“A Thread that Connects the Worlds”:
Ovoid Logics and the Contradictory Lines of Force of Brazilian Improvisations

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Pois o ovo é um esquivo.
(For the egg is an evasion.)

Clarice Lispector, “O ovo e a galinha” (A descoberta 225)

One never seizes the egg. One never arrives at it. The egg remains unseizable. Then you have it and then you don’t.

Hélène Cixous (105)

The Baron François Toulour—aka the Night Fox—is engaged in worldmaking. A few moves, and space is subtly reconstituted: emergent pathways, like arteries, pulse new relationships and new configurations. This is not “the discovery of the world” (a descoberta do mundo); it’s the active emergence of one.

The Night Fox is a thief, self-styled as the greatest ever to live. The desired object of his latest heist: a priceless Fabergé egg on display in the Great Hall of a museum in Rome. He’s vying against a team of twelve crooks from the United States. It’s a competition, and if Night Fox wins, he’ll simply get the accolades he believes he deserves. If the team wins, they’ll receive a rather large sum of money from their opponent.

Protecting the jeweled ovum is a “laser grid” that is “impossible to beat,” as Livingston—one member of the team of crooks trying to best the Night Fox—informs us. His colleague Ruben offers the following rejoinder: “Nothing’s impossible.” And Livingston: “This is impossible. It’s in constant motion, and it’s programmed to improvise randomly, which means we can’t plan a way through it.”

The Night Fox knows better. In the ever-elastic spatio-temporal sphere he has trained within (and we see him training assiduously, at an earlier moment in the film), the randomly improvised (perhaps Livingston meant the “diabolically algorithmic”?) is parsable, surmountable. The Night Fox knows how to move with and against the laser system, and it is his movements that reveal the cracks in the system’s own motile, luminescent armor.

Here’s the spoiler: against all odds, the Night Fox manages to steal the egg (or so he thinks). The theft seemingly done, the contest seemingly over, the title of “world’s greatest thief” seemingly his, the Night Fox is face-to-face with Danny Ocean, the leader of the American team. The obvious question is posed by Ocean: “How did you get by the laser fields in the Great Hall?”

The answer is given to us in the next, wordless scene. The Night Fox is putting on his headphones, listening to an instrumental version of the song “Thé à la menthe” (Mint Tea) by the Moroccan-French rap duo La Caution. We peer over the Night Fox’s back. The laser field—all random motion—is before him. Then, an abrupt switch to a frontal shot, we have a clear view of blue laser shadows decorating his face. He crosses himself, kisses his right hand, and enters the field. In another context, we might say that he’s entering the world.

We can see him criss-crossing the space, narrowly keeping the lasers from feeling the heat of his skin, successfully making his way to the display that houses the egg. The moves he uses to remake this space from one of mere display into an agonistic one profitable for a crook have names: macaco (“monkey”—a close-to-the-ground back flip); au sem mão (“handless cartwheel”—feet in the air, head hovering just above the ground); rolé (“roll”—an evasive, protective movement); queda de rins (“fall on the kidneys”—the body improbably held up by an elbow and a wrist); salto mortal (“mortal leap”—an aerial back flip, which the Night Fox does from the base of a tall statue); pião de cabeça (“head spin”—the body becomes a top); rasteira (“trip”—the foot becomes a hook, sweeping along the ground); negativa (“negative”—an ambiguous, “canceling” move, simultaneously defense and attack); esquiva lateral (“side escape”—even the egg knows it’s an evasion).
Beyond the moves—or sinewously embedded in the moves—are improvisative tactics that are characteristic of this particular style of navigating and refashioning space: *ginga*—"a form of defense for those who [. . .] must improvise to survive, who can not situate themselves at a fixed point" (Abdala Júnior 169);4 *jogo de cintura*—"swing of the hips, the improvisational response to emergent situations" (Mische 130); *axé*—"performing operations on structure, process, and context and improvising on, in, with, and around them [. . .] the power to bring things into existence, to make things happen" (Drewal 27); *malandragem*—"the art of using ambiguity as a tool for living" (DaMatta, *Carnivals* 64); *malícia*—"a combination of wariness, quick wit, savvy, unpredictability, playfulness, vivaciousness, aesthetic flair, and a talent for deception" (Downey 123). These are, all at once, attitudes and habitudes, gestures and flows, catalysts and responses, energies, resources, adaptations, comportments. They are recuperative and regenerative, they confer advantage. Ever nascent, they really do help make things happen.

So, how does one best an improvising security system? The Night Fox’s answer, provided to us in the arsenal of movements he successfully employs, is “capoeira,” the Afro-Brazilian cultural form that resides in that uncategorizable space between a dance and a martial art, between a game and a full-on fight. Capoeira is philosophy, it is theater, it is ritual, it is history and social commentary. It can protect, it can satirize, it can seduce. It is, all at once, sacred and profane, tender and brazen, metaphoric and direct, playful and deadly serious. Ever adaptable, it is also a fully formed adaptation. It is a practiced improvisation. As Clarice Lispector wrote about her own egg, “There it was designed, the fruit of the most deliberate spontaneity” (1996, 79).5

When Night Fox crosses himself and moves out into the laser field, he’s moving out into what is called the *roda*, the circular space in which capoeira is played, typically conceptualized by capoeiristas as being a kind of world in miniature. As J. Lowell Lewis puts it,

> Referring to the inside of the circle as the “the world” is a metaphor linking the two spheres [. . .] As in all metaphors, the iconicity between spheres is never exact, since it is the contrast, as well as the similarity between the two, which provides the richness of the trope. In this case, by identifying the capoeira world with the outside world, practitioners are “saying” [. . .] that social life is really a combat like capoeira, a struggle between dominance and submission. (193)

The *roda* is a world created out of the movements made within it. And from movements made from without it, too (this circle knows both afference and efference). Just like when Nelson Goodman says that worldmaking, “always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking” (6). Worlds are made, “not from nothing, after all, but from other worlds” (6). Or when Danielle Goldman, writing about “dancing in tight spaces” (what tighter space than the infinitesimal distance between the Night Fox’s body and the randomly moving laser beams?), states that “the world-making potential of improvisation involves the ability to make new spaces, to create and form one’s surroundings continually, as one would wish them to be” (142-143).

So, we can modulate Deleuze and Guattari’s edict that “to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it” (311). No, to improvise is to create worlds, small ones. And every world is merely the fleeting sum of so many coagulated improvisations. “The egg,” after all, “is something in suspense. It has never settled” (Lispector, *Selected Crônicas* 78).6
Brazilian? Improvisations?

Neste maravilhoso país das improvisações...  
(In this marvelous country of improvisations...)  
Milton Santos (qtd. in Geiger 267)

...no people can live without a theory of themselves.  
If they do not have an anthropology to provide it, they improvise it...

Darcy Ribeiro (189)

The laser scene from Steven Soderbergh’s 2004 star-studded Hollywood heist film might, on one level, simply be taken as evidence of the globalization of Brazilian culture. Alternately, one might suggest—in a fitting inversion akin to capoeira’s upside-down movements—that the scene is representative of the Brazilianization of global culture. The improvisative tactics of capoeira used by the Night Fox to outsmart the laser field can be found, in one form or another, embedded in video games (Sony Play Station’s Tekken series); in other major Hollywood films (Catwoman, Meet the Fockers); in automobile commercials (Mazda’s “Zoom-zoom” campaign); and, most importantly, in the academies that have sprouted up all over the world teaching the practice to thousands upon thousands of non-Brazilian students. Capoeira is just one of many on a long list of Brazilian products and practices that have recently gone global: açaí, bikini waxes, blowouts, butt-lift workouts, caipirinhas, havaianas, jiujitsu. That list should also include achievements within global political, cultural, and economic sectors in which Brazilians have attained a level of ascendancy: modeling, Formula 1 racing, rodeo, mining, agricultural production, progressive politics (e.g. the World Social Forum).

But the laser scene tells a subtler story about Brazil, one that goes beyond mere transnational flows of people, products, and processes. The scene could be placed within a larger corpus of performances and representations that reveal how global projections of brasilidade (Brazilianness) are tightly bound to notions of the improvisative. In this sense, capoeira should be thought of in tandem with other improvisation-rich practices that manifest brasilidade within the global ecumene: soccer, favela architecture and design, cinema, music and dance. It’s remarkable that, in so many different realms, improvisation has become a sign for brasilidade—or the other way around.

