

Nocturnal History of our Lady of the Slash-Knife, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

In the Garden of Flowers, or Devil's Hole, over ashes of the old Slash-Knife District, on the edges of a city in the interior of Brazil, live daughters – or granddaughters and great granddaughters – of slaves and “Indian women lassoed in the woods”. Many consider themselves to be daughters of Our Lady Aparecida, the patron saint of Brazil. The juxtaposition of these maternal lineages may produce a sort of montage effect. In bodily innervations of Our Ladies may be detected the flashing images and gestures of Indian and slave women, as past and present come together. In subterranean regions of symbols one may discover traces of “nocturnal histories” of Our Lady. On this ground, a study of processes of settlement in Piracicaba, in the interior of São Paulo, a particular form of archaeology may be required: a double dislocation from the heroic *bandeirante* civilizing male figure to Our Lady, and from Our Lady to native American and slave women “lassoed in the woods”. In subterranean regions, the gesture of the woman who “cut a man to pieces” – a recurrent theme of stories which recount the origins of the “Slash-Knife District” – agitates the shades and shadows of a nation. I believe that a detailed ethnography in dialogue with the “theater of cruelty” of Antonin Artaud and psychoanalysis of Julia Kristeva helps us understand processes of construction of such personae on the stage of the Slash-Knife District. At a moment when the old “Slash-Knife District” undergoes processes of urbanization, with city lights and rectilinear avenues and streets named after *bandeirante* figures, an image of the Indian woman “lassoed in the woods” flashes up and gives rise to the origin story of the woman who “cut a man to pieces”. In tension-packed bodies of women of Devil's Hole a double lineage is revealed, and a lower bodily stratum of Our Lady is illumined. One final note: the image of the Indian Woman Lassoed in the Woods is closely associated with that of the Woman Crazy with Rage, which sometimes flashes up as a protector of her mates and of her sons and daughters.

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In this essay I intend to revisit notes of field diaries made in a small ravine on the edges of the city of Piracicaba, Sao Paulo, where approximately one-hundred families from the North of Minas Gerais and other regions of Brazil built their shacks. As a reminder of the forces of geological and social erosions which are part of the history of the place, it was called “Devils’ Hole”. It also received a more lyrical name. I will call it Garden of Flowers. As for the couple which received me, I will call them Joana and Mister Z. They came from the state of Minas Gerais. Mister Z was a sugarcane cutter. So was Joana, until the birth of her grandsons and granddaughters.

During the 1970s, as a result of the oil embargoes and the end of the so-called “Brazilian economic miracle”, the government invested in programs aimed at production of ethanol. The interior of the state of Sao Paulo was transformed into an ocean of sugarcane. And many people turned into sugarcane cutters. Multitudes of people came from different regions of Brazil to Piracicaba, as workers in cane fields, producing the sources of renewable energy to feed the automobile industries.

Why revisit these faded field diaries? Here, as you will see, can be found the scene of a crime. And a weapon: a machete for cutting sugarcane. I believe this crime, such as a scene that one may find in the type of theater imagined by Antonin Artaud, mobilizes, even today, many years after their register in field diaries, the shades or shadows of a nation.

If one were to do an archaeology of the Garden of Flowers, one would discover that the shacks which there exist were built over the ashes of an old peripheral area of the city of Piracicaba: the Slash-Knife District. With cycles and scythes provided by city government do “cleanse” the place, the first families arriving from Minas Gerais removed the weeds and woods and built their shacks from residual materials gathered at construction sites. But other people already lived in the area, in the woods, as part of the lower social stratum of the city.

Storytellers sometimes spoke of the origins of the place. The stories which they told sometimes looked like an inverted sort of myth of paradise. Mention was made of a primordial couple: male and female. However, in the style of creations stories of Ancient Mesopotamia, or of the stories of Lilith, the devil-woman of Biblical narratives, origin stories of the Slash-Knife District sounded like tales of horror: a woman brandishing a machete cut a man into pieces.

