

Deserto

Jamie N. Davidson

During the consulta described in “**On the Medium**”¹ Pai Antônio informs the ethnographer that she will return. Because it was a combination of chance encounters and circuitous travel that led her to this out-of-the-way settlement, she is incredulous. A year later, she has quite inadvertently and quite by another route, indeed returned. Realizing her location—the intersection of past and future—when riding past, she spots Deserto out a bus window. In that instant, Pai Antônio is vested with a new credibility, and she attempts to recall other observations he made during her initial reading. The ethnographer is traveling, researching beliefs, and is made to believe. If the first irony is in the initial skepticism of the researcher, the second is that the nexus really *is* called Deserto (a name which refers to a non-place: the deserted, or a desert).

“**Deserto**” is a story about faith, in which each character takes risks and precautions, and in which one character’s precaution might be another character’s risk, as in the use of cane liquor and the gun. Ultimately, the ethnographer, who is researching faith and magic, chooses to put her faith in her driver. She suspends reason (good sense) in pursuit of the story. We might call this the “teleological suspension of the sensible.”

The story takes an ironic twist when upon arriving at the curing ceremony, she finds the *pai de santo* (who is in the business of faith and magic) undergoing a crisis of faith. He is worried that he will be unable to cure the ailing client whom, he observes, is too close to death. Doubt overshadows the ceremony, potentially overdetermining its outcome and the fates of both the healer (his credibility) and his client (his life).

We expect the story to play out at the healer’s compound, but instead the story turns out to have been in the getting there. Thereby the reader’s faith (that the

Jamie Davidson is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Performance Studies Graduate Group at the University of California, Davis. Her research regards mediumship, dance and spirit possession in Afro-Brazilian religions. A dancer and ethnographer, her creative practice also involves experimental and performative modes of writing about/with/as embodied practices. Her work also appears in *Anthropology and Humanism* and *Current Anthropology*.

¹ See the accompanying essay, “On the Medium: Embodiment, Textuality and Performativity,” in *Liminalities* 19.1 (2023): <http://liminalities.net/19-1/medium.pdf>

story will carry them over an arc and to a satisfying conclusion) is also tested. The reader is never told the result of the ceremony; that is, whether or not the *cura* has been efficacious. They are left to arrive at a conclusion; that is, to *believe* in one outcome or another.



Deserto

Betinho surprised me by showing up right at the time we had agreed upon.

He was young, and a guy, so I figured he'd tear up that road as fast as his motorbike could carry us. And it was going to be pitch black out there. Which is why, he explained, he was carrying a gun.

We tore through the humid evening, flying across the crevices and rough patches in the road, my driver's confidence fired-up by a few shots of cane liquor. It was a good distance we'd be traveling so he must have figured one drink really wouldn't do.

Pleased with myself for having had the good sense to suggest helmets, I propped my sandals on the pegs and adjusted my body. My arms wrapped around Betinho's waist just tightly enough to avoid spilling off at every bump, yet sufficiently relaxed so as not to give him any wrong ideas out there, alone, on the road, in the night. I wondered where he kept his gun and bet if I were to slide my hand down to his pocket, I would feel it.

I was grateful too that I didn't have to shout directions through our helmets. Too much effort for words that would only be sucked away by the wind. Betinho knew the spot. He had frequented Pai Antônio Carlos' *terreiro*, but it had been a long while and he was owing a visit. That's what he and *the pai de santo* had been saying there in the boticário where I happened to be buying the herbs I needed for the *banho* Pai Tô had prescribed several days prior when I'd paid him the extremely unlikely visit he had read in my cards a year earlier.

This fortunate convergence (and note I don't say "coincidence") meant that at the precise moment I was there, Pai Tô should arrive in town to stock up on candles and other supplies for the *Cura* he'd be hosting on Saturday. I had been invited to attend, but still had to figure out a ride. Hold-ups are so common, even in the interior, making it too dangerous for busses to run at night. Pai Tô greeted

the young man and called him out. Moments later, I had gathered that Betinho had a motorbike and we were negotiating a ride out to Deserto.

We pulled off the road and parked the bike in front of the little wooden shack that functions as a bar, with those ubiquitous white plastic chairs and Brahma² tables arranged about the hardened dirt in front.

We arrived to find Pai Tô in a tizzy. I had never seen him pissed off and, at first, thought he was already incorporating some irritable entity. People sat around the periphery of the room, still waiting for things to get started. The tiny backroom was lit and several busy-looking people entered and exited with deliberate movements and hushed voices. The *pai de santo* was in a pinch. The body delivered him that night for *cura*, was nearly a corpse already. It was too close to death for this, and his failure to revive it was going to cost Pai Tô credibility. He doesn't *do* resurrections.

I took in the pervasive odor of mold and frankincense that is perhaps the single consistent element across *terreiros* of variations and nations of Candomblé Nago/Ketu, Candomblé Bantu, Tambor de Mina, Tambor de Mata, Terecô, Pajelança, Xangô and Macumba in northeastern Brasil.

Could Pai Tô smell immanent death, I wondered?

Part 2

The sick man lay in a hammock in the back room, with his people gathered around him. Candles were lined up along the floor between the *pai de santo* and his client. After long delay, the *Cura* was finally underway.

Dressed in white, and seated in a chair draped with a white cloth, Pai Tô sang *Ave Marias*. Then his body began to shake, first his fingers and hands and feet, then breaking into full, bodily convulsions. His breathing became gurgly and his mouth flapped open and closed. Then, another voice spoke through Pai Tô, to the man with the small face who has a sweet way about him. And the man with the small face hit Pai Tô softly up and down his arms and shoulders, then blew over his shoulder as if to dispel something. Two men on either side of Pai Tô had difficulty supporting his weight as his body spasmed.

² The popular beer in Maranhão state.

The voice that speaks through Pai Tô prescribes something. I hear only “*cebolinha branca*” (little white onion). And one of the women sets about preparing it right away.

Pai Tô appears to waver in and out of trance, singing *Ave Marias*, and the man with the small face is muttering along with him and tapping Pai Tô’s arms and shoulders and blowing over his shoulder again.

Then it is time to dance. Pai Tô’s *entidade* raises me to my feet, hugs me to one side and then the other, and I take my seat again. The next time Pai Tô circles round, his entity pulls me up to dance and points me toward an elderly woman, indicating that I am to follow her example. The “dance” is a rhythmic shuffle that proceeds clockwise around and around the room. It is a relief to be in motion again.



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