A case in point (and one rather more explicit than the scene from Ocean’s Twelve): In the mid-2000s, two international advertising campaigns for Brahma beer leaned heavily on brasilidade’s improvisative cachet to help the Brazil-based beverage giant make inroads into global markets. The first, an online digital campaign, revolved around a tagline with a rather direct relationship between the beer and a putatively Brazilian lifestyle: “Brahma/Improvise.” The creative directors of the campaign, Paul Knott and Tim Vance (then at the advertising firm LBi, whose company’s own tagline is “Building Believable Brands”), put it like this on their website: “The Brahma brand is all about living with effortless flair. Improvising and having fun in the inimitable Brazilian way.”

The second campaign, created by the Lápiz Agency (according to their website, the “premier Hispanic marketing communications agency in the USA”), opted for the Brazilian word ginga instead of “improvise.” This was not a straightforward move, but an elaborate coding that, one would imagine, was initiated in order to bring the English-language concept of “improvisation” closer to an imagined Brazilianness. Part of the campaign took the form of a remarkably elaborate 56-page “manual” entitled Brahmastutra: The Brazilian Philosophy of Living with Ginga that was given out with purchases of the beer. With lines like “Brasilians are known for their optimistic view of the Universe” and an entire section giving the ins and outs of proper bodily comportment for drinking beer like a “Brasilian,” the booklet was obviously meant to function as a detailed primer on how non-Brazilians could secure some form of Brazilianness. It seems that to consume a Brazilian product, one must, in some manner or form, become Brazilian—or “Brasilian.” Most fascinating is the way the term “ginga” manifests itself in the booklet. On a double-page with the title “A Word about Ginga (jeen-ga),” and with a large drawing clearly intended to depict an alluring Brazilian woman and smaller drawings portraying hands playing a pandeiro (a Brazilian tambourine, one of samba’s iconic instruments), dancing feet, a soccer player, and Brahma’s curvy bottle, the relationship between ginga and improvisation (and, of course, the consumption of beer) is laid bare:

The exact concept of Ginga is hard to grasp. Ginga means that effortless flair with which Brasilians conduct their lives. It can be seen in the unique way Brasilians move—observe a Samba dancer, a soccer player, a capoeira fighter—or in the seductive tones of their voices. Ginga is a graceful approach to everyday
Patriotism

Here are three (admittedly) decontextualized examples (among many others) drawn from the Brazilian press:


In summoning up the locution "capacity to improvise," Stam and Shoat, both North America-based scholars, are paying close attention to language that permeates Brazilian national discourse. "Capacity"—with its overtones of something that is taken and held, something a person has inside themselves, imagined as either the product of diligent training or some kind of magically given innate ability—becomes a mechanism for yoking improvisation to the flexible axes of cunning, contingency, and nascency? Can we attune ourselves to the interference patterns that "improvisative politics of being Brazilian"?

Fashioning such a list of terms prompts a number of questions: In what ways is such a lexicon spun out along the broad arc of national ontology? Do these terms have something to do with what might be generally referred to as the "improvisative politics of being Brazilian"? What does it mean for the contours of a national identity to be laid along the broad contours of national belonging. Indeed, from sports to politics, from economics to pedagogy, from the arts to the quotidian expanses of everyday Brazilian life, the social and cultural spheres of Brazil (with its overtones of something that is taken and held) have often been characterized as having decidedly improvisative valences. The importance of improvisation to the enactment of Braziliananness would seem to be borne out by the sheer abundance of common words and phrases used in everyday Brazilian speech that emphasize extemporaneous action as a crucial modality of being "Brazilian": jeitinho, malandragem, ginta, jogo de cintura, malicia, gambiarra, esperteza, axé, manha, suinque, astúcia, drible, malabarismo, balanço, equilibrista, pirataria, arranjar-se, molejo, cordialidade, and so on. Some of these terms, admittedly, have a slightly more oblique connection to the improvisative than others, and each would require a substantial philology to be unpacked in even a rudimentary fashion. But each evinces tendencies that, broadly speaking, could be correlated with the meta-term "improvisation."

The last question is an utterly crucial one. It's not farfetched to make the claim that some vector of brasilidade is founded upon the improvisative. One could go as far as to argue that improvisation forms one of the principal ballasts for notions of a Brazilian exceptionalism, a claim that Robert Stam and Ella Shohat subtly make in their book Flagging Patriotism:

. . . the Brazilian capacity for clever improvisation, summed up in the word jeitinho; that is, a creative gift for surviving and even thriving in situations of poverty and disadvantage. Brazilian culture has often demonstrated an immensely creative capacity, doubtless the partial legacy of its subalternized populations, to improvise with scarce resources. We find this improvisational quality especially in the manifestations of Afro-Brazilian culture, where African Brazilians, working from a situation of material deprivation, have shown a capacity to turn everyday objects such as matchboxes into percussive instruments, to turn the throwaway parts of the pig into a delicious feijoada stew (the national dish, invented by Africans during slavery), or to turn even garbage into art. Brazilian intellectuals pride themselves in the country's "anthropophagic" ability to take the best of everything in the world and make it Brazilian. (56)

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The choice of whether or not to take the umbrella carries in it much of the culture of the Brazilian people, who trust and bet on their high capacity for improvisation and the certainty that there is a jeito for everything, even to divert the rain.10 (Souza)

The Brazilian context requires managers to have a tremendous capacity to improvise, know how to circumvent (driblar) the lack of resources and infrastructure, and still work toward the goals.11 ("Executivo de ouro")
Leonard Boff morphs the Brazilian colonial sphere into a planetary one: “The high creativity of the Brazilian people as “povo brasileiro” and “brasilidade” emerge in coordination with the improvisative. One could even argue that they both form an inextricable part of the larger system in which locutive and locative worldmaking technologies such as povo brasileiro did not produce what they wanted but rather what resulted from their often unrestrained actions” (40). And, skipping the ethic of an adventurer who improvises at every moment as he faces the challenge he must confront, the Iberians improvised. This is how everyone [all countries] started and we [in Brazil] also started this way. The problem is that we persist in this error and we take pride in it, and treat it as if it were an exceptional quality. In improvisation, experiences do not accumulate, they are lost. They are momentary solutions that occur due to the absence and lack of coordination and organization specific to the medium, which is where we find the big gap in our television stations. We must not confuse improvisation with creativity, which can not exist without technique.” (Pasquini 123)

What is hidden in such articulations is the anxiety that improvisation sometimes generates within Brazilian contexts. For sure, the improvisative, as broadly conceived, is often romanticized in Brazil: more than simply symptomatic of abject conditions, it is even sometimes framed as a kind of curative. Indeed, Stam and Shohat’s account quoted above is representative of a kind of genre of analysis that trains focus on the compensatory dimensions of improvisation, its necessity in conditions marked by depravity, disadvantage, and differential justice.

But this optimistic perspective is often flipped around and improvisation, rather than being a result of difficult social conditions, is taken to be their cause. In this view, improvisation is something to be surmounted, left behind in the forward progress toward Brazil’s vaunted “future.” Driving this point home is an article with the title “Chega de improviso!” (Stop Improvising!) that appeared in the newspaper O Globo in 2010. The article insists that in order to heal many of the social woes facing Rio de Janeiro, actions need to be taken by politicians to move the city “further from underdevelopment and improvisation.” The author is blunt: “We can’t continue improvising” (Viera). This type of sentiment has a long history in Brazil. For example, in an essay about the Brazilian television industry published in 1975, Vinício Pasquini contends that improvisation is one of our greatest faults. When we communicate with thousands of people, we can not improvise. This is how everyone [all countries] started and we [in Brazil] also started this way. The problem is that we persist in this error and we take pride in it, and treat it as if it were an exceptional quality. In improvisation, experiences do not accumulate, they are lost. They are momentary solutions that occur due to the absence and lack of coordination and organization specific to the medium, which is where we find the big gap in our television stations. We must not confuse improvisation with creativity, which can not exist without technique.” (Pasquini 123)

And even on the broadest national level, when people ruminate critically on quality-of-life issues, improvisation is often pointed to as a source of social malaise. At the end of 2008 through the beginning of 2009, the United Nations Development Program in Brazil (Programa das Nações Unidas para o Desenvolvimento, PNUD) asked over 500,000 people all over Brazil a simple question: “What needs to change in Brazil for your life to really get better”? (PNUD 3). One answer, provided by Edna Maria de Oliveira from the city of Goiania, points directly to the unease improvisation causes for some Brazilians: “It’s necessary to do away with the jeitinho brasileiro for resolving things, because this jeitinho is what opens precedents for the growth of impunity and social inequality” (PNUD 26). (In the next section I show how the jeitinho is linked to the improvisative; here, let the quote suffice to serve as another reminder that the broadly “improvisative” is summoned in lexically diverse ways in Brazil.)