The fire was dying down. The Witch-Doctor told me a story: “Ten years ago there was only darkness. Only bushes. Weeds and woods. There were some eucalyptus trees. A guava tree. And this water hole. There was no asphalt. Nothing. Itapuã [the adjoining neighborhood] was a sugarcane field. There were a few shacks made of mud and clay. One day, a woman cut a man, ripping through his guts with a machete, from below, between his legs, up above. She cut him into pieces. That’s why they call the place *Risca-Faca* [“Slash-Knife”). The name caught on. The people who live here were all, as you could say, highly dangerous *nêgos* [derivative of *negros*, sometimes endearing, sometimes pejorative, may be used for people of different colors, including white]... “Baby-Face” (*Chupeta*), “Devil-Boy” (*Capeta*), *Bertaia*, *Fião*, *Noel*...” (June 16, 1983).

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In this origin story, we encounter a body in pieces. If worlds of sense arise from the senses of the body, then this story may provoke a shudder. A man is cut into pieces. This doesn't sound, so it seems, like a story about a founder. What can one say of the woman? A devil-woman from hell she carries the stench of flowers of evil. Far from a creation story, we are in the face of destruction. In place of a couple coming into being, the couple is undone. In place of light and birth, only darkness and destruction.

In anthropological accounts about the creation of social webs in low-income urban populations, images of mothers are recurrent. Such images are sometimes charged with aura. And emerge at the center of webs of reciprocity capable of offering care and protection. The very forces of chaos, as if moved by the action of an unseen pottery-maker, are transformed into cosmos. Amid inhospitable and uncertain landscape, where one can only live in danger, matrifocal forms of social life emerge. The resilience and vitality of such forms may be remarkable.

The image of the woman which emerges in the story of origins of the Slash-Knife, however, has little to do with the gift of life. Whatever aura may be associated with the image of a mother is dissipated. Here flashes a woman who brings death. Her gesture sinks in darkness. It's like a thing from hell. It has the stamp of something hideous, something bad, capable of shaking the images of saints and Our Ladies which can be found on altars of homes in the shacks of the Garden of Flowers.

Curiously, however, this gesture may also evoke images of saints, afraid of no man, such as Joan of Arc. One of the field notes refers to such an image kept beneath the bed of a woman:

When passing by the shack of Maria and Gabriel, I encounter Diolindia, a widow from the backlands of the North of Minas Gerais. She too had "fallen into Devils' Hole". She speaks with enthusiasm about a movie which she had just seen on television: "Joan of Arc! That's a real woman! A saint! Afraid of no man! She would put on armor and go into the fire of battle. She would defend her people. And go up against arrows, swords and cannon fire!" (January 21, 1984).

In this presentation, I am especially interested in discussing a particular image: the "Indian woman lassoed in the woods". In one of her stories, Diolindia told an incident involving a discussion with the wife of her brother:

I'm a woman of destiny. That devil-woman tried to make me go crazy, but that's okay. I'm also a devil-woman. I'm the daughter of an Indian woman who was lassoed in the woods. My mother was Indian, a raging Indian who was not afraid of any man. She would go up against any weapon or nation. It would take a cannon to bring down that Indian woman of the woods!" (May 25, 1983).

The image of the woman which erupts in the origin story of the Slash-Knife evokes one of the main characters of narratives concerning the making of people of the backlands of Brazil: the "Indian woman lassoed in the woods".

Montage

One detail deserves attention: the main characters of the field diaries of “Devils’ Hole” – including Joana and Diolindia – are devotees of Our Lady Aparecida, the patron saint of Brazil. The lineages overlap: women of Devils’ Hole see themselves as daughters of Our Lady and of Indian Women Lassoed in the Woods as well.

