

## **About Bakhtin, *Quilombos* and Popular Culture / *Sobre Bakhtin, quilombos e a cultura popular***

Michele Freire Schiffler\*

### **ABSTRACT**

This paper aims to discuss the up-to-dateness and episteme of Bakhtin's studies about popular culture, based on performance theory and cultural studies. The focus of this study is the cultural productions of Quilombola communities in the state of Espírito Santo, Brazil, such as *Ticumbi*, *Jongo*, and *Reis de Bois*. Verses from the *Ticumbi de São Benedito* performance were selected for the analysis. Bakhtin's studies on popular culture indicate that popular festivities, processions and performances have transformative and ambivalent potential, with emphasis on the concept of carnivalization. In the streets of the city, ambivalent laughter, hyperbolism and a subversion of hierarchies and social order celebrate the possibility of the recognition and the struggle of old African kingdoms subdued by the Atlantic Diaspora.

**KEYWORDS:** Popular Culture; Bakhtin; Performance; Carnivalization; *Quilombola* Communities

### **RESUMO**

*Este trabalho tem por objetivo discutir a atualidade e a episteme dos estudos bakhtinianos acerca da cultura popular, a partir de teorias da performance e dos estudos culturais. O foco deste estudo são produções culturais de comunidades quilombolas do Estado do Espírito Santo, Brasil, como o Ticumbi, o Jongo e os Reis de Bois. Para efeito de análise destacam-se versos da performance do Ticumbi de São Benedito. Os estudos de Bakhtin sobre a cultura popular lançam um olhar para o potencial transformador e ambivalente de festas populares, cortejos e performances, com destaque para o conceito de carnavalização. Nas ruas da cidade, o riso ambivalente, o hiperbolismo e a subversão das hierarquias e da ordem social estabelecida celebram a possibilidade de reconhecimento e a luta de antigos reinados africanos subjugados pelo peso da Diáspora Atlântica.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Cultura popular; Bakhtin; Performance; Carnavalização; Comunidades quilombolas*

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\* Universidade Federal do Espírito Santo – UFES, Vitória, Espírito Santo, Brazil; CAPES/FAPES, Proc. 70984425; miletras@yahoo.com.br.

## Introduction

This article attempts to create a dialogue between Bakhtin's studies on popular culture and the cultural productions of *quilombola*<sup>1</sup> communities from the state of Espírito Santo. Therefore, it intends to think about the author's theoretical-methodological contribution to cultural studies and, in particular, to popular culture.

In this dialogical process, elements that are part of the observation and participation, as an audience, in cultural performances produced by *quilombola* communities in the Northern region of the state of Espírito Santo are incorporated into the text. The ritual performances are celebrated in the period corresponding to the Christmas holiday season - between the end of December and the middle of January -, calling for blessings for the year that is about to begin. In general, *quilombola* celebrations take place publicly in the city of Conceição da Barra, in the community of Barreiras, and in the village of Itaúnas, all located in the state of Espírito Santo. It is a region where the activity of trafficking in human beings during the slavery rule in Brazil was intense for centuries.

Located between the towns of São Mateus, Conceição da Barra and the South of Bahia, territorial *quilombola* goes beyond the physical and political limits of municipalities and states. The region, which is known as *Sapê do Norte*, comprises dozens of communities, hundreds of families gathered by traditions, memories, stories, and ancestral struggles.

The name *Sapê do Norte* is a metaphorical reference to a resistant regional grass called *Sapê*, which survives upon the clearing, the cattle, and the monoculture of eucalyptus (SCHIFFLER, 2014). The large plantations expand in the region, which puts pressure on the communities' inhabitants because of real estate speculation and the expropriation of the lands of traditional communities. It is a metaphor for the resistance of the remaining *quilombo* communities that still fight for recognition and justice, dealing with the violation of their constitutional rights every day.

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<sup>1</sup> TN. *Quilombolas* are descendants of enslaved men and women who in the past escaped from farms and gathered in communities called *quilombos*. According to current Brazilian legislation, ethnic-racial groups that, by criteria of self-attribution, demonstrate historical and territorial trajectories linked to black ancestry, resistance and historical oppression are considered remnants of the *quilombo* communities.

In this scenario of political, territorial, cultural, and social clash, year after year, *quilombola* performances occur. The festivities, which correspond to the Christmas holiday season, include different events, such as *Reis de Bois*, *Jongo* groups and *Ticumbi*. During the slavery time, this period of controlled freedom, enslaved men were allowed to celebrate their traditions as long as they interfaced with Catholicism. Similarly to what Bakhtin (1984, p.75)<sup>2</sup> described as the indispensable nature of festive laughter in the festival of madmen, the freedom of African celebrations were seen as “a vent for the second nature of man.”

To this second festive life, demonstrated in laughter by Bakhtin, the idea of Brazilian freedom and renewal is added, which, for the slave system bastions, would be an escape for social control purposes. For black communities, however, this festive life became a sign of identity, union and projection of a free and fair future. In centuries of celebration, the *quilombola* festivities have rebuilt a past of injustices, bringing to the present reflections upon and denunciations of the past.