These two expansive perspectives—one that holds improvisation to be a response to challenging conditions and the other that takes improvisation to be a catalyst for those very conditions—are not necessarily mutually exclusive (and neither of them, tellingly, denies that the improvisative is central to Brazilian social life). What I want to suggest is that they both form an inextricable part of the larger system in which locutive and locative worldmaking technologies such as povo brasileiro and brasilidade emerge in coordination with the improvisative. One could even argue that “Brasil” itself—a kind of impulse, a projection, a space, a conceit, a juridical entity, a brand—was, ab ovo, conjured out of the improvised colonial encounters that began taking place in April 1500 when Pedro Álvares Cabral and his crew arrived and had their first interactions with the indigenous tribes already there (providing the stimulus for the chaos that subsequently ensued). Darcy Ribeiro paints the picture of the incipient colonial period like this: “Acting with the ethic of an adventurer who improvises at every moment as he faces the challenge he must confront, the Iberians did not produce what they wanted but rather what resulted from their often unrestrained actions” (40). And, skipping across the span of 500 years to the year 2000, during the quincentennial of Cabral’s arrival, the liberation theologian Leonard Boff morphs the Brazilian colonial sphere into a planetary one: “The high creativity of the Brazilian people [povo brasileiro], their inventiveness and capacity for improvisation can stimulate a similar ethos, needed for the era of globalization if it’s not to be a mere prolonging of the age of nation states, but really a new stage of humanity, building a common destiny in the same home, Earth” (Boff 118-19).

Brasil. Brasilidade. O Povo Brasileiro. Each summons up exact resonances that are manifestly inexact. Each manifests a state of homological non-coterminity, or “designed [. . .] deliberate spontaneity” (Lispector, Selected
Crônicas 79): those inert, vectoring identities. A lot of contradictions arise when one tries to impute a stable, overarching set of attributes to a dynamic nation of almost 200 million. As José Miguel Wisnik makes clear in his interview with Micaela Kramer in this issue, the almost reflexive resort to yoking generalizable schemas to modalities of national belonging can do an injustice to the incongruous:

I try to avoid the term brasilidade [Brazilianness] and its correlates, which might suggest the idea of a national essence. However, I do believe in the existence of contradictory lines of force that can be traced in multiple sites within cultural spheres and which allow for the identification of certain tendencies—even if these are complex ones. (qtd. in Kramer 2)

So, what I try to do in the rest of this essay is point to a few of these “complex tendencies” and “contradictory lines of force,” providing snapshots of a few key loci within and around which one can examine and critique the stories people—Brazilians and non-Brazilians alike—tell about the zygotic relationship between improvisation and brasilidade. Each of these snapshots—of the jeitinho brasileiro, of the gambiarrismo aesthetics of the global favela, of futebol brasileiro (Brazilian soccer)—reveal, I hope, that the concept of improvisation (rendered directly and in its many other lexical guises) performs a vital function in Brazil. It’s a nexus around which deliberations over matters of national import take place, a ready-to-hand theoretical apparatus for peering into the “inert vectoring” that characterizes the varied performances of citizenship that take place within Brazilian communities. I’m careful, however, to let each of the following three sections play out within a global frame, working under the assumption that Brazil is not (and never has been) coterminous with itself.

Brazil is constantly being reborn under the contradictory forces of appraisals of the improvisative, and these appraisals manifest in such a diversity of ways that the plural form of improvisation in Portuguese—improvisações (as seen in the epigraph for this section by the great Brazilian geographer Milton Santos)—begins to seem more and more salient. What follows, then, are heavily curtailed readings of a tip-of-the-iceberg compendium, just a toe dipping into a rather extensive number of debates and discourses on improvisações brasileiras.

O Jeitinho Brasileiro/O Jeitinho Não-Brasileiro

O jeitinho fornece espaço para negociação. É uma ponte entre dois mundos...
(The jeitinho provides space for negotiation. It is the bridge between two worlds...)

(Roberto DaMatta, qtd in J.P. Ribeiro 183)

Of all the available terms used to mark Brazilian forms of worldmaking, it is the jeitinho brasileiro that is the most vital for summoning up improvisation’s place within the architectures of Brazilian national belonging. Most directly translated as “the Brazilian way,” it has been given an almost dizzying number of definitions in Brazil, many of which have some variant improvisation at their core. For example, in her seminal book O jeitinho brasileiro: a arte de ser mais igual que os outros (The Jeitinho Brasileiro: The Art of Being More Equal than the Others), Lívia Barbosa calls the jeitinho a “procedure defined as a social form of creativity and improvisation, creating personal spaces within impersonal domains” (45). In the popular press, the improvised is also often set next to the jeitinho. In a 2003 column in O Estado de São Paulo, for example, the economist Antonio Márcio Buainain maintains that “In Brazil, we cultivate the jeitinho brasileiro, the capacity for improvisation, informality, individualism, and waiting until the last minute as national values relevant to success in private life and the progress of the country” (Buainain).

The jeitinho has also been a darling of non-Brazilian observers of Brazilian culture, providing a lever with which to do the heavy lifting of creating an epistemological horizon for trying to understand what goes on in South America’s largest country. Joseph Page puts it like this at the very beginning of The Brazilians, his 540-page book for a non-Brazilian audience that is, at least in part, about “what makes Brazilians Brazilian” (x):

Brazilians characteristically seek subtle ways to circumvent difficult situations. Instead of resorting to confrontation, they prefer what they call the jeito or jeitinho, a difficult to translate term referring to what a French scholar once described as “an ingenious maneuver that renders the impossible possible; the unjust just and the illegal legal.” It is a rapid, improvised and creative response to a law, rule, or custom that on its face prevents someone from doing something. The jeitinho personalizes a situation ostensibly governed by an impersonal norm. (10)
In one of his love-affair-with-Brazil columns that appeared at the beginning of 2008, New York Times Op-ed columnist Roger Cohen presented the jeitinho as a kind of palliative for the general malaise he saw facing U.S. society. Resolving to “adopt Brazilian karma for 2008 and forget all the little irritants that plague American lives,” he points out that Brazil, for him, is “a serious as well as a sensuous country with a stock market that rose more than 70 percent in 2007, burgeoning oil and ethanol industries, planes for export, iron ore to keep the Chinese happy and much else to buttress its rising-power status. But pleasure trumps sacrifice and there’s a ‘jeitinho’—ingenious fix—for anything” (Cohen).

The scholarship on the jeitinho brasileiro is voluminous in both Portuguese and in English, and this is not the place for a full literature review. It is important to note, however, that most scholars highlight what they see as the jeitinho’s dual nature, emphasizing that it can be conceptualized both as a blessing and a curse, something to embrace or eradicate. In an English-language version of some of the research contained in her still untranslated book, Barbosa is careful to point out that the jeitinho brasileiro is revelatory of Brazil’s “multiple and contradictory nature”:

... it promotes, depending on how we use it, a positive or negative encompassment, without imposing exclusive and definitive choices. It is the symbol of our institutional disorientation, incompetence, and inefficiency as much as it is a symbol of our cordiality, street smarts, and conciliatory character. It reasserts our eternal marriage with a relational and traditional worldview and our equally unending affair with an individualistic and modern ideology. (“The Brazilian Jeitinho” 47)

I’d like to present a few examples that highlight this dual nature of the jeitinho: its capacity, as a form of “national social navigation” (DaMatta, O que faz), to participate in multiple and sometimes contradictory processes of worldmaking. It’s important, however, to first emphasize that while Barbosa’s analysis includes an acknowledgement that the jeitinho is a “homogenizing category” which dissolves “internal diversity,” she also suggests that it brings together “a great variety of geographical, political, and sociocultural units, with innumerable distinctions, under a single rubric that locates [Brazil] on a broad international scene of nation states” (“The Brazilian Jeitinho” 46).