In various field diary entries the gesture of Our Lady of the Slash-Knife flashes:

“She grabbed me by the throat and slapped me in the face. I ran to the kitchen, got me a knife (*peixeira*) this big. The knife shining...! I said, “you’re shining, but now you’re going to turn red!” (...) I was going to rip her like this, bottom up, from the groin all the way up to the throat, not letting the head get in the way!” (September 9, 1983)

“I told the whore: “come here so I can teach you how to cut things right. I’m going to shove this knife beneath your legs and cut you into pieces!” (May 28, 1985)

“He doesn’t know I’m crazy, I’m not a person! (...) I’ll put a hole in that plague! I’ll put a hole in him and laugh aloud! Oh my God! Doesn’t he know that I’m a mother?” (November 12, 1983)

Astounding daily life. The laughter, along with deranged violence, reveals an excess. Aggressive, it transgresses. With the innervation of the body an image is produced. Here one is struck by the overlapping of planes. An opposition flashes up (cf. Eisenstein 1990, p. 41). And a montage charged with tension: the Virgin Our Lady and the Indian Woman Lassoed in the Woods.

Purity and danger

As Antonin Artaud might say, shades or shadows agitate this history. Dangerously flashes the image of the Indian Woman in the body of the devotee. Purity and danger. The juncture of these images evokes the title of Mary Douglas’ book (Douglas 1976). And, also, in a state of friction, two of Julia Kristeva’s writings: *Powers of horror* and “Stabat Mater” (Kristeva 1980; 1982; 2002a).

In *Powers of horror* Kristeva interprets the primordial experience of female gender: hideous, vile, revolting, liminal, ambiguous, unclean. The mother’s body. Fecund and strangely familiar. Neither subject nor object: abject. In the dark light of abjection, the mother-woman image is revealed. Dangerous!

In “Stabat Mater” (originally published as “Herethiue de l’amour”; cf. Kristeva 1977), Kristeva speaks of the place of the Virgin Our Lady in the constitution of the social and symbolic universe of Christianity. The formation of symbolic orders involves processes of purification.

Reframing some of Kristeva’s thinking in the language of Walter Benjamin, the following question may be set forth: is Our Lady of the Slash-Knife an image of the past which flashes in the present in a moment of danger?

In the following, I intend to discuss the origin story of the Slash-Knife area, first, in the social context of the 1970s and 1980s of Piracicaba, and, then, in relation to its own narrative context of hideous stories found in field note diaries.

Both exercises evoke a social imaginary which highlights the image of Our Lady of the Slash-Knife in her relations with two male figures: in the first case, the *bandeirante* (literally, the “flag-taking”) heroic figure known as a civilizing force in Brazilian history; and, in the second case, the “highly dangerous *nêgo*” male figure cited in the origin story – the one who was cut into pieces.

A few questions arise. Is the woman of the Slash-Knife story a manifestation of a sort of nocturnal or dark history of Our Lady? After all, why did she cut the man into pieces? And, particularly, this poor devil?

Bandeirantes and sugarcane cutters

During the 1970s and 1980s, sugarcane cutters riding on backs of trucks emerged in cities of the interior of the state of São Paulo. Brought by the winds of a storm called progress, they evoked in cities images of the backlands of Brazil. Covered with ashes of burnt cane fields, they were sometimes referred to as ghosts (*assombrações*) as they passed through city streets on their way to and back from the cane fields. As such they haunted the dreams of progress which gave force to Brazilian industry.

During this period the *bandeirante* image also gains strength in Piracicaba. City government makes efforts to urbanize the periphery of the city, focusing on the impoverished Slash-Knife area. With tractors and bulldozers and avenue is opened and named after one of the most famous *bandeirantes*: Antonio Raposo Tavares. Like an elongated and rectilinear spear, the Raposo Tavares avenue cuts through the old Slash-Knife District, dividing the area in pieces and quadrilateral spaces. At the end of the spear another avenue evokes a name from *bandeirante* history books: the *Avenida das Monções*, or, literally, the Avenue of Monsoons, another name for the band of explorers better-known as *bandeirantes*. While Raposo Tavares cuts through the Slash-Knife District, the Avenue of Monsoons encloses its borders.

Along the Raposo Tavares Avenue electric lines are extended. City lights come to the periphery. Darkness is undone. With cycles and scythes provided by city government families arriving from the backlands of Brazil “clean” the area. With residual or leftover materials collected at construction sites, shacks are built. New city districts emerge from the ashes of burnt weeds and bushes, taken by forceps from the entrails of the Slash-Knife District. One of these districts becomes the Garden of Flowers, also known as Devils’ Hole. During the process of urbanization of the city periphery, the origin story of the Slash-Knife District is noted in a field diary: with a machete for cutting sugarcane a woman cuts a man into pieces. In this gesture flashes the image of the Indian Woman Lassoed in the Woods.