My attendance of the performances ranges from the years 2012 to 2017. As a member of the audience, I was able to dialogically contribute to the celebration, and as a researcher, I could reflect upon the up-to-dateness of Bakhtin’s studies on popular culture as well as on the greatness of the knowledge shared by the participants during their presentations.

Broadly, the *Reis de Bois* bring to the marketplace the jocular and the festive and ambivalent atmosphere of the carnival. Such elements are publically shown by *Catirina*, a travestied male character; animal representations that run after the audience; and a cowboy, who represents the authoritarian character towards the herd and the audience. Celebrated in the backyard of the houses of the festivities’ benefactors, the *Reis de Bois* perform stories of violence motivated by land expropriation mixed with festive laughter shared in the public square. Cowboys, playmates, and audience dance together accompanied by accordion sound until sunrise.

The *Jongo* groups highlight the importance and the beauty of a *quilombola* woman singing back and sing *senzala*<sup>3</sup> songs while dancing. Men participate in the

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<sup>2</sup> BAKHTIN, M. *Rabelais and His World*. Translated by Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> The *senzala* was the place where the slaves lived.

*Jongo* by playing the drums and the *casaca*<sup>4</sup> while the women respond to the sounds singing. The *Jongo*, as a ritual performance, is distinguished by the use of skirts and by the imposing presence of an old lady, bringing a rich African Bantu tradition heritage. Since 2005 the *Jongo*, whose ritual comprises the entire southeast region of Brazil, has been recognized as a Brazilian cultural heritage by IPHAN,<sup>5</sup> and 25 *Jongo* groups are known in the state of Espírito Santo (MACIEL, 2016).

Another element from the *quilombola* performance highlighted here is the *Ticumbi de São Benedito*. According to the oral tradition recorded by Oliveira's research (2016), *Ticumbi*, also known as a Congo ball, dates back to 200 years ago in the northern region of the state of Espírito Santo. During the festivities, devotion saints are celebrated. They are St. Benedict, St. Sebastian, and Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception. Performed only in the state of Espírito Santo, the *Ticumbi* is dramatized by four groups, namely, *Conceição da Barra*, *Bongado*, *Itaúnas*, and *Santa Clara*. Despite similar characters and structure, the plot and the social demands expressed are different in each group.

For the purpose of a contextual analysis of verses and traditions, the *Ticumbi de São Benedito*, the group from Conceição da Barra, will be analyzed due to its complex dramatic structure. It is a popular representation, a street theater, which merges different literary genres, composing a linguistic and a thematically hybrid representation. The presentations take place every year, always on December 31st and January 1st, during the Christmas holiday season, and are held in honor to St. Benedict.

Broadly, the plot relates to the dispute between the King of Congo and the King of Bamba for the right to hold a ball in honor of St. Benedict in order to thank him for the year and to ask for blessings for the year that is about to start. During the dramatization they also denounce problems experienced by *quilombola* communities, such as the struggle for land ownership and prejudice.

Through the transcription of verses and songs as well as the observation of the corporeity and musicality of the performative act, the elements of popular culture that are merged into the *quilombola* performances are highlighted. The hybridization of several cultural elements from Iberia, Africa, and Brazil allows us to recognize and

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<sup>4</sup> A regional handmade musical instrument.

<sup>5</sup> IPHAN stands for Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional [National Institute of Historic and Artistic Heritage].

bring up to date elements from buffoonery, carnival, hyperbolism, and the grotesque in the enunciation of *Congos*. These characters, in dialogue with Bakhtin's ideas, point to the subversive and liberating potential of popular tradition. In the upside-down representation of the world, a fairer and less serious future is projected, bringing to the marketplace the perspective of those who carry the historical weight of slavery in their souls.

## 1 Popular Culture

By exposing his thesis on François Rabelais' oeuvre, Bakhtin approaches popular culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in a consistent way. In his attempt to do so, he is immersed in the culture and documents of those historical periods, which points out the researcher's methodological attention to his object of study.

Bakhtin highlights the importance of the vision not only of history, the microhistory, but also of the living context, which is also observed in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1993),<sup>6</sup> in which he presents the architectonics of the world as a dynamic, unique and unrepeatable event, and in *The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art*, an essay in *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin (1990),<sup>7</sup> in which he associates aesthetic analysis to historical and social reality, and, therefore, to the ethical reality of the act. Through the living word, culture and life are united by the uniqueness of the act.

In his studies on Rabelais, Bakhtin (1984)<sup>8</sup> points out the importance of being immersed in the popular culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance so as to find the key to analyze Rabelais's oeuvre. Thus, Bakhtin shows us a methodology of analysis that subverts the Eurocentric logic of literary analysis, for the writing enigma would be solved through the performance of popular culture.

