Quilombo Country (2006): A Film by Leonard Abrams

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I. Film Review

I was not surprised to learn during my interview with Leonard Abrams that he had at one time written feature length screenplays. I mention this because if one were to pitch his excellent documentary *Quilombo Country* as – let us imagine – a narrative film, one might enthuse, in the parlance of Hollywood, that "it has it all." It offers the viewer images of lush locations and exotic cuisine (such as armadillo prepared with babassu milk), charismatic heroes, a well-paced "ride" westward through northern Brazil, dance, pageantry, musical performances, tales of flight and rebellion, religious ceremonies involving trance and possession, and a sobering history lesson. Abrams' first nonfiction effort, which has been shown internationally at universities, museums, film festivals, and gallery spaces, provides an effective counterbalance to such plot-driven entertainment. *Quilombo Country* begins with a striking slow-motion image of the swirling hem of a dancer's dress. As the woman turns, the camera gradually reveals drummers in the background. The soundtrack is silent except for a voice which asks, "How did this dance start?" The dancer, the drummers, and the speaker, all members of the quilombo community, are all part of larger questions posed by Abrams that address issues of history, identity and collective struggle. The word "quilombo," roughly translated as "encampment," is derived from Congolese and Angolan languages, and came generally to refer to communities of fugitive slaves located in, but not limited to, Brazil. These communities were formed by maroons, or fugitive slaves whose history can be traced to the early 1600s, when they fled the dehumanizing conditions on the plantations and ranches of northern Brazil. In *Quilombo Country* the image of the dancer becomes a potent visual motif that acquires a persuasive force as it is presented in a variety of settings ranging from sacred to profane.

Abrams' video brings to mind the 1984 narrative film *Quilombo* directed by Brazil's veteran director Carlos Diegues. Diegues' film tells the story

of Ganga Zumba, the first elected leader of the seventeenth-century republic of Palmares, and his successor Zumbi. While largely faithful to historical fact, Diegues utilizes a vibrant cinematic palette, enlivened by the samba soundtrack of Brazilian musician and composer Gilberto Gil. Diegues presents his subject, often through flamboyantly choreographed set-pieces, as an historical epic informed by mysticism and theatricality. Abrams' *Quilombo Country*, shot on digital video and narrated by rapper/producer and Public Enemy founder Chuck D, focuses on the quilombos of rural northern Brazil found in Itipacura, the island of Marajó, and the Trombetas region. Abrams' work follows a much more earthbound trajectory and affirms the human scale of its social actors. His camera respectfully observes their daily means of subsistence, their work ethic and religious observances, their education and local political systems, and their colorful rituals and celebrations, all in the face of pervasive poverty. Abrams also records how the cultural practices of the quilombolos reveal an abiding and often conflicted awareness of their own history.

The opening post-credit sequence presents key moments in the history of the Afro-Brazillian quilombo communities. Voiceover narration and interview segments accompanied by maps, illustrations, shots of quilombolos, and landscape footage identify Brazil as the site of the largest slave colony in modern history, and describe the oppressive historical conditions that produced heroic figures of resistance such as Zumbi and Black Cosme. Abrams supplements the voiceover information with comments by contemporary witnesses such as Ivo Fonseca Silva, a representative of the Rural Quilombo Communities of Maranhão. Silva attributes the formation of the quilombo communities to slave resistance and the decline of the plantation economy. Successive shots of the Itipacura jail, where Black Cosme was imprisoned before his execution, reveal that the building today serves as a cultural center, linking past and present, just as Zumbi's execution on 20 November 1695 is now commemorated as a national holiday. Silva also reaffirms the necessary continuity between past sacrifices and contemporary social struggles, when he comments, "Our black leaders were all killed. Today we have to model ourselves on a leadership that remains alive." In this relatively brief sequence Abrams maps, literally and figuratively, with economy and efficiency, a framework for the issues which will be subsequently addressed. What follows is fleshed out with a geographic sweep and density of detail that more than fills out these preliminary outlines.

Quilombo Country is structured around two lines of development that make up what Bill Nichols has described as the "voice" of a documentary, or its merging of style, argument, and point of view (1991: 252-253). The first line, which parallels a westward expansion of enslavement, escape, and settlement, is announced clearly by Chuck D in the voiceover narration. The video's intention is to trace a path from Itipacura westward to the Trombetas region that corresponds to the movement of Blacks across Brazil. The video assembles a varied cast of social actors ranging in age and occupation. These subjects and interviewees include political activists, grade school teachers, academics, parents, artisans, local politicians, and laborers who are identified through "burned in" or superimposed names that accompany their subtitled speech. Abrams travels westward from quilombo to quilombo, primarily by land and water, bearing witness to the collective experience of individual communities based on the testimonies of their inhabitants.

