

Reclaiming Resistance: Brazilian Feminist Voices and the Theatre of the Oppressed

Fatima Qaraan

Abstract

Feminist activists in Brazil have powerfully adapted Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, using participatory theatre to highlight and resist women's experiences of oppression. Through interactive performances, audiences witness struggles and collectively problem-solve, creating a democratic space for community building and agency. This paper examines how Brazilian feminist theatre groups use Boal's methodology to challenge patriarchal norms and reclaim cultural and intellectual labor. By analyzing the intersections of theatre, gender, and politics, the research emphasizes how these performances foster solidarity, amplify women's voices, and disrupt long-standing patterns of marginalization. Drawing on case studies from Brazil, the analysis considers how the *Theatre of the Oppressed* has been specifically transformed to address issues such as gender-based violence and reproductive rights, framing these interventions as acts of narrative reclamation and resistance. This research centres participatory practices within the Brazilian context to demonstrate how feminist applications of Boal's work have contributed to broader movements for social transformation. The *Theatre of the Oppressed* thus serves as a powerful framework for feminist resistance and collective reimagining in Brazil.

Keywords: theatre of the oppressed, feminist resistance, cultural reclamation, Brazil

Reivindicando la Resistencia: Voces Feministas Brasileñas y el Teatro del Oprimido

Resumen

Las activistas feministas en Brasil han adaptado de manera contundente el Teatro del Oprimido de Augusto Boal, utilizando el teatro participativo para visibilizar y resistir las experiencias de opresión vividas por las mujeres. A través de presentaciones interactivas, el público presencia estas luchas y participa en la búsqueda colectiva de soluciones, creando un espacio democrático para la construcción comunitaria y el fortalecimiento de la agencia. Este artículo examina cómo los colectivos de teatro feminista brasileño emplean la metodología de Boal para desafiar las normas patriarcales y reivindicar el trabajo cultural e intelectual. Al analizar las intersecciones entre teatro, género y política, la investigación enfatiza cómo estas actuaciones fomentan la solidaridad, amplifican las voces de las mujeres y desarticulan patrones de marginación arraigados. A partir de estudios de caso en Brasil, el análisis considera cómo el Teatro del Oprimido ha sido específicamente transformado para abordar cuestiones como la violencia de género y los derechos reproductivos, enmarcando estas intervenciones como

Palabras Clave: Teatro del Oprimido; resistencia feminista; reivindicación cultural; Brasil

actos de recuperación narrativa y resistencia. Esta investigación centra las prácticas participativas dentro del contexto brasileño para demostrar cómo las aplicaciones feministas de la obra de Boal han contribuido a movimientos más amplios de transformación social. Así, el Teatro del Oprimido funciona como un poderoso marco para la resistencia feminista y la reimaginación colectiva en Brasil.

Recuperando a Resistência: Vozes Feministas Brasileiras e o Teatro do Oprimido

Resumo Ativistas feministas no Brasil adaptaram de maneira contundente o Teatro do Oprimido de Augusto Boal, utilizando o teatro participativo para evidenciar e resistir às experiências de opressão das mulheres. Com performances interativas, o público testemunha as dificuldades e busca soluções coletivamente, criando um espaço democrático para a construção comunitária e para a agência. Este artigo examina como grupos de teatro feminista brasileiros utilizam a metodologia de Boal para desafiar as normas patriarcais e reivindicar o trabalho cultural e intelectual. Ao analisar as interseções entre teatro, gênero e política, a pesquisa enfatiza como essas performances promovem a solidariedade, amplificam vozes de mulheres e rompem com padrões históricos de marginalização. Com base em estudos de caso do Brasil, a análise considera como o Teatro do Oprimido foi especificamente transformado para abordar questões como violência baseada em gênero e direitos reprodutivos, enquadrando essas intervenções como atos de retomada de narrativa e de resistência. A pesquisa centraliza as práticas participativas no contexto brasileiro para demonstrar como aplicações feministas do trabalho de Boal têm contribuído para movimentos mais amplos de transformação social. O Teatro do Oprimido serve, assim, como um referencial poderoso para a resistência feminista e a reimaginação coletiva no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Teatro do Oprimido; Resistência Feminista, Recuperação Cultural, Brasil

