

Ribamar José de Oliveira Junior and Lore Fortes: *Deborah Learned How to Play Sword with the “Cabras”*: Lesbianism and Activism in the *Guerreiro*, a Brazilian Popular Culture’s Manifestation



Deborah Learned How to Play Sword with the “Cabras” : Lesbianism and Activism in the *Guerreiro*, a Brazilian Popular Culture’s Manifestation

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Translation from Brazilian Portuguese by Bruna Barros and Jess Oliveira

Abstract

The main objective of this research is to present a study on the activism of sexual and gender dissidents in Brazilian popular culture, through a focus on the performative production of the *Guerreiro* tradition in the city of Juazeiro do Norte in the countryside of Ceará, Brazil. By taking into account the mode of subjectivation and the performative politics of Deborah Bomfims, a member of the group “Guerreiras de Joana D’arc,” coordinated by Mestra Margarida Guerreira, we seek to understand the way in which sexuality permeates the activism of the Northeastern regional tradition, by distorting the “*cabra macho*” [macho man] ideal in popular culture through visibility and resistance in the scenic dance performance.¹ We argue that the *Guerreiro* tradition arises as a way of life for Deborah’s lesbian existence, mainly because, as a *brincante*² [player], she faces prejudices by standing between her lesbian identity and heteronormativity.³

Keywords: Guerreiro; Theatre; Popular Culture; Lesbianism; Gender and Sexuality.

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This paper seeks to present some thoughts on Brazilian lesbian experiences through Deborah Bomfins’s participation in the popular cultural tradition of groups in Juazeiro, in the Cariri region of Ceará, in Brazil’s Northeast. We apply the methodology of sentimental cartography, proposed by Rolnik (1989), in order to follow the production of subjectivity and the movement of the player’s desire within the *Guerreiro*’s cultural production, characterised by the Christmas festivities that take place during the “*Ciclo de Reis*” [Three Kings’ Cycle], a period that corresponds to the second half of November and the first half of January on the municipal calendar. The popular celebration ends on *Dia de Reis* [Three Kings’ Day], January 6th.

The analysis takes place in the João Cabral neighbourhood, in the city of Juazeiro do Norte, where the most popular Christmas parties, the *Reisado* and the *Guerreiro* are celebrated. According to data from the *Carroça de Mamulengos* Collective, in 2019 the district counts 250 participants, while the municipality has 778 participants in the popular culture’s events. This research focuses on the *Guerreiro* tradition and relates it to the *Reisado* insofar as the tradition’s learning process branches into Deborah’s discourse [from the *Guerreiro*] between the two cultural events. Brandão (2003) highlights the *Guerreiro* as a variant of cultural practices originated in the states of Alagoas and Pernambuco and defines this tradition as a modernized appearance of the *Reisados*. The *Guerreiros*’s narrative is danced and sung through a sequence of performative acts, characterised by “songs danced by a group of dancers dressed in multi-coloured costumes, the emulation of the colony’s old noble costumes, adapted to the taste and economic possibility of the people” (Brandão 2003, 76).

One of the key concepts for the development of the research is the “theatre as enchantment,” elaborated through the cartography of Barroso (2013) on *Reisados do Ceará*. For the author, the scenic performance of tradition takes place through enchantment, a moment when the players are enchanted and enchanting through the embodiment of fantastic and legendary characters’

majesties, as well as through disenchantment, when the players leave the popular scenario and return to ordinary life. It is interesting to note the contrast between the cultural production of tradition and social issues, because, generally, the players are simple and humble people who live in poor and peripheral neighbourhoods of urban centres.

As Barroso (2013, 44) explains about the *Reisado* tradition, “the vast majority of players are men, although the participation of women has increased in recent times, it apparently has always existed in many places.” According to the author, women would be linked to secondary functions in the festivity, such as production roles both in the making of costumes and ornaments, as well as in arranging presentations. Thus, we consider Deborah’s playful body to be powerful on the scene, especially because of its ability to deconstruct the patriarchal nature of relationships (Navarro Swain 2010) through activism of sexual and gender dissidence, as Colling (2018) points out.

How can the *Guerreiro* game provide a lesbian resistance’s coalition (Butler 2018) beyond heterosexual contracts (Wittig 1978) within popular culture’s tradition? If tradition allows for a condition of survival through the theatre of Reis’ art, we can assert that, for Deborah, the learning of swordplay appears to the extent that her “lesbian existence,” expressed also by artistic practices, can “undo the power that men perform over women” (Rich 2010, 43). Therefore, we highlight the way in which activism is crossed by corporeality in the *Guerreiro* play, as well as by lesbian sexuality in the practice of Brazilian Northeastern culture.