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<sup>6</sup> BAKHTIN, M. M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Translation and notes by Vadim Liapunov. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> BAKHTIN, M. *The Problem of Content, Material and Form in Verbal Art*. In: BAKHTIN, M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov, translated with notes by Vadim Liapunov, supplement translated by Kenneth Brostrom. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, pp.257-325

<sup>8</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

In a dialogue with Bhabha (1994),<sup>9</sup> it becomes evident to us that it is in the performance of popular culture that the severing between pedagogical time and the performatic time is observed. In this double temporality, the microhistory of enunciation presents itself as a marginal narrative to the official culture, revealing, therefore, conflicts expressed through language and boosting unforeseen potential for social transformations.

For this reason, we do not understand history from a universal perspective, superficially approached and perceived only as a flow; history is understood based on the enunciative singularity of the performatic time. Thus, the responsibility to the present time and the dialogical responsiveness are inscribed in the perception of each moment of the past. This responsibility also concerns the future, seen as a becoming and a responsive link in the enunciative chain. Time and space, inscribed in the enunciative performance, lead to the concept of chronotope, triggered for the understanding that the meaning of time and space are not unique and homogeneous, but inscribed and changeable according to the enunciative context and human needs.

Bhabha takes chronotopes into account as he questions national identities, problematizing the repetition of fixed discourses that aim at the maintenance of cultural differences. Although Bhabha's thinking is somewhat different to Bakhtin's, both point to the importance of the topos of enunciation. According to Bhabha,

[t]he analytic of cultural difference intervenes to transform the scenario of articulation – not simply to disclose the rationale of political discrimination. It changes the position of enunciation and the relations of address within it; not only what is said but where it is said; not simply the logic of articulation but the *topos* of enunciation. The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization – the repetition that will not return as the same, the minus-in-origin that results in political and discursive strategies where adding to does not add up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification. The subject of the discourse of cultural difference is dialogical [...]. It is constituted through the locus of the Other which suggests both that the object of identification is ambivalent, and, more significantly, that the agency of identification is never pure or holistic but always constituted in a process of substitution, displacement or projection (1994, p.162, italics in original).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> BHABHA, H. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> For reference, see footnote 9.

The understanding of the non-neutrality of discourse as well as the dialogical constitution of the subject and the importance of the here and now for unique and unrepeatably enunciations brings the authors into dialogue when the location of culture, especially the popular culture and subalternized communities, is considered.

Still on the subject of culture, but not specifically on popular culture, Bakhtin (1990)<sup>11</sup> draws attention to the fact that cultural acts live essentially on boundaries. Not only are they enunciated as creative singularity, but they also integrate a preexisting cultural life. All this considered, autonomy and participation are mutually challenged. This is why the perception marked by the unrepeatably act of its enunciation, by the creative singularity of the act seen as a concrete system is relevant. Responsiveness is part of the cultural act because it is not indifferent to cultural, moral, and ethical values already developed. According to Bakhtin, the artistic act “lives and moves not in a vacuum but in an intense axiological atmosphere of responsible interdetermination” (BAKHTIN, 1990, p.275).<sup>12</sup>

Ambivalence is a distinguished sign when considering the autonomous participation or the participant autonomy in the cultural act, revealing bridges and keys for the production of meanings. Ambivalent is also the popular culture whose understanding is based on one of its most striking features: the festive laughter shared by everyone in the marketplace.

During this process, Bakhtin (1984)<sup>13</sup> recognizes a concrete epistemology in the ambivalent liberating laughter that is consistent with the dialogic philosophy of language because it is responsive. He attempts to understand the phenomenon through the vividness of its enunciation, a glance at the laughter that transcends the positive and negative binarism because it is complex, provoking, and, we dare say, provocative in its ambivalence.

Thinking popular culture based on the liveliness of everyday events and laughter in its ambivalence is an epistemological problem that embraces culture, science, and language. In order to adopt this attitude, historicity as a return to daily movement, considering its tensions, contradictions, and incompleteness is essential. Bakhtin draws

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<sup>11</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>12</sup> For reference, see footnote 7.

<sup>13</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

attention to the ambiguity of roughly modernizing popular laughter in an attitude that, dichotomically, does not contribute to the necessary problematization of ambivalent laughter. Such a position can also be extended to the problematization of popular culture and scientific production.

The complexity and critical potential of analysis are placed in the interval. In the case of the laughter, in its ambivalence, as the author explains,

[t]rue ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naiveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. Such is the function of laughter in the historical development of culture and literature (BAKHTIN, 1984, pp.122-123).<sup>14</sup>

Ambivalent laughter calls for epistemological reflections and leads to possibilities for rich aesthetic, literary, and cultural analyses. In the atmosphere of the culture of marketplaces, popular humor was opposed to the seriousness of medieval official culture. “*Ritual spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace,” “[...] *comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written [...], and “[...] *various genres of billingsgate*: curses, oaths, popular blazons” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.5; emphasis in original)<sup>15</sup> were part of these manifestations. *Ticumbi* dramatization inherits these rites and shows forms, even though they are seen as comic elements or part of a cursing vocabulary.