Quilombo Country also records diverse activities that include the making of musical instruments, the construction of houses, hunting and farming, the preparation of food, public celebration, and religious rituals. At this level, sound also functions in a fairly straightforward way. Interviews and performances directed at the camera, which are often a source of personal stories and experiences, are balanced by Chuck D's voiceover narration, which often provides a more generalized commentary on issues such as local politics, race, and history. Sources of sound also include "overheard" events such as the Festivals of the Mast, religious rituals, public meetings, drum and dance celebrations. As Abrams makes his way westward, events and activities – some typical, some regionally specific – are given a sense of place and cultural context. For example, the quilombo of Santa Joana is located in Itipacura, where the means of subsistence include rice and manioc rootstocks. Although the cultivation of rice and manioc is hardly specific to this particular quilombo or region of Brazil, we get a sense of the role of farming and material culture through the work rhythms and collaborative labor of this community, as their members interact with the camera and with their immediate environment. The quilombo of Bacabal, located in Marajó is linked to the folklore of Matita Pereira, a woman who appears on Friday night under a full moon to frighten men. Matita Pereira is associated with the Saci Perere, the one-legged elf, and the headless mule, both popular characters in the country's folklore. Abrams, however, records a children's reenactment of Matita Pereira, in which a young boy is visited by the

woman and frightened out of his wits while riding his bicycle on the road to Bacabal, thus providing a specific geographical marker for a popular Brazillian folktale. As Abrams' peripatetic camera moves further west through northern Brazil, he records stories, voices, and specific details that are grounded in specific locations, while at the same time alluding to a shared cultural history.

The second, more complex line of development is Abrams' repeated emphasis on ritual process, cultural continuity and transformation. One particular blogger, reacting to *Quilombo Country,* complained about the video's truncated and underdeveloped narrative line. By seeking a conventional narrative thread which would ideally weave together a wide variety of characters, cultural practices, and geographical location, this criticism overlooks the video's more interesting and complex rhetorical form. Abrams sees himself as a storyteller, and his narrative progress is that of a curious, sympathetic observer/participant following an arc from east to west, from one community to another. But that westward arc is inseparable from the persuasive force of Abrams' presentation of documentary evidence. These rhetorical designs in *Quilombo Country* have an almost mobius strip-like fluidity, with interconnected evidentiary turns, and images that gain persuasive power through placing cultural practices in new contexts. Abrams' use of an interview with Marinalva de Jesus Alves illustrates this stategy. Although she was born in a quilombo, Alves is linked to the large sprawling city of Belém, where she is shown in her workplace and reclining on her bed at home. Her memories of poverty include a lack of electricity and a childhood fear of the dark Headless Mule and Saci Perere of Brazilian folklore. Her recollection sets up a Bacabal teacher's description of the folktales and the children's reenactment mentioned earlier. Later in the video, however, Alves contrasts the difficulty of her former life with the comforts provided by life in the city. She admits with a hint of embarrassment that she cannot return to the quilombo, without television, electricity, and hot showers. The editing of Alves' interview links her experiences to the internalized rich and sustaining power of folktales, the poverty of quilombos, and the threat of encroaching modernity. Alves is linked through her own words and editing to multiple roles: child, quilombo dweller, consumer of modern urban luxuries that have now become necessities. She is also typical of many quilombolos in that she is potentially the embodiment of, and vulnerable to, modernity's threat to quilombo traditions.

Evan Zeusse's comments on the delimiting and illuminating power of ritual provide a useful approach to the rhetorical dimension of *Quilombo Country.* In his anthropological study *Ritual Cosmos,* Zeusse examines a wide range of African rituals and practices that include hunting, agriculture, millenary cults, initiation rites, and trance possession. Ritual, he writes, "announces our limits," but also "indicates that our limits and bodies are sanctified participants in a larger marvelous whole" (1979: 239). My intention is not to reduce all quilombolo practices to ritual, but, drawing from Zuesse, illustrate how the video's images of religious ritual, the phases of the production of material culture, and its staging of the shifting contexts of performance and cultural artifacts are part of its power to persuade and provide evidence. Abrams' camera approaches domestic, public, and sacred spaces with equal respect. Yet, due to the syncretistic nature of many aspects of quilombo culture, very often those spaces overlap.

An example of Abrams' rhetorical strategies can be found in the video's opening sequence. *Quilombo Country* begins with the question, mentioned earlier, "How did this dance start?," which functions as a brief voiceover as the camera singles out a woman dancing in a group celebration. Abrams then cuts to a close-up of the as yet unidentified man who asked the question. The speaker then makes a series of statements that place the shots which follow in historical perspective. They show the manual construction of a drum, the tree from which the drum's cylindrical body is cut and shaped, and the stretching of the hide over the drum's body. The man's voice aurally "bleeds" over these images, commenting that the slaves invented amusements such as the dance as a response to years of oppression, enslavement, and torture. Another man is shown pounding a segment of wood into the drum's body to stretch the drum skin, followed by the shot of a man tapping out a single beat on the finished drum, which gives way to the polyrhythms of multiple drummers, musicians, dancers, and others in the act of celebration and singing. The song's lyrics are not translated in the subtitles.

