

FESTA JUNINA AND THE CHANGING MEANINGS OF BRAZILIAN RURAL FESTIVALS IN URBAN SPACES

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Festa junina (June Festival) is a set of religious celebrations that is mostly popular in the country but has also become prevalent throughout Brazilian cities. The most popular of the festas juninas, the festival of São João, is seen as an occasion in urban centers to celebrate rural life. Unfortunately, the way in which some urbanites choose to celebrate the festival of São João smacks of elitism and prejudice against rural people, since the day is partly characterized by performances of rural stereotypes. It is not immediately evident why a festival that was intended (among other motives) to celebrate rural life has become a day in which to ridicule it in Brazilian cities, but I believe that a particularly powerful phenomenon that I have termed the “urban gaze” may be to blame.

Introduction

Every summer, students from around the world travel to a small liberal arts college in New England in order to participate in one of their prestigious language school programs. Students take a vow to eschew the English language and to immerse themselves in whichever language and culture area they are studying. In the summer of 2013, I spent nine challenging weeks living in Portuguese and learning about new aspects of Brazilian culture. Like the other language schools, the Portuguese School combines learning with entertainment by organizing cultural events and since we were the Portuguese School, this meant Carnival parties and

samba concerts. The school also held another event, called *festa junina*, which I had never heard of before but in which I was nevertheless excited to participate.

Before I arrived, the School sent accepted students a summary of each cultural event and suggestions for what to bring for costumes. For “festa junina”, we were told to bring plaid-patterned clothing, straw hats, and other accessories that were evocative of country life. Surprised by the apparent similarity in style between rural Americans and rural Brazilians and almost convinced that this represented a gross generalization of rurality, I nevertheless fashioned a gingham blue-and-white festa junina dress that I hoped would be inoffensive. Shortly before the festival, our Brazilian teachers taught us how to dance *forró*, demonstrated the rules of the Brazilian square dance known as the *quadrilha*, and showed us pictures of festa junina in Brazil with women and men dressed in much more whimsical attire than my own modest attempt of a simple country aesthetic.

In fact, on the day of the event I learned that festa junina was really about an exaggerated imitation of country-ness. As seasoned festa junina revelers, our Brazilian teachers had the most fully realized (and perhaps most authentic) costumes. They not only wore checkered clothing, but also donned frayed straw hats, pigtails, and tattered overalls. Some even inked select teeth and penciled on freckles in what appeared to be a comedic portrayal of poverty and naïveté. Despite its Brazilian connotations, I was already familiar with the image of the unsophisticated country bumpkin and unpleasantly surprised that this stereotypical image of rural people that many urban dwellers have exists in Brazil as well.

Traditionally, festa junina (June Festival) is a set of religious celebrations that is mostly popular in the country but has also become prevalent throughout Brazilian cities. The most

popular of the festas juninas, the festival of São João, is seen as an occasion in urban centers to celebrate rural life. Unfortunately, the way in which some urbanites choose to celebrate the festival of São João smacks of elitism and prejudice against rural people, since the day is partly characterized by performances of rural stereotypes. It is not immediately evident why a festival that was intended (among other motives) to celebrate rural life has become a day in which to ridicule it in Brazilian cities, but I believe that a particularly powerful phenomenon that I have termed the “urban gaze” may be to blame.

The Urban Gaze

The urban gaze, the influential way in which the Urban views the Rural, is inspired by John Urry’s work in the tourist gaze. In turn inspired by Foucault’s discussion of the medical gaze, Urry contemplates the gaze of the tourist who “gaze[s] upon or view[s] a set of different scenes, of landscapes or townscapes which are out of the ordinary” for leisure or pleasure (1). The tourist gaze is seemingly innocuous and indeed, it is not necessarily negative since it depends on the viewer and the object that is gazed upon (in this case, a tourist destination). However, due to the tourist’s socioeconomic power and privileged status as a consumer, the tourist gaze can have an unwanted effect on a destination and its host people.