Even the parish and agricultural feasts had a comic folk aspect. During these occasions, laughter and language were ambivalent and allowed the construction of a *second* world, which is unofficial and *upside down*. The principle of popular laughter inscribed a heavy tone of freedom to criticize, vituperate, parody, or project a better future in the festivities.

Due to this tone and the inverted plays materialized at the festivities in which social hierarchies were subverted, the dramatic genre was most explored. According to

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<sup>14</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

<sup>15</sup> For reference, see footnote 1.



Bakhtin (1984),<sup>16</sup> the medieval theater constantly approached the essence of popular carnivals, standing on the borderline between art and life.

Similarly to carnival, the medieval theater shared the fusion between the spectators and the actors, who were all participants of a spectacle experienced by all the people. As a typical element of popular festivities, carnival embodies, as a universal element, an essence of freedom and renewal, shared by popular comic culture, connecting the border of the real with the illusory.

On these occasions, not only were the parodies and the transvestism that mocked the feudal regime common, but the comic dramaturgy, miracles, morals and mysteries were also the target of carnivalization. On the process of carnivalization, Bakhtin says that

[c]arnival discloses these traits as the best preserved fragments of an immense, infinitely rich world. This permits us to use precisely the epithet “carnavalesque” in that broad sense of the word. We interpret it not only as carnival per se in its limited form but also as the varied popular-festive life of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance; all the peculiarities of this life have been preserved in carnival, while the other forms have deteriorated and vanished (1984, p.218).<sup>17</sup>

In a perspective similar to Bakhtin’s, Baroja (2006) also discusses the carnival theme in relation to social and psychological intentions and the permission to wear masks and to change or invert characters. Under the license of carnival there were inversions, introjections, and projections that through a temporary imbalance would guarantee social balance. This psychological factor was also used as a means to balance and sustain the Brazilian slave regime through small festives in the middle of the yards and *senzalas*, as if once a year non-exemplary events were abolished and the symbolic annihilation of the old world regenerated time in its entirety. Baroja points out that

[f]rom the social point of view, established violence, a disorder of facts and words that fitted to specific forms prevailed; thus the status quo reversion played a major role in the festivity. [...] It is the world in which the order of things is reversed, which is observed in some old farces (BAROJA, 2006, p.51; our translation).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

<sup>17</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

<sup>18</sup> Text in original: “Desde un punto de vista social, lo que imperaba era una violencia establecida, un desenfreno de hechos y de palabras que se ajustaba a formas específicas; así la inversión del orden normal

In the process of carnivalization marked by the upside-down world view, popular comic culture presented specific traits that influenced and continue to influence cultural productions through the ages. As constitutive forms of this culture, some factors are pointed out, such as family and public vocabulary with diminutives, nicknames and insults; the re-creation of ancient rites added to everyday contents; the use of marketplace language with a magical and enchanting character; and ambivalent blasphemies, which mortify and regenerate.

In the inverted play, earth and the lowel stratum of carnival grotesque bring ambivalence, the principle of absorption (the grave, the womb) and, at the same time, birth and resurrection (mother's womb). Earth, as an ambivalent ritual aspect, constitutes not only the play of an inverted world, but also the belief in a better, reborn, and re-signified future.

The grotesque, constructed also by hyperbolism and naturalism, is assumed as a sign of transcendence from the observance of its ambivalence. According to Bakhtin,

[t]o degrade also means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to acts of defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth. Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. [...] Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving (1984, p.21).<sup>19</sup>

In this play, the upper and the lower spheres “swing,” the hierarchical planes are mixed in order to withdraw and release the concrete reality of the object, showing the true material and bodily physiognomy. Since it is a popular festivity full of symbols, the denial and annihilation of the object is, above all, its permutation in space. All in all “[c]arnival celebrates the destruction of the old and the birth of the new world” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.410),<sup>20</sup> even if only during the days of the festivity.

The body must be understood as a physical and symbolic reality. The features attributed to the body organize a discourse that plays a role in the establishment of

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de las cosas tenía un papel primordial en la fiesta. (...) Es el mundo en que el orden de las cosas está invertido, lo cual se advierte en algunos viejos entremeses.”

<sup>19</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

<sup>20</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

social hierarchies, such as the oppositions between men and women, Jewish and Christian, leprotic and healthy people. The lower body is thus summoned to explain evil and its transmission (SCHMITT, 2005).

Communication between the physical and the ideological is made through gestures that inscribe symbolic relations in the social fabric, challenging or proposing social codes. The movement, as value judgment, corresponds to the social role that is expected of each one, disclosing hidden elements of the essence and the humors to the audience.

In the Medieval culture, which manifested itself through theatre, the body was lent for the representation of the male figure. His performance gestures corresponded to a symbolic end, but by no means were they interpreted as neutral or unpretentious.

Body performance helps man to free himself from the dominant point of view about the world and allows him to look at the universe with new eyes, understanding a different world. In order to do so, body performance uses a jocular and cheerful character of space and laughter.