This pre-credit sequence creates a temporary gap in time that is filled later in the video when the speaker is identified as Libiano Peres, who recites the song's lyrics and provides a political context for the song. We now read in the translated subtitles, "Ai, Ai, Ai go find someone to take you away." The words, according to Peres, refer to a time when quilombolos helped one another escape from slavery. The lyrics of the song become more specific in their reference to those escaped slaves who traveled great

distances, who “came from far away.” He sings, “the way is long Bastião, the way is long. I am leaving Bastião, I am leaving/ I’ve had enough of this place/ I can’t fly like a sling, Bastião, the way the monkeys swing, Bastião.” Abrams then cuts to the previous footage, of drummer, singers, and dancers that preceded the title sequence of *Quilombo Country*, and the song that precedes and then accompanies it. With the lyrics translated, the viewer now understands that the words refer to the quilombolos’ history of slavery, their longing for escape, and how the life of fugitive slaves was one of struggle and mutual cooperation. We also experience a new formal relationship in which the sequence showing the drum’s construction (with its own percussive, rhythmic elements), the beat of a single drum, and the multiple rhythms of several drums is paralleled by Peres’ singing of the song and the collective singing of the same song in celebration. The delayed translation of the lyrics situates both lines of development in the historical context of collective memory and struggle.

Ritual, according to Zeusse, also immerses us in “process and becoming…it can be nothing else than concrete and specific, engaging our particular sensory world, our family and our neighbors, our house and plowing instruments” (1979: 239). The image of an intricate network of meanings linking ritual, history, and material culture is reaffirmed by the words of Damensceno Gregorio, a blind singer who performs in a variety of musical styles, and who situates the drum at the heart of quilombo culture. He traces the carimbo, or drum, to “our black origins. We see things of beauty – a legend or a medicinal plant. Whatever we do in our lives we make a carimbo based on that.” The images and rhythms of the drum are often linked to dance and performance. All are represented in shifting contexts which extend their web of association throughout the video. The drum is the end product of a process of step by step construction that evokes other images such as the processing of rice and manioc root, or the hunting, capture, slaughter, and cooking of an armadillo. Drumming accompanies solo singers who are shown singing the same song as part of a group celebration. The sound of the drum also evokes the rhythms of a group of quilombolos pounding rice with pestle and mortar, the breaking of babasso nuts, or the chopping of Brazil nuts with a machete. If we approach the quilombo as a vital organism, drumming literally and figuratively provides the lifeblood and pulse. Dance and drumming are an essential part of the pageantry-rich celebrations such as Boi Bumba, performed in the rural quilombos. Dance and drums also play a trance-inducing role in macumba ceremonies, which mix Catholic

and West African religious traditions. Patricia da Souza, who is both a practicing Catholic and an active participant in Macumba ceremonies, is shown dancing with children to invite a hovering spiritual entity or "companion" to dance with the child. Later in the video, as young quilombolos are shown dancing to reggae, the dance hall becomes part of a contested site claimed by both traditional cultural practices and newer forms of dance. "This reggae business" is seen by one quilombolo as "taking the space of many of our cultural things," yet Ivo Fonesca Silva perceives these modernizing trends as less of a threat because he links black identity with healthy self-esteem. His comments are heard over the images of the same couples dancing to reggae and more modern musical styles. Thus the implication, which acquires a cumulative force from the many images of dance shown throughout the video, is clear: dance is portrayed as a vital part of the history, collective identity and the self-image of quilombo culture.

Musical performance in *Quilombo Country* is also linked to political struggle. Perhaps the most powerful scene in the video is a song performed by Seu Mimi Vina of Oriximiná, who recalls picking Brazil nuts at age fourteen to "stay alive." As an adult he moved closer to the city, which brought about the loss of quilombo values. Accompanying himself on guitar, he sings a song which encapsulates many of the themes in *Quilombo Country*:

> I'm proud of being a man of the river
> I am a son of that land and that race
> descended from Negroes, from slavery.
> My grandparents were slaves and fugitives.
> Because of this I do not deny my Negro blood, my heritage.
> I've lived so long with nature,
> enchanted by a beauty I carry with me
> and now forget.
> Today I live in a world totally different.
> I don't see the origins of our life, but I see the sciences I'd never dreamed of …

His understated, authoritative performance recalls many of the songs, dances, and celebrations which appear throughout the video. Identifying himself as "a man of the river" situates him in the Trombetas region, but also alludes to the significance of rivers and waterfalls in quilombo

history. The song expresses a fierce racial pride and celebrates the role each generation plays as bearers of tradition and historical knowledge. The internalized beauty of nature, and nature as a source of tradition and agrarian values, seem doomed to disappear in the face of modern developments. The lyrics of Vina's song remind the viewer that the visually sumptuous and aesthetically pleasing shots of the Brazilian landscape – the forests, rivers, the waterfalls – are not without historical and political significance. The Pancada Falls in the Trombetas region played an important role in the protection of escaped slaves. As Roberval Melo dos Santos points out, escaping quilombolos fled to the waterfalls with the knowledge that slave hunters could not navigate the falls, so it served as a natural protective barrier against pursuit. The lyrics "sciences I'd never dreamed of," recall shots of the passive, almost catatonic response to television in quilombo households. The video's voiceover narration also recounts the Rio Norte Company's plans for the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Trombetas River to provide energy for the bauxite mines, although a coalition of academics, Catholics, quilombolos, and indigenous groups, was later able to reverse the decision. The land, which produces crops, lumber, and raw material for ritual practices, appears in almost every shot of these rural settings. Yet the land, demarcated by ever changing property lines, has proven elusive in its promise of security. The legalization of land rights has been part of an ongoing struggle for members of the quilombolo villages. Father Daniel of Oriximiná describes the quilombolos' sense that "they live with the feeling that they are on borrowed land," suggesting a constant threat of imminent dispossession. Quilombolos in Bacabal describe the sense of being squeezed between the fences of powerful landowners. The fight for land rights can be seen as part of a larger struggle to make possible the "rescue of history" which, according to Father Daniel, encourages pride in the past and enables a deeper understanding of the present. He describes the years between 1987 and 1989 as a break through, when history – stories of the "dignified past" recalling the suffering and the struggle for freedom – penetrated the stagnant "present" of quilombolos dominated by the boss-worker relationship. These stories, "hidden" in the memories of the older generations, take on a transformative power in a country where it is customary, in Father Daniel's words, to "hide history from the people."