For many tourists, the search for pure, authentic cultures is a necessary part of the travel experience. Referencing MacCannell, Urry maintains that “all tourists...embody a quest *for* authenticity, and this quest is a modern version of the universal human concern with the sacred. The tourist is a kind of contemporary pilgrim, seeking authenticity in other “times” and other “places’ away from that person’s everyday life” (8). Urban revelers who travel to the countryside of Brazil for the festival of São João are no different, since they seek more

authentic and thus sacred cultural experiences of festa junina that what they would normally find in the city (Packman 332). However, when these tourists arrive they unwittingly find themselves enjoying performances of people who are also dressed in stereotypical ways and who are playing caricatures of themselves (Packman 338).

Urry argues that the preconceived ideas of tourists, fashioned through years of travel writing, have such an effect on the host culture that when confronted with tourists, they will present a modified version of their culture that aligns with the tourist gaze.¹ Using MacCannell's concepts of "tourist spaces" and "staged authenticity," Urry provides the following explanation for this behavior: "The development of the constructed tourist attraction results from how those who are subject to the tourist gaze respond, both to protect themselves from intrusion into their lives backstage and to take advantage of the opportunities it presents for profitable investment" (9). Rural people who dress according to urban images of themselves are likely not trying to protect their traditions but instead are trying to benefit economically from a transitory source of income (i.e. festa junina tourism). Unfortunately, this could be indicative of symbolic violence, where because of the power of discrimination, subaltern people begin to believe the negative stereotypes against them (Pine 2008). The stereotypes that are celebrated by tourists and others who celebrate São João as authentic aspects of rural life originate from consciously constructed images of difference between urban Brazilians and rural Brazilians.

Urban Brazil/Rural Brazil

The story of the divide between rural Brazil and Urban Brazil begins in the nation's colonial history. As a colony of Portugal, Brazil provided raw materials and agricultural goods for the benefit of the Portuguese empire. Aristocrats controlled the agricultural production and

formed a rural nobility class that enjoyed considerable favor from the Portuguese monarchy (Freyre 4-5). Brazilian cities during the colonial era were intimately linked to and depended on aristocratic landowners who not only used cities to transport their goods, but who also used to migrate to their mansions in the city during the rainy season (Freyre 7). Power shifted in the 18th century when the gold mining industry began to take precedence over the sugar cane industry. At this time, industrialization steadily took hold of colonial cities and a bourgeoisie class began to form that was independent from the plantations.

This slow but radical change in the power structure created tensions between the old aristocratic landowners and the new bourgeoisie urbanites. For example, in Pernambuco (a state in the Northeast region of Brazil), the rural aristocracy and urban capitalist elites fought the “Peddlers’ War,” which the urbanites won with the support of King Dom João (Freyre 4). Similarly, in 1710 there was a clash in Pernambuco between the “plantation-owner” city of Olinda and the more cosmopolitan, “middle-class, artisan city” of Recife which Freyre believes represents the “clash between rural and urban interests” occurring at the time (7). Urban interests eventually triumphed and the Portuguese crown modified its economic policy to favor the industrializing cities and capitalist businessmen over the once-mighty agriculture industry.

The change in policy reflected a change in social perceptions of the landed gentry. Younger male aristocrats, who were educated in industrial cities like Rio de Janeiro and Salvador, Bahia as well as in European cities, forsook their rural estates for the modernity of the city. Likewise, the daughters of plantation owners sought marriages with the university-educated elites of the city (Freyre 19-20). The shift in power from the land-owning nobility to the self-made industrialists signaled a transition that was fraught with tension as these two

groups negotiated their new standing in the Brazilian social order. No longer geographically privileged, the landed gentry bitterly gazed upon the new modern cities and their urban elites, while the urbanites gazed back with a paradoxical look of reverence and derision:

The city square triumphed over the sugar plantation, but gradually. And for the most part respecting certain qualities and idiosyncrasies of the defeated, trying to imitate, at times even glorifying and exaggerating them, in that aping of “superiors” by “inferiors.” At other times jeering at the rich backwoodsmen, the wealthy planters, more old-fashioned in their ways of speech and dress, the boasted and even quixotic squires, the yokels, the “hillbillies.” Holding up to ridicule their defects of speech, their being years, even centuries, behind the times in the way they lived and their methods of travel, their outmoded morality and manners. (Freyre 26)

As the influence of the rural aristocracy waned and industrial cities became more prosperous, rural Brazil obtained a reputation as a place outside the reach of modernity that was antithetical to the wealth and power of the city.

