

Crossing the Sertão

Going Places to Make Things Come Your Way

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Just give me a torn dress, a hit of acid, and
let's go to the beach! That's enough, that's a lot!
– Anton 'Reggie' Dunnigan, Cockette



Wouldn't you immediately trade the place where you've just sat down to read this essay for this potholed road somewhere deep in the Bahian Sertão? Just to walk and walk and walk, without really knowing where the road will take you? I know that I would. So if by some miraculous chance the opportunity presents itself, I'd say: grab it. No offence taken.

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'Nothing multiplied with nothing plus the Devil' (*Nada, nada vezes e o demo*). That is how the Brazilian novelist João Guimarães Rosa (1908-1967) characterized the Sertão, the vast open spaces that make up the interior of north-eastern Brazil. In his classic novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (1956) the emptiness of these arid expanses acquires a deeply metaphysical meaning. Guimarães Rosa's Sertão is the nothing that

is all: it is 'the one thing, the end of all, the emptiness, stretchable, back to front' (*aquela coisa, taperão de tudo, fofo ocado, arreverso*) as well as 'of the size of the world' (*do tamanho do mundo*). A place of essences. Beginnings. Skeletons. Stones. Dust. Skies. For the *Grande Sertão* to be told, said Guimarães Rosa, the Portuguese language itself had to be stripped of all its conventional and worn out meanings. It should become a born-again language, cleared of the forms that were passed down through the ages, freed of all customary expressions and meanings (cf. Willemsen 1993).

Such is the truth seeking that the Sertão provokes. It is the truth seeking that takes the form of 'stripping'. The primordiality of this world speaks to the intuition that God does not reside in the works of men. The barren nakedness of these arid landscapes resonates with the mystic's conjecture that 'unknowing' is what it takes to come closer to God.

Unsurprisingly then, in the Brazilian imagination the Sertão has been peopled with prophets, mystics, cross-carrying-penitents, hermits, flagellants, *pagadores-de-promessas*, pilgrims, and the holy men called *beatos*. And bandits, of course, although in the Sertão these too come as credulous creatures. All these characters have turned their backs on society – out of piety, rebelliousness, misery or any odd combination thereof. Having left behind them the pettiness of their everyday affairs, the narrow-mindedness of their worldview, the vanity (or hopelessness) of their life pursuits, they are up to something big. Some life-transforming experience will come to them on these gravelly roads. Some miracle will happen. Some sacred truth will reveal itself.

I can't deny that I am utterly susceptible to the idea of revelatory travels through empty badlands. For me, the seduction of a place like the Sertão is that its emptiness easily translates as 'the absence of any human intervention', which in turn endows the scenery with a strong sense of what – for want of a better term – I would call its 'mindlessness'. Places like the Sertão don't care about you (or anything else, for that matter). They don't send predators your way, like jungles do. Or torrential rains and lightning. Or quicksand that tries to suck you into the earth. Or avalanches. The Sertão doesn't engage with you in such active ways. It's just motionless rocks. Silent plains. A scenery ostentatiously indifferent to human presence, unresponsive to whatever the human mind seeks to make out of it. Antônio Conselheiro, Jack Kerouac, the desert fathers, Thelma and Louise, that Zen Buddhist on a motorcycle, Guimarães Rosa (who, as a medical doctor, crossed the Sertão on horseback), Jesus Christ, Bruce Chatwin, Lawrence of Arabia, or Dora, the moth-eaten letter-writer from that famous 1998 road movie by the Brazilian cinematographer Walter Salles called *Central do Brasil*: they all had their reasons to enter the nothingness, and they all returned from empty lands with a story to tell. Yet in distant mountain ranges the Sertão shrugs its shoulders over such human significations.

It is exactly this indifference to signification that holds the Sertão's eternal attraction to me. For it is this particular quality that allows for the fantasy that here, finally, I might be acquitted of the task to be the author of the world, to narrate and envision the world before entering it. Here, in the soothing ochres of the Sertão, I finally may lay my head to rest on a sun warmed stone.

