

**Der
Standpunkt
der
Aufnahme**

**Point of
View**



Video still from the work-in-progress *Remanescences* (2011-2014) by Raphaël Grisey.

Taking Part in Festivities of One Hundred Years Ago

After I graduated in History I began attending a post-graduate course. I am now doing a specialization in science and cultural politics with the aim of contributing to the construction of an as yet unrealized quilombola* cultural politics. This is a passion I have had since I was young. Always. I do not relate to people of my generation. My relationships are linked to the past as if I had lived with my great-grandma and my great-aunt; as if I had taken part in festivities which happened at the beginning of the last century.

I have a strong connection to them even though I didn't know them. When I was a child, there were still a lot of houses from the time of my great-grandma. The place had a lot of forest vegetation, so it had the sense of the origin of the territory. I grew up in this ambience and this was always part of me.

When my family migrated from Nova Lima to Belo Horizonte, abolition had already taken place. We have documents showing this transition, which date from the end of the nineteenth century. The city of Belo Horizonte didn't exist yet. We know about the historical transgression of the law, but the long history of our habitation clarifies who owns the land.

When my great-grandma was still alive and I was small, I could go freely to all four corners of the place. I was never disrespected. But new inhabitants arrived, invaded what is ours and thought they had the right to discriminate against us. It was awful: the invasion, the loss of what was characteristic of the territory, and especially the treatment that we received. Now, we are the ones seen as invaders when in fact they are. Their permits are recent, not more than twenty years old.

* Quilombolas are the residents of 'quilombos', settlements that were founded by Afro-Brazilians who had fled from slavery and went on to resist oppression.

Why didn't someone regulate construction? Because the way the property was acquired was irregular. Why, then, is it us who have to suffer prejudgments? People should understand, know and respect us. To me, this would be a great start. What form could this respect take? What I would like, if it were possible, would be to demolish the buildings that have invaded this space. The solution for the majority would be to be seen as the rightful landowners, to be able to earn rent, for example, or to get compensation, in acknowledgment of the invasion. But this capitalist proposition doesn't interest me. I am not worried about that. What I would like to see is the protection of our history and our community's bond. I would like it to be made clear that the struggle of our ancestors was valuable.

I know that it might not have been easy for them under the circumstances, particularly the indifference toward black people at that time. Today, we have many resources; we have access to education and other things. Imagine them in the middle of that unequal, unjust, absurd struggle. My great-grandma was illiterate. This may have been the case for most of them, but they remained until the end of the struggle and secured the land for us. I'd like this to be somehow valued and recognized.

I see the quilombola movement as very shy. During the age of the quilombos—the hinterland settlements founded by quilombolas, most of which have already been destroyed or are still being destroyed—the movement could have been bigger, more visible, stronger. Now, I feel that we get inspired by other examples more than we are an example to others: I see a lot of strength in the MST (Landless Workers' Movement) and the indigenous movement. I think—and that is why I began this specialization—that it is possible to build a cultural politics which could embrace other fights. In my case, for example, I take a lot from activism, but also from the law too. Knowledge of the law can help secure our rights, which allows us to continue the struggle.

This extract is taken from Decree 4887/2003 of the 20th November 2003:

[Regulation] for the procedure in the identification, recognition, delimitation, demarcation and titling of lands occupied by the remaining descendants of quilombo communities according to Article 68 of the Transitory Constitutional Provisions Act.

Article 68 defines that “the definitive ownership of the [remaining] descendants of the quilombos to the land they are occupying will be recognized and the State shall make every effort to issue them title to these lands.” This affirms that the quilombola communities were founded by the ancestors of the black people, and were occupied ancestrally in various cases. There has been a reformulation of the law that previously required a minimum occupation of one hundred years.

We also have Article 215:

The State guarantees to all the full exercise of cultural rights and equal access to sources of national culture, and to support and foster the appreciation and dissemination of cultural expression. The State shall protect the expression of popular culture, indigenous and Afro-Brazilian, as well as other groups participating in the process of national civilization. The law provides for the establishment of commemorative dates of significance for the various ethnic groups of the nation.