Today, rural Brazil is still defined in the negative —in how it is unlike the Urban. Images of the Rural include perceptions of scarcity: a lack of people, resources, and industry (Moraes 5). Although in modern times there is no real difference between the Urban and the Rural (considering that they are interdependent on each other for socioeconomic reasons), there are imagined and symbolic differences between these two places (Lichter and Brown 366-69; Moraes 2). The Rural and the Urban are set up as diametrically oppositional to one another

where the Rural represents barbarism and the Urban represents civilization. In Brazil, the *sertão*/littoral binary also represents a civilized-savage dialectic (Sena 2010).

Sertão is a complicated term whose literal and figurative meanings are sometimes blurred. In the simplest and literal definition, the sertão is a geographic area in the interior of the Northeast with a dry climate and scrub vegetation. At the time of colonial Brazil, the sertão corresponded to all the land that was beyond 100 meters from the coastal strip and originated as a “colonially geographic” idea of Brazil’s first emperors who were searching for new lands to conquer in the interior (Sena 2010; Moraes 5). In modern usage, the term applies to the peripheries of the state of Tocantins, the Northeast, the north of Minas Gerais, and the Central-West, not including the capital of the Federal District, Brasília. In a more figurative sense, the sertão or os sertões are those places in Brazil that evoke popular images of decayed ruins of a decadent, prosperous colonial past and present backwardness. In this sense, the sertão is a semi-imagined space that delineates frontier areas of Brazil (Moraes 5) or rurality in general.

The term still has use today and somewhat maintains its colonial meaning since it is also thought of as a forgotten and abandoned place of potential urbanization (Moraes 3). Introducing his essay on the sertão, Moraes notes that sertões are seen by many Brazilians as:

Lugares esquecidos, compostos de cidades mortas e fazendas arruinadas, onde predominam lavouras de subsistência e atividades de extrativismo animal e vegetal. Espaços de esquecimento na ótica do padrão territorial hegemônico, imersos numa vida autárquica, de fluxos majoritariamente locais.

Forgotten places, composed of dead cities and ruined plantations where subsistence agriculture and foraging from plant and animal sources predominate.

Forgotten spaces from the viewpoint of the hegemonic territorial paradigm, immersed in an autarchic life of [socioeconomic] flows that are mostly local.

(Moraes 5)

In the Brazilian imagination, the decay and poverty of the sertão is a testament to the fall of the noble landowners and perhaps represents poetic justice for the indigenous and Afro-Brazilians who toiled, suffered, and died to fuel the colonial agricultural industry. Today, the sertão is no longer the purview of the landed gentry and now belongs to the less-entitled masses, who in these modern times must deal with the lingering prejudices of the past. Nevertheless, the sertão is an important concept for the Brazilian people because it embodies the dualities of their country (Sena 2010): as hinterland/heartland, civilized/savage, and sacred/profane.

Another rural imagineme in the Brazilian imaginary is the Northeast. Unlike the sertão, the Northeast is an actual geographic region but it was also constructed as a way to differentiate between the Rural and the Urban and as a means to protect the supposed cultural and moral purity of the former. According to Muniz, the Northeast of Brazil was first imagined in the 1920s to supersede the traditional division of Brazil into a north-south dichotomy. As the social and economic powers of Brazil shifted to southern cities, elites in the north who were cognizant of their diminishing influence campaigned to delineate a geographic space in which they could maintain their power and avoid intrusion from their southern neighbors (Muniz 44).

Elaborating, Muniz states that “The Northeast was born of the recognition of defeat; it was a response to the closing of a subaltern space in the network of powers by those who could no longer aspire to dominate the nation” (Muniz 46). The newly marginalized sugar and cotton barons and intellectuals in the Northeast (perhaps anticipating arguments from the South

about inconsequentiality of the North in the industrial age) championed for the need to isolate the region in order to preserve its *brasilidade* [Brazilian-ness]. These Northeastern elites lamented that traditional Brazilian lifeways had been lost and Brazilian national identity obfuscated in the rest of the country —represented by the southern urban centers of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo (Muniz 49). Thusly, born was the tradition of romanticizing the Northeast as a “rural, patriarchal, and pre-capitalist society” that preserved the history and culture of the Brazilian people (Muniz 53).