From this point of view, laughter is not only universalizing, but it is also a liberation weapon in peoples' hands; “[i]t was the world’s second truth extended to everything and from which nothing is taken away” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.84),<sup>21</sup> gathering people who take over the streets in jubilation. Here laughter is postulated as a world conception, a phenomenon in which the truth about the world is expressed. It has the freedom to bring up important aspects of social reality that are often veiled by the culture of the seriousness, which is why it prevails in contemporary cultural performances.

In this process, we point out that language is not neutral but ambivalent, and it is the play with words and actions that allows laughter to the audience, which participates in and interacts with the popular festivity. It is a time when one can grasp “the gay relativity of the limited class theories and the constant unfinished character of the world – the constant combination of falsehood and truth, of darkness and light, of anger and gentleness, of life and death” (BAKHTIN, 1984, pp.432-433).<sup>22</sup>

Popular culture, which is rich and universal from the festive laughter to the carnivalization of the tensions of everyday lives, sets the festive tone of freedom. From

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<sup>21</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

<sup>22</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

carnivalization, it assumes the possibility of liberation and renewal. Based on these considerations, some transcribed elements of the cultural performance of *Ticumbi* will be presented, confirming the up-to-dateness of Bakhtinian studies to problematize popular festivals as spaces for the renewal of life.

## **2 Popular Culture, Subversion and Freedom in *Quilombola* Performance**

Bakhtin's up-to-dateness in popular culture studies stems from his epistemic attitude towards a free living universe filled with tensions and conflicts inherent to the discursive sphere of street theater, originated from the multiple voices of the marketplace.

In the lively movement of people in the streets, the ambivalent laughter stands out for its jocular, festive, and liberating tone, and must be observed from the point of view of its revealed tensions and dichotomies. In its complexity it purifies the people from dogmatism and from the unilateral vision spread by power relations and hegemonic ideologies.

From the Bakhtinian perspective, laughter and its epistemological contribution to culture and literature play a fundamental role in preventing the single meaning, the single level. The ambivalence of laughter must therefore contribute to the movement of decentralization of the production of knowledge, considering the construction of knowledge in constant incompleteness so that it is not immobilized in the face of stable and illusory certainties.

In the field of language and literature studies, this view contributes to decentralization, as the the researcher's place as well as the laughter of popular festivals are regarded as unstable and ambivalent. Therefore, as we observe popular culture performance, we have to deem episteme hybrid and under construction.

From this prerogative, and, in order to illustrate the argument about the importance of Bakhtin's studies to popular culture, I present a fragment from the cultural performance of *Ticumbi de São Benedito*, which I have recorded and transcribed. Held on January 1, 2016, it is the speech of the King of Congo's secretary, who went upon an embassy to King of Bamba. The context is that of a dispute for the right to hold the feast in honor of Saint Benedict:

King of Bamba, mine, yours, powerful Kings of Congo  
King of Congo is thus called  
Because when he was the Master of the province,  
country, and all the states  
He sends me to announce  
That the glorious *São Benedito*<sup>23</sup> festival you do not do

And neither shall I celebrate,  
Because as long as his chest resists  
And that beautiful and blossoming sword,  
He hits so heavily that pieces fly

And whether you want it or not,  
If you do not respect his orders  
You will crawl across the floor  
Like a *two-headed snake*  
But you will kneel on his feet for him to baptize you.

Kings of Bamba, I've already given the message  
That my king has given you  
I shall not talk much but I'm going to say almost nothing  
But I will tell the ones who do not know  
This *past* is already being spread  
This *sword, beautiful people*, belonged to my great-great-grandfather.  
He died *310 years* ago.  
He left it to my great-grandfather  
My great-grandfather is gone too.  
So he passed it on to my grandfather  
My grandfather was summoned to the *Ticumbi* of the Lord.

So my father and my his father fought a lot  
Defeating a bloody battle  
Until one day when God called them.  
And my father passed the sword to the master and he passed it to me  
And I am supposed to do the same, whether here or over there,  
Wherever I go  
In order to win every battle  
In honor of God the Creator  
And I work with it.  
And I do not carry any prayer  
*The prayer I carry is speaking little and listening a lot.*

I walk slowly and I have quick feet  
I'm like a young rabbit,  
I sleep with an opened eye.  
I never tell where I come from,  
I do not trust anyone  
I only trust in Jesus who is in heaven

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<sup>23</sup> The names of the devotion saints are kept in Portuguese in order to show respect for the religiosity of the participants of the performance.

And in *Virgem da Conceição*,  
Glorious *São Benedito* is our patron.  
Therefore, Kings of Bamba,  
With this sword in my hand  
And with the courage I have  
I saunter the whole world.

I'll give you a message  
With great indignation  
To see *our people suffering*,  
With *no jobs and no beans*  
And hips of money  
From *mensalão*.<sup>24</sup>

*Malnourished children*,  
Without food,  
*People being humiliated*  
In the city and in the country  
And all *the money in Brasilia*  
Going from hand to hand.

In Brazil, there there are too many  
*Politicians with masks*  
Who take money from the ones who have nothing  
While the rich people are spared,  
*Poor people vote on those*  
*Who later on steal from them*.