There are various other articles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the constitution of the International Labour Organization. What are not lacking are resources in the law.

There is such thing as ‘black Brazilian.’ We arrived here and we constituted a nation called Brazil. This has to be made clearer, because this point is always put aside. Black Brazilians are always described as ‘Afro-descendant.’ But the non-black Brazilians are not described as Luso-Brazilian, nor Italian Brazilian all the time. Why is it necessary to raise the black question? This necessity comes from the discourse of separation, devaluation and segregation that have occurred throughout history and to the number of contingents of black slaves brought here.

It is important to consider the reparation of these historical ambiguities. In our society, the non-black Brazilians have a very distinct history from the black Brazilians. Discrimination is latent; we experience it all the time. Yesterday, I came home very tired. I was getting out of my car when a passer-by saw me and hid her bag. It is very painful to experience this.

In reality, who are we? We are simply the Brazilian people. Here nobody is a purely A or purely B. We are a nation of mixed people, but the discourse that was instilled in us and the experience we continue to live through is that there are indeed differences between us on the basis of the color of our skin. If you are black you are inferior. Today, if you are black you can't live in a region considered rich.

What connects me to the struggle are my ancestors. I have a very strong relationship with these people, as if I had lived with them, or as if they are all gone but I remain. It seems that it is my responsibility to secure this place. For us—and particularly for me, as a teacher—there is a need to clear up and undo these ambiguities which occurred during our history. To show people that equality is possible; to find a form that proves it.

The fact that people who aren't from the quilombo or who aren't black, comprehend our struggle makes clear that there are others who share our feelings. Others value this identity, and are part of it in some way. They share our pain, and organize a wide defense of our struggle. But what happens is this: at the moment of real struggle, when the judicial fight begins, we can no longer count on this wider community to help us in an efficient manner. We can only count on our own community, because we are the ones who hold the documents. Our families' names are contained in these documents. Only we have shares in the territory.

Belo Horizonte, 2011

The text is an excerpt of an interview given by Miriam Aprigio to Raphaël Grisey during research for his film *Remanescentes* (2011-2014).

Dear Miriam,

the day we did the interview was also the first day we met. I had only spent one or two days researching and filming in the quilombo dos Luizes (quilombo of the Luizes), in the upper-middle-class district of Grajaú in Belo Horizonte. I was wondering whether I wanted to do something there or not. I started to get interested in visiting urban quilombolas' communities. Still not knowing what to focus on, I was driven rather by making encounters, by being there with you for a while. Maybe then, with my own 'instruments,' I could receive, amplify and translate some voices and sounds (rather than 'give a voice to') and think about a possible film—I could climb on your 'raft,' as it were. As Fernand Deligny wrote, by letting the water flow through, the loose tie-up of the wood trunks are necessary to save a raft from breaking in the currents. He describes the raft as a "durable structure which came as an unanticipated result of the 'we':

When questions come up we don't close ranks, we don't join the trunks to constitute a solid platform. On the contrary, we only maintain of the project that which connect us. You see, in this way, the principle importance are the bonds and the mode of attachment, and even the distance that the trunks can maintain between them; the bond has to be sufficiently slack [that it does not break], yet not slack.¹

When I was filming *Minhocão* about the social housing building named 'Pedregulho' in the Zona Norte (North Zone), Rio de Janeiro, in 2010, my experience soon confirmed that the 'racial democracy' in Brazil was a modern myth associated with the foundation of the Brazilian Republic. I witnessed some families suffering from discrimination within the building itself.

The racial issue, appearing often in conversations as a ‘playful’ game of difference and jokes, was also constitutive of discrimination in language, in behavior and acts.¹

When I first got interested in quilombos, community settlements of descendants of former Afro-Brazilian slaves who claim an historical and cultural heritage of resistance, people told me that they were not places you could just go and visit. I was told that I would have to travel to remote places in the hinterland to meet quilombolas. I got in contact with quilombola community associations through the CEDEFES (Documentation Center Eloy Ferreira da Silva, Brazil), an association created around the MST (Landless Workers’ Movement) in the 1980s, which engages in mapping and indexing quilombola and indigenous communities in the state of Minas Gerais.