Despite the positive imagined role that rural Brazil plays in the maintenance of Brazilian national identity, its people and the land itself are subject to forms of ridicule that are reminiscent of how rural people are scorned in the United States. In discussing the American countryside, Litcher and Brown note that “many urban people play at being rural” in seemingly benign ways such as starting urban gardens and quilting clubs, holding folk festivals and county fairs, and listening to country music and dressing in ways that evoke a typified country aesthetic (Licher and Brown 570). At the same time, the average urban American views the country and rural people as “unsophisticated, uncultured, and uneducated” (Lichter and Brown 570). This paradoxical glorification and denigration of the Rural also occurs in Brazil and is especially apparent during festa junina. Generally, festivals like festa junina are opportunities to play with social paradoxes. In Brazil, this play usually occurs during Carnival and other carnivalesque events.

Carnival, the Carnavalesque, and Social Inversion

Carnival in Brazil is a quintessentially Brazilian event in which the entire nation seemingly halts all day-to-day operations in order to celebrate the chaos of life. Historically,

Carnival took place in the private sphere, that is, in the homes of family and friends. As the years passed, Carnival moved to the street, which allowed for more participation and integration among the social classes (da Matta 75). Carnival is also carnivalesque—in that it is an event when social norms are temporarily transgressed and inverted. This inversion helps to complicate the division between the sacred and the profane—considering the religious origins of the celebration—but inversion-play can also be used for the benefit of the marginalized people of society (de Souza 2002).

The Bakhtian carnivalesque can refer to any type of festival that is “ludic, inersive, [and] expressive” (Santino 62). However ludic a festival may appear on the surface, it may serve the purpose of highlighting inequalities or challenging norms when it is not acceptable to do so during everyday life (Santino 62). Similarly, festivals may “neutralize social conflict” by providing a kind of release valve for disaffected people who might otherwise resort to violence in order to get their grievances heard. Festivals may also be used by the elite class to distract the lower classes from the suffering they experience as marginalized members of society (Waterman 60).

For revelers, the festival is a necessary respite from quotidian drudgery but it also demonstrates the dangers of too much freedom. In this way, the festival could be seen as a form of social control that allows pre-negotiated displays of discontent through inversion-play for a brief period. According to Scheper-Hughes, “Carnaval is both the opiate (or the metaphorical ‘speed’ or ‘crack’) of the popular class *and* their symbolic Molotov cocktail” (Scheper-Hughes 482-3). Although the inversion of race, class, and other markers of social stratification occurs during carnivalesque events, Amaral contends that they “also mean the annihilation of the differences among individuals” where it is understood that “these

differences are what maintain order” (Amaral 2009). In this way, Carnival “affirms the ‘*perenidade*’ [the eternal nature] of power” where “power” is understood to mean elite power (del Priore 9). Carnival and carnivalesque festivals create spaces in which social inequalities may be addressed and challenged, but usually in ways that do not threaten elites by calling for a permanent inversion of the social order.

However, not all carnivals or festivals are carnivalesque. For example, Packman maintains that in the Northeastern state of Bahia, Carnival amplifies differences instead of inverting them (Packman 329). Furthermore, festivals lose their subversive nature if not all of the social classes are present. Stallybrass and White argue that the middle and upper classes are noticeably absent from carnivalesque festivals and that this absence is what partly defines them as members of the privileged classes (Stallybrass and White 176). In an anonymous town in the state of Pernambuco that Scheper-Hughes names Bom Jesus da Mata, *carnaval* there also exacerbates class and race differences because the rich inhabitants abandon the city for the beaches. The ones who are left therefore have no audience to whom they would present their inversion play and so the political aspect of carnival becomes lost (Scheper-Hughes 484).