Lesbianess as activism: gender performativity in the theatre of Kings

The first time Deborah Bomfins Pinheiro, 26, played the *Guerreiro* was outdoors, at the Carlos Cruz Square in the João Cabral neighbourhood, in Juazeiro do Norte, Ceará state, Brazil. It was 2003 and she was ten years old. The artist collective *Carroça de Mamulengos*⁴ had arrived in Juazeiro do Norte and all

the children were impressed with people on wooden legs, clown games and popular cultures’ dances. “My first contact with art was at the circus,” explains Deborah who is today one of the six *Guerreiras* of Mestra Margarida’s group. According to the player, the novelty of an artist collective made children start liking street art.

The theatre company kept going back and forth to the city, always bringing games to the neighbourhood. One day, the collective decided to stay and set up an artistic headquarters in the neighbourhood. According to Deborah, this was due to the richness observed by the artists in the popular cultures that emerged in the João Cabral neighbourhood. The *União dos Artistas da Terra da Mãe de Deus* [The Union of Artists from God’s Mother’s Land] opens its doors and, in a short time, the children begin attending theatre, painting and drawing classes besides playing instruments, singing and even harvesting in the square. “Everything was already there and the company brought us what we could learn,” Deborah says.

Then, the artists group had the idea of assembling a group that would play the *Guerreiro* cultural tradition. The artists managed to bring Mestra Margarida Guerreira, one of the first women in the city to lead such a group, to dance with the children in João Cabral. Margarida Guerreira lived in a neighbourhood called Mutirão and, according to Deborah, this meeting with the company allowed a greater care of her basic needs as an elderly player. “The group started taking good care of her, so she could give back in music and teach us,” Deborah says. At first, the group members were all women. Four of Deborah’s six sisters danced in the group. However, there was a family barrier placed by their father’s permission that, at the time, would not allow the girls to play the *Guerreiro*. “My daughter will not go out in the middle of the street running with a sword in her hand, this is not for her,” recalls the player about this sad childhood episode.

The general parents' prohibition to take part in the group's activities made the actress Maria Gomide, a member of *Carroça de Mamulengos*, visit each house in the neighbourhood to explain what exactly the children's encounters with art consisted of. The process was slow and, according to Deborah, difficult, but it worked out. Today her father has all of her videos of sword playing and taking part in popular culture events. This is how the tradition began to take place in João Cabral due to the trust gained by and placed in Maria Gomide; due to her efforts, the *Guerreiro* group came into being between 2003 and 2004.

“Our differential was that, after we set up the *Guerreiro*, I will not say that we were the first, but we had a very strong history inside this tradition, and, after that, other groups started to pop up,” explains Deborah about the emergence of other women-only *Guerreiro* groups. Although the news of the group's performances was widespread in the neighbourhood, Deborah believes that the fact that Maria sat with the children, picked up the guitar and sang all the handwritten notes until everyone learned them, touched the children's sensibility. “She sang lyric by lyric until she learned them all.”

In 2003, Mestra Margarida Guerreira no longer played swords, although she knew how to do it very well. She was well known as the mother of Masters in the Cariri region. Since she learned it from men, Deborah considers that the performative reproduction of the acts might have made her acquire the reiterated character of the male gender in dance. “We learned from men, so when I play I look like a man playing! Antonio, Maria's brother, said: “Deborah, come here, do it, put your hand on your hips, show us some lightness...” and I said: “But I learned it from the guys, man, I'm going to play this way!”

Over time, she explains that the group has sort of “personalized” the way of playing swords, so they play it in a softer and more delicate way, “a more feminine touch, so to speak,” adds Deborah. The player points out that there is a thought, along the lines of tradition, that the *Guerreiro* is for women, while the *Reisado* is for men. This norm was learned during the first rehearsals, although

"both [plays] have female and male characters, for example the *Guerreiro* has the character Mateu, who is a male. The *Reisado* has a character who is the Queen." Deborah also says that *Guerreiro* is more melodic. "Men use more strength to sing and women sing softer. With men, it's kind of a war, a fight..." she says.