Bandeirantes were also known as Indian hunters. And they chased runaway slaves. According to some of the better known stories concerning the founding fathers and mothers of Brazil, Black slave women and Indian women “lassoed in the woods”, giving birth to sons and daughters of Portuguese fathers, became mothers of the nation.

During the 1970s and 1980s the city government of Piracicaba intensified efforts to “preserve the memory” of the city, giving special attention to restoring the “House of the Founder”, the *bandeirante* Antônio Correa Barbosa. This male figure was not cut into pieces, or, as one says in Brazil, made into *picadinho*. Rather, he opened up *picadas*, or pathways through the woods.

In one of her books, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes*, Julia Kristeva (1988) speaks of a familiar type of estrangement. The figure of the stranger evokes the Other in ourselves. I believe that the image of the Woman Lassoed in the Woods is particularly interesting in this regard. At the moment in which an avenue named after the *bandeirante* Raposo Tavares is opened and paved through the periphery of Piracicaba, amidst dreams of progress, an image erupts with a machete knife cutting a man into pieces. A primordial mother: a stranger.

Narratives of horror

How about relations between Our Lady of the Slash-Knife and the man who was cut into pieces? In the aforementioned origin story, the narrator is laconic. He says: “The people who live here were all, as you could say, highly dangerous *nêgos*... “Baby-Face” (*Chupeta*), “Devil-Boy” (*Capeta*), *Bertaia*, *Fião*, *Noel*...” (June 16, 1983). Two cases, involving characters with this type of profile, emerge in field diaries. The first refers to a figure which I will call The King of Eyes (*Rei dos Olhos*) and his relations with a woman here referred to as Anna Jaguar. The second case has to do with a young man whom we will call Bimba, and his relations with Bella, his girlfriend, and a half-witted fool (*bobinho*).

King of Eyes and Anna Jaguar

The King of Eyes actually killed two beautiful women.

Anna Jaguar was a beautiful woman. She was the daughter of an African mother and of a Portuguese father. She had green eyes and light dark skin. Anna Jaguar left her legitimate husband to live in the Garden of Flowers with The King of Eyes. (...) After a while, Anna Jaguar (...) left The King of Eyes. Misfortune happened when she went with her boy to get her things. [According to one version, she had just come back from the cane fields.] All was dark. “The King of Eyes struck with his knife. He threw the boy in the woods and slashed Anna Jaguar, tearing through her breast and belly, her intestines spilling out... The place where she was killed... you know, the grass never came back and the banana trees withered?” (May 2, 1983)

The most intriguing aspect of narratives regarding The King of Eyes, however, has to do with the wavering of signs. In some narratives one is struck by images which are not easily found in police reports. In such passages, for example, women storytellers speak of the suffering (and courage) of The King of Eyes. Here one may find elements suggesting a sort of *Via Crucis* or Way of Sorrows. “They beat him... Over at the stone quarry, you know?” “He was hung upside down, and tied up.” “They let him pass the night light that, handcuffed to the eucalyptus tree.” (September 5, 1983). “They say now

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that he has softened up. If you were to see him now you wouldn't say that this is The King of Eyes" (May 3, 1983).

Various elements call attention in these narratives. In first place, the way he attracts Anna Jaguar. And, then, the *Via Crucis* or Way of Sorrows of The King of Eyes, in stories which seem to turn this character into a "sacrificial victim".

Why did this beautiful woman leave her husband to live with The King of Eyes? One detail may deserve attention: before getting together with Anna Jaguar, The King of Eyes had already done a sort of apprenticeship with *Nego Preto* and *Nicolau*, becoming, like them, a "*nego de alta periculosidade*", a "highly dangerous *nêgo*".