Leonard Abrams vividly documents these stories of struggle and empowerment enabled by shared historical knowledge. Abrams' video

also reminds us that very often the more interesting "story" of a documentary, in addition to its narrative line, is how it reveals a complexity of form or style commensurate with the importance of its subject. *Quilombo Country* accomplishes this by immersing the viewer in an ever expanding network of relationships – alive with the music and intermixed rhythms of doing and making, work and worship – which encompasses the concrete details of religious practices, public celebrations, and the production of material culture. Abrams' considerable achievement has been to draw upon these formal resources and provide us access to the many dimensions of quilombo experience in a way that is persuasive, complex, and timely.

II. Interview with Leonard Abrams

I caught up with Leonard Abrams after a showing of *Quilombo Country* at The University of Southern Mississippi. Abrams had just arrived from a screening of the video in Louisiana. He seemed a bit road-weary but was soon energized by the enthusiastic reception of the audience. *Quilombo Country* had been generating interest at a number of international festivals including the Independent Black Film Festival in Atlanta, the Zanzibar International Film Festival, and the Pan African Film Festival in Los Angeles, and Abrams was looking forward to an upcoming screening at the British Museum in London. When we finally settled down for the interview, Leonard was relaxed and eager to talk about his previous experience as publisher and cultural impresario in New York's East Village, his travels in Brazil, and his approach to documentary video.

PG: Tell me a little about your professional experience before you decided to make *Quilombo Country*.

LA: My career really started in alternative journalism. I published this magazine called the *East Village Eye*. It was kind of a hybrid newspaper-magazine. It was monthly, and was printed on newsprint with slightly better stock on the cover. It was monthly and it was a lot of stuff on punk rock, new wave, and early hip-hop and the emerging art scene in East Village and other underrepresented areas of New York. There was this kind of a pan-underground kind of sensibility and we did sell some out of town. We were sending them out to

various places. So that was a lot of fun and that lasted until '87 and went under. Then for a while I got involved with one of the people. We used to throw parties.

PG: With an eye toward mixing various strands of culture?

LA: Yeah, I've always been interested in presenting marginalized culture as if it were not marginalized at all and I really like it when it works. So with a couple of other guys, we started doing these dance party clubs called Hotel Amazon. The music was all dance music so it was actually mostly black music. It was hip-hop, reggae, funk, soul, and house.

PG: Where did this take place?

LA: This was in the Lower East Side, which was just adjacent to the Village. There was an old school building. A lot of these school buildings were abandoned in the '70s and taken over by various groups that had a cultural edge. We're renting from these people who have gotten this big old school building. We threw these big parties. The audience was multi-racial. The music was mostly black dance music with a little bit of other stuff. It was very exciting. It was the equivalent of the excitement of the early punk new wave era, but it was the black energy so you had the late '70s early '80s, you had all this white tribal energy and then you had this black renaissance coming pretty soon and really kind of at the same time, but it kind of broke into the white world a little bit later. So that [was] a lot of fun. One of the things that came out of that was that I met Chuck D and these other rappers at that time. I lost contact with everybody for a while, but ran into some old friends when I started going around and showing the film to people. I made the connection to Chuck. I sent him a DVD and he liked it and he agreed to do it, so we re-cut it. We got Chuck to do the voiceover. I knew this was going to take it up a notch and indeed it did.

PG: And you had done the original voiceover?

LA: I did, yes. There are a few out there, institutions that bought it in 2005 that had my voiceover and not Chuck's.

PG: He's an interesting choice because when I heard him for the first time divorced from the context of Public Enemy, I was unsure how to react. I associated him with a freer declamatory hip-hop style, but the more you hear the way it works with the material in the video, the more it makes sense because he's bringing his own cultural authority to the project.

LA: I know it was a little more feisty than your typical documentary voiceover. But it does work because after all you want to keep people awake. And Chuck, as many other hip-hoppers, is discovering African derived communities in other parts of the world, diasporan communities. He has been to Brazil a couple of times. I got to talk to him a little bit because he still lives in the house he grew up in Long Island. He picked me up from the train station and drove me to the studio, which is in the back of his house. So we talked a little bit. He is developing his Brazilian connection and that is one of the reasons he was glad to do it. So that worked out really well. You know you get up with these people and they go, 'Oh, Chuck D'. And I needed that, the film needed that.