I realized then that the realities of the quilombos were as diverse and complex as the increasing number of other communities that have appeared and had their self-recognition approved by the state authorities. During the colonial, slave-owning paradigm, quilombolas had to hide from the colonial power and settle in remote places. Invisibility was one possible condition of freedom.

Most of the quilombos formed after the abolition of slavery were to be found along colonial economical axes—along the Estrada Real, a network of colonial-era roads built to facilitate trade, for example—on the land of their former ‘masters’ or close by. Former slaves had to gather in communities to sustain themselves and to survive because, during the politics of ‘whitening of the nation,’ rural manual work was only given to poor, newly arrived European migrants. Even today, economical segregation serves to exclude Afro-Brazilians.

I understood therefore that geographical isolation was only one factor to explain invisibility. The invisibility was also, in political terms, representational invisibility. Quilombos had no legal acknowledgment of their existence: neither with respect to their members’ citizenship and rights, nor in terms of the legal recognition of their territories. The paradigm of the

Brazilian Republic brought about conditions for new forms of exploitation and segregation, forcing the quilombos into a new form of invisibility after the colonial paradigm. But I wondered if it could be possible to once again turn invisibility into an active, necessary tool of liberation, as something which encourages concentration, focus, intensity and resistance.

Nevertheless, I liked the idea of going to work in the countryside, as a gesture. I was expecting to find another relationship to time and space there, concentration, focus and density, perhaps also for my practice.

Indeed, the territorial dimension of quilombos provided a completely different approach to land issues than the urban context. Certainly, as in the cities, the phenomena of occupation and invasion were to be witnessed in the countryside as well, but somehow these phenomena expanded in time and landscape, interfering differently with inhabitants' practices, perception and memories of their territories.

But the city came back abruptly—just as it did to the quilombo of the Luizes—unexpectedly and forcefully. Firstly, as mentioned previously, these knots on the trade roads eventually became cities in the second part of the twentieth century. Secondly, even the most remote quilombo nowadays is still dependent on the wages of its members working in cities close-by, due to the lack of enforcement of those political measures designed to help and promote self-sustainability inside the communities themselves.

The quilombos' struggles, especially the urban ones I had heard of before meeting you, were, for me, a potential model for other struggles: for the right to the city, concerning collective living and with regard to ownership in general. Thinking from my cultural perspective—that of a white, European, urban artist—I was wondering if urban quilombos could provide an example that would help to sustain, support and protect autonomous places and sites of production and knowledge and, in doing so, provide a framework for understanding issues related to the so-called 'immaterial patrimony.'

Was it a projection or an all-too-easy identification with quilombos? I suppose this was what I wanted to clarify and understand by meeting you and encountering some members of the Luizes. Or, let's say it was a bet: by understanding its inherent contradictions, this projection, which at first sight could be seen as an exoticization of the struggle as well of the politics of autonomy, could become a point of departure towards a potential place of production, discussion, support and solidarity.

First, I entered the yard of your house, where you live with your mother, your sister and her two young children on the avenue Silva Lobo in the Grajau district of Belo Horizonte. Entering the quilombo was like debarking onto a green island. An island of plants and small houses under the old birasca tree surrounded by a sea of condominium buildings. I had heard that you were one of the few who could tell the history of the quilombo, and that you were one of the 'guerreras'—one of the women activists of the quilombo—and that only women attend to the organizational and legal issues and struggles in the Luizes.

I can't remember whether I asked you if I could film our discussion. I didn't; I just recorded the sound. I told you that I wanted to record it for my research for a film about quilombos and that I had no idea at first what I would do with this material. I said that I wanted to keep a memory of these first conversations. What you told me that day—or should I say, what you gave me that day?—and your precision in the telling keeps haunting me and has become essential to my understanding of the complexities, particularities and issues surrounding what you called quilombola politics.