The Festa of São João and Rural Stereotypes

The Catholic celebrations of Santo Antonio, São João, and São Pedro make up festa junina, which is also colloquially known as São João because it is the most popular holiday of the June festivals (Packman 328, 330). The festivals take place throughout June (as well as before and after June) and celebrate the beginning of summer and the coming harvest season (Packman 330; Gomes 102). According to Tadeau, festa junina has its origins with the ancient Romans and Aryans, who brought their customs to the Iberian Peninsula (590). In addition to

celebrating the start of the harvest cycle, the festivals were designed to stave off evil spirits who would ruin the crops of the season by inflicting disease on them. In the Middle Ages, the festivals obtained a Christian identity while maintaining aspects of its pagan past (Tadeu 590). For example, during São João women and men will use the skins of bananas in order to divine who their future spouse will be (Waddington 2002). The use of magic during a religious celebration, or the coexistence of the “sacred and the profane” is characteristic of Catholic Brazilian festivals such as carnaval and especially of Brazilian festivals that occur in the countryside (Waddington 2002; de Souza 2002).

As a traditionally rural celebration, festa junina finds its most ardent revelers in the Northeast —the symbolic keepsake box of Brazilian rural traditions. Festa junina (and the festival of São João in particular) is characterized by bonfires, typical festa junina food, forró (a musical genre and dance style that is most popular in the Northeast) and quadrilhas (Gomes 2011 102). The quadrilha (a Brazilian version of square dancing) is perhaps the most central aspect of São João. It derives from European rural dances that eventually become popular in the French court and later among other European courts. Maria Leopoldina of Austria is credited with introducing the dance to Brazil by way of her court when she arrived in Brazil after her proxy marriage to Emperor Pedro I in 1817 (Macaulay 59). According to popular belief, her Viennese courtesans introduced the dance to the upper classes in Rio de Janeiro while her accompanying soldiers, who would frequent the local taverns, introduced it to the humbler classes and subsequently became part of the popular culture (Waddington 2002).

Another origin story of São João involves Northeastern musical legend Luiz Gonzaga. Gonzaga is known for popularizing forró and other Northeastern musical styles in Brazil’s

southern cities and in so doing, introducing the musical traditions of São João (Packman 331). Gonzaga's infiltration of the musical scene in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo signaled the subversion of the traditional symbolic divide between the Northeast and the South as well as between the rural sertão and the urban centers. As rural and urban spaces immersed, the festival of São João urbanized, in the sense that it has lost some of its Christian religiosity in favor of more secular spectacle akin to the carnivals of Rio de Janeiro or Salvador, Bahia. (Tadeu 591; Gomes 104; Packman 329).

Packman uses the term *carnavalização* to describe the Carnival-like changes happening in the festa junina celebrations in the Northeastern state of Bahia. Packman employs the term not to evoke Bakhtin and carnivalesque inversion, but to lament the “commercialization of festas juninas” in an effort to attract urban tourists (Packman 328; Gomes 104). In fact, in the city of Fortaleza, in the state of Ceará, São João is now honored with its own *sambódromo*,² called the quadrilódromo, where upwards of 4,000 people participate in festa junina each year. Despite the growing similarities between the larger Carnival celebrations and festa junina, festa junina has not attained a reputation as a carnivalesque event. In fact, it has been described as an “apolitical event” that merely serves to maintain order and the status quo: “unlike Carnival, where various groups —especially those with Afro-centric agendas— have challenged ongoing inequities, numerous naturalised unequal aspects of the festas juninas remain unquestioned, contributing to the continuation of racial and related socio-economic hierarchies” (Packman 338). The most visible way in which festa junina maintains race, class, and geographic hierarchies is through its stereotypical costumes based on elite urban gazes of the rural poor.

During festa junina, middle and upper class urbanites dress themselves like “hicks,” or as typified poor people living in the countryside (Packman 330). In the city of São Paulo, children wear costumes of *caipiras*, or people who live in the rural parts of the state of São Paulo. During São João, children typically behave and dress themselves with:

Roupas remendadas, dentes falhados, bigodes e costeletas horrorosas, chapéus esgarçados, andar trôpego e espalhafatoso e um falar incorreto.