PG: Can you say more about the transition from publishing and the creation of "happenings," to deciding to make your first documentary?

LA: Philosophically it wasn't a leap really, you know. As I think about what I've done, yeah there've been constants. Practically, it's difficult to change a career in terms of the nuts and bolts of moving ahead – getting the money, getting the jobs, just getting the wherewithal to do what you want to do. We're talking ten years. That's tough. That's a nice piece of anyone's life. But, I just didn't want to stay in one field, plus equally challenging for me, was to change from a culture organizer to a culture maker. Now granted, I end up observing. I'm still observing the culture. I'm still presenting other people's stories in a sense, but still it's much more hands on and it has more of my direct creativity than what I was doing as an editor, publisher, and an impresario – if you want to call it that. But I always knew that I would have to move into more personal work and finally I heard the clock ticking very loudly and realized that I had to do this if I was going to do this at all.

PG: How long has *Quilombo Country* been in circulation?

LA: The first time I started showing it was in mid-2005. However, I continued to tweak it. Then in the beginning of 2006 I actually pulled it and started recutting it. And I also got the new narration, the narration that I wanted. So I rolled it out as a 2006 film even though I did sell a couple in 2005 when the universities started requesting it. So I guess you could say for the record that the 2005 was a work in progress and I rolled it out in earnest in 2006.

PG: Is there any specific reason that you chose to re-edit it?

LA: Yes, because I was getting some useful criticism. Basically, some people felt that it was just a little too long; and it was. I was just trying to do too much. And it was kind of difficult for me to cut a few things. But, they in and of themselves, they were nice but they weren't crucial. And then another thing I realized was there was a lot of little tightening I could do without sacrificing. And because this is my first film really, if you don't count the few little shorts I did along the way. I was not familiar with all the techniques that you can use to shorten the time of your film such as cutting away, doing a lot of voicing over, or just have the talking act so that you start out with the talking head and move pretty quickly to the footage that is mostly visually interesting or tells a visual story.

So I've got sometimes the visual story being told which tells you how someone is doing something and I double-time it by putting it over basically unrelated interviews of some things that were an important context. There were some happy instances where they helped each other out.

So these are the kind of things that I did to kind of get in everything that I wanted to get in and keep it short enough so that I didn't lose the audience. I'm always very aware of the attention span in the audience and I don't want to lose any people. I never liked seeing somebody walk out before the thing is over and fortunately, most people don't.

PG: How did you decide upon this particular subject?

LA: There were two things that excited me about it. First of all, it just so happened that when I decided to make the change and work in the area of film and video, I started writing scripts because anyone can write a script in terms of you don't need equipment. I started doing that. I wrote two scripts. I rewrote them several times and they were pretty good. But that didn't get me any closer to having anything made.

PG: Feature length screenplays? Did you shop them around?

LA: Feature length screenplays. I shopped them around. I didn't do it with an obsessive single-mindedness. I got some nibbles, but nobody came right out and offered me money. Incidentally, nobody did for this film either. But I've done it a lot better selling it by myself than I dreamed of getting from a distributor. Then I had the great fortune to be hit by a truck. I was on my bicycle in Brooklyn when I was blindsided by a minivan. I woke up on a stretcher. Thank God, first of all, that I wasn't crippled and secondly, that New York state has a hit and run provision in its insurance, so I got my hands on a little bit of money. It wasn't a lot of money. It was like twenty grand. Okay, then I knew. As I lay on the stretcher, I started scheming about making this film.

PG: I read that the idea for the video was partly inspired by a visit to Salvador da Bahia.

LA: Yeah, here's what happened. When I got in a position to start the digital film production, I was either going to do comedy or I would do this story. Then I thought, well, I'd better start out doing the thing I felt most strongly about because I might not get to it otherwise. I felt really strong about this because of the theme of self liberation – number one. And number two, the theme of self-sufficiency in terms of people who actually do make the nuts and bolts of the material culture of their lives. That was very exciting to me. Another thing that happened is I was looking at a map of South America and I saw on the map territories that were called retribalized people. I thought 'wow, that's quite a concept.' Why do we have to only detribalize if we can retribalize. That's an option for us. So it was like the hippie in me; I was excited about that. Then I also went

to Salvador da Bahia in 1995. It was the 300th anniversary of the death of Zumbi.

They were doing the blocos. The crews that were marching had themes, particularly one – this great group of teenage girls were dancing and drumming with this theme. That got me and then I needed to know who Zumbi was. Then when I found out – started to find out about that story, I thought it was really important to give examples of successful self-liberation. That was something that to me is essential to the things that I work with.

PG: And that led you to the story of Palmares?

LA: I will mention it briefly. Palmares was not just a camp somewhere of desperate runaways. It was a country. It was a mini-empire, if you like, of Africans that existed inside Brazil. The only reason there is no Palmares today is [and] was because the Portuguese, after many defeats, organized a successful counterinsurgency force against them, and what they were able to defeat was such a large concentration of quilombos and freed peoples; but they did not defeat the idea or the phenomenon of the quilombo. Interestingly, one of the reasons that Palmares was crushed by the Portuguese was that they did not simply exist alongside the plantations. They raided the plantations to abduct people and they did that not just in a simple sense to free people, but to increase their numbers.