Clearly, such yearnings have everything to do with the fact that I work in a place

where words reign supreme; where the sayability of things may be discussed but is never questioned; where no one ever shuts up because all want to be heard, one way or the other. In a similar vein, my longings for aimless wandering and just-letting-the-world-be follow from the fact that in academia knowledge has to be extracted from the world through active and well-guided intervention, cleverly designed conquest and relentless battle. In such a place, empty landscapes cease to be dream destinations. In such a place, I actually found myself planning a trip. Staring at the map I keep push-pinned on the wall of my office, I followed the red lines to see how coastal highways veer inland, branch off into provincial roads, which become municipal roads that lead into the blank spaces. And in the middle of one such blank space I detected a possible destination. Canudos.

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‘So don’t expect Canudos to be a pretty place’, is how I had warned my travel companions. ‘There’s nothing much out there. Crossing the sunburned landscapes of the Sertão is what the trip is all about’.

I had been very keen to introduce some visiting colleagues to Canudos, a dusty back-of-beyond in the Bahian interior where, in the late 19th century, a messianic prophet by the name of Antônio Conselheiro had brought thousands of his destitute devotees to found a New Jerusalem, a make-shift city that grew to enormous proportions but was destroyed to the last muddy brick when government troops finally succeeded to wipe out this ‘nest of religious fanatics’. With the plans already made, I had suddenly worried that my colleagues were expecting a cute little colonial town, or something to that effect. Which is not at all what Canudos is like.

Out of a similar concern that the trip might not live up to expectations raised, I had suggested them to prepare themselves by reading the Vargas Llosa novel *The War at the End of the World* which recounts the bloody events in Canudos in graphic detail, or better still, if they could get their hands on a translation, *Os Sertões*, the eyewitness accounts of the struggles in these backlands by the Brazilian writer, Euclides da Cunha.

‘For the place to be able to speak to you’, is how I had put it.

As good academics (Bahians would probably smile and say: as good penitents) they had brought these voluminous and heavy works, all the way from Amsterdam.

Rather unsertão-ish, a drizzly rain had remained with us as we had left the coast further and further behind. And in fact it was only beyond a place called Tucano that the Sertão began to look the way I had promised my travel companions it to be. As the little town petered out into its last houses, the gasoline station, and some dilapidated wooden shacks, a breathtaking panorama opened itself up: the BR-115 stretched out into the distance as a single straight line of tarmac cutting the vast, empty expanses of the Bahian interior in two. Both to the right and to the left there was nothing but land. Stones, thorny bushes, and succulent plants dissolving into shades of grey and ochre. Land that just never stops. At regular intervals we passed the dried out carcasses of cattle on the roadside, black vultures circling above them. And every once in a while there was the little whitewashed chapel clinging to the road, or the man with a cowboy

hat driving a bicycle – their insignificance magnifying the immensity of this world. Even the nameless mountain ranges on the horizon had been cleverly designed to evoke the promise of more empty expanses beyond them.

From the back of the car came the remark: ‘Wow, this is how I always imagined Latin America to be! If only these grey skies were blue, this would be exactly as in *Central do Brasil*’.

And so it was. Sitting in a car, driving a 100 kilometers an hour, the Sertão was a moving picture. Beauty framed behind glass. The opening scene to a screen adaptation of the Mario Vargas Llosa novel. Or indeed, *Central do Brasil*.

For a brief moment I sensed the urge to stop and get out of the car. I fancied that being tied to that straight line of tarmac, to the directionality of a road, prohibited me to contact the vastness all around. If only I were able to walk into these arid lands – just walk until I would lose sight of the road – this film might become real.

Of course I never stopped the car. There were many miles to go before reaching Canudos, and it was getting late already. Too many potholes to risk driving here after dark. And so we continued. We discussed patterns of settlement and landownership in these parts. And recipes for raspberry cake. And PhD. projects. But an irresistible thought had come to my mind.

‘Horses’, I said to my colleagues. ‘What if we rent horses tomorrow and go for a ride?’

