

“Sir, you’re robb’d”: Iago and the Ethics and Aesthetics of Adapting Shakespeare in Brazil.

Cristiane Busato Smith
Liana de Camargo Leão

Othello's presence in Brazil has never been a case of passive transmission but rather of explicit or embedded cannibalism. The first theatrical productions of the play were translated/adapted from French neo-classical adaptations that themselves notoriously bowdlerized Shakespeare's text. *Othello*, via Jean François Ducis's 1792 version was one of the first Shakespearean productions to appear in Brazil, in 1835. Two years later, Brazilian actor-manager and promoter of Shakespeare, João Caetano (1808-1863) staged a production of *Othello* (via Ducis), receiving great critic and audience acclaim. His successful formula was to impart his impactful voice modulation and melodramatic acting style to his interpretation of the protagonist. Even though Shakespeare's presence in 19th century Brazil is not particularly noteworthy, it would be a mistake to ignore *Othello*'s preeminence,¹ as its presence in the theatrical and literary scene attests.²

The twentieth and twenty first centuries ushered in new modes of incorporating *Othello*: no longer mediated by European translations, the play has been freely adapted to the stage and TV to express different aesthetic and political concerns. That *Othello* holds a particular favoritism in Brazil should not be surprising: in addition to its domestic

¹*Othello* shall always be [Brazil's] favorite play by great English poet. [...] In general, theatergoers do not understand the subtleties of Hamlet; the despairs of Lear [...]; the usury of Shylock [...] but everyone fully understands the loyal, credulous, amorous rumbustious Moor – into whose soul the satanic genius of Iago inoculates the virus of jealousy. [...] Were it not for the legendary quality of the protagonist and the remoteness of the period, today *Othello* would be staged as a contemporary play [...]. That's why the public embraces *Othello* as their favorite tragedy. In: *Teatros in Jornal do Comércio*, p. 2, 15/06/1891

² The most representative 19th century parodies of *Othello* are: Gonçalves Dias's romantic drama *Leonor de Mendonça* (1848) and Machado de Assis's *Dom Casmurro* (1899), considered one of the greatest novels of Brazilian literature.

structure, Othello's plight as a colonial other speaks to the sensibilities of the Brazilian colonized condition.

In this sense, many contemporary stage adaptations of Shakespeare, including *Otelo da Mangueira*, are paradigmatic models of "transcreation", as conceptualized in 1963 by brothers Haroldo and Augusto de Campos. Transcreation emphasizes the creative process and the potentials of the new text over the old one. In this respect, the Campos brothers reactivate the modernist metaphor of cannibalism formulated by Oswald de Andrade, which expresses the idea that the colonized culture, rather than rejecting the hegemonic culture, should appropriate, digest, and assimilate it in an anthropophagic fashion in order to be *empowered* rather than overpowered by it. Andrade's cannibal 'law' from the *Manifesto*, "I am only interested in that which is not mine" highlights the self-empowering consumption of European culture - the cannibal eats his enemy to absorb his bravery and strength. In this logic, Shakespeare's "To be or not to be" becomes Andrade's 'Tupi or not Tupi' - the iconic catchphrase of Brazilian *Modernismo*. Alluding simultaneously to the indigenous Tupinambás, who practiced cannibalism to incorporate the wisdom of the Europeans and to Hamlet's famous line, 'Tupi or not Tupi' both embraces *and* rejects Shakespeare/European culture. The bold transgression which "Tupi or not Tupi" encapsulates hints at the project cultural cannibalism was determined to undertake: to absorb the foreign experience, cherry-picking elements that revitalize and strengthen the Brazilian ethos. In this logic, Brazil is not the place "where Shakespeare eats, but where he is eaten". Indeed eating, ingestion, deglutition, consumption, absorption, devouring, digesting are all fitting metaphors for the cannibalistic concept because they lay emphasis on the process of recycling and incorporating otherness. The new model became the anthropophagus, the evil and ravenous savage, who should contrast with and replace the image of the "good and noble savage", the tamed Indian hero that frequently appeared in Brazilian 19th century literature. By the same token, Andrade's cannibal 'law' from the *Manifesto*, "I am only interested in that which is not mine" further highlights the nature and urge of the cannibalistic enterprise.