For the purposes of thinking about Brazilian forms of improvisation within a global frame, it’s vital to pay close attention to the locative and internationalizing dimensions of the jeitinho. That is, the jeitinho brasileiro finds its necessary concomitant in what might be called, in a fit of non-identity thinking, the jeitinho não-brasileiro. This is to say that the jeitinho brasileiro is a fundamentally relational practice, a type of improvisative worldmaking that relies upon sophisticated modalities of interaction and subtle understandings of environment and context. The jeitinho, however, is relational not just because of the formative role it plays in up-close social transactions; it is relational too in the sense that it places the “Brazilian” within a planetary enclosure, and often in highly contradictory ways.

Two print advertisements that appeared in Veja, Brazil’s major newweekly, in the late 1970s and early 1980s—just as the abertura (the “opening” from the military dictatorship to democracy) was slowly beginning to unfold—are indicative of the jeitinho brasileiro’s reliance on what we might call the “non-Brazilian” to provide a backdrop against which the jeitinho’s nationalist contours can be highlighted. That is, in these two examples, we see how the jeitinho becomes brasileiro only in contradistinction to the não-brasileiro. The first, a 1978 advertisement for Judoka sandals, uses the jeitinho to harness the particular form of value that cultural modalities of mixing and hybridity have within Brazil. Here, the jeitinho is given a positive gloss, becoming a social technology that can articulate with the non-Brazilian in productive ways. The advertisement text reads,

From Japanese technology and the jeitinho brasileiro came the charm, beauty and grace of this sandal. From the Japanese side it has inherited the quality, durability, and softness of its rubber and the technological sophistication of the East. But the cheerful and vivid colors, the charm of its shape, its overall grace, the jeitinho used in its non-slip soles and revolutionary adjustable strap, are our things and Judoka was made for our people, for men, women and children.

An advertisement for Orient watches from 1980 provides a slightly more pessimistic envisioning of the jeitinho. Under a headline that reads “Orient. A watch without the jeitinho brasileiro,” we find this text:

The jeitinho brasileiro can be good for everything. But not for manufacturing watches. Watches are high-precision machines. They require very special manufacturing conditions, sophisticated equipment, rigorously qualified labor, top-level technology. And with all of that we produce Orient watches, in Manaus [capital of the Brazilian state of Amazonas]. And this is why they are acclaimed in 120 countries. If your watch isn’t running well, don’t try and do a “jeito” on it. Buy an Orient.
There’s more at stake with the jeitinho brasileiro than a pair of sandals or a watch. For some, the jeitinho is the cause of virtually anything that ails Brazil, including broad structural problems that affect Brazil’s standing in the world’s economic and political system. Some would contend that if Brazil is to climb higher in the global pecking order (and reach a position concomitant with its size and ample natural resources), the jeitinho—“the national acceptance for breaking the rules,” as two writers of a rather dystopic article about violence in Rio put it—will need to be eradicated (França and Soares 106). The desire to do away with the jeitinho is, in some instances, about creating new global alignments and, through these, new global advantages for Brazil. In the neoliberal world order, there’s no room for improvised and creative responses to rules and laws.

That’s certainly the point made in Cultura das transgressões no Brasil: lições da história (Culture of Transgressions in Brazil: Lessons from History), a volume of essays that was summed up in the following headline from a review that appeared in the Folha de São Paulo: “Book says that the jeitinho hinders the economy” (Wiziaock). The thin volume was the fruit of a conference co-organized by the think tank run by former Brazilian president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Instituto Fernando Henrique Cardoso). Cardoso was one of the book’s editors and his imprimatur appears in the form of a blurb on its back cover: “Today we live in a mass urban society and under a democratic regime, but the rule of law remains a goal to conquer.”

In his Preface to this volume, Victório De Marchi speaks to how this conquering might be achieved. After calling Brazil “A country of vast legal tradition, but still without the means to adequately curb impunity,” he goes on to point out that factors such as impunity have “eroded the evaluation of Brazil in the international ranking of countries with liberal economies” (viii). (He adds that these rankings come from studies undertaken by the Heritage Foundation, in partnership with The Wall Street Journal.) Continuing, he says,

> With sensitivity and depth of analysis, the authors of this book weave connections with history and arrive in the present day with a crystal clear conclusion: transgression has become a kind of tolerated practice. That is to say, disrespect for the law, once romantically labeled the jeitinho brasileiro, has become a national second nature, a threat to development that needs to be overcome.

Without weighing in on the validity of Marchi’s argument (that is, without launching into a discussion of the injustice that inheres in the vast economic inequality that still rives Brazilian society), we can see that the jeitinho brasileiro is not just a kind of social maneuver; it is also an organizing principle, an analytic ballast for both understanding and calling into being the Brazilian condition.

“The Country of Gambiarras” and the Improvisative Aesthetics of the Global Favela

> The subdesenvolvimento não se improvisa. É fruto de séculos. (Underdevelopment is not improvised. It is the fruit of centuries.)

Nelson Rodrigues (qtd. in Nóbrega)

> O Brasil não é um país subdesenvolvido. É um país injusto. (Brazil is not an underdeveloped country. It is an unjust country.)

Fernando Henrique Cardoso (2)

The recent rise of “favela chic” and “favela aesthetics” on the global stage has been one of the most fascinating (and sometimes fraught) manifestations of the worldmaking capacities of brasilidade. From M.I.A. and Diplo’s use of funk carioca to the emergence of diasporic botequims like Brooklyn, New York’s “Miss Favela”; from the gigantic, global community dedicated to performing the samba traditions of Rio’s favelas to the ecstatic international attention placed on the corpus of favela-based “hunger cosmetic” films (Bentes 245), it is clear that the Brazilian favela has gone worldwide.

And, for those who can make it down to Brazil, there are the “Favela Tours” that allow vacationers to step into the world of the favela and have an up-close relationship with both precariousness and the worldmaking improvisations of “favela aesthetics.” For example, the webpage titled “The Favela Tour; Not a Safari” on the website The Rio de Janeiro City Guide for Gringos answers the question “Why a favela tour?” like this:
You will get the opportunity to see how these societies work. You visit social projects and get to see how these communities are warm and welcoming. The absolutely stunning views together with the improvised absolutely unique buildings is an attraction itself. These tours bring money to the favela Rocinha everyday and also gives the visitor the opportunity to observe the reality for so many Brazilians.33

A 2006 comment on the discussion board "Brazzil Forum" (run by the long-standing, and insightful magazine Brazzil) drives this home.34 A post asking about the legitimacy of the Rio-based "Bealocal" tour agency35 received this response from a forum member named "e harmony":

. . . please don't go on one of those favela tours. There is nothing more gringo than that [. . .] Again, that is not to say there is nothing more to any of these people, life is complex and has many interesting stories and personalities they say is the spice of life. And it is quite evident that the people of the favelas are survivors and know how to adapt and improvise.36

Within Brazil—that is, across the strata of multiple, infranational Brazils—the favela often plays a similar role to the one it does internationally. The voyeuristic is not a function of either proximity or distance.37 In an article entitled “Slumsploitation” about the genre of Brazilian TV shows and films set in favelas, Melanie Gilligan attempts to answer the question “is representation the answer to ‘social exclusion’ or one of the mechanisms of its reproduction?” Her answer clearly veers to the latter possibility: “those living in favelas will continue to be portrayed in cultural commodities but are unlikely to benefit from their production.” Her reading of how favelados are portrayed in City of Men—the TV spinoff of the popular film City of God—is particularly insightful. She contends that the TV version of the film tries for

the same handheld documentary “gritty realism” in a modern-day Rio favela. The first TV drama set in the favelas, it was shot in slums like Rocinha, Rio’s largest, and watched by 35 million people in Brazil, spawning several other favela soaps. The protagonists amaze audiences with their resourcefulness and entrepreneurial zeal, getting themselves out of the tight spots and near death experiences that living in a community regulated by arbitrary police and gang violence creates. In other words, it celebrates the slum as a dangerous but creative place where people improvise solutions. (55-56)

Of course, on the international stage, the Brazilian favela has become a kind of poster child for depicting the savagery of global poverty (to cite one conspicuous example, see the cover of Robert Neuwirth’s book Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, a New Urban World). These images function as what Ivan Bentes calls an “inside-out postcard” (248).38 The favela thus performs a dual function within the realm of global culture: it is a potent marker of violence and destitution and it is an example of and—compellingly—a source for heightened, improvisative forms of creativity.