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In our academic modes of being, all you are ever encouraged to do is to access the world by being its author. You first make a picture of the world and then you step inside its frame. Which may be pleasurable enough. Yet as a consequence of this mode of being, all you will ever be is a spectator to a world of your own making. As if driving a horse into the Sertão could ever be anything other than replacing one film script (*Central do Brasil*) with another (*How the West was Won*, *Dancing with Wolves*, *Brokeback Mountain*). As if this majestic Sertão could ever be subjected to one’s particular wishes. As if the Sertão could be put to work as one’s subordinate; hired to be the Brazilian maid who will clean up a messy head. No, no, no. As Guimarães Rosa already succinctly put it: the Sertão is too big for that. It is *do tamanho do mundo*.

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I have come to see that the academic stress on authorship pervades the study of that other type of revelatory travel: pilgrimage. Time and again, pilgrimage has been cast in definitions that stress the directionality and purposefulness of the pilgrim’s travels. From the by now classic definition of Edith and Victor Turner, who considered pilgrimage to be ‘a form of deliberate travel to a far place intimately associated with the deepest, most cherished axiomatic values of the traveler’ (Turner & Turner 1978: 241) to encyclopaedic descriptions as ‘journeys made to some place with the purpose of venerating it, or in order to ask there for supernatural aid, or to discharge some religious obligation’ (Catholic Encyclopedia Online): what gets stressed is that the pil-

grims know where they are heading, they know what they are doing, what values are at stake, and what is to be expected at the end of their journey. Although there is no denying that a sense of destination plays a role in pilgrimage (and an important one at that), I keep wondering whether the stress on purposefulness and directionality doesn't blind us for other important dimensions of revelatory travels. Take the pilgrim who booked a fully organized trip to Lourdes, with a three day program explaining his trip from A to Z in his suitcase, and with a tour guide leading him around. I dare say that what this pilgrim will recall as meaningful was what came to him on the road, in the doing: the events and occurrences that were unexpected, unpremeditated, unforeseen and unsolicited.

Victor Turner and others were certainly not blind to these dimensions of pilgrimage. Notions such as anti-structure and *communitas* point out exactly the possibility to face the 'beyond' of human meaning production. I do think, however, there is too much 'agency', too much 'willful action', too much *a priori* knowledge in the definitions that he and others introduced to discuss the phenomenon of pilgrimage. To follow up on a term introduced above: these scholars give too much 'authorship' to the pilgrims, who seem to be in charge of meaning production at all times. In that sense, their pilgrims strike me as too academic, too obviously modeled after modes of knowledge production that speak to us – seculars discussing pilgrimage – but not necessarily to pilgrims.

Take that other Victor that I happen to know, who was born and raised deep in the Bahian Sertão. He once told me that when he was aged nine or ten, some of the big boys in the village had told him that if he just kept digging he would end up at the other side of the world, where he would find himself in a place called Japão. He had no clue what it was, this Japão. Yet it was clear to him that this Japão had to be far removed from his village – '*lááááá no outro lado do mundo!*', is how he recounted his childhood understandings to me, wildly gesticulating with his arms to indicate distance. This single idea was sufficient reason to start digging. Deeper and deeper he made his hole in the ground, but then of course, the place called Japão never materialized, and those big boys started mocking him for his credulity.

I recall how at this point in his story he smiled, shyly, remembering his childhood naiveté and ignorance – he is one of the big boys now.

But then he continued, telling me that, right there in that hole in the earth, he made up his mind. So now he knew. And from now on he would never be fooled again. All those places that get mentioned sometimes – Japão, America, Europe, Nova York, the Torre Eiffel – they don't exist. They are lies. Fabrications of people that are out to deceive you. Brazil is all there is. *Do tamanho do mundo*.

Victor's digging may probably not qualify as pilgrimage, it does however bring into focus another way of revelatory travel: a mode where you go some place to let things come your way. Victor didn't know what Japão was. He had no 'associations' with it. He just started digging, only then to find out. And thus it must have been with many pilgrims. You hit the road, and then you'll find out.