In 1973, theatre practitioner Augusto Boal was exiled from Brazil due to the “cruel and murderous civic and military dictatorship” (Boal 2008, ix) where traditional avenues of dissent had been restricted (Bezerra 2022). During his exile, Boal wrote *Teatro dos Imprimidos* (Theatre of the Oppressed) in which he argues that theatre, in all contexts, is inherently political. When practiced correctly, Boal (2008) explains, theatre can be a “very efficient weapon [and] for this reason the ruling class strive to take permanent hold . . . utilizing it as a tool of domination” (Boal 2008, xxiii). This domination is accomplished by dividing the stage into two distinct capacities, those who go to the stage and act and those who remain at a distance as passive spectators or “the masses, the people” (Boal 2008, xxiii). To further entrench this division, the aristocracy labeled certain actors as protagonists to represent the aristocrats while all other actors represented the masses and the people. The most effective attempt to abolish this separation though, Boal (2008) argues, was happening all over Latin America at the time he was writing. The revolutions taking place were destroying “the barriers created by the ruling class,” (Boal 2008, xxiv) and marked the beginning of the people’s revolution to seize back the powerful weapon of performance, a “conquest of the means of theatrical production” (Boal, xxiv). Drawing on the work of the Madalena-Anastácia collective in Rio de Janeiro and the Capulanas Cia. de Artes Negra collective in Sao Paulo, this paper will show how Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* has been used as a source of feminist resistance for women in Brazil from the 1960s onwards.

By examining the intersection of theatre, politics, and gender, this research explores how this theatrical methodology has empowered women to challenge patriarchal structures and resist cultural commodification. Feminist theatre often incorporates intersectionality, addressing overlapping systems of oppression related to gender, race, and class. This particular methodology rejects hierarchical and binary frameworks in theatrical processes and redefines leadership and representation, while creating spaces for marginalized voices to challenge systemic inequality. In Brazil, patriarchal norms and systemic violence against women remain persistent, perpetuating gender inequality (Nakamura et al. 2023; Caulfield and Schettini 2017). In 2003, femicide rates for Black women was “23 percent higher than their White counterparts” and, ten years later, in 2013 increased to 67 percent, compared to that of White women (Gonçalves 2017). This is due, Giani Monteiro et al. (2021) argue, to Black women’s “historical dimension in Brazilian society as a bitter legacy from the slavery period [still evident] in social and economic disadvantages of Black women in the country . . . [who] face greater obstacles in accessing qualified health services, and a higher prevalence of sexual and reproductive health problems” (Monteiro et al., 2021, 361). Despite legislative advancements such as the Maria da Penha Law (2006), legislation targeting domestic violence against women by creating mechanisms to curb such violence (Prestes and Nascimento 2016), in 2020 the World Health Organization ranked Brazil fifth for the highest femicide rates in the world (Gonçalves 2017).

Since the 1960s, Brazilian feminist movements have utilized theatre as a tool of resistance, although there have been many obstacles slowing down the progress of these actions. Romano (2021) argues that “contemporary feminist engagement with political theatre in Brazil began in the 1960s, in the wake of the struggle for human rights and the freedom of women . . . though it has diminished in intervening years” (Romano 2021, 390). The civil-military coup responsible for

for exiling Boal contributed to the setbacks experienced by feminist groups based on economic, political and social changes. Andersen Sarti (2004) explains that the situation of women in Brazil was influenced by European and North American feminist movements in the 1960s, “calling into question the traditional gender hierarchy” (37). This crucial contemplation took place, “at the same time as the unfolding of the bitter context of the Latin American dictatorships, which silenced discordant voices” (Sarti 2004, 37). In 1996, “the academic space opened up to an eminently political event that debated torture during the military dictatorship in Brazil . . . discussing the presence of the woman as a protagonist in the resistance to the dictatorship and, for the first time, as a victim of specific violence” (Sarti 2004, 38). Romano (2021) describes this violence as not only physical but psychological with “an intense campaign carried out by the mass media, supported by state institutions that devalued women” (390). This was followed by “the banning of debates about gender inequality in the performing arts which continued to occur in the next century” (Romano 2021, 391).