Both the *Guerreiro* and the *Reisado* are groups that need to be commanded by a whistle. Generally, the object is always in the Master's mouth. In the case of Mestra Margarida's *Guerreiras de Joana d'Arc* group, when the whistle blows, two rows of women need to get in formation. When the Mestra speaks, each character is "taken away," that is, enacted during the presentation. In a short time, Deborah started to lead lines; she went from the sides to the centre and got the title of Reis. If someone older were missing to interpret a character, she would cover the role. Altogether, she has approximately 15 years in this tradition, "I consider myself a player, even though they keep calling me Mestra Deborah," she confesses. Deborah did what she calls "creating her space" between the *Guerreiro* and the *Reisado*, an action that can be seen as powerful considering the domination's point of view and the political meanings of heterosexuality, as shown by Curiel (2013).

In 2017, Deborah's *Guerreiras* group announced its return, but a question remained in the air. Deborah had had a child, and her sisters had started families. How would it be possible for them to follow the rehearsals and perform with their lap children? The idea of taking their children to the *Guerreiro's* and *Reisado's* rehearsals appears to have solved the problem. Why would the *Guerreiras* not take their children to dance? Deborah wonders. "So we did rehearsals with mothers from the first formation, who played with their children on their laps. My child was in the middle of the *Reisado*," she remembers. In the performance about six *Guerreiras* danced, the scene is composed by 15 players, apart from the people involved in the organization and behind the scenes logistics.

“As I played since 2003 and came out as a lesbian in 2017, people were surprised, but I had no barriers, “Deborah? She has a baby!” “but she used to date that guy.” people used to say it couldn't be possible, but it is,” says the player about the acceptance of obstacles by her popular culture partners. Today, Deborah says she notices more LGBTQ + people on her side. “Of course, we, gay people, still suffer a lot... the gay who is a *travesti*, the gay who is a trans person, they are putting themselves on the line. Me, as a lesbian... I don't have that thing: “oh, she is a lesbian, I'm going to mess with her”... So whether it is a trans or a *travesti*, they are the ones to take it, they are there in the front line defending homosexuality,” reflects Deborah about constructed categories like the “macho” lesbian and the more “effeminate” gay. The player considers herself a strong woman due to the presence of social markers in her body as a mother, as a black person and as a lesbian. The participation in Mestra Margarida Guerreira's group has empowered her. Deborah says she does not want to be rich, she wants empowerment: “I want to play for the rest of my life. If I can, I will plant this seed. I want to teach, because this is my life and I want to multiply it, I want to pass it on.” It is worth noting that Deborah's lesbian experience changes this cultural event, for it breaks the traditional heritage passed on historically by the male figure of the Master, that is, from father to son.

Conclusions

Although Deborah deviates from labels, she argues that there is no way to get rid of them. Sometimes the *Guerreira* says she looks at herself in the mirror and thinks, “Am I a lesbian? Am I a *sapatão*? I am a woman!” She adds that sometimes we see ourselves through other people's eyes, by believing them when they tell us who we are, which often differs from the way we recognize ourselves. “I look at myself and I see a woman who likes another woman, but the label's strength is very strong...” According to her, the lesbian woman has a strength that makes her fight for her space, while saying that being part of a minority in João Cabral can generate allied spaces, “when everyone comes together to address the issue, the space is created.”

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If the *Guerreiro* tradition enables survival through popular theatre, we highlight Deborah's, corporality and artivism as powerful tools to resist lesbophobic violence with art.

In performance, physical acts perceived as "masculine" end up being evidenced by the public through the way Deborah learned them. However, it is worth noting that the very performative acts point to the gender norm's very failure and, before the lesbian existence within the tradition, challenge through the "Lesbian continuum," as described by Rich (2010), the expected ideal of "cabra macho" who are expected to play the sword in the *Guerreiro* tradition

When Deborah declares that the struggle for spaces is related to her condition as a lesbian woman, she is talking about happiness. According to the player, a relationship with another woman is good for her. "It makes me feel more beautiful, I feel good." Thus, it is possible to notice what she says not only through the story she tells, but also through the way she evokes Margarida's memory while throwing the swords out of the norm, that is, out of the ways a woman who dances the *Guerreiro* is supposed to play. Deborah seems to be right; the sword is a way of life.

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¹ T.N.: *mestra*: (f) master in Portuguese.

² T.N.: a *brincante* is a person who takes part in a popular *brincadeira* [child's play]. In some Brazilian popular cultures, *brincadeira* stands for a type of traditional cultural play and/or practice. *Brincadeiras* are deeply ingrained with the local culture and history of those who take part in them.

³ The term "*cabra*" [goat] is used to name men who are legitimized by male virility in northeastern Brazil; see more about *Guerreiro* at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rCACdFV6lB8>>; work carried out with the support of CAPES during the Master's course in Social Sciences at UFRN.