A key manifestation of favela culture outside of Brazil has been in the art and design exhibitions organized around the concept of gambiarra.39 The term is not strictly associated with favela culture, although the forms of gambiarra labor that manifest within slum environments seem to provide the most common reference point for the art that makes it into museums outside of Brazil. Like the jeitinho, gambiarra has been defined by a wide range of commentators. Rosas suggests that it “means something [. . .] akin to the English term makeshift, referring to any improvisation of an expedient substitute when other means fail or are not available. In other words, ‘making do’” (343-344). For Boufleur, it is a kind of “spontaneous design,” “a necessary procedure for configuring an improvised artifact [. . .] a way to use or construct artifacts, through an approach of differentiation, improvisation, adaptation, adjustment, transformation or adaptation” (25).40 The website of the editorial collective Mutirão da Gambiarra (Multitude of the Gambiarra) refers to it as “a cultural practice made up of all kinds of improvised solutions to everyday problems, made possible with any available material.”41 And, finally, New York-based Brazilian artist Vik Muniz phrased it like this in the lead-in to an interview he did with Fernando and Humberto Campana, Brazilian designers whose pieces such as their “Favela Chair” have become emblems of gambiarra on the international museum circuit:

In Brazil, the term gambiarra applies to a spontaneous and makeshift style of problem-solving that is very present in our tool-depleted yet resourceful tradition [. . .] Brazilians pride themselves on repairing airplanes with paperclips, catching fish with prescription drugs as bait, or using saliva as a building material. Consequently, cities, the government, and belief systems have become gambiarras themselves: the survivalist ingenuity of a people who live for the present alone compensates for the lack of material and psychological security.42
As Muniz suggests, gambiarrā—like so many forms of Brazilian improvisation—is compensatory, it grows out of pragmatic needs that require a “fix” or a “workaround.” Outside of the museum, the necessity of living always in solution is obviously connected to differential access to resources, to class politics, and more broadly, to forms of denigration that are the spawn of a country with one of world’s highest levels of inequality. Moacir dos Anjos, the curator of a 2007 exhibition at the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art that had gambiarrā as one of its themes, makes exactly this point in an article written by Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves. Anjos contends that “[i]n the symbolic field and in the field of the sensible, [gambiarrā] expresses Brazil’s incapacity to universalize basic rights, when synchronically it must confront previously unseen fundamental matters” (emphasis mine). Gonçalves glosses Anjos’ account by adding that “The improvised mechanisms [of the gambiarrā] reveal a Brazilian creativity born of the need to deal with social, economic, and political precariousness” (Gonçalves).

In his review of a traveling exhibition called “Gambiarrā: New Art from Brazil” that made it to Colchester, England in 2004, Joel Robinson makes a subtle argument against Brazilian exceptionalism by suggesting that “various [gambiarrā] strategies exist across the globe, especially in Southeast Asian contexts like Thailand and Indonesia where artists have not enjoyed the same quality of infrastructure for the promotion of culture” (Robinson). He suggests that visitors to the Colchester exhibition were “meant to infer that the phenomenon of gambiarrā is particularly resonant here, i.e., in light of the social inequalities, political hardships and ethnic differences marking contemporary Brazil.” He goes on to give a compact but tantalizing description of one of the works exhibited at the Colchester show, an installation by Marepe (Marcos Reis Peixoto), an artist from Santo Antônio de Jesus in the Brazilian state of Bahia. Entitled “Um Fio Que Ligue os Mundos” (A Thread that Connects the Worlds), it is, according to Robinson, a piece in which “the precarious balance among three spheres of cheese incised with nations representing the first, second, and third worlds is threatened by the implied presence of a rat” (Robinson).43

Global favela. Global gambiarrā. What is the thread that connects these worlds?

Futebol: Ordem e Bagunça

Again, the First World bowed before our talent and capacity to improvise [. . .] We can not and should not be like the gringos on or off the field. We have our history, our identity, our malandragem. Perhaps what we need is to recover the successful, positive, dynamic and efficient aspects of our personality. To believe that we are better, with all our contradictions. The Macunaímas that did well. “The Best.” Why not?45

Cátia Moraes (2002; just after Brazil won the World Cup Final against Germany, 2-0)

A bagunça dá muito mais sentido à vida que a ordem. . .
(Messiness brings much more sense to life than order. . .)

José Pedro Goulart (2010)

Of all the major Brazilian practices that have gone global, it is Brazilian soccer that has had the most pronounced, long-term effect on projecting an improvisative form of brasilidade outside of Brazil. In his 2009 book Futebol Brasileiro Hoje (Brazilian Soccer Today), José Geraldo Couto, making the evident connection between human capital and athletic capitalism, points out that “[t]he Brazilian football player is one of the country’s most valued products for export” (14).46 He goes on to point out that of the first 18 winners of FIFA’s “Player of the Year Award” (1991-2008), 8 were Brazilian (14). Providing further evidence (drawn from data from the Brazilian Soccer Association Confederação Brasileira de Futebol, the national body governing soccer), Couto tells us that 851 players left Brazil in 2006 to play outside the country, 1085 in 2008, and 1176 in 2009 (15), all following in a long tradition that goes back at least to 1931 when the midfielder Fausto dos Santos was sent from Vasco da Gama in Rio de Janeiro to play for Barcelona.

Despite being spread out among teams worldwide, Brazil’s best players are drawn together to form the Seleção Brasileira, the Brazilian national team that competes in international matches and, most dramatically, in the World Cup. Every four years, the tournament functions as a referendum on the place improvisation should have (or shouldn’t have) in Brazilian soccer and society. For a segment of the population, Brazil, with its five World Cup titles (the most of any nation), is not only expected to win—it’s expected to win by sticking close to a script that is also seemingly scriptless; to utilize a style of play that is imagined, through creativity, improvisation, inventiveness, and fluidity, to be quintessentially Brazilian; a style that is drawn from the incubator of informal sandlot games; a style that
evinces the jogo bonito, the beautiful game, futebol arte. For another segment of the population, Brazil must throw off the shackles of what is a messy style—uma bagunça—a style lacking strategy, precision, and physically; a style incognizant of the changes that world soccer has undergone; a style not fit for modernity. This debate is long standing. It has never settled.

The discourse surrounding the 2010 Seleção that played in the World Cup in South Africa provides a case in point. The team’s coach Dunga (Carlos Caetano Bledorn Verni) had long been accused of utilizing and promoting a rather inelegant style of play (as a player, Dunga was the captain of the team that won Brazil’s fourth World Cup in Pasadena in 1994). But as the Seleção was making its way to South Africa in 2010, the coach was the target of a fusillade of criticism, derided for not allowing the continued florescence of Brazilian creativity. To cite one example, Carlos Alberto Torres, the captain of the team that won Brazil’s third World Cup in Mexico City in 1970, appeared on BBC Brasil lambasting the team’s stilted style: “This team doesn’t play a soccer worthy of the greatest traditions of Brazilian soccer, a soccer of drible, imagination, creativity and improvisation.”