Efforts to silence women across the country remained a culture norm. By the early 1990s, Brazil’s women’s rights movement responded to this silence and gained significant momentum, particularly due to the establishment of women’s police stations (*Delegacias de Defesa da Mulher*) in the mid-1980s—a direct response to feminist advocacy against high rates of violence targeting women (Hautzinger 1997; Santos 2004). The first station opened in São Paulo in 1983, staffed by women officers dedicated to investigating crimes like rape and domestic violence (Santos 2004). This institutional advance encouraged many women to report abuse that had previously been hidden, and the number of complaints steadily increased, giving greater visibility to the issue (Santos 2004). By 1990, there were 80 women’s police stations across Brazil, and this number continued to rise throughout the decade, with 339 stations reported by the early 2000s (Santos 2004). There was a significant increase of reports of domestic violence and femicide, reflecting both heightened awareness and improved reporting mechanisms (Guimaraes 2007). Studies from the late 1980s and early 1990s indicated that most violence occurred within the home, typically perpetrated by spouses or partners, with physical abuse being the most common form (Guimaraes 2007). The period also saw the rise of feminist activism demanding legal reforms and better protection for women, exemplified by organizations like SOS Mulher (SOS Woman), which launched impactful campaigns such as “Quem ama não mata” (Those who love don’t kill), in response to a series of high-profile murders of women by their partners (Guimaraes 2007, 6). However, despite these advances, violence against women remained widespread, frequently hidden behind closed doors and often going unpunished due to persistent patriarchal attitudes and limited gender-sensitive training for police staff (Santos 2004; Machado de Vasconcelos et al. 2024).

It was not until early 2010, that feminisms and feminist expression made a prominent comeback to the Brazilian theatre scene (Romano 2021). As political feminist theatre gained traction “women artists [all over Brazil] . . . dedicated their actions to focusing on femicide, domestic violence, harassment . . . [and] reproductive rights” (Romano 2021, 391). Rio de Janeiro-based theatre practitioner, Bárbara Santos, directed the first women-led laboratory with the intention “to develop productions in which women were not blamed for the sexist violence

they face” (Prefeitura de Marica 2022). Santos aimed to cultivate a theatre group where women could openly discuss oppressive experiences without feeling as if they needed to justify themselves or their stories (Bernardete Toneto 2022). From this laboratory, Santos developed a re-imagining of Boal’s work through a critical feminist lens called *Teatro das Oprimidas* (Theatre of the Oppressed for Women). Santos (2023) describes her recreation as:

a theatrical methodology focusing on how to face oppression from a feminist perspective . . . it is recognizing that the oppressions we face exist because we live in a patriarchal and capitalist system where the masculine gender, white people, and the issue of hetero-normativity has more value . . . so we consider this before making our play . . . because we cannot tell any story without considering this system.” (Centro do Teatro de Oprimido 2023, 00:41:00)

This sudden upsurge in feminist theatre “took place adjacent to the public inquiry about the ‘speech space’ of the so-called minorities, fighting against the privileges of whiteness and cisnormativity, and speaking about unfixed identities,” (Romano 2021, 391). Romano acknowledges that this “necessary examination of [Brazilian] ways of life,” would not have been possible without, “the long struggle of black people, [and members of the LGBTQ2S+ community] with whom women share a history of oppression” (Romano 2021, 391).