Brazilian appropriations of Shakespeare since, mainly, the 1980s have resourcefully adopted the anthropophagic stance to redefine the meanings of

Shakespeare's plays while at once reflecting and challenging the Brazilian status quo. A salutary result of such risky undertakings is that, by purposefully defamiliarizing Shakespeare, they offer us refreshing opportunities to reappraise his works.

“You are well tuned”: translating Shakespeare into the universe of samba.

Is it possible for the poetics of 16th century drama to dialogue with the popular parlance of 20th century Brazilian samba? Is it possible to combine such strikingly different universes – literally worlds apart in language, time and space? *Otelo da Mangureira* wants us to think so. Even Barbara Heliodora, the fiercest (and most feared) theater critic in Brazil agrees. Writing from the height of her authority as the greatest Brazilian Shakespearean scholar and translator of *The Complete Dramatic Works* (2016), Heliodora warmly endorses it: “the great merit of Gasparani is to make the plot of *Othello* fit smoothly in the world of the samba school, with the ‘samba-enredo’ dispute³ substituting with ease Iago’s ambition for Cassio’s new post. The most attractive aspect of this *Otelo da Mangureira* is that, although rooted in Shakespeare, it is also a perfect Brazilian musical, and that is not an easy job.” (*O Globo*, 2013).

Heliodora is undoubtedly correct in pointing out the risky potential of such radical appropriations. *Otelo da Mangureira*⁴ (2006-2007) takes transformation to a more sophisticated level in that it is, by no means, a straightforward “rewriting” of *Othello*. Relocated to a Rio de Janeiro favela in the 1940s, *Otelo da Mangureira* cannily reclaims a new identity for Shakespeare’s tragedy in terms of genre, style, geography, history and

³ The *samba enredo*, is a defining part of the organization of a samba school for the carnival parade. Its selection entails a long and competitive process which will determine the theme of that year’s samba school parade. Once the theme is chosen, it will define all the elements of the parade such as costumes, floats, wings, choreographies, etc. In *Otelo da Mangureira*, the critical dispute for the theme song triggers Dirceu’s feelings of jealousy and hatred which leads to the tragic ending. Dirceu used to win all samba enredo’s contests but this year the winner is Candinho, a newcomer in Mangureira, and not Dirceu (Iago), who is *Otelo*’s right hand man and Vice President of the samba school. Outraged, Dirceu can’t accept this loss and *Othello*’s preference for a white younger and more refined sambista, an outsider in the *favela*.

⁴ The complete vídeo is available for viewing at the MIT Global Shakespeares digital archive: <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/otelo-da-mangureira-herz-daniel-2006/#video=otelo-da-mangureira-herz-daniel-2006>

language. To celebrate the 75th anniversary of Mangureira,⁵ his beloved samba school,⁶ Gasparani engaged in telling its history and trajectory. The result is that a whole “new” product⁷ was created, in a dynamic process that reinvents the notions of “original” and “copy”. While traditional samba songs dialogue with Shakespeare’s theme of love, jealousy and betrayal, they primarily celebrate the vibrant culture of samba and carnival in Rio de Janeiro. Shakespeare’s text was translated and adapted by Gustavo Gasparani, who, not by accident, also plays the role of Iago. Gasparani is in fact an absolute Johannes Factotum: playwright, actor, director, historian, samba musician and talented dancer. The show in fact starts and ends with Gasparani in his dual role as playwright and actor: he literally opens and closes the stage curtains, not the actual front curtain, but the scenic curtain made of patches and shreds, simultaneously signaling at the the poverty of the favelas and the patchwork quality of his appropriation. He is the *metteur en scène*, the one who literally sets the scene, as well as its creator. This paper focuses on Gasparani-Iago’s aesthetic approach to the Shakespearean playtext, treating it “as his own”. Much as the iconic figure of the cannibal, Gasparani’s self-empowering consumption of Shakespeare will fuse scenes from *Othello* and the history of Mangureira, as well as reinvent characters and create new ones. While G. Wilson Knight famously coined the phrase “the Othello music” to metaphorically describe the protagonist’s poetry, music is here referred to in its literal sense, as genre; therefore, we speak about musical