A month before the start of the 2010 Cup, journalist José Pedro Goulart (2010) offered a more nuanced critique, one that didn’t revolve around the either/or binary of improvisation/non-improvisation. He expressed his hope for the kind of soccer that would put a “milco” (military type) like Dunga side by side with the “bagunceiro” (messy) striker Romário (Romário de Souza Faria). For Goulart, this combination would amount to what he called a “pragmatic poetics” (pragmatismo poético). His designation of Romário as a bagunceiro is, in this instance, a compliment, and Goulart ends up using different forms of bagunça (meaning mess or messiness, in the sense of confusion) seven times in his short column. While he concedes that Dunga’s disdain for bagunça and his proclivity for systematization and organization produces victories, Goulart also admits that he feels a lack, and senses that Dunga doesn’t know that:

... bagunça gives much more meaning to life than order. As a matter of fact, bagunça is a genuinely Brazilian product, it’s the answer to a bureaucratic world, cold and tedious; the bagunça in Brazil is equality. The jeitinho brasileiro is socialist, organic, sensual.

Here’s my point: that there is coordination, bravery; that there is solidarity, efficiency: the game is no fun without competition. But all this with a good dose of insanity, improvisation. And without an exaggerated nationalism, please.

The great Brazilian film director Cacao (Carlos) Diegues weighed in on the debate in a provocative and remarkable column in the Folha de São Paulo. Writing in the wake of Brazil’s demoralizing loss to the Netherlands in the quarter finals on July 2, 2010, Diegues situates a stylistic shift in Brazilian soccer within the context of the early 1990s (the beginning of the Dunga Era) when the country, he says, was “emerging from the medieval savage anarchy caused by the military dictatorship” and was “anxious for a new national agenda”:

It's as if Brazil [...] had finally decided to be a “serious country.” Instead of just dancing and “swaying” (gingar), we began to propose that praise of work be deserving of grace, to desire the substitution of discipline for inspiration, planning for improvisation. The permanence of elaborate tactics, rather than uncertain in-the-moment creation.

We aim to introduce some rigor into our taste for the jeitinho (the drible?), this learning of corruption. And a bit of rationality into the baroque delirium we are so proud of, the one that was consecrated in the gilded churches built with power that came out of the cruelest and longest period of slavery in Latin America. And with this spirit, we won our fourth Cup in 1994 in Los Angeles, the capital of the culture of Anglo-Saxon Protestant pragmatism.

The Dunga Era represented a quantum leap in Brazilian culture, a desire to put a dash of enlightenment in the bagunça of our hearts. It was during his term [...] that we returned to being champions in 2002, a period of relative economic stability and income distribution in the country.

These debates that pit order versus bagunça can be traced back from 2010 to Brazil’s first World Cup victory in 1958. (I’ll refrain from relating stories drawn from that 50-year period; there are many.) When Brazil annihilated Sweden 5-2 in the final, Veja published a commemorative Campeões do Mundo (Champions of the World) issue with a photo of a jubilant Pelé (then 17 years old), with his teammates Gilmar and Didi on the cover. Inside, an article with the title “Flight Plan” (Plano de Vôo) reads,
The championship delegation buried the era of improvisation and messiness (improviso e bagunça)—led by Paulo Machado de Carvalho, they were organized, efficient and prudent. It’s a lesson for the entire country.51 (Plano de Vôo)

Paulo Machado de Carvalho was the chief of the Brazilian “delegation” that accompanied the Seleção Brasileira to Sweden for the World Cup. In the article, he is presented as the consummate planner, one sufficiently organized to rein in Brazil’s unruly tendencies. The debate I described above—between “ordem” and “bagunça”—is here placed in a context that goes beyond the pitch and reveals well the articulation between the world of soccer and broader worlds of Brazilian society:

It wasn’t only on the pitch that world champion Seleção innovated and surprised. Behind the scenes the team had another revolution, almost as decisive for the conquest as the maturing (amadurecimento) of the country's footballers. The Brazilian delegation in the World Cup was an example of organization and efficiency, ending an embarrassing history of unpreparedness, messiness, neglect and even corruption. In past contests the Seleção traveling abroad was so bedraggled, like a bunch of shoeless soccer players in a weekend game. The Brazil of 1958 ran like a Swiss watch. This time there weren’t any big wigs trying to gain political prominence or some change on the outside; there was no improvisation in transfers or disorder in the training camp; there were no last-minute rescues or jeitinhos. The Brazilian Sports Confederation (CBD) outlined a comprehensive plan and followed this prescription exactly. The tumultuous world of football, who would have thought, provided an example for the rest of the country—which, under the auspices of President Juscelino Kubitschek, is attempting to modernize, expand and enrich.52 (Plano de Vôo)

This was indeed the era of Kubitschek. His presidency began in 1956, and immediately, and famously, he embarked on a vast modernization project, initializing a plan that promised “fifty years of progress in five.” (Indeed, one reading the Veja article might think that it simply represented propaganda for the Kubitschek administration.) At the beginning of his term, Kubitschek set in motion preparations to realize his most daring objective: the construction of Brasília, the new capital in the center of the country. It was to serve as a symbol that Brazil had thrown off the shackles of its past (read: bagunça, improvisation, jeitinho, malandragem, etc.) and was finally arriving into modernity. It was during those heady days that Kubitschek said, “Brasília isn’t an improvisation, but the result of a maturation (amadurecimento). It isn’t just the moving of a Capital, but the announcement of a reform” (Kubitschek 55).53 Modernity, at least for Kubitschek, is conferred on those who chega de improviso.

But, once again, another contradictory line of force—just a little twist—arises. Oscar Niemeyer, Brazil’s most famous architect—and with Lucio Costa, one of the leaders of the team that designed Brasilia from the ground up—had, at least at that time, a more subtle relationship with improvisation than Kubitschek. David Kendrick Underwood has suggested that “Niemeyer’s architecture reflects the meandering Brazilian jeito in both its sinuous, sensual style and its improvisational, extemporaneous way of coping with life” (27). Indeed, just as the construction of Brasilia was getting under way, Niemeyer himself stated that

Our modern architecture reflects the social contradictions in which we live and in which it has developed. Presented to clients not interested in problems of a general building economy and to a governmental body that shies from plans of national dimensions and from large scale construction projects, our architecture is forced to make improvisation its basic element [. . .] Some of these buildings are often appreciated from a design point of view but they always reflect the social disequilibrium of the country with a majority of its citizens living in the most miserable quarters. The great variety of forms that is seen in our architecture stems from the lack of an effective social and economic basis. The absence of a large building industry with prefabricated assemblies and parts further encourages the development of a wealth of individualistic architectural forms and solutions.54 (12)

This debate is never settled. Contradictory lines of force continue their endless improvisations.
Conclusion: Ovoid Logics

Só quem visse o mundo veria o ovo. Como o mundo o ovo é óbvio.
(Only those who could see the world would see the egg. Like the world the egg is obvious.)

Clarice Lispector (A descoberta 218)

As I was finishing writing this editorial essay, I couldn’t stop peering at the image that decorates this special issue’s “splash page.” Taken by Marcel Gautherot, a French-born photographer who relocated permanently to Brazil as a young man, it shows a soccer match at Rio’s iconic Maracanã Stadium (the very stadium where Brazil lost the World Cup final to Uruguay in 1950, and where the final match of the 2014 World Cup will be played). Gautherot took the image sometime around 1970 during one of the most repressive periods of the military dictatorship that had assumed power in 1964. It’s a remarkable shot, captured from the depths of Maracanã’s bleachers. The vantage point shows us the openings that allow the immediate, improvisative moves of the soccer match to seep out into the wider world. Beyond the mouthy opening of the stadium, beyond the mountains in the background (it’s barely possible to see, but Cristo Redentor is on one of the peaks), even beyond the big roda that is the planet earth, the sun is giving shadows to the improvisative movements happening on the field—the dribles and jeitinhos and malandragems and jogos de cintura created in all those tight spaces between the players. The shadows draw out the moving coordinates of the field’s topographies. There are so many worlds involved in worldmaking.

If you stare at the photo long enough—allowing the improvisations of the light to do their work—it almost looks like the field is twisting up, as if the flat plane of the oval field is being born into a three-dimensional ovoid. I’d like to think that it is the worldmaking moves of the players that achieve this calculus, refashioning the always nascent morphologies of Maracanã’s vast spaces, doing their part to help create a few small, contingent worlds, drawn from the ever-shifting, contradictory lines of force of Brazilian improvisations.