In 2015, Brazil experienced a “Brazilian Feminist Spring,’ making visible the recovery of feminist militance and growth in the awareness of gender inequality and intersectionality with sexuality, social class and ethnicity–race markers” (Romano 2021, 391). During this feminist spring, Santos was “faced with the demand from black women to experience a laboratory that articulated gender and race” (Ribeiro 2023, 14). In response to this demand, Santos created the Madalena-Anastácia Collective for “black women who were interested in aesthetically investigating their experiences in a structurally racist and sexist society” (Ribeiro 2023, 14). The Madalena-Anastácia fulfilled “the need to increase the participation of artist-activists as facilitators of the production processes and of dialogue with the public” (Santos 2019, 119), epitomizing Boal’s initial intentions for the *Theatre of the Oppressed*. The collective uses Boal’s Forum Theatre, an interactive theatrical technique where audience members become ‘spect-actors’ who can stop the performance and step in to change the outcome of a scene depicting social or political problems (Boal 2008). This technique serves as both a group-based problem-solving method and a tool for meaningful discussion, attracting participants through reason and emotion to explore creative solutions to community issues and oppression without commanding or instructing (MacDonald and Dickinson 2001). The purpose of this methodology, Ribeiro argues, is to allow the activists to “put themselves in the shoes of those investigating their ethical-political sufferings, then confront the oppressions they experience and theatrically question other women and men about their stances on relevant black social issues” (Ribeiro 2023, 14). Boal’s Forum theatre provides the Madalena-Anastácia’s with the necessary tools to provoke discussions around systemic inequalities and to empower participants to envision solutions to these challenges.

Another prominent Brazilian feminist theatre group practicing Boal’s techniques is the Capulanas Cia. de Artes Negra “founded in . . . São Paulo, by four Black women—Adriana Paixão, Débora Marçal, Flávia Rosa and Priscila Obaci ” (Romano 2021, 391). Their work, similarly,

to the Madalenas, aims to deconstruct the privileges historically embedded in Brazilian theater and transform it from “a social event for a few,” to a platform for marginalized voices, especially Black women (Stefanel, 2013). The Capulanas incorporate Boal’s methods into their creative process by employing collaborative direction and a non-naturalistic theatrical language where the body and collective expression are central (Romana 2021), echoing Boal’s emphasis on embodied participation and social dialogue. Their performances have drawn inspiration from the “life stories and aesthetics and creative experiences of figures such as Maria Nascimento, Margarida Trindade, Clélia Guerreiro Ramos and Thereza Santos who were at the forefront of Black cultural and pedagogical artistic actions that were often made invisible by male domination that comes from the social problems generated by machismo, racism and many other ways that [the Black Brazilian community] is subjected to” (Lourenço 2021, 183). The Capulanas also host “reflection groups on feminism and Blackness, using theatre as an instrument for dialogue and direct intervention” (Romano 2021, 392), mirroring Boal’s goal of using theater for “social change, where personal and collective oppressions are explored and confronted in a participatory setting” (Sandi Diaz 2007). By integrating feminist theory with participatory performance techniques, the Capulanas exemplify how art can serve as both a site of resistance and a catalyst for social transformation.

Having examined the work of the Madalena-Anastácia and Capulanas Cia. de Artes Negra collectives, it becomes evident that these groups do more than simply perform Boal’s techniques. They actively transform them to address the specific realities of Black women facing violence and systemic oppression in Brazil. Both collectives utilize participatory theatre not only as a means of storytelling but as a dynamic tool for empowerment and social change. Their performances invite audiences to engage directly with the actors and disrupt traditional spectator roles, fostering a collective space where experiences of gendered and racial violence can be openly confronted and challenged. This collective articulation of oppressive experiences and call for resistance is crucial in a context where Black women disproportionately suffer from femicide and systemic neglect. Together, these case studies illustrate how Boal’s *Theatre of the Oppressed* serves as a vital framework for Brazilian feminist groups to navigate and contest the complexities of intersectional violence. The Madalena-Anastácia and Capulanas Cia de Artes Negra collectives adapt these theatrical methods to reflect the lived realities of Black women, and have contributed to a broader feminist movement that is inclusive, participatory, and deeply rooted in community empowerment. Their work exemplifies how theatre can transcend performance to become a potent form of social intervention, challenging structural inequalities and inspiring collective action against violence. These initiatives have created a space for Brazilian women to reclaim their agency within oppressive systems while envisioning alternative futures rooted in equality and justice. Initiatives like Teatro das Oprimidas empower women to critique societal norms while rehearsing strategies for real-world change. This approach highlights the transformative potential of theatre in fostering solidarity and envisioning alternative futures rooted in equality and justice.