Patched-up clothes, blacked-out teeth, grotesque sideburns and mustaches, and frayed hats while walking in a lumbering way and speaking grammatically incorrect Portuguese. (Tadeu 594)

Tadeu criticizes this tradition by noting that rotten teeth and ragged clothes are symptoms of poverty and should not be trivialized or made into a joke for the entertainment of privileged middle and upper-class schoolchildren. He also views the practice as the debasement of rural caipira culture (despite the extolment of ex-President Lula’s caipira heritage) and as the “ridicularização da miséria” [mocking of misery] (Tadeu 594).

The costumes and play of São João seem to be predicated on urban stereotypes of the rural poor, who are seen as stupid, undernourished, unkempt, provincial, and unambitious (Tadeu 596). These stereotypes seem to transcend nationality, since rural Americans are similarly considered “unpolished, naïve, out of touch with the faster pace of urban society” (Lichter and Brown 570) and British country folk endure taunts that they are backwards and “inferior” to their urban counterparts (de Lisle 46). These similarities in stereotypes suggest a general urban gaze of the Rural which serves to establish a socioeconomic hierarchy in which the Urban and urban dwellers always prevail. In Brazil, São João is a time of festivity and of

celebrating Brazil's rural traditions, but it is also an occasion to engage in performative symbolic violence that oppresses the rural poor and reminds them of their subalternity. The play is so successful that urban tourists regularly travel to the interior of Brazil to watch sertanejos don the very costumes that mock who they are. These festas juninas in which rural people dress like in stereotypical hick costumes are considered the most authentic way to celebrate festa junina. However, it is perhaps truer to say that these performances are an authentic representation of an urban gaze that disparages of rural people.

Conclusion

Festa junina is a Carnival-like and yet un-carnavalesque festival in which many Brazilians celebrate traditional rural life and Brazilian national heritage. During this event, the paradoxically mythic and real sertão is in the forefront of the popular consciousness as revelers dress themselves in embellished outfits that pay homage to the sertão, the Northeast, and the caipira but also insults them by refusing to acknowledge the differences between them and reducing them to easily interchangeable caricatures of rural people. This insensitivity is a product of the urban gaze, which is based on a social hierarchy in which the Urban is placed on a more privileged position in relation to the Rural. In Brazil, these regional hierarchies play out during festa junina, which, unlike Carnival and other carnivalesque festivals, does not seek to invert the social order for the benefit of the masses. Instead, it is an opportunity to emphasize the difference between the Northeast and the South, the sertão and the Urban, and the elites from the underclasses.

As an American who has only experienced festa junina in a constructed space of Brazilian culture within the mountains of Vermont, I have reservations about passing judgment

on a cultural practice that is not from my own culture and of which I do not have extensive experience. However, in cases of discrimination, I believe that considerations of cultural relativism have to be put aside and a more critical stance taken in order to identify and solve the issues that prejudice and marginalization create. It is possible that the stereotypical urban gazes inherent to festa junina are examples of discrimination and so further study is necessary.

This essay should be viewed as a starting point for future ethnographic research on festa junina and the urban gaze in Brazil, which could further elaborate on the nature of such a gaze. It is my belief that the urban gaze is an especially powerful phenomenon that influences the ways in which urban people view the Rural and how rural people view themselves. In its most insidious form, the urban gaze maintains a post-colonial paradigm of the Urban-Rural, modern-traditional divide that praises the former and disparages of the later —leading to symbolic violence, as rural people convince themselves of their own savagery and insignificance.

Moreover, further research on festa junina is important in order to understand the limitations of the carnivalesque and to recognize that the theory does not apply to all carnival-like events. Likewise, it is imperative to elucidate instances of passive discrimination, of which some practices of festa junina are a part, since they tend to be especially dangerous. The stereotypical performances of festa junina seem to be harmless and inoffensive and are oftentimes genuinely viewed as homages to rural Brazilian life. The festivals may have started as simple celebrations of the changing seasons, but once placed into an urban context, they have come to signify urban elite dominance in an increasingly urbanized world.

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Notas

¹ For a discussion of travel writing and its influence on tourists' gazes, see Pratt 1992.

² The sambódromo is a stadium located in Rio de Janeiro in which samba schools parade for Carnival.