There are many *corrupted people*  
Here or anywhere,  
In the *quilombola welfare program*,  
In the *family welfare program*.  
In the *zero hunger program*.  
In the *school meal program*.

In Brazil there are lots of *thieves*  
Where money is  
There are thieves in this place.  
You just have to look for them.

And these [*corrupts...*] *politicians*  
Should not to be forgiven  
It is taking what they have  
And throwing in the election.

Eating once a week,  
Drinking water every three days,  
Bathing every two months,  
Wearing the same clothes and still sleeping  
on the floor. [laughter and applause]

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<sup>24</sup> TN. Mensalão was a vote-buying scandal in Brazil in 2005.

And these corrupted politicians  
Who claim not to be guilty  
*Should be stamped*  
*And branded with hot iron.* [laughs and applause]

Leave them with only two soft teeth in the mouth  
One to gnaw bones  
And the other in the front to hurt.

There is *no competence*  
And *no medicine in hospitals.*  
No shame.  
You do not see respect anymore.

Not to mention education  
In every capital city.

The way you are doing it,  
The one who is right thinks it is wrong,  
If a father wants to raise his son  
The way was raised,  
If a corrupted neighbor sees it,  
The neighbor reports him to the authority  
And the authority seizes the child,  
To do whatever they want.

With no *turututu*,  
If your children do not learn,  
*They are taken to eucalyptus fields,*  
*They are either left in a ditch*  
*Or in a vulture beak.*

And my situation,  
Not unlike any other  
Here in our country,  
*People who work are imprisoned*  
*And people who steal are free.*

All that I have said,  
I'm not afraid of the outcome.  
*I'm proud to be black,*  
*I was born and was raised in the countryside,*  
*But I'm not misinformed.*

I'm talking to you and warning you  
For you to open your eyes  
So that you can see.

And you give me my embassy  
So that I can lead my king.  
He's there, tired of waiting for me.  
If you do not leave soon,  
Looking at me,

With this lion-like face,  
I'll pierce you with my sword  
And make exhumation,

I'll give the *prepared guts*  
to the Congos to fry  
And *eat them all with beans*  
The well-seasoned meat  
I will serve for this beautiful population  
And make a barbecue  
And drink *cachaça*  
And tar brandy

And to make my king happy,  
From you, I will take an ear  
And from you, your heart.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Text in original: “Reis de Bamba, o meu, o seu, poderoso Reis de Congo / Rei de Congo é assim chamado / Porque quando era doutor da província, país e todos os estados, / Por mim mandou dizer / Que a festa do glorioso São Benedito vocês não fazem // E nem tampouco hei de festejar, / Porque enquanto o peito dele resistir / E aquela linda e floriosa espada glorear, Ele te dá um tamanho golpe que pedaço há de voar // E queira você ou não queira, Se não respeitar as ordens dele / Vocês vão se rastejar pelo chão / Igual cobra de duas cabeças / Mas vai ajoelhar nos pés dele para ele te batizar // Reis de Bamba, eu já lhe dei o meu recado / Que meu rei mandou te dar / Eu to aqui para falar pouco, mas vou falar quase nada / Mas vou dizer a quem não sabe / Esse passado já se espalha, / Essa espada, lindo povo, era do meu tataravô / Morreu faz 310 anos / Deixou pro meu bisavô / Meu bisavô também se foi / E passou para o meu avô / O meu avô foi convocado para o Ticumbi do Senhor // Então ficou para o meu pai e meu pai muito lutou / Venceu batalha sangrenta / Até quando Deus chamou / Então passou para o mestre e o mestre para mim passou / Para mim fazer igual a eles, seja aqui, seja acolá, / Seja onde que eu for / Para eu vencer todas as batalhas / por ordem do criador // E eu trabalho com ela / E não carrego oração / A oração que eu carrego é falar pouco e ouvir muito // Eu ando devagar e possuo pé ligeiro / Sou igual coelho novo, / Só durmo com olho aberto / Não conto por onde eu venho, / Que não confio em companheiro / Só confio em Jesus no céu / E na Virgem da Conceição, / Glorioso São Benedito que é nosso padroeiro // Por isso, Reis de Bamba, / Com essa espada na mão / e com a coragem que eu tenho / eu reviro o mundo inteiro // Eu vou te dar um recado / com muita indignação / de ver nosso povo sofrendo, / sem emprego e sem feijão / e o dinheiro aos montes / na linha do mensalão // É criança desnutrida, / sem ter alimentação, / o povo sendo humilhado, / na cidade e no sertão, / e o dinheiro em Brasília, / passando de mão em mão. // No Brasil tem por demais / É político mascarado / Que tira de quem não tem / Enquanto o rico é poupado, / Vai o pobre e vota nele / Que é para depois ser roubado. // Existe muito corrupto / Aqui ou em qualquer lugar, / É na bolsa quilombola, / É na bolsa família / É no programa fome zero / E na merenda escolar // No Brasil tem muito ladrão / Onde que rola dinheiro, / Nesse lugar tem ladrão / É só vocês procurarem // E esses (corrupto...) político / Não é para se ter perdão / É tomar o que eles têm / E jogar na eleição // Comer uma vez por semana, / Beber água de três em três dias, / Tomar banho de dois em dois meses, / Vestir a mesma roupa e ainda dormir no chão [risos e aplausos] // E esses políticos corruptos / Que se diz ser inocente, / Deveria ser carimbado / e marcado com ferro quente [risos e aplausos] // deixar dois dentes moles na boca / um para roer osso / e outro para doer na frente / está faltando competência / e remédio nos hospitais / vergonha já não se tem / respeito não se vê mais. // Educação nem se fala, / Em todas as capitais, / Do jeito que vocês estão fazendo, / Quem é certo acha errado, / Se o pai quer educar o filho, / Do jeito que foi educado. / Se um vizinho corrupto vê, / Corre e vai dar parte à autoridade, / Autoridade apanha para criar / Para fazer o que eles bem quer, // Sem fazer turututu, / Se seu filho não aprende, / Eles levam para o eucalipto, / Chegando deixa na vala / Ou no bico do urubu. // E a minha situação, Não é diferente das outras / Aqui no nosso país, / Quem trabalha mora preso / E quem rouba vive solto. // Tudo isso que eu falei, / Não tenho medo do resultado. / Sou negro com todo orgulho, / Nasci e criei na roça, / Mas não sou mal informado. // Eu estou falando e te avisando / Para você abrir seu olho / Que é para você enxergar // E tu dá a minha embaixada, / Que é para o meu rei eu levar. / Que ele está lá cansado de me esperar. / Se você não despachar logo, / Assim