Note on the Special Issue,
Jason Stanyek and Alessandra Santos, Editors

It is my hope that this special issue of Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation (CSI/ECI)—like any work of academic scholarship, a tentative concordance of a vast series of improvisative moves—is able to find some openings in the tight spaces of our ever-more jam packed informational universe (just as Brazil’s very best jogadores de futebol do, on the pitch at Maracanã). Alessandra and I were lucky to be able to attract a stellar group of scholars to offer up their intellectual labor, and to each and every one we send an obrigado(a) and an abraço. Nine of the sixteen essays published in this issue required translation and we were blessed to have on our team four experts in the tricky art of moving between Portuguese and English: Camille Sutton, John Thomas Maddox, Daniel Peixoto Irby, and last but not least, Micaela Kramer (who did double duty, also providing an unprecedented interview with José Miguel Wisnik). Cidio Martins Neto and Vera Lucia Ferreira da Silva at the Instituto Moreira Salles have our appreciation for working so quickly to grant us the license to use Marcel Gautherot’s stunning photograph of Maracanã that appears with this issue. Ditto to Alexandre Pimentel and Joana Corrêa of the Associação Cultural Caburê in Rio de Janeiro for graciously giving us permission to use the excerpt from the track “Cantoria de Viola” by Ivanildo Vila Nova e Sebastião da Silva at the Instituto Moreira Salles have our appreciation for working so quickly to grant us the license to use Marcel Gautherot’s stunning photograph of Maracanã that appears with this issue. Ditto to Alexandre Pimentel and Joana Corrêa of the Associação Cultural Caburê in Rio de Janeiro for graciously giving us permission to use the excerpt from the track “Cantoria de Viola” by Ivanildo Vila Nova e Sebastião da Silva (the track originally appears on the CD that accompanies Pimentel and Corrêa’s edited collection Na ponta do verso: poesia do improviso no Brasil). Marta Peixoto, my colleague at NYU, provided advice on translating a difficult passage from Lispector and Carla Brunet was there to train her expert eye on an earlier draft of this essay.

At the journal, Daniel Fischlin, Ellen Waterman, Michelle Peek, Karl Coulthard, Melissa Walker, Wayne Johnston, Kim Thorne, and Ajay Heble each evinced what, in the present context, can only be called a jogo de cintura, as they dealt with the numerous impasses that inevitably arise when a large project such as this one is being brought to fruition. The flint that helped provide the initial spark for this special issue was given to me during the inaugural meetings of the Improvisation and Transcultural Understanding Research Area of the international Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice research project. I want to thank my colleagues in that group, especially its coordinator, George Lipsitz.
CSI/ECI is what might be labeled a leading-edge journal, a crucial entity that calls at least some of the tunes for the already vast, yet still emergent field of Improvisation Studies. This special issue is indeed a call—uma chamada, as capoeiristas might say—for non-Brazilian researchers to pay close attention to the scholarly work on improvisation being done in Brazil, and to the worldmaking capacities of Brazilian improvisative practices. Lamentably, a big portion of this fabulous, interdisciplinary body of work remains untranslated. It is my hope that this special issue can serve as a humble offering to help open up to a non-Brazilian readership a few of the worlds contained within Brazilian Improvisation Studies. A few jewel-bedecked eggs that, hopefully, will hatch, but still remain ever-nascent.

Notes

1 Except for the quote that appears as the epigraph to the conclusion of this essay, all excerpts from Clarice Lispector's story “O ovo e a galinha” are taken from Giovanni Pontiero's English translation (Selected Crônicas). Beyond these instances, all translations in this essay from Portuguese into English are my own.

2 “A descoberta do mundo” (The Discovery of the World) is the Portuguese title of Clarice Lispector's volume of “selected crônicas.”

3 The non-instrumental version of this song can be found on the 2005 album Peines de Maures/Arc en Ciel.

4 “... uma forma de defesa, para quem [...] precisa improvisar para sobreviver, de quem não pode se situar num ponto fixo.” (Abdala Júnior 169).

5 “Lá foi calculado, fruto da mais penosa espontaneidade” (Lispector, A descoberta 219).

6 “O ovo é uma coisa suspensa. Nunca pousou” (Lispector, A descoberta 218).

7 http://tim-and-paul.com/campaigns/brahma.html

8 From the time of Carmen Miranda, the U.S. culture industry has consistently and problematically collapsed Brazilian people and products into a broader “Hispanic” economy. See, for example Beserra (61-63).

9 Two papers in Portuguese provide analyses of the Brahma campaigns: Nogueira and Sovik. Also see Foote.

10 “A escolha de levar ou não o guarda-chuva carrega em si muito da cultura do povo brasileiro, que confia e aposta na sua elevada capacidade de improvisação e na certeza de que há um jeito para tudo, até para desviar da chuva” (Souza).

11 O cenário brasileiro exige que os executivos tenham uma enorme capacidade de improvisação, saibam driblar falta de recursos e infra-estrutura e ainda trabalhem por metas” (“Executivo de ouro”).

12 “Nem todos os mercados que buscam os profissionais daqui estão no mesmo nível, mas a criatividade brasileira é valorizada pela rapidez na apresentação de alternativas, uma característica que encontra apoio na capacidade de improvisação do povo brasileiro. ‘Quando trabalhava no Brasil era tudo mais de um dia para o outro e os ajustes eram feitos no processo,’ lembra Valter Klug, 28 anos e há dois anos vivendo fora—primeiro em Londres e agora em Miami. ‘Aqui eles são bem mais organizados e mais lentos. Chego a gastar o dobro do tempo na criação, mas também não há ajustes no período de implantação’” (“Brasileiros valem ouro”).

13 “A improvisação é um dos nossos maiores defeitos. Quando nos comunicamos com milhares de pessoas, não podemos improvisar. É assim que todos começaram e que nós também começamos. O problema é que persistimos no erro e nos orgulhamos dele, como uma qualidade exceptional. Na improvisação, as experiências não se acumulam, mas se perdem. São soluções momentâneas que ocorrem em função da inexistência e desconhecimento de coordenação e organização específica para o meio, que é onde se encontra a grande lacuna das nossas televisões. Não podemos confundir improvisação com criatividade, que não pode existir sem técnica” (Pasquini 123).
14 “O que precisa mudar no Brasil para a sua vida melhorar de verdade”? (PNUD 3).

15 “A alta criatividade do povo brasileiro, sua inventividade e capacidade de improvisação podem estimular um ethos semelhante, necessário para que a era da globalização, não seja mero prolongamento da era dos Estados-nações, mas realmente a nova etapa da humanidade, construindo um destino comum na mesma casa, a Terra” (Boff 118-119).

16 Citing a number of different authors, Fernanda Duarte makes the sage point that “similar social mechanisms [to the jeitinho] exist in other cultures” (she provides examples such as the German trinkgeld, the Egyptian backsheesh, the Russian vizyatha, the Algerian chtara, the Chilean pituto, and the Cuban guaperia. Glossing the work of Lívia Barbosa, Duarte does, however, end up arguing for the jeitinho brasileiro’s exceptionalism: “it can be speculated that the difference lies in the ‘social choice’ or the ‘social weight’ attributed to the jeitinho in Brazilian society. In other words, the jeitinho has crystalized into a social category because Brazilians recognize it, value it and use it to define a certain style of solving problems perceived as ‘essentially’ Brazilian” (511-512).

17 “Procedimento social definido como uma forma de criatividade e de improvisação, criando espaços pessoais em domínios impessoais” (45).

18 “No Brasil cultivamos o jeitinho brasileiro, a capacidade de improvisação, a informalidade, o individualismo e o deixar para a última hora como valores nacionais relevantes para o sucesso na vida privada e os progressos do País” (Buainain).

19 A few principal sources in English are Barbosa (“The Brazilian Jeitinho”), Duarte, and Rosen. Fernanda Carlos Borges’s essay (“Improvisation in the Jeitinho Brasileiro”) included in this issue could also be added to the list.

20 In DaMatta’s book, the jeitinho is paired and contrasted with malandragem and both are labeled as forms of “national social navigation.”