⁵ “The Grêmio Recreativo Escola de Samba Mangureira”, better known as Mangureira, originated in the Mangureira *favela* on the hillside. It is one of the most traditional samba schools in Rio de Janeiro. Mangureira’s traditional colors are pink and green. Mangureira stands out amongst other samba schools in that it has remained true to its traditions as well as its drug free policy.

⁶ Samba schools are a very important part of the culture of Rio de Janeiro. They are devoted to practicing samba and competing in the vibrant carnival parade. The schools are organized as community guilds located in different shanty town neighborhoods. Samba schools organize and laboriously prepare for the world famous Rio de Janeiro parade for months, which results in a spectacular display of music, dance, allegorical floats and props.

⁷ The question of whether this “new product” *is* or *is not* Shakespeare is multifarious and it involves processes of influence and reception. In suggesting the lens of Cultural Anthropophagy lens to study *Otelo da Mangureira*, we acknowledge and agree with the benefits of approaching Shakespeare through Deleuze and Guattari’s non-hierarchical concept of a “rhizome”. This allows us to remove the Shakespearean text from its position of center and privilege and consider other rhizomatic interconnections within the organizational structure. As Deleuze and Guattari propose, the rhizome “ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles” (Deleuze and Guattari apud Desmet, Loper and Casey: 4, 2017)

compositions⁸ and their traditions in the form of Brazilian samba.⁹ Indeed, if the vibrant cadence and rhythm of samba invite improvisation and citation, *Otelo da Mangueira* results in something (*almost*) entirely different from Shakespeare.



Fig. 1 Gasparani (in the left foreground corner) closes the spectacle by drawing the curtains.

In terms of structure, Gasparani revealed in a recent interview¹⁰ that he spent months on end listening to traditional samba songs to compose his narrative thread. He cannily stitched together the samba songs, interweaving them with elements and leitmotifs drawn from Shakespeare's tragedy. *Mangueira* and Shakespeare had been lifelong passions and *Othello* was the logic choice as it allowed him to explore the universe of samba and otherness. Yet, radical changes needed to be made. The new characters had to face a divided duty: function in Shakespeare's plot as well as make sense in the favela universe. With the exception of the protagonist, all of the other characters are given new names to honor famous Mangueira figures: Desdemona

⁸ We are aware that we have not analyzed many significant samba compositions in the production. One of them is the ingenious transposition of the "Willow Song" into Cartola's "Roses don't talk". Much as the "Willow Song", "Roses don't talk" represent Desdemona's (and indeed Luciola's) impossibility to express their plights. See Smith (2016).

⁹ For the origins and history of samba see Mark A. Hertzman, *Making Samba: A New History of Race and Music in Brazil*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2013; and Chris McGowan and Ricardo Pessanha, *The Brazilian Sound: Samba, Bossa Nova and the Popular Music of Brazil*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008; and Idelber Avelar and Christopher Dunn, eds., *Brazilian Popular Music and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011

¹⁰ See the interview at <https://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/otelo-da-mangueira-herz-daniel-2006/#video=interview-with-gustavo-gasparani>

becomes “Lucíola”, after a devout prayer, Emilia and Bianca become “Marlene” and “Nininha”, to honor great *passistas* (samba dancers), Iago, Cassio and Roderigo become samba composers “Dirceu”, “Candinho” and “Jurandir”. To better recreate the setting and atmosphere of Mangureira, other characters were added, such as “Tia Fé”, a bahiana¹¹ and Candomblé* priestess who represents the iconic “tias” (aunts), women in whose houses the community gathered to cook, pray, dance, compose and sing. Indeed, Mangureira becomes the theme and protagonist.