The potential for the analysis and construction of meaning from this short excerpt is huge. This so called *embassy* is one of the performance elements and comprises approximately an hour and a half of dramatization. To propose a reading and an analysis based on the hybrid material of such cultural performance requires a methodological attitude that refers to the ambivalence proposed by Bakhtin.

The task is to consider aesthetic and stylistic elements that are beyond the binarisms imposed by Modernity. In a discursive genre that is hybrid and from oral tradition, how can we limit diversity and complexity to a unilateral direction of analysis? It is important to transcend the epistemic ties of literary criticism, recognizing and problematizing hybridism as a sign of abundance and identity.

In a similar way, a transdisciplinary and hybrid epistemological stance, which is not fixed in the binary logic of simplistic criticism, stands out. This is one of the central points of the Bakhtinian view for working with popular culture and one of the great advantages for the production of knowledge in this field of study.

By observing *Ticumbi*'s cultural performance from a lively and dynamic dialogical perspective, many of the elements referenced by Bakhtin stand out in the production of meanings. The performance has been produced since slavery times, in which slaves assumed the identities of African kings, accessing the ancestral memory and abruptly reversing the imposed social hierarchy.

It is the logic of the upside-down world through the carnivalization of processions, which reveal elements of libertarian struggle, subversion, and resistance against the established social order, abolishing "all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.10).<sup>26</sup> In a life celebration, Carnival not only celebrates ancestral identities, but also brings old struggles up to date that still echo today in the remaining *quilombo* communities. This is due to the historical weight of centuries of subalternization and social marginalization. Therefore, subversion is also the projection of a becoming. Movement, transformation, and freedom, understood as

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olhando para mim, / Com essa cara de leão, / Eu vou lhe meter a espada, / E fazer exumação // Vou dar as tripas preparadas / Para os congos fritar forte e declarado / Comer todas com feijão / A carne bem temperada / Eu vou dar a essa linda população / Para fazer um churrasco / E tomar com cachaça / E conhaque de alcatrão // E para satisfazer meu rei, / De tu eu levo a orelha / E de você, o coração.

<sup>26</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

constituent elements of popular culture and semanticized by ambivalent laughter, are important contributions for thinking about the place of culture.

Ancestry is a source of union and recognition because it marks a discursive place of authority and social representation. In addition to the contact with African cultural matrices and their celebrations of enthronement of lineage kings, fertility rituals and the depiction of ancient kings, the verses of the King of Congo's secretary increase the importance of heredity metonymically represented by the sword, a sign of belonging and authority.

A striking element of popular culture pointed out by Bakhtin (1984) as positive, due to its "growth, fertility, of a brimming-over abundance" (p.64),<sup>27</sup> is hyperbolism. The representation in the grotesque realism of the bodily lower stratum is achieved by means of the exuberance of the material and the body, linked to the acts of devouring and procreating. In this perspective, eating and drinking become signs of rebirth and prosperity seen not as antonyms, but as continuities.

A striking example of this process is the reference to the ambivalent body representation as food in the fragment "I'll give the prepared guts / To the Congos to fry / And eat them all with beans / The well-seasoned meat / I will serve for this beautiful population / And make a barbecue / And drink *cachaça* / And tar brandy." Similar to Rabelaisian banquet, the body of the defier is exposed, deflagrated, turned into food for the audience. Its destruction will be converted into anthropophagic survival. Death and life become a single meaning element, and the meat will be served with beans, just like *feijoada*, which is made of less noble meat cuts. That would be the weight imposed on those who challenged the power of ancestry, enclosed in the sword and secular hierarchy. In Bakhtin's words (1984, p.283),<sup>28</sup> "[f]urther, the triumphal banquet is always universal. It is the triumph of life over death. [...] The victorious body receives the defeated world and is renewed."

