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Drawing Down Spirits:

Pontos Riscados. Umbanda's Sacred Ground Drawings as Visual Event

I. Afro-Diasporic Ground Drawings and Afro-Brazilian Religion

The World of African Diasporic religions has manifested a rich legacy of sacred ground drawings that are created in the process of ritual using flour, gunpowder, cornmeal and chalk. These ritualized drawings are called “veves” in Afro-Haitian Vodun, (figure #1) “anafouruana” in Afro-Cuban Abakua, “firmas” in Afro-Cuban /Palo Myombe Lucumi and “pontos riscados” (pronounced “paw-n-toes his-cah-doe”) in Afro-Brazilian Umbanda (figure #2). These ground drawings originate in the iconography and writing systems of African religions. Writing systems such as Nsibidi from the Ejagham people of Cameroon and Nigeria in addition to iconography from the Kongolese cosmogram called “yowa”. Umbanda is the manifestation of the three primary formative cultures in Brazilian society. The indigenous Amerindian, the European and the African. Umbanda is given special attention in this visual and critical examination because these three cultures intersect in a uniquely discursive manner that manifests them in the creation of a ritual ground drawing called a “ponto riscado” or “drawn point.” This paper will examine Umbanda's pontos riscados as a visual event produced from a network of ritual, intersecting cultures and ways of being. The Afro-Brazilian religion of Umbanda provides a platform that manifests unique cultural intersectionality and polycentric aesthetics that are used as artistic strategies both globally (Brazil) and locally (Oakland and Berkeley).

Contemporary Umbanda originates in Rio de Janeiro in the mid 1920s from the contact that middle-class white Brazilians had with African Brazilian religions during an unprecedented influx of Black folks to the urban centers of Brazil. Since Umbanda combines the elements of Brazil's major formative populations in its religious pantheon and belief system it is seen as being different than the more secretive Afro-Brazilian Candomble religious houses and less elitist and Eurocentric than the Catholic churches. White Brazilians drew many practices from African religious practices that they pejoratively called "Macumba" and combined them with the practices and beliefs found in Amerindian spirituality in addition to French spiritist Allan Kardec to create what many Umbanda practitioners call the only "Brazilian" religion.

II. Intersectionality and Umbanda's Visual Subjects (The Practitioners)

The Umbanda ceremony is called a "Gira" and is primarily focused on the incarnation of various African, Amerindian and European spirits in the form of what are called "Preto-Velhos" (Old Blacks/Enslaved Africans), Caboclos (Amerindian spirits), Brancos/senhores (White gentlemen) and Boiadeiros (Cowboys/Cattle herders) amongst others. The Umbandista or Umbanda practitioner is called a "Filha/Filho do Santo" or "Daughter/Son of the Spirit." These initiates channel the spirits during the "Gira" (Umbanda ritual) and while in trance offer healing advice to the visiting public clientele for free. The drumming and songs called "Pontos Cantados" or "Sung Points" summon the spirit to the dancing initiate. The dances resemble those that one would see in the more African centered Candomble ceremonies that depict "Orishas" or gods that become present by possessing the initiates. In Umbanda the Orisha acts only as a governing entity that sends an ancestral spirit. The Orishas in many (not all) Umbanda ceremonies do not become present by possessing the initiates. However, the initiates perform the Orisha dance appropriate to the type of ancestral spirit or "power" that is being summoned. In

the case of the Amerindian Caboclos the Yoruba Hunter god Oshoosi is the governing spirit.¹ As the initiates pantomime the shooting of arrows appropriate to the hunter and the drumming reaches its climax the arrival of spirits hit the initiates. Their faces change to grimaces and their eyes dart about the room but most importantly the spirit, through the initiate, writes/draws their ritual sign on the floor of the terreiro with great rapidity using a piece of white chalk called “pemba.” The sign/design/ signature created within a hastily drawn circle is the spirit’s announcement that it is present. The ponto riscado is transient in nature. It is a utilitarian piece of art, not a permanent design. Sometimes it lasts but a few moments as immediately after drawing it the initiate stands in the circle of the Ponto and dances barefoot often times obliterating the drawing. The transient nature of the drawing, its impermanent state, sets it apart from the tradition Western religious art object making strategies. At other times the design is enhanced with lit candles or gifts such as cigars and flowers that the spirit may have requested to be present at the “Gira.” However, even under these circumstances the pontos are not meant to last longer than the “Gira.” These drawings straddle the borders between writing and ritual because they are attached to a matrix of several ritual performances that work in concert with their creation. Coinciding with the creation of the ponto riscado is the ponto cantado or sung point. These are the ritual songs that signify the presence of a spirit.