PG: They did it for practical reasons, for example, to address the gender imbalance?

LA: Right. There were never enough women. And probably there were never enough hands. And so they did, they raided the plantations, so they had to be dealt with. So I was not in the position to do a historical drama. I didn't want to do something that just happened a while ago. I wanted to do something contemporary and that is why I decided to do this and to enter it actually as an anthropologist, not as a journalist or strictly a filmmaker or documentarian.

PG: How do you see those distinctions for you personally?

LA: First let me say that it was a practical thing. In the sense that I felt that journalists, anthropologists sometimes too, but more so journalists have a bad reputation in many cases in Brazil because the prevailing or the predominant media groups in Brazil are not there to enlighten the world. They're just there to extract. They are there as informational henchmen and extractors of wealth. They're not there to tell anybody what's going on in the world – in places like quilombos. They're basically like the fox and foxer. They're like a bunch of foxes. Anyway, I didn't want to do that.

Also, I took an anthropology course because I actually had not finished my B.A. so I went back to school, took a course, researched and did a pretty decent anthropological paper about the first communities. I corresponded with anthropologists and I gained entrée into the communities that way. I wore that hat – that was my titular mask. Not only that, it saved me – I can't sit down with everybody and explain exactly how my approach is a melding of journalism, filmmaking, and anthropology. It's just too much to tell people. You've got to call yourself something and that's what I did. I want to try to change people's brains a little bit. I want to infiltrate their consciousness and so the last thing I wanted was to present my subjects as poor people; as someone to be pitied; as someone to make you feel good about yourself for even bothering to pay attention. Equally I didn't want to present the people as noble savages or noble anybodies. Yes, sympathetically, I like them. But not to the point where one is able to separate oneself from them. I'm hoping that people will see them as peers and if the viewer likes himself I hope he will like these people as peers and treat them that way because that is a very important thing for them as well as the viewer. That was my motivation.

PG: Formally, stylistically, how do you make that work?

LA: Well, first of all I think that when you get your subjects relaxed enough you find out pretty soon that no matter who they are, they are not as different as you thought. Most people who are living in a less technologically advanced manner or a more rustic manner, we inevitably make assumptions about them that separates us from them and it very often is not true.

Actually, I don't know if it's my opinion or if it's my feeling in this case but I thought these people were pretty cool. Whether it was that I just simply found the connection to them, or that it was that their culture was closer than I thought in reality to me, I'll have to sift out some other time. I haven't really thought about it that much. What I did get from them was that they were able to articulate their position or their situation in such a way that at least an American audience – a western, northern, first world audience – can grasp very easily as a peer. Maybe it's just to get to that point of relaxation with them or find a point that they are relaxed about. Some people, I could only do that with the actual material culture as we did it because they were not ready to spill their guts to me. Particularly the people in the Itipacura area living a very rustic lifestyle. I did ask people, "how do you feel about such and such?" and sometimes people had gotten to the point where it was easy for them to talk about it and sometimes they didn't. The last group, the ones in Trombetas, who had had the most exposure to this whole land possession and repossession issue and had kind of a media circus around them for a little while. I'd say a more intensive political education for lack of a better word, exposure to political issues. Those were the people that were most able to speak about their experiences in a very clear way, and so for them that was where I focused. As it happened, those same people had lost more of their traditional culture, so I gravitated toward those people.

PG: You also make a conscientious effort to provide the names of the interviewees, the social actors, if you will, and very often the name is linked to human labor.

LA: Instinctively I felt that it was important to name people. Not just the people who held a position somewhere or other which was fine, but I like the idea of putting them on the same level – the professors on the same level as the man or the woman who was making the instrument. I wanted to do that because the viewer will absorb that as well and that is part of my effort to make people see the subject as peers.

PG: Can you say more about the history and derivation of the term "quilombo"?

LA: I'll tell you what I can. First of all, you have to realize that people use a lot of words for the same thing and a lot of the same words have conflicting meanings or different meanings and this is certainly no exception. The root of the word is Angolan and it means "encampment." It's like a camp. When a part of the community perhaps went on an extended hunting trip or went off to war, they'd set up camp. They call that a quilombo. There was actually at least one documented African society in which they actually lived in a quilombo all the time. It's really fascinating. There was an ethnic group that was always on the go. They didn't have time; they didn't have the means to raise children. So what did they do? Basically, they abandoned their babies and abducted youngsters who were just old enough to carry on without a lot of attention – say ten or eleven years old. And that's how they lived. I believe they used that word, quilombo. But in the context of what we're talking about – Maroon communities, primarily but not only – Maroon itself is a word that comes from cimarron which means "wild." It's also the same marooned as if you abandoned somebody. Now in parts of Latin America they use a word called palenque, which is basically a palisade – a fort made out of stakes or polls, indicating that so many of these communities were fortified because they were often under attack. Then there's mocambo. The meaning of the root word goes back to the Congo. The actual use of the word quilombo in contemporary times really can be traced to anthropologists. Anthropologists started using this word for these communities and it also takes in communities that were abandoned by the planters, by the whites; sometimes because they were bankrupt, sometimes because the whites were fleeing the rebellion. Sometimes they were assassinated and so they just felt unsafe and they left. These two kinds of communities, if I had to guess, I would say that the anthropologists deliberately conflated these two kinds of communities with quilombo for practical purposes. As did I. Because I had to call them something, and it was handy and in fact there are distinctions between them in terms of – now I'm kind of hypothesizing here – in some cases the escapees had ended up abandoning more of their traditions than the people who never had to move. A lot of times the people who stayed in one spot; their traditions were reinforced more by a network in place. Brazil became an African country – not just because of the quilombos, but because of the vast number of Africans who were