"He became like that after he bought a book of St. Cyprian. I think he read only the bad parts. Oh, he knew how to read. [...] The ones who taught him all those things [*malandragem*] were *Nêgo Preto* and *Nicolau*. (September 17, 1983)

The reference to St. Cyprian's book, and, especially, to the "bad parts" of the book, deserves attention. The powers of darkness, and of the underworld, are invoked. Devils' Hole. Prior to his conversion to Christianity, so the story goes, Cyprian did an apprenticeship with Evora, a powerful witch. And he invokes the powers of Lucifer. What are his deeds? Even though he is a vulgar man, Cyprian is able to seduce beautiful and virtuous virgins of noble origins. He humiliates their fathers. Even kings fall to his feet.

Bimba, Bella and the fool

In field diary notes another character with a profile of a "highly dangerous *nêgo*" appears. There is a particularity to this case, also registered in police reports. A young man, whom we will call Bimba, who lives with Bella, one of the most beautiful women of the Garden of Flowers, kills a half-witted fool bashing his head with a stone.

Just as Bimba left on his way, disappearing among the shacks, Joanna turned to me and said: "He's bad! He's really bad! Four months ago he killed a fool bashing his brains with a stone. Right there, you see [she "points" with her lips]. That night he showed up here with the brains of the fool running down the legs of his trousers." (May 27, 1983)

Another narrator confirms the story: "Bella [the woman living with Bimba] said that he would rub his hands on his trousers. He would rub off the brains of the fool with his hands and put them in his mouth" (July 3, 1983).

"The fool even said: 'Are you hitting me just to play or for real? Bimba was getting more and more angry, finding a stone to bash the fool until he killed him.'"

Different versions seem to agree: "He would bash the head of the fool with a stone and the fool would say, 'Bimba, I don't want to play'. According to the fool, it was play" (June 12, 1984). Bimba viciously attacked another neighbor who was also known as a "poor thing" (*coitado*) and half-witted fool (*bobo*), "slashing him with a knife and laughing at the same time" (August 25, 1983). Such reports evoke recurrent phenomena associated with popular celebrations of the Middle Ages and Renaissance: macabre

laughter amidst degradation and tearing apart of the body (cf. Bakhtin 1993, p. 167, 168, 230, 307).

Such as the case of The King of Eyes, some of these narratives tell of the sufferings of Bimba. His *Via Crucis* or Way of Sorrows. Signs waver. Bimba is also transfigured into a “poor thing”. “When they got him they were merciless, they hit him so much” (August 25, 1983). “His trousers, they say, are with Bella. They stripped him naked” (August 24, 1983). “The police got Bimba. I saw him trembling in the car, without a shirt... I couldn’t bear to look. I just felt right then something in my heart.” (July 3, 1983).

Why did Bella, one of the most beautiful women of the Garden of Flowers, fall in love with Bimba? Before discussing this question, we may need to deal with a second enigma: why was Bimba peeved at people who were known as half-witted fools?

Becoming a worker (*peão*): to be or not to be

Field diary notes offer few but interesting clues:

(While talking with Bimba), I comment that I never saw anybody work as hard as Mister Z. I was only repeating a phrase I had heard from different people, with admiration. But my comment didn’t produce the effect I had imagined. Bimba turned suddenly with fury and contempt: “Mister Z is a poor thing!” (June 10, 1983)

In the Garden of Flowers people who work hard may be highly admired. But hard workers also run the risk of becoming “poor things!” (*coitados*). And half-witted fools (*bobinhos*). The following fragment of the field diary may be suggestive:

“The landowner (*fazendeiro*) wants his employees to be fools. Because fools don’t think. They just work. Some fools work like horses. The landowner scares the fool. He says: “Work harder, or I’ll call the police. You’re not working enough.” So the fool becomes scared and works double. A lot of times landowners try to get their workers to marry in their own families, to give birth to half-witted fools” (May 26, 1978).

One of the sons of Joanna and Mister Z was known as a “poor thing”. And as a *peão*, literally “peon”, or “hard worker”. Rumors had it that he was on a list of ten names made up by Bimba. He was “marked to die”, people said. Joanna was so worried she could hardly sleep. By the way, she said that she also worried about me, the researcher.