The Ponto Riscado is the locus of a unique intersectionality that allows cultural interaction between segments of a society that don’t commonly encounter each other any other way. For example: the middle class white Brazilian male may receive advice through a medium who is a Black Brazilian woman channeling a male Amerindian spirit that is governed by an African god. The two spiritual identities are represented in the symbols of the Ponto Riscado by the hand of the spirit medium. As a result the medium and the client encounter through the

creation of the ground drawing a trope for Amerindian and African identities. This spiritual graphic sign facilitates what critical legal theorist Kimberle Crenshaw calls “intersectionality.”ⁱⁱ Intersectionality allows for understanding the cross-cultural implications of multiple identities engaging each other in social and political spheres. As a result the subject or person that identifies with one or more groups has a way of navigating the complexities of being a member of two or more groups with potentially conflicting interests.

In Brazil this intersectionality manifests itself in complex ways that provide the medium through which voices that have been silenced by Eurocentric history have an opportunity to incarnate in the mouth of the Umbandista and speak directly to white clients of Umbanda. In addition the white initiate in Umbanda may channel/perform the personae of a long dead enslaved African or Amerindian Indigenous spirit and as a result come to a more intimate understanding of the history of those oppressed groups in the formation of the Brazilian nation state. This application of intersectionality is not without complication. It is entirely possible that the Brazilian Umbandista may view the Amerindian and African personae in stereotypic manners and as a result remain oblivious to the history of oppression carried within the personae of the entities that she/he is channeling. Umbanda in some manifestations has been criticized for being a whitening of African rooted religion. Much of Umbanda’s claim as a “Brazilian religion” is founded in the early twentieth century ideology of “racial democracy” as put forth by the Brazilian intellectual Gilberto Freyre. Freyre’s claim that the concubines of slave masters produced a populace that added to “...Brazil’s social democratization” is rightly denounced as a myth by Afro-Brazilian intellectuals such as Abdias do Nascimento amongst others.ⁱⁱⁱ

The practice of Umbanda in the local context provides us with additional intersectional identities. The Templo Guaracy is an Umbanda terreiro that is located in both Santa Cruz and Berkeley California. While attending a “gira” at Templo Guaracy’s location in Berkeley my consultation was with a Puerto Rican woman who channeled the spirit of a male Amerindian Caboclo and Boiadeiro. The governing African Orisha for her was the male Yoruba god Shango. She describes her self as a Nuyorican (New York Puerto Rican), participates in an ostensibly “Brazilian” religion and channels male warrior spirits. This is a vivid example of how Umbanda facilitates intersectional identities in the local setting. Carlos Buby founded Templo Guaracy in the city of Sao Paulo Brazil in 1973. I was told that he initiated changes to the clothing that is worn by the initiates to more closely reflect the clothing worn by enslaved Africans as opposed to the plain white clothing oftentimes found in Umbanda.

The mediums oftentimes dress up as the spirits who manifest in them. According to Tina Gudrun Jensen in her essay “Umbanda and its Clientele” “...the clientele would not believe that the spirits incorporate in the mediums if the mediums were not dressed up like the spirits.”^{iv} Umbanda’s visual subjects, its clients and initiates, are agents of sight and entities that come into being because of visibility and social power. The social power of the Umbanda initiate is given efficacy by way of the ritual “Gira” and the manner in which they occupy the visual field through mannerisms appropriate to the incarnated spirit. The visibility is underlined and aided by the way in which the initiates dress as well as the drawing of the Ponto Riscado which authenticates the presence of the ancestral identity in the Umbanda ritual.

III. Pontos Riscados: Drawn Points and their Meaning

There are thousands of Pontos Riscados and the myriad of signs and symbols contained in them have additionally countless combinations that will determine their meaning. I will examine just three types. The Ponto Riscado for the Caboclos or Amerindian spirits, (figure #3) the Ponto representing Exu^v or Pomba Gira (figure #4), the entity who rules crossroads and entryways and finally the Ponto Riscado for Ogum^{vi} (figure #5), the Orisha that represents warriors, iron and technology. The primary identifying sign for the Caboclo Ponto Riscado is the “flecha” (Portuguese for arrow) that is sometimes combined with single-headed axes. The axes are single headed to differentiate from the double-headed axes that are associated with the Yoruba deity Shango. The drawn points for Exu the Yoruba deity of the crossroads and doorways are separated into two categories. The primary identifying sign for both is the three-pronged pitchfork. This may be derived from the derogatory Catholic association of Exu with the devil. The Exus are separated into male and female signs. The female Exu or “Pomba Gira” is characterized by pitchforks with rounded curves. Squared lines in the pitchfork characterize the male Exu/Pomba Gira. The words Pomba Gira are according to Robert Farris Thompson a creolization of the Ki-Kongo words Mpamba Nzila.^{vii} Identifying names for the many Exu figures in Umbanda are oftentimes accompanied by the words “tranca ruas” meaning crossroads or sometimes associated with the hustler character Ze Pilintra (figure #6) to illustrate the trickster aspect of his character. Afro Brazilian Painter Abdias do Nascimento provides some clarity in regards to the Ze Pilintra character and Exu.