This doubling of movement, the awareness that your going will set the world in motion, and will make it act *on you* is an insight that is at the heart of the surrealist admiration of the *flâneur*, who would wander the city to provoke chance encounters

(Tythacott 2003: 32ff.), or the beatnik's faith in serendipity, or the Indian's 'lonely vision quest', or Alain Badiou's philosophical understanding that what matters is the Event

For the process of truth to begin, something must happen. Knowledge as such only gives us repetition, it is concerned only with what already is. For truth to affirm its newness, there must be a supplement. This supplement is committed to chance – it is unpredictable, incalculable, *it is beyond what is*. I call it an event. A truth appears in its newness because an eventful supplement interrupts repetition (Badiou 2002)

Victor's digging for Japão might thus provide us with a more convincing understanding of the revelatory journeys that come under the label of pilgrimage.

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Take Luis. His story is a clear indication as to how the revelatory potential of travel is grounded in the chance encounters a road may produce: underscoring the thought that you go places to make things come your way.

I had met Luis in a shop in the Bahian capital Salvador that sells religious articles, where he was buying some herbs and minerals for a ritual bath. We entered into a conversation, and he started to talk about his recent experiences in a *terreiro do candomblé*. He pointed out a big tattoo on his arm, a portrait of a Cheyenne Indian with waving black hair. He told me that the prime reason for choosing this particular tattoo was the fact that the black hair had served the purpose of covering up an earlier tattoo that he did not like anymore. Two weeks later, however, he had become possessed by a Cheyenne Indian. This was indeed a strange occurrence. Indian-spirits (*caboclos*) are well known entities in candomblé cosmology, but as far as I know, north American plain Indians descending from the skies have not yet been reported. The priestess responsible for his initiation, however, insisted that this was the spirit who was taking possession of his body. He told me that ever since, he had been surfing the Internet to find all kinds of information about Cheyenne Indians.

Weeks later he called me up from his mobile phone. He was somewhere on the highway to the neighboring state of Sergipe, and told me – quite excited – that while making a sanitary stop he had found 'a strange bone' on the roadside. He figured it might well have been from an Indian. But he wasn't sure. Thinking that anthropologists know about bones and Indians, he wanted my opinion on his finding – clearly hoping that this bone might be interpreted as a sign of the authenticity of his possessions.

Clearly then, Luis put his faith in that which came unsolicited. What became a revelation was not some finding on the Internet, not the words of the priestess, but this one sign that was not 'authored' by anyone: a bone on the roadside, stumbled upon when taking a leak.

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Going places to make things come your way is also the Leitmotif in the story of Dona Clarice and Dona Suzana. Every year, these two middle-aged ladies who live in the Bahian capital Salvador travel to Serrinha, a small, typically *sertanejo* market town, for the yearly celebration in honor of their sister's *boiadeiro* spirit. Both Dona Clarice and Dona Suzana are spirit mediums too, and like their sister in Serrinha, they too receive the *boiadeiro*.

The *boiadeiro* is one of the many spiritual entities (*entidades*) that roam the pantheon of afro-Brazilian religions such as candomblé. *Boiadeiro* translates as 'cowboy', and this spirit (of which there are various avatars, such as *boiadeiro menino*, the 'boyish' cowboy, *boiadeiro da Campina*, cowboy from Campina, *boiadeiro bugre*, savage cowboy, and *boiadeiro do Sertão*, cowboy from the Sertão) is usually pictured as a dark skinned cowboy, dressed in leather clothes, driving a bull. His inseparable attribute is the *capanga de couro* (a leather bag), in which he gathers the medicinal herbs and plants found during his wanderings. Some say the *boiadeiros* are from the 'village of Jequiriça' – which turns out to be an actual village deep in the Bahian Sertão, but which, in the urban setting of a candomblé temple, mainly denotes: 'deep down in the back-lands'.