brought in. So that completely outside of the quilombo experience, there are these aspects of African diasporan culture to reinforce the people who have access to it.

PG: I wanted to ask you about the scenes showing the Macumba ceremonies and the potential problem of exoticizing or sensationalizing them. I'm assuming you took that into consideration when deciding to shoot it and edit it?

LA: Well, first of all there are people who are very sensitive to the point where they will seek to de-aestheticise the experience. I'm not one of them. I feel that as much as we fear the Other, we are attracted to it and it is completely legitimate to show the beauty or the surprise, the wonder of something that is really different from your experience. I don't have any philosophical problem with that. Again, I want to show people as peers. As I said, I don't want to show them as some people who are in any way inferior or superior. I don't mind making people maybe sometimes feel a little envious of what these people have, because I think it's important to value what these people have. Practically speaking, I think the best thing that I could do about that is to try as carefully as I can to explain what they are doing. So that we realize that there are reasons why they do what they do. And I am hoping that through that it will demystify to the point where you can appreciate it aesthetically without removing yourself or without becoming a voyeur.

PG: You also acknowledge the syncretistic aspects of the ceremony. I found it interesting that the woman who performs in these ceremonies also shares with the camera the fact that she embraces her Catholicism as well.

LA: That was important to me. That this woman was aware of how she was viewed by other people for what she did but that she felt sincere in the performance of the Catholic side of the practice.

The other way that I try to keep the viewer present in a process was to go to the store; to go to the supply store, to the nuts and bolts part of actually getting the products you need to have a ceremony. I thought that was important because there were these shops all

over Brazil and I can tell you for a fact that there are many, many of these in New York City and other places where there are a lot of people from the African Diaspora particularly. There are some that are completely derived from the North America experience right here in the United States. Not as much as you get in the Latin areas. Though indications of places like New Orleans, you do, and I think that probably has to do with the Latin and the tolerance of the Catholics towards, and perhaps also the coincidence of the importance of the saints, and how easy it is to compare saints with African deities. Whereas the Protestant variety of Christianity emphasizes so much, one person or one figure.

PG: And that is influenced by the local traditions of the individual communities?

LA: Yeah, but also the other point is that for whatever reason Protestants, particularly evangelists, fundamentalist Protestants – which is a growing – are absolutely obsessed with stamping out all other forms of religion.

PG: But the quilombos are fairly isolated, because as you said before, access is not easy.

LA: Well, let me try to clarify that. The quilombos that I went to are fairly or relatively isolated; I chose them because they better represented a different kind of living. There are many towns presently that were founded as quilombos and are now integrated into the mass culture of Brazil completely. There are settlements in which the city grew [into] a larger city; grew to the point where it enveloped the quilombo. There are some quilombos that exist as portions of a city. There was one or two in Salvador where the people are certainly exposed to the outside culture and have absorbed very much of it but still have some degree of unique identity. There are quilombos who have embraced various strains of Protestantism. There are others who are Catholic and would not contemplate any of these polytheistic Africa-based practices. I chose to emphasize that because it was an aesthetic choice and it [was] also a choice of my preference to show diversity.

PG: What do you think is the biggest challenge confronting the quilombo community today?

LA: I'd say two things. Number one is television. Perhaps if they had the wherewithal to make their own TV, they'd be better off but right now that hasn't happened yet. Some of the people are just getting television. I've seen people stare at a TV in which the image was 95 percent snow, follow a soap opera. One of the quilombos that I stayed at was visited by a bus twice a day. He'd take that bus ride into town. The most remote community that I was at was the quilombo Pancada which was where the rapids started on the Rio Itipacuru, which was actually a pretty big river. The last community that I went to was the farthest you could go by boat because the rapids would prevent you from going any further. There were about fifty people there. They had a big satellite dish and they had as clear a picture as I get at home. They were watching a soap opera, which is in the film. They were watching these white folks' problems and that's because of the trade in goods that they have with Brazil nuts and other produce; that they've got more cash on their hands and they can do that. And they are better organized, having gone through this whole experience of getting thrown off their land and gotten back in and they are now at least more equipped to deal with the outside world.