In Brazil , the figure of the malandro, akin to the hustler or the bad dude, with his street wisdom and ability to dupe the man, is often flouted in the face of white society in the same spirit. The Orisha Exu, misrepresented by the Catholics as the

devil, is represented as a malandro in the Umbanda religion. Called Exu Pelintra, he opens the doors to survival and victory for the black community.

Abdias do Nascimento.^{viii}

Broadswords, machetes and the number seven oftentimes characterize Ogum the Yoruba warrior god. (figure #2 Middle Right) Seven being the number of iron tools associated with the manifestation of his power. The title “Ogum Meje” (figure #5) accompanies these designs whether they are done in the ponto riscado as a ground drawing or in iron as an altarpiece. “Meje” means seven in Yoruba. The later two of these entities and their designs I will use as my point of focus because contemporary African Diasporic artists oftentimes use them as the subject of artistic expression.

IV. Drawing Down Spirits: Pontos Riscados and Contemporary Artistic Practice

The ideograms found in African-Diasporic ground drawings have provided inspiration to Cuban artist Jose Bedia and Haitian artist Andre Pierre as well as Brazilian artists such as Rubem Valentim, Jose Adario dos Santos and Abdias do Nascimento. Jose Bedia’s work incorporates some of the ideograms found in the Afro-Cuban religious ground drawings for Palo Myombe called “firmas.” (figure #7) Bedia is an initiate in the Palo religion. The late Andre Pierre was the senior master of Haitian Vodun Painting until his death in 2005. His paintings are primarily of the Haitian Vodun Loas with their veve signatures visible on the ground. (figure #8) The work of Rubem Valentim (1922-1991) utilizes the signs used in pontos riscados and the colors that signify Orishas. The relief sculpture “Emblema Relevô” (figure #9) uses the double-headed axes motif of the Yoruba thunder god Shango as well as the colors red and white that signify his presence in the clothing of Umbanda initiates. Jose Adario dos Santos is an artist that works in iron to build altarpieces that utilize the signs that are used in Umbanda’s Pontos Riscados. The

sign used in Umbanda as “Ogum Meje” is interpreted successfully in Iron (figure #10) by Adario dos Santos. His work straddles a position between fine art and the utilitarian altarpieces used in Candomble and Umbanda. The legendary Afro Brazilian Pan Africanist intellectual, playwright, activist, Senator and Painter Abdias do Nascimento uses the Orishas as his primary influence even though he has never been an initiate. Nascimento uses these ideograms as a powerful statement about the dynamic nature of African religion and struggle.

In my painting I try to distinguish between those symbols and myths that exist only as tradition and those that fulfill the needs of our time and can open up perspectives for the future. I don't advocate simply that we recall our past. My Orishas are not immobilized in time or space. They are powers of the present. They emerge in daily life and in secular matters. My Orishas receive the names of living people and take on the defense of the heroes and martyrs still offered by the African People as sacrifices to the search for freedom. Abdias do Nascimento^{ix}

Abdias do Nascimento invokes the deities Oxossi and Ogum as well as Shango in a triumvirate of warrior ideograms in his painting titled “Efrain Bocabalístico, Oxossi-Shango-Ogum.” At the top the bow and arrow of Oxossi, the middle has the double-headed axe of Shango and the bottom the seven iron tools of Ogum. (figure #11) Ogum and Shango have specific significance as the Orishas of war and justice respectively. The figure of Ogum as a symbol of African Diasporic resistance to enslavement is found in Cuba, Haiti and Brazil amongst other locales. According to Nascimento, “To mention Ogum is to evoke the idea-force opposing African peoples' submission anywhere in the world.”^x Abdias do Nascimento's artistic strategy parallels the artistic practice of the author and underlines the political nature of African religion and ritual as the locus of resistance in the African Diaspora.