Otelo, a celebrated composer and president of Mangureira samba school, is married to Lucíola, a girl from the *asfalto* (the wealthy part of town). In a reversal of the predicament posed by Shakespeare, where Othello is the outsider in the white Venetian world, it is white Lucíola who moves to the world of black Otelo.¹² Candinho (the Brazilian Cassio), a white young man from the *asfalto*,¹³ has also recently moved to the favela. When he wins the samba dispute, Dirceu, who used to be Otelo’s right hand, is outraged and swears revenge. Cunningly, Dirceu persuades Otelo that his wife is unfaithful to him with Candinho, playing on issues of race and culture: “Watch your wife ... this girl is not from here, Otelo. She is not from the hillside! She has different habits. Watch her ways when Candinho is around. They share similar stories ..., Candinho, on the other hand, is young and seductive ... God forgive me if am being unfair.” Overpowered with jealousy, Otelo murders his wife and then kills himself.

As we can see from the summary above, Gasparani preserves Shakespeare’s tragic sequence but introduces significant alterations. And while Otelo does not share the same tragic weight as cultural Other as Shakespeare’s protagonist – he is from the Mangureira community –, the Brazilian Iago takes an even more central in staging the

¹¹ Baianas are Afro-Brazilian women from the northern state of Bahia. On the streets of Salvador (capital city of Bahia), they cook and sell their Afro-Bahian treats, typically wearing a white dress and turban. They are a symbol of *Mês da Consciência Negra* (Black Consciousness Month).

¹² Given the limited scope of this paper, we have not been able to explore the racial and class issues that are problematized in the production. See Smith (2016).

¹³ Gasparani highlights the line of demarcation between two diametrically opposed geographies in Rio de Janeiro: the *asfalto* (asphalt) in the *Zona Sul* (southern Rio) where the wealthy or middle class live and the *morro* (hillside) where the impoverished favelas are. Rio de Janeiro is depicted as a “split city”.

celebrated Shakespeare's villain. Iago's role as the mastermind is resignified and magnified through the anthropophagic lens.

In *Otelo da Mangueira*, the devil has the power to assume different faces and its most significant incorporation is Exú, an Afro-Brazilian trickster-orixá¹⁴ (deity) who ambivalently creates chaos to restore order. At a certain point, Dirceu pleads: "May Exú and darkness guide me!" (80). At another, he sings: "I stepped on a macumba offering; I'm looking for a *Pai do Santo* (a Candomblé¹⁵ priest) to give me the healing touch (...). I need a spiritual herb bath of herbs and an orixá to guide me" (84-5).

In its guise as the evil Exú, Dirceu/Iago reveals its true colors in two monologues. Addressing the audience and echoing Shakespeare's lines (2.3.245-271), he exclaims:

Who dares to say I play the villain in this story? I acted in good faith... I gave advice freely ... Many are the faces of the devil. This wolf here is disguised as a gentle and kind sheep. While you pester Lucíola, asking her to fix your undoings, I will whisper in Otelo's ear some pestilent rumors about our flag-bearer¹⁶. And the more she strives to do you good, the more she will undo herself with her husband. And thus will I turn her virtue into pitch and catch everybody in this web. (97-98)

The second monologue bears no direct correspondence with Shakespeare text and it is better understood as a continuation of the first. This is Dirceu's grand scene – when Gasparani's talent as dancer, singer and actor stuns the audience. The scene starts in the dark, with the actor alone on the stage.¹⁷ Once his face is illuminated, he faces the audience directly but without really seeing them. Deep in thought, he dives into himself

¹⁴ We are adopting the Brazilian spelling of orisha.

¹⁵ Candomblé is an Afro Brazilian religion.

¹⁶ An important position in the carnival parade, the flag bearer is a highly skilled *passista* (samba dancer) who carries the samba school flag.