Boiadeiro-spirits belong to the larger category of spirits called *caboclos* and for that reason they are sometimes called *caboclos-de-couro* (*caboclos* dressed in leather) so as to distinguish them from *caboclos-de-pena* (*caboclos* dressed in feathers). Both *boiadeiros* and *caboclos* are considered to be '*os donos da terra*', 'the masters of the land' – and they are thought to be very 'Brazilian' when compared with the foreign *Orixás*, the ancient African spirits that are worshipped in afro-Brazilian religion. The most outstanding feature of the *boiadeiros* is that they are associated with the undomesticated wilderness that is the Sertão, which in the Gestalt of the *boiadeiro* takes on highly positive values. They are considered to be freedom-loving creatures, who do not easily accept authority, and due to their lifelong wanderings through the vast open spaces of the Brazilian northeast they have developed an aversion to indoor places: their altars are usually outdoors, just as celebrations in their honour usually take place outside the temples, in make-shift shacks of palm leaves and other natural materials. Being close to nature, they have great knowledge of medicinal herbs (their healing powers are highly esteemed) and unburdened by the requirements of civilized manners they are considered to be a 'rowdy' bunch, described as cheerful (*alegre*), party-loving (*festeiros*), relaxed (*descontraídos*) and extroverted (*extravertido*) characters who love to drink wine and beer and smoke cigars and straw cigarettes. Being from the interior they do, however, maintain a very conservative morality.

Clearly then, the cult of the *boiadeiro* reveals a certain urban nostalgia for the simple ways and wisdoms of the interior, a yearning for the bucolic settings of the Sertão, for origins, roots and beginnings. In that sense, the annual journey of Dona Clarice and Dona Suzana to their sister's temple in Serrinha, compares with my trip into the Sertão. Their journey also qualifies as a chosen journey to a significant place. Underlining purposefulness is the fact that they always take the direct bus to Serrinha (needless to say Dona Clarice and Dona Suzana would not dream to ask the driver to stop the bus so they could wander off into the plains); and in their suitcase, the two women have packed the clothes in which they will be dressed when the *boiadeiro* will

possess them: leather cowboy hats and the chequered fabrics that make for a rustic country-look. Yet within the larger framework of their religious endeavour – the fact that later that night they are going to be possessed – the sense of purpose and direction ('straight to Serrinha!') is indeed to be understood as 'going some place to make things come your way'.

Possession is a script that cancels active agency on the medium's part. It is to hold your tongue. To close your eyes. To empty yourself of all your wants. And then to let yourself be possessed. To give up on yourself so as to let yourself be signified. Tellingly, in afro-Brazilian possession cults, spirit mediums are oftentimes called *cavalos*, horses, which are *montado*, mounted, by the spirits. The thunderous arrival of the *boiaderos* during celebrations in their honor are quite spectacular to witness – it is 'like a shock of 220 volts', a medium told Jocélio Teles dos Santos (1996:74). As the cowboy spirits mount their horses, the mediums spin and shake and are literally swept off their feet until the *boiadeiro* manifests itself with what is – quite literally – a primal scream.

It is tempting to believe that this is a script in which you cease to be the protagonist in a moving picture of your own making. Dona Clarice and Dona Suzana contact the world of the Sertão not by driving their horses into the nothingness, but by being the horse for the *boiadeiro* to take a ride.

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Which makes for quite a vertiginous thought. Just think of it: to be ridden by the Sertão itself, to be penetrated by an immensity *do tamanho do mundo*, to be filled up by the archetypical cowboy, to be animated by the spirit of all those endless tales of drought, hardship, poverty, violence, endurance, vitality, faith and devotion. Regrettably, I can only engage in desirous speculation as to what all of this would bring. Although I fulfilled the stipulations to access this experience in quite promising ways – all priests and adepts of *candomblé* would tell me that the *orixá* that governs my head is *Oxóssi*, the African spirit considered to be closest to the *Caboclos*; whose sacred implement is the horse-tail brush; and whose mediums are dressed with a cowboy hat and enter in a galloping dance, whereby they hold their hands in such a way as to suggest a bow-and-arrow – fact is that I have never been possessed.

