*Touristifying the slave past : Memory, identity and Opportunism in Rio de Janeiro’s Little Africa*

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Since 2010, Rio de Janeiro’s port district has been the object of a large-scale urban operation, called Porto Maravilha (Marvelous Port), that aims to transform this derelict post-industrial area into a shiny new mixed-use entertainment district. New infrastructure include world-class museums, a pedestrian boulevard, new public spaces, a light rail system and sleek new urban design intended to attract investors, creative industry workers, tourists and upscale residents. However, much of the area’s symbolic rebranding as Rio de Janeiro’s futuristic new cultural district ignore the port’s rich past as the landing point of the largest number of enslaved human beings in world history, as the site of Brazil’s buziest slave trade, and as the cradle of some of the most iconic features of Afro-brazilian culture, including samba, capoeira and carnival. In their effort to fight this last wave of invisibilization and expulsion after centuries of repression and abandonment, Afro-brazilian residents of the port district have, over the last few years, become increasingly active in reclaiming their right to existence and representation in this strategic central-city urban sector. This paper discusses different resistance strategies devised by local afro-descendants in their efforts to negotiate some form of recognition and representation in the touristification of the area, that will allow them to detergentrification and benefit from tourism revenues. From symbolic appropriations of key sites of the slave past for the holding of Afro-brazilian rituals that mix genuine and « invented » practices, to opportunistic cooperation in their own folklorization as part of Porto Maravilha’s cultural legitimation strategies, to judiciary struggles for official protection and recognition, to their objectification as human relics in the ongoing recognition of the Valongo Slave Wharf sector as part of UNESCO world heritage, these strategies raise important questions about the construction of memory, identity, and community in tourism development.  They also testify to the thin line that often separates perceptions of authenticity and simulacrum in the production of tourism-worthy realities, especially with respect to re-readings of history, cultural appropriation and instrumentalization, and the construction of a consensual urban image.

The presentation rests upon an ongoing SSHRC-funded research project that closely follows members of a state-recognized quilombo (Quilombo da Pedra do Sal, incorporated as ARQPEDRA) as they struggle to reclaim, renovate and reinstate a series of buildings recently obtained after a long judicial struggle, and thus to give a new life and significance to a highly symbolic sector of Rio’s port area. This project also aims to assist and accompany this community in transforming this sector into a meaningful site of memory for the african diaspora. The paper will conclude with the results of a series of international design workshops held in May and June 2017 to devise culturally-sensitive architectural and urban design proposals for the renovation of the sector and thus with a discussion of the difficulties of intervening in such a complex social environment.

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