22 “Com a tecnologia japonesa e o jeitinho brasileiro, nasceu o charme, a beleza e a graça desta sandália. Do lado japonês ela herdou a qualidade, durabilidade, a maciez de sua borracha e a sofisticação tecnológica oriental. Mas as cores alegres e vivas, o charme de sua forma, a graça de seu conjunto, o jeitinho empregado em sua sola antiderrapante e na revolucionária alça móvel são coisas nossa, e Judoka foi feita pra nossa gente, pra homens, mulheres e crianças.”


24 “…a aceitação nacional a quebra de regras” (França and Soares 106).

25 “Livro conta que "jeitinho" atrapalha economia” (Wiziack).

26 “Hoje vivemos numa sociedade urbana de massas e sob regime democrático, mas o império da lei continua a ser um objetivo a conquistar.”

27 “Um país de vasta tradição jurídica, mas ainda sem meios para coibir devidamente a impunidade” (Marchi viii).
"Todos esses fatores vêm prejudicando a avaliação do Brasil no ranking internacional de países com liberdade econômica" (Marchi viii).

"Com sensibilidade e profundidade de análise, os autores deste livro vão tecendo conexões com a história e chegam aos dias atuais com uma conclusão cristalina: a transgressão transformou-se numa espécie de prática tolerada. Quer dizer, o desrespeito à lei, antes rotulado romanticamente de "jeitinho brasileiro," tornou-se uma segunda natureza nacional, uma ameaça ao desenvolvimento que necessita ser superada" (Marchi ix).


The idea to pair the quotes from Rodrigues and Cardoso came from a column by Maílson da Nóbrega. Note that Nóbrega uses the word “fruto” in the Rodrigues quote but other sources have it as “conquista” and “obra,” conferring very different meanings. For example “Subdesenvolvimento não se improvisa. É trabalho árduo de vários anos” (Viera).

See Jacques (“Zonas de tensão”; “The Aesthetics of the Favela”) for insightful research on favela aesthetics.

http://www.gringo-rio.com/favela-tour.html

http://www.brazzilforum.com

http://bealocal.com/


As Susan Sontag put it, “Images have been reproached for being a way of watching suffering at a distance, as if there were some other way of watching. But watching up close—without the mediation of an image—is still just watching” (Sontag 117).

“A favela é o cartão-postal às avessas” (Bentes 248).

Gambiarras has certain resonances with the concept of “adhocism” as developed by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver in their oft-cited 1973 book. In their reading of Jencks and Silver’s work, Smith and Dean point out that “adhocism is not synonymous with improvisation, but is a process harnessed to improvisation. In so far as improvisation sometimes involves solving new problems, there is no normal method, and so it can only use ‘available’ materials or ideas and fulfils the definition of adhocism” (242).

“…procedimento necessário para configuração de um artefato improvisado…uma maneira de usar ou construir artefatos, através de uma atitude de diferenciação, improvisação, adaptação, ajuste, transformação ou adequação” (Boufleur 25).

“É uma prática cultural composta por todos os tipos de soluções improvisadas para os problemas cotidianos, viabilizadas com qualquer material disponível.” See http://mutgamb.org/conteudo/SobreAbout

Also see Alfred for information about the “Favela Chair.”

Robinson mistakenly gives the title as “Um Fio que Liga os Mundos.” The rat, according to an article on the website of O Estado de São Paulo, was made of bombril, brillo pads (“Marepe abre”).

Soccer: Order and Mess. The title of this section is a play on “Ordem e Progresso” (Order and Progress), the motto on the Brazilian national flag.
45 “Mais uma vez, o Primeiro Mundo se curvava ante o nosso talento e capacidade de improvisação [. . .] Não podemos e nem devemos ser como os gringos dentro ou fora de campo. Temos a nossa história, a nossa identidade, a nossa malandragem. Talvez o que estejamos precisando é resgatar os aspectos vitoriosos, positivos, dinâmicos e eficientes da nossa personalidade. Acreditar que somos melhores, com todas as nossas contradições. Os Macunaímas que deram certo. The Best. Por que não?” (Moraes). Note that “The Best” is in English in the original.

46 “[o] futebolista brasileiro é um dos mais valorizados produtos de exportação do país” (Couto 14).

47 “Essa seleção não joga um futebol digno das maiores tradições do futebol brasileiro, um futebol de drible, de imaginação, de criatividade e improvisação” (BBC Brasil).

48 “. . . que a bagunça dá muito mais sentido à vida que a ordem. A bagunça, aliás, é um produto genuinamente brasileiro, é a resposta a um mundo burocrático, frio e tedioso; a bagunça no Brasil é igualitária. O jeitinho brasileiro é socialista, orgânico, sensual.”

“Eis o meu ponto: que haja coordenação, bravura; que haja solidariedade, eficiência: jogo sem disputa não tem graça. Mas tudo isso com uma boa dose de loucura, improviso. E sem nacionalismos exagerados, por favor” (Goulart).

49 “. . . éramos um país saindo da selvagem anarquia medieval provocada pela ditadura militar…ansiosos por uma nova agenda nacional.”

50 “É como se o Brasil…tivesse resolvido enfim ser um “país sério.” Em vez de só fazer dançar e gitar, começamos a propor o elogio do trabalho como merecimento da graça, a desejar a substituição da inspiração pela disciplina, a empreender em vez de improvisar. A permanência da tática elaborada, em vez da incerta criação do instante.”

“Almejamos introduzir um pouco de rigor no nosso gosto pelo jeitinho (o drible?), esse aprendizado da corrupção. E um pouco de racionalidade no delírio barroco de que nos orgulhamos tanto, esse barroco que se consagrou nas igrejas douradas construídas pela força da escravidão mais cruel e mais longa da América Latina. E, com esse espírito, fomos tetracampeões em 1994, em Los Angeles, a capital anglo-saxônica do pragmatismo protestante na cultura.”

“A Era Dunga representou um salto importante na cultura brasileira, um desejo de pôr uma pitada de iluminismo na bagunça de nossos corações. Foi durante sua vigência…que voltamos a ser campeões em 2002, num período de estabilidade econômica e relativa distribuição de renda no país” (Diegues).

51 “A delegação campeã entrou a era do improviso e da bagunça—comandada por Paulo Machado de Carvalho, foi organizada, eficaz e prudente. É uma lição para todo o país” (“Plano de Vôo”).

52 “Não foi só dentro das quatro linhas que esta seleção campeã mundial inovou e surpreendeu. Nos bastidores da equipe houve outra revolução, quase tão decisiva para a conquista quanto o amadurecimento dos futebolistas do país. A delegação do Brasil na Copa foi um exemplo de organização e eficácia, encerrando um constrangedor histórico de despreparo, bagunças, negligência e até corrupção. Nos certames passados, a seleção viajava ao exterior de forma mambembe, como um bando de palmeiros de final de semana. O Brasil de 1958 funcionou como um relógio suíço. Desta vez não havia cartolas querendo ganhar projeção política ou algum trocado por fora; não existia improviso nos traslados ou desordem na concentração; não havia nem quebra-galhos nem o jeitinho de última hora. A Confederação Brasileira de Desportos (CBD) traçou um plano completo e seguiu esse receituário à risca. O tumultuado mundo do futebol, quem diria, deu exemplo para o resto do país—que, sob os auspícios do presidente Juscelino Kubitschek, tenta se modernizar, crescer e enriquecer” (“Plano de Vôo”).

53 “Brasília não é uma improvisação, mas o resultado de um amadurecimento. Não é apenas uma mudança de Capital, mas o anúncio de uma reforma” (Kubitschek 55).

54 As Read eloquently suggests: “Paradoxically, much of the sense of modernity surrounding [Brasília] stems from Niemeyer’s employment of ‘surreal’ curved forms to produce the sense that something ‘new’ had been built unlike
anything built before. These curvatures most likely would not have been possible in Europe or the United States. Because Niemeyer operated in a semi-industrialized context, he could not be confined to the rigidity of regular pre-fabricated components. On the contrary, the most cost-effective building materials at his disposal were those that could be assembled on-site-concrete poured over steel frames, precisely the technique which allows maximum flexibility for experimentation with curvature. The architect's use of unconventional forms in Brasilia thus stands as a direct index to the nation's level of industrialization at the mid-twentieth century. Since many parts and components could not be pre-fabricated, Niemeyer was forced to improvise, which in turn promoted an architecture of improvisation" (266).


Works Cited