The Madalena-Anastácia and Capulanas Cia de Artes Negra collectives encourage important dialogue and action by creating spaces for women to directly challenge patriarchal structures in Brazilian society. Their activist approach aligns with broader feminist activism in

Brazil that seeks to dismantle cultural commodification of women while advocating for racial justice and intersectional equality (Gomaa 2024). These collectives' actions ratify the feminist insight that the personal is also political, because the work accomplished by their use of the *Theater of the Oppressed* explores the subjective perspective of the problem, exposing the social structure that fosters it to reveal the mechanisms of oppression that sustain and perpetuate the patriarchal system. Through the intersection of theatre, politics, and gender, Boal's methodology serves as a critical framework for understanding how performance can challenge oppressive systems and foster social change. Boal's techniques are embraced by these collectives to address political issues, demonstrating how theatre can transcend traditional boundaries and become a powerful instrument for challenging oppression and envisioning equitable futures. These examples demonstrate how Boal's methods have been effectively used in Brazil to address feminist concerns, empowering women to reclaim narratives and resist oppression through participatory theatre practices. The legacy of Augusto Boal's methodologies continues to influence contemporary feminist activism in Brazil, providing both a language and a practice through which marginalized women can reclaim agency and demand justice. In the ongoing fight against femicide and violence toward women in Brazil, feminist theatre stands as a compelling example of how art and activism can unite to challenge oppression and build more just and equitable societies.

References

- Bezerra, Antonia Pereira, César Augusto Paro, Michelle Assis Couto, and Simone Requião. 2022. *O Teatro do Oprimido Ontem, Hoje e Sempre*. Salvador: Universidade Federal da Bahia, Escola de Teatro, <https://repositorio.ufba.br/handle/ri/37909>
- Boal, Augusto. 2008. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto Press
- Caulfield, Sueann, and Cristiana Schettini. 2017. "Gender and Sexuality in Brazil Since Independence." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199366439.013.296>
- Centro de Teatro do Oprimido. *Documentário Teatro das Oprimidas* [Video]. YouTube Video, 11:57. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OB63MtgOwXg&t=79s>. May 16, 2023
- Gomaa, Chanel H. 2024. *Theatre as Resistance: Application of Queer and Feminist Theories to Theatrical Practice and Pedagogy*. PhD diss., University of Central Florida. STARS. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1245&context=etd2023>
- Gonçalves, Juliana. 2017. "Femicide in Brazil Is Directly Linked to Race and Class, According to Researchers." *Brasil de Fato* (online), November 8 Accessed [April 24, 2025]. <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2017/11/08/femicide-in-brazil-is-directly-linked-to-race-and-class-according-to-researchers>
- Guimaraes, Estefania. 2007. "Talking about Violence: Women Reporting Abuse in Brazil." PhD diss., University of York