Hyperbolism also appears in animal metaphors, which aim either to mock the opponent or to extol the qualities of the enunciator. It is the moral and bodily lowering ("two-headed snake") of those who defy the authority and power of the elder king, the "Master of the province, country, and all the states." Another moment in which an animal appears is when a serious complaint is registered: the *quilombolas* are being

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<sup>27</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

<sup>28</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

delivered to the “vulture beak” by the hands of the authorities. The extermination of black communities in Brazil is not new, and, unfortunately, it is not just a figure of speech. The temporary freedom of popular festivities demands the renewal of life and not its annihilation.

The temporary freedom of these popular festivities allows denunciation and social criticism as a sign of renewal of life. There are several uttered demands, which encompass not only the immediate reality of the communities’ everyday lives, but also the corruption that plagues Brazil. In the short excerpt, the suffering of people (malnutrition and humiliation), the lack of employment and food, the precariousness of public services, police violence, corruption, the fallacy of politicians and their campaign promises, fraud in social programs and school meals are denounced.

Uttered in the marketplace, these denunciations take shape and obtain representativeness with the aims of articulating a better future. Therefore, they are committed to a movement of transformation, also highlighted by Bakhtin, in his studies on popular culture, as a memory of the future, in which the event related to the current utterance does not refer only to the past, but is committed to the future in a responsible and responsive way. This movement is often disregarded by the standpoint of the official hegemonic and serious culture.

There are moments when festive laughter becomes universal, free, and is shared with the audience. This shared laughter is both ambivalent and libertarian, as seen in “And these (*corrupts...*) *politicians* / Should not to be forgiven / It is taking what they have / And throwing in the election / Eating once a week, / Drinking water every three days, / Bathing every two months, / Wearing the same clothes and still sleeping on the floor [laughter and applause] / And these corrupted politicians / Who claim not to be guilty, / *Should be stamped* / *And branded with hot iron* [laughs and applause] / Leave them with only two soft teeth in the mouth / One to gnaw bones / the other in the front to hurt.”

In this moment of sharing with the audience, the meaning effects are polyphonic and strong. I highlight the Freudian slip, in which the King of Congo’s secretary, as he refers to the politician, uses the word *corrupts*, something immediately understood by the audience, leading to universal laughter. Responsiveness and ethical positioning follow, pinpointing the responsibility for the electoral process and the voting power.

As example of ambivalent laughter I point out the fragment “And these corrupted politicians / Who claim not to be guilty, / *Should be stamped / And branded with hot iron* [laughs and applause].” The laughter produced by these verses frees and enshrouds, celebrates and mortifies, bearing the traces of the slaves’ suffering, which is resignified as a historical debt to be charged. To analyze these verses based on Bakhtin’s reflections on the ambivalence of laughter brings to the fore necessary problematizations in relation to the iron marks on the skin and soul of Africans descendants. They are demands that have been historically invisible, but become alive in popular culture, celebrating, but also charging, the renewal of social and ethical relations marked by the coloniality of power.

## **Conclusion**

The considerations proposed in this paper encourage important reflections. Similar to laughter in its ambivalence and moves, our thoughts herein should serve as a path for constant problematizations based on plural perspectives. There are, however, important topics to be emphasized so as to reaffirm the importance of Bakhtin’s studies on popular culture.

By way of concluding, I would like to reaffirm the concrete possibility of life renewal in the space of culture. It is the renewal even of academic life, leading to an ambivalent investigative attitude, since it is living and in movement. Bakhtin’s studies guide us in this direction, since they underscore the movement between past, present and future, in a chain that awaits answers in the double temporality of culture.

The up-to-dateness of Bakhtin’s reflections lies in the fact that, from the culture of daily life and the microhistories contained in the performative time, we can search for signs that break with dogmatism and “the single meaning, the single level” (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.123),<sup>29</sup> the unilateral vision that reproduces and crystallizes arrogant, hegemonic and prejudiced positions. In order to do so, we find the libertarian, universal, and ambivalent laughter. Cultural studies are greatly enriched by the observation of the living movement of people in the streets and by the understanding of carnivalization as a world view and an aesthetic category.

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<sup>29</sup> For reference, see footnote 2.

*Ticumbi's* cultural performance is an example of Bakhtin's up-to-dateness as he depicts an upside-down world that breaks with hierarchies in the perspective of projecting a fairer future for historically marginalized communities. The liberation and subversion shown in the popular festivities of *quilombolas* are the proof of faith in the unquestionable and necessary renewal of life.

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Translated by Fernanda Sales Pietrolungo – [fernandapietro@hotmail.com](mailto:fernandapietro@hotmail.com)

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