As a demonstration of the presence and continuance of the figure of Ogun as a signifier of political resistance specific to African people in the Diaspora I will turn to an example of my artwork. As evidence of local artistic practice and strategy being influenced by the iconography of Umbanda's Pontos Riscados an explanation of the drawing "Ogun Meje" (for the Black Panther Party) will be used. (figure #12)The strategy or manner in which the drawing is produced is influenced by the idea of the ground drawing. The drawing is produced from the "frottage" or rubbing technique that is said to have been invented by the German born surrealist Max Ernst. ^{xi}However, the use of it in this Ogun drawing as with the others in this series focus on extracting a texture from the ground. The ground of the local urban environment in the city of Oakland. Cracks in the sidewalk, manhole covers and metal plates provide the texture for these "ground drawings." "Ogun Meje" (for the Black Panther Party) has as its central symbol the bow and arrow that is also prominent in the altar piece by Jose Adario dos Santos and the painting "Efrain Bocabalistico, Oxossi-Shango-Ogum" by Abdias do Nascimento. The linguistic message in the piece is provided by the rubbing of the manhole cover that contains the words "Iron Works Oakland Cal." The connotative message in this instance is a reference to Iron as Ogun's metal and as a result of the title being "... (for the Black Panther Party)" the words "...Works Oakland Cal" allude to the organizing work and founding location of this world-renowned Black liberation movement organization. The tools of Ogun are modified to include the railroad spike and the gun. The spike alluding to the Iron horse or train that is also a symbol of Ogun's power and the gun alluding to the Black Panther's famed use of the right to bear unconcealed arms. The performative/ritual nature of going into the streets of Oakland to make ground drawings in honor of Black heroic figures is similar to the role of the Ponto Riscado in declaring the presence of a spirit in a specific location. "Ogum Meje" can also be read as a Ponto Riscado that invokes

the presence of long dead Black Panthers such as the much-valorized Bobby Hutton who died by the hands of the Oakland Police at age 17.

V. Conclusion: The Ponto Riscado. Syncretism and Polycentric Aesthetics

The worlds to be explored within the Ponto Riscado drawing serve as the syncretic field within which Afro-Diasporic artists can explore mutually enriching creative responses. A manner of aesthetic African call and response that explores the common denominators in the conditions of oppression that beg for the need to invoke similar spirits of resistance. This polycentric aesthetic^{xii} strategy that embraces modernist painting in Rio de Janeiro, utilitarian ritual art making in Salvador, Bahia Brazil and surrealist drawing techniques in Oakland California can generate a rich legacy of multiple, intersectional, recombinant narratives and identities. As a result African Diasporic artists express themselves as Black artists in a multiplicity of ways most of which still lie waiting to be explored.

ⁱ This hierarchy was the case with the Umbanda terreiro Temple Guaracy. Because Umbanda has so many variations this may not be a hard and fast rule with all Umbanda groups.

ⁱⁱ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color". Pg. 176 (2003)

ⁱⁱⁱ Abdias do Nascimento and Elisa Larkin Nascimento, "Africans in Brazil A Pan-African Perspective." Pg 109. (1992)

^{iv} Tina Gudrun Jensen, "Umbanda and Its Clientele", Pg. 79.

^v I am using the Portuguese spelling of the Yoruba name for Esu. Exu is pronounced "Ay-shu."

^{vi} I am using the Portuguese spelling of the Yoruba name for Ogun. Ogum is pronounced “O-goom.”

^{vii} Thompson, Robert Farris. Dancing Between Two Worlds: Kongo Angola Culture and the Americas. Pg. 4

^{viii} Abdias do Nascimento and Elisa Larkin Nascimento, “Africans in Brazil A Pan-African Perspective.” Pg. 107 (1992)

^{ix} Ibid. Pg 54. Although Nascimento views Umbanda as the appropriation of African religions by whites and the subsequent whitening of it, there is an interesting parallel to his statement in the practice of Umbanda. Umbanda still manifests the ancestors of enslaved Africans called Preto Velhos or Old Blacks. This would seem to be a potent way of honoring past African struggle in the present by giving voice to those enslaved Africans.

^x Ibid. pg. 54

^{xi} Ernst, Max. Beyond Painting, 1936; first published in Cahiers d’Art, Max Ernst, Special Issue, 1937. Published in the Anthology Surrealism, Patrick Waldberg ed., Thames and Hudson, London (1965). Ernst discusses the frottage technique and its relationship to automatic writing.

^{xii} Shohat, Ella and Robert Stam. Unthinking Eurocentrism Multiculturalism and the Media. Routledge. NY. (1994) Pgs.313-318. The notion of polycentric aesthetics and syncretism is explored in the section titled “Syncretism as Artistic Strategy.”

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