¹⁷ The scenic space in *Otelo da Mangueira* is bare. Composed of different levels and acting areas, it evokes the architecture of the Elizabethan open-air theater as well as the verticality of the carioca's favelas perched on the hillside of Rio de Janeiro.

and, in a confessional tone, reveals the extent of his villainy. The text is Gasparani's amalgamation of the traditional samba songs "Hell's Cathedral" (by Cartola) and "Devil's Law" (by Sargento):

The seed has been planted and now I must be patient and wait for evil to spread. God invented me for the despair of the Devil. I turned samba into the Cathedral of Hell. Mad, raving mad, totally insane. I can turn life into what I want. Now it is going to be different. It is an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. I no longer have a choice. I've torn apart my fool's diploma. I'm no longer a lamb, I'm now a wolf. In all situations. War is war....I've changed the rules of the game. I deal out mischievous cards. It is the devil's law. It is a tough world. No easing it out for anyone. First me, second me, third and fourth, me again. And as such, I thrive. War is war!

The scene gains momentum. The stage lighting colors everything red. In a display of sheer virtuosity, Dirceu dances frantically with syncopated elbow and hip movements. In a trance-like state, as if possessed by *Exú* in a Candomblé ceremony, the actor moves in circles, descending down the circles of hell as the beating of the drums reaches a crescendo. Evoking *Exú's* sensuous dance steps, Dirceu shows us that "hell is empty and the devil is a samba dancer": Shakespeare's divinity of hell speech transcends the realm of words and invades the metaphysical spaces of music, dance and Afro-Brazilian religion.



Fig. 2 Gasparani as Iago/Dirceu

Another relevant manifestation of *Exú* is to act as a translator of languages and interpreter between two disparate social universes. Gasparani approaches Shakespeare not merely to adapt *Othello*; as in a macumba séance, he *incorporated* the playwright, recreating the story and the characters anew, translating two distinct and distant poetic universes - apart in language, time, and space. Dispensing with formal Brazilian Portuguese, he labored to capture the lexicon, syntax and rhythms of the popular oral speech of the hillsides. As a good interpreter, he aimed at instant communication, especially that of the Mangueira community – real success would mean they recognized themselves on the stage.

Drawing freely from Shakespeare, from traditional samba songs as well as from Afro Brazilian traditions, Gasparani cannibalizes *Othello* and gives his Iago free rein. His are the ethics and aesthetics of the proverbial cannibal of Brazilian *modernismo*. He does not “borrow” from Shakespeare. Borrowing implies asking for permission, and a commitment to return something. He takes possession. Iago’s evil is translated to a Brazilian universe through words, dance, music. The nod to the evil anthropophagus, eager to eat and consume Shakespeare makes total sense, especially when Gasparani himself admits that his motto as a Brazilian artist has always been Oswald de Andrade’s “tupi or not to tupi”¹⁸. As it were, Gasparani looks at the celebrated author of *Othello* and cheekily says: “Sir, you’re robbed”.

Works cited

Gasparani, Gustavo.; RIECHE, Eduardo. *Em Busca de Um Teatro Musical Carioca* (Ed. Imprensa Oficial - SP).

Miranda, Celia Arns de. “*Otelo da Mangueira*: Shakespeare no carnaval carioca. In: Pereira, Antonia; Isaacson, Marta; TORRES, Walter Lima. (Org.). *Cena, corpo e dramaturgia*: entre tradição e contemporaneidade. Rio de Janeiro: Pão e Rosas, 2012.

Smith, Cristiane Busato. “The Brazilian Accent of *Othello*.” In: *Renaissance Shakespeare: Shakespeare Renaissances*: Proceedings of the Ninth World Shakespeare Congress,

¹⁸ Personal communication with the authors.

Prague, 2011. Eds. Martin Procházka, Michael Dobson, Andreas Höfele, and Hanna Scolnicov. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2014. 296-305.

Smith, Cristiane Busato. "Shakespeare, Samba, Solace and Escape: an Analysis of *Otelo da Mangueira*." *Lapis Lazuli: an International Literary Journal* 6 / 1-2, (2016): 164-176.