- Hautzinger, Sarah. 1997. "Calling a State a State": Feminist Politics and the Policing of Violence Against Women in Brazil. *Feminist Issues*, 15. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02860606>
- MacDonald, Susan, and Rachel Dickinson. 2001. "Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre for Teachers." Notes from a workshop presented at Athens Conference on Theatre Education, 2000. Published in *Education & Theatre*, 1. Hellenic Theatre/Drama & Education Network
- Mario Francisco Giani Monteiro, Jackeline Aparecida Ferreira Romio, and Jefferson Drezett. 2021. "Is There a Race/Color Differential in Femicide in Brazil? The Inequality of Mortality Rates for Violent Causes Among White and Black Women." *Journal of Human Growth and Development*, 31(2): 358-366. <https://doi.org/10.36311/jhgd.v31.12257>
- Nakamura, Isabella Bagni, Marcus Tolentino Silva, Leila Posenato Garcia, and Tais Freire Galvão. 2023. "Prevalence of Physical Violence Against Brazilian Women: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380211029410>
- Prefeitura de Maricá. 2022. "Peça teatral chama a atenção para as formas de violência contra a mulher." September 20. Accessed April 1, 2024
<https://www.marica.rj.gov.br/noticia/peca-teatral-chama-a-atencao-para-as-formas-de-violencia-contra-a-mulher/>
- Prestes, Cleides Maria Silva, and Edna Maria Fernandes dos Santos Nascimento. 2016. "Lei 'Maria da Penha': Uma Nova Forma de Vida da Mulher Brasileira?" *Estudos Linguísticos* (São Paulo) 42(3): 45-60
- Ribeiro, Adriana Barbosa, and Andréa Vieira Zanella. 2023. "The Madalenas Laboratory—Theater of the Oppressed and the Contributions of Lev Vygotsky and Augusto Boal: Intertwining Art and Life." *Pro-Posições* 34 <https://doi.org/10.1590/1980-6248-2022-0061en>
- Romano, Lúcia. R. V. 2021. The Feminist Struggle in Performing Arts in Brazil. *Theatre Research International*, 46(3): 390-97. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S030788332100033X>
- Sandi Diaz, Gina. 2007. "Latin American Theater for Social Change: The Case of Augusto Boal and Enrique Buenaventura." Master's Thesis, University of Kansas
- Santos, Bárbara. 2019. *Teatro das Oprimidas: Estéticas Feministas para Poéticas Políticas*. 1ª ed. São Paulo: Casa Philos Editora
- Santos, Cecília MacDowell. 2004. "En-Gendering the Police: Women's Police Stations and Feminism in São Paulo." *Latin American Research Review*, 39(3): 29-55. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2004.0059>
- Sarti, Cynthia Anderson. 2004. "Brazilian Feminism Since the Seventies: Revisiting a Trajectory." *Estudos Feministas*, 12(2): 35-50. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0104-026X2004000200003>
- Stefanel, Xandra. "A saúde da mulher negra sobe ao palco, em produção da periferia paulistana." Portal Geledés (Instituto Geledés), September 30, 2013. Accessed April 1, 2024. <https://www.geledes.org.br/a-saude-da-mulher-negra-sobe-ao-palco-em-producao-da-periferia-paulistana/>

Vasconcelos, Nádia Machado de, Regina Tomie Ivata Bernal, Juliana Bottoni de Souza, Polyanna Helena Coelho Bordoni, Caroline Stein, Carolina de Vargas Nunes Coll, Joseph Murray, and Deborah Carvalho Malta. 2024a. "Underreporting of Violence Against Women: An Analysis of Two Data Sources." *Ciência & Saude Coletiva*, 29(10): 1- 10. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1413-812320242910.07732023EN>

Vasconcelos, Nádia Machado de, Juliana Bottoni de Souza, Adauto Martins Soares Filho, Polyanna Helena Coelho, Sofia Reinach, Caroline Stein, Crizian Saar Gomes, et al. 2024b. "Female Homicides in Brazil: Global Burden of Disease Study, 2000–2018." *Lancet Regional Health - Americas* (Online), 40: 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lana.2024.100935>

Fatima Qaraan is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Politics at York University. She is published in the Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship and Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy. She wrote and directed The Library for the 2015 London Fringe Festival and Las Meninas in 2019 for her master's thesis project at the Red Sandcastle Theatre in Toronto. Her PhD dissertation explores how gender-role dynamics, social and cultural norms, and consent legislation impact child marriage in Canada.