So there's television, but the biggest challenge, equally with everything that television represents, is the increasing value of their land, the increasing financial value of their land, which increases the temptation for people to take it away from them. Better financed, better armed people in Brazil can still make it [a] very brutal bloodthirsty place. There has been a moratorium on sales of quilombo lands, but that does not stop people at the regional or local level from throwing their weight around – which is very important. A very large, local land owner with his own money and hired thugs and control of the local authorities can do a lot. As a matter of fact, that's one of the reasons I mention in the film how there was a judge colluding with a hotel to provide eco-tourism on land stolen from these quilombos which is kind of wonderfully ironic and yet horrific at the same time.

PG: There were constitutional changes in 1988, but little progress was made immediately after that in terms of access to land titles. I believe it was in the '90s that because of the involvement of Afro-Brazilian movements there was some progress made toward the acquisition of land titles.

LA: Yeah, it was a good start, and is a very important step; but interestingly enough, the current president of Brazil's Lula which they call Ignacio Lula da Silva, which is who you can see hugging George Bush on the cover of the newspapers today. He is the leader of the Workers' Party which is known to be significantly more pro-labor and more radical than I'd say the Democratic party of the United States. He has proved to be a lot more pragmatic and centrist than people thought and with that he has also acceded to a lot of the demands of these large farmers and the mono-culturalists in Brazil and one of the reasons is that his base is urban. Urban working class Brazilians who need all the help they can get, up to a point. If it means cutting down one less tree in Brazil to plant soy beans, that's more help than I think they should get. But the down side of this is that he has ignored rural people's concerns and he has done very little in terms of gaining land title for the quilombos and my guess is that perhaps a lesson that he never forgot is that one of the reasons he defeated Cardozo is that Cardozo paid proportionately more attention to the rural folk of Brazil and spent money and energy doing things like increasing the electrical grid to the point where the quilombos – the ones that didn't have electricity when I first arrived, have it now. They didn't even have that before. He lost to Lula who had a larger urban base. So this is a problem and I don't know what will happen; but I am very concerned about these people because of that pressure. And now when you can equate all that with energy, you can see what happened in Mexico where a lot of people are having trouble affording tortillas because they have become integrated into the American agribusiness grid, providing cheap corn. That's a whole other story. But still, it's dangerous, if you can take somebody's forest and turn it into oil. What does that mean? Well you have to get rid of that somebody and you've got something the whole world wants. So I'm worried about that.

PG: And this is compounded by the problem of the lack of education that would at least enable them to work through the legal system.

LA: Yeah, it's kind of a race there to get people educated and informed quickly enough so that they can hold on to what they have.

PG: Which is connected to the problem of modernization and the options associated with the urban areas. I'm thinking specifically of the teacher who had only a grade school education, who was committed to her students, and her options were to go to the city, work for less wages and abandon her teaching; and I'm assuming that's not an isolated case.

LA: No. There is another illustration of one or two others; of how people can have a better life staying on the land than they can being just another poor person in the city. Some people do it anyway. Some people succeed in having more of the life they want. Hey, I grew up in a small town and I couldn't wait to get to the city and the truth is, I never looked back. I wouldn't move…you'd have to jail me to live in that town again. That's kind of the way or the creed or the way of the world. The trend everywhere seems to be a movement toward a mass culture. Indeed there are no exceptions.

PG: I came across a wonderful quote of yours, "if you're not sure what you're doing, fake it." It seems like that's worked pretty well for you.

LA: Oh, yeah. You can't wait 'til you are absolutely sure. I can't! Fake it till you make it, as somebody said to me – because that's much better than remaining in inertia and I would say to the young people coming up in the world that if you've got a good idea – if I tell you I'm a filmmaker – I'm a filmmaker. If I told anybody in the course of making this film that I wasn't sure what I was doing, all I'm doing is making it harder for them to work with me. That doesn't mean that I'm going to step in and grab a hold of a piece of heavy machinery and start using it without knowing what I'm doing. But it works better with software. But you've got to go out on a limb. I have to tell you that I went completely out on a limb, as I've done before with this project; spent my last dime. I didn't try to do a fiction film; to me that would have been, even for me, too far out

on a limb, self-financed as I am. I can tell you that what I did as a documentary is rooted in some information that has some staying power and that worked for me.

PG: Considering your background, do you now see yourself as a filmmaker?

LA: Yeah, I guess I am a filmmaker. Sometimes I say I'm a story person, a story teller or I'm a person who has made a film; but the reason that I don't feel completely like saying I'm a filmmaker is number one I know I'm other things, and number two... Maybe I'll just say I'm never really comfortable in defining myself by one thing so I guess I'd better stick with filmmaker if I want to get anything done.

PG: What future projects do you have planned?

LA: There are a lot of things that I'd like to do. I'm going to see what I can get some support for. I'd like to take some of the subjects that were touched on in the film; which I realize is a bit of a smorgasbord and develop them more single mindedly into a 30 or 40 minute documentary that can be useful as cultural information. That may be what I do next.

PG: Well, it's an impressive first effort. We're using the word film, but technically, we're talking about video.

LA: Yeah, I think it's pretty much close to convergence. But for me, I've never been an aesthete. I like to make it enjoyable and rich; but to me it's about the story. So I don't mind working in video. If I start working in film I could get sucked in by the beauty of film. I haven't yet.

PG: I'm looking forward to seeing your next project.

LA: Thank you.

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