I take comfort in the fact that I don't really like horses. They have expressionless faces that never betray what it is they have in mind. And they move their asses like women do, or transvestites. One of the few times I actually rode a horse was some years ago. It was with Victor, in the Chapada Diamantina, a mountain range in a more Western part of the Bahian interior. I'm not sure whether Victor is as good a horseman as his performance sought to convey, but I vividly recall that the moment he sat on that horse it looked as if he had not done otherwise ever since he was born. An impression which, more than anything, reflected the way I found myself sitting on the horse assigned to me: the tamest horse, as I had requested, was constantly harassed and bitten by the other horse, and had to trudge itself up and down the hills with me on top of it, feeling like a bag of beans.

And yet, the more significant thing to recall is that then and there in the Chapada

Diamantina, all of this was of no concern. Agile rider and bag of beans: we had fun. We laughed. It was a bright sunny day in the rainy season. There were colored snakes on the road and waterfalls ahead.

'*Felicidade se acha é em horinhas de descuido*', Guimarães Rosa once wrote. Happiness is found in little moments of disregard. The words are recited by Brazil's greatest singer, Maria Bethânia on a recent CD called 'Brasileirinho'. And then, after having spoken these words with that somewhat hoarse voice of hers, she sings the song of the Boiadeiro, the cowboy from the Sertão:

Meu Cigarro de Paia
Meu cavalo ligeiro
minha rede de malha
meu cachorro trigueiro.

My straw cigarette
My fast horse
My mesh-net hammock
My vigilant dog

Quando a manhã vem clareando
Deixo a rede balançar
No meu cavalo vou montando
Deixo o cão pra vigiar
Cendo um cigarro vez em quando
Pra me esquecer de me lembrar
Que só me falta uma bonita morena

When dawn comes to light up the skies
I leave the hammock swinging
I will mount my horse
Trusting the dog to be on guard
Lighting a cigarette every now and then
So as to forget to remember
That all that is missing for not missing
anything

Pra mais nada me faltar

Is a beautiful dark girl

What an enchanting song. There is only the slightest touch of irony in the musical arrangement of Bethânia's rendition of it – some whistling in the background, and a man shouting 'whoo-ha!', the way that only cattle-driver's in Hollywood Westerns shout 'whoo-ha!' And yet, it is exactly this irony that allows you to identify with it to the full. I guess it signals that you need not worry to find yourself indulging in trashy country & western music: Bethânia's wink that she-knows-that-you-know-that-this-is-nothing-serious-but-just-a-simple-song enables you to enjoy the music without further inhibitions. Moreover, the rhythmical strumming of the accompanying guitar, in lazy syncopation to the words, is deeply suggestive of a horseback ride in a very leisurely pace. You can't keep the upper part of your body from making the accompanying moves to the left and to the right. And you realize that this is probably as close as you'll ever come to contacting the Sertão on horseback. Listening to Bethânia, that is just fine.

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I propose a new definition for pilgrimage: *pilgrimage is going places to make things come your way*. This definition has a more balanced understanding of the revelatory journeys grouped under the label of pilgrimage in that it stresses that these journeys cannot be studied exclusively in terms of their cultural design. It seeks to foreground

the fact that pilgrimages acknowledge that ‘the network of signifiers in which we have our being is not all that there is’ and that they are indeed a provocation of that ever-present possibility that ‘*the rest of what is* may chance to break in upon us at any moment’ (Lacan, in Bowie 1991:103, italics mine).

In fact, all of this should ring a bell or two in anthropological circles. In a recent interview anthropologist Anton Blok reminded us that anthropology is exactly this: informed reflection on ‘serendipitous encounters’ provoked in fieldwork (Blok, in Sunier & Verkaaik 2005:110). Yet he also noticed just how much the idea to grant chance encounters a decisive role in our undertakings goes against all that academia wants us to be or do. ‘The current phrase ‘to leave nothing to chance’ epitomizes an entire way of life – a worldview that attributes a dominant role to the driving force of agencies to explain social events’ (ibid.).

On my way back to the Sertão I once more make up my mind: to walk and walk and walk until I loose sight of the road.

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