We met a few more times after this conversation; often you didn't really have time for further discussion. You were busy, either working in the tiny paper shop that you ran, which faced onto the avenue Silva Lobo, or teaching at the elementary school. Sometimes you had to run to attend history seminars or talks dealing with Afro-Brazilian politics at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) or elsewhere in the city.

When we would finally meet, you did not make yourself very available, either to talk or be filmed, almost as if you felt that what was most important had already been said during that first encounter. I ended up talking with your mum in the kitchen and—in the yard with the barking dog—finally filming her. You often passed by while I was filming; I sensed a kind of amused curiosity. Was I right? You seemed to like what I was doing or to approve at least. Quilombo, in a way, is a family business. Forms of filiation, transmission; this is what it is also about, right? Filming your mother helped me to understand this.

She has been working for years as a servant in other people's houses. When she moved to the quilombo with your father, she was doing laundry for people living in the city centre like a lot of other women from the quilombo. She would walk on little paths through the forest to the city to get the laundry and bring it back to wash it at home. This work has been decisive in sustaining the daily needs of each home and to giving children, like you were at that time, a chance to study. Your mother says that the situation is better nowadays, because there is electricity and public transport. Even though the territory has been shrinking year after year, invasions of and threats to the quilombo territory started a long time ago anyhow.

When I met Mr Fígoli, the anthropologist who undertook an anthropological report on territorial delimitation (RTID) in 2008 with a team from the Centre for Quilombola and Traditional Societies' Studies (NUQ) from the anthropology department of the UFMG university, I mentioned the quilombo of the Luizes I had been to. Too many points concerning the recognition of the territory were still under negotiation at the time, so he refused to allow me to record him. Talking about you, he said that you were not ready yet to lead the quilombo, that you were perhaps not pragmatic enough. What did he mean? I still don't understand, but it raises a question that I have not discussed with you. Do quilombos need a leader rather than a legal association and a spokesperson? What forms of internal organization would you claim for the Luizes? I know that you were exhausted by some of the family conflicts existing inside the quilombo. They got in the way when the community should have been united in the struggle against the difficulties it faced, right?

Maybe I should speak for myself. ... Inclusion and exclusion are constant; being quilombola is being in a state of flux rather than a fixed identity. As an anthropologist would say, conflicts are sometimes the condition and matters of social boundaries. Would you agree with such an assertion concerning quilombos, at least concerning the Luizes? I guess you aren't calling each other guerreras, 'women warriors,' for no reason. Kilombo, in the Kimbundu Bantu language of Angola, means an initiation society for young warriors but also a place to rest for nomads: a place or a society to learn resistance and a refuge to stay for a while.

In June 2012, only part of the territory claimed by the Luizes and defined by the anthropological report was recognized by INCRA, the National Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform. During a meeting we attended with some quilombola spokespeople like yourself, INCRA workers and members of the Parliamentary Front for Racial Equality, the anthropologists of the NUQ, who had written the report, left the room as a sign of disagreement with the unilateral decision of the INCRA concerning the size of the recognized territories. You were bitter. The decision came much too late to stop the construction of a new apartment building inside the newly defined perimeter. The fight has to continue in the court for recognition of the rest of the territory, which is being invaded by individuals who build their own villas or by real estate companies. But the fight is also now against INCRA itself.

As the social uprising in Brazil continued in June 2013, especially in Belo Horizonte, and while some were occupying the municipal assembly with the aim of redefining the agenda of city politics, I was wondering where you were and if quilombolas were on the streets. Of course you were; at least you, Miriam. I came across a picture on a social network website that showed you carrying a placard calling for resistance in the name of Zumbi, the historical and mythological figure of the Palmares quilombo. You had a large smile, you looked beautiful. I wish I could have been at your side.

Berlin, 2013

Note

¹Fernand Deligny, “Le croire et le craindre”, in: Fernand Deligny, *Oeuvres*, edited by Sandra Alvarez de Toledo, Paris: Editions L’Arachnéen, 2007, p.1127