Becoming dangerous

Now we come to the second enigma: why did Anna Jaguar and Bella, two of the most beautiful women in the Garden of Flowers, fall in love with these “highly dangerous nêgos”, The King of Eyes and Bimba? Is there an attraction in the Garden of Flowers for highly dangerous characters?

“Expressing her admiration for someone who was admiring himself, Joanna comments: ‘Look at him fixing that hair. Looking in the mirror. He’s dangerous!’” (July 27, 1983). “When I do my hair *Black* I have to walk carefully” (July 24, 1983). Joanna was admiring

her son in law, Charles. Charles didn't pass that cream Wellin on his hair. The prescription for the cream Wellin for straightening hair which the researcher (I myself) had found in a ditch in the Garden of Flowers said "Straight, soft and docile" (June 30, 1984). "Maria pokes fun at *Witch-Doctor* (Pagé): 'I've never seen Pagé take the bus to go downtown'. Pagé (*Witch-Doctor*) responds: 'Who me? Me go downtown? The bogey-man will get me!'" (June 4, 1983).

Here is the danger: the irruption of peripheral or liminal characters downtown. The police were alert.

Bulls and boys

"They put those wires to produce shock". In this way narratives evoke the *Via Crucis* or Way of Sorrows of The King of Eyes, the "highly dangerous nêgo" who killed Anna Jaguar. The phallus, or prick, which in Brazil may be referred to as *pica*, with the same root found in *picadinho*, "cut into pieces", receives special attention of the police. It is well known that one of the places where police place electric wires to give shock is the region of the phallus and testicles.

According to the imaginary which surrounds the figure of the *bandeirante*, the civilizing process is visualized as a movement which goes from the coast to the *sertão* (backlands), from the city to the countryside, and from the center to the periphery. In societies, such as Brazil, which oftentimes see themselves as peripheral in regard to the European and North-American (now Chinese) centers of development, the coast tends to be viewed as a place which is nearer to the real centers of activity, projected overseas. The civilizing process is also thought of in terms of gender. The *pica* (or phallus) is one of the images mobilized for interpreting this process.

In terms of this imaginary, the experience of becoming dangerous has to do with the image of someone from the periphery moving towards the center. In such manner, so it seems, things are inverted: the periphery penetrates the center.

As for the "*pica de boi*" (bull prick, or phallus). The boys who worked as shoeshiners, whom I had known since 1978 and 1979, had told me that the police sometimes took them to the spigot on the other side of the river, on the right bank of the river, where they were flogged with a *pica de boi* (bull phallus). (...) I said: "was it really the bull's phallus?" "Yes", Joanna said. "Long and black, it's the bull's prick. They let it dry, then use it as a whip. It cuts through the skin, it hurts a lot" (November 8, 1983).

In these notes one detects an inversion of an inversion. The inverted expression, perhaps, of a carnival-like celebration. In his writings, Mikhail Bakhtin speaks of a game of the "violated bull", mentioned by François Rabelais. "For this violated bull, destined for slaughter, was a *victim of carnival*. He was the *king*, the *reproducer* (incarnating yearly fertility) and at the same time the *sacrificial meat*, which was supposed to be beaten and cut up into pieces to make sausages and pates" (Bakhtin 1993, p. 176).

The same author says: "The beaten (and dead) body is decorated with ornaments; the flagellation is *merry*; it begins and ends in laughter" (italics placed by Bakhtin, 1993, p. 176).

On the right margin of the Piracicaba River things are inverted (inverting and impeding carnival-like inversions). A *pica de boi* (bull phallus) impedes sons (or grandsons and great grandsons) of slaves and Indian Women Lassoed in the Woods from producing a carnival-like inversion, keeping them from emerging downtown.

Now we return to our initial question: how can we interpret the origin story of the Slash-Knife District? What can one say of the woman who cut the man into pieces? And of the gesture associated with the Indian Woman Lassoed in the Woods?

One more field note deserves attention: “I would like to be a man so as to kill!” (November 28, 1983). This phrase, which was spoken in a moment of tension, but one of the daughters of Joanna, illumines one of the most obvious inversions which occur in the origin story of the Slash-Knife District: the woman who kills.

Besides this inversion, is there another in ellipses? Are we in face of an unfinished story? The culinary image of *picadinho* (“cut into pieces”, which, in Brazil, also refers to a dish of diced meat), involving the breaking apart of bodies, is a recurrent theme of celebrations of the Middle Ages and Renaissance (cf. Bakhtin 1993, p. 168). (Incidentally, here one may also find affinities with the *sparagmos* of Dionysian cults of Ancient Greece.) This image has to do with the “grotesque opening up of the body” and with the system of images referring to “pregnant death” (Bakhtin 1993, p. 315). “Man is not something finished and closed; he is unfinished and open” (Bakhtin 1993, p. 320). In such celebrations, the act of making *picadinho*, or of “cutting into pieces”, becomes a way of announcing, against the grind of somber eschatology, the merry re-creation of the world (Bakhtin 1993, p. 206). The shattered being (*ser picado*) becomes protagonist. He “represents the old world, *pregnant, giving birth*” (Bakhtin 1993, p. 180). Darkness comes to light. In rites of passage inversions of this type also take place: *tombs* turn into *wombs* (cf Turner, 1967, p. 99; 1969, p. 96).

Is the woman of the origin story of the Slash-Knife District a mother in the strongest and most surprising sense of the word? By means of this gesture, even the “old world”, having as one of its representatives a “highly dangerous *nêgo*” becomes pregnant and ready to give birth. Does the configuration of a woman ready to kill – along with the volcanic effects of such an inversion – permit for the irruption of incandescent material from deep-seated substrata of maternal experience?

Subterranean regions of symbols: Our Lady and the Indian Woman Lassoed in the Woods

In the Garden of Flowers, above the ashes of the old Slash-Knife District, live the daughters – or granddaughters and great granddaughters – of slaves and Indian Women Lassoed in the Woods. Many consider themselves to be daughters of Our Lady Aparecida, the patron saint of Brazil. The juxtaposition of these maternal lineages may produce a montage effect, charged with tension. In the bodily innervations of Our Ladies, I believe, flash up the gestures of Indian and Black slave women.

According to Victor Turner (1969, p. 128), powerful symbols are oftentimes recreated at margins of social structures. From these margins arise cults of Our Ladies. However, it may be necessary to provoke a double dislocation, going to margins of margins, so as to

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capture other images such as of the mothers lassoed in the woods. Such images are located in deeper substrata. They belong to subterranean regions of symbols.

Shades or shadows of a nation are agitated. Cults of Virgin Our Ladies are especially strong, says Edmund Leach, in highly hierarchical and patriarchal societies, such as colonial Brazil, in which “male landowners, although never marrying people of lower classes, nevertheless (...) graciously allow themselves to take slave women as concubines and to elevate their offspring to elite status” (Leach 1983b, p. 129). In the backstage of history, in the lower regions of the Brazilian social imaginary, fantasmagorical *bandeirantes* and slave masters sometimes haunt the streets and riverbanks as doubles of the Holy Spirit. In this terrific or frightful register, the Holy Ghost also doubled for hunters of Indians and Black slaves. Indian Women lassoed in the woods and Black women of slave quarters also turned into Our Ladies and Virgin Mothers of God. Mothers of nations. Patron saints. Powerful myths, Antonin Artaud says, often emerge from heinous crimes.

In the area of the old Slash-Knife District, the study of processes of settlement may require a special kind of archaeology: a double dislocation, as suggested, from the *bandeirante* founder to Our Lady, and then, from Our Lady to the Indian and slave Women Lassoed in the Woods. Or, as Julia Kristeva might say, from the Virgin to abject women. In this way some of the stories of women founders may flower, many of which have not yet been told. As flowers of evil some come to light.

One final note: the image of the Indian Woman Lassoed in the Woods is closely associated with that of the Woman Crazy with Rage, which sometimes flashes up as a protector of her mates and of her sons and daughters (cf. Dawsey 2006).

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