

# ICWA

## LETTERS

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## A Periphery in the Center of Everything

### *The Gringo Who Speaks Meets Cooperifa*

By Raphael Soifer

MARCH 2008

Wednesday nights are always standing-room only at Zé Batidão, a bar in São Paulo's Chácara Santana neighborhood in the city's burgeoning, primarily poor and working-class South Zone. People spill over each other at the bar in the back room, passing around platters of *escondidinho* (a casserole of sun-cured meat covered in a thick layer of baked cheese) and ice-cold bottles of beer. There are also *gostosinhas* (delicious little things), Zé Batidão's signature drinks, which combine the standard Brazilian *caipirinha* — lime, sugar, and cachaça — with a thick pool of honey at the bottom of a plastic cup, imparting a sugar rush that rivals the cachaça's boozy punch. From the wireless microphone in the front room, someone will hush the boisterous crowd at the bar. Sérgio Vaz reminds us that "Silêncio é uma prece!" (Silence is a prayer) before introducing the next poet from a clipboard with almost forty names. "The list is full tonight," Sérgio, leafing through the clipboard, tells those still waiting their turn. "There's no time to tell your life story. Just read your poem."

For the past five years, Zé Batidão's bar has played host to Cooperifa, a local movement whose name stands for "Cooperativa Cultural da Periferia" (The Cultural Cooperative of the Periphery). The collective, a grassroots effort, began in 2000 as a group of about five poets with a mission of promoting culture, especially literature, in the South Zone. Since then, Cooperifa has grown into one of the principal fonts of literary culture in the city. The movement's Wednesday night *sarau* (from the same root as "soirée;" a sort of open mic or informal jam session) routinely draws nearly 300 people to Zé Batidão's bar. Here, from 9 to 11 p.m. sharp (this is São Paulo, after all), the poetry in the front room flows like the beer and *gostosinhas* in the back. Regular poets range in age from 13 to 69, and their writing encompasses everything from haikus to rap to epic prose poems. Most of the poets come from Chácara Santana or neighboring regions of the South Zone, but the event draws folks from throughout São Paulo. As the group's reputation grows, the *sarau* has also become an obligatory stop for hip visitors from far beyond the city. Any given Wednesday night might include journalists from Rio de Janeiro, hip-hop stars from



Sérgio Vaz, Márcio Batista and Salles Azevedo (left to right), the ringleaders of Cooperifa's *sarau*, lead the crowd in chanting Cooperifa's mantra.

Brasília, or wandering Argentine bead workers and German punk rockers.

The exuberantly controlled chaos of a Cooperifa *sarau* came as a welcome shock when I first made it to Zé Batidão on the cold, drizzly night of July 29<sup>th</sup>. After a bus ride from the downtown Praça da Sé — nearly two hours of rush-hour traffic and standing-room-only silence — I managed to find the right stop. Once off the bus, I hiked three minutes up the steep incline into Chácara Santana, and followed the sound of applause to the gleaming, whitewashed bar. It was 9:30, half an hour after the rigidly enforced starting time, and the bar was already overflowing. A sizeable crowd huddled near the entrance, trying to stay dry. I was feeling too shy to venture through all the unfamiliar bodies to get the bar, so I settled in under the awning. The poets were hot that night, each one better than the last, and I was swept up in the spirit of the place. Toward the end of the *sarau*, Dugueto Shabazz, a locally renowned hip-hop artist, strode up to the mic and soon had the crowd on its feet. I joined the rest of the audience in chanting the chorus of a fiery poem urging a return to Palmares, Brazil's most famous *quilombo* (a community of escaped slaves and their descendants):

*Mesmo se eu tenha que cruzar terras e mares...*  
EU VOU PRA PALMARES! EU VOU PRA PALMARES!  
*Mesmo que, no caminho, me sangrem os calcanhares...*  
EU VOU PRA PALMARES! EU VOU PRA PALMARES!  
*Mesmo que os inimigos contra nós sejam milhares....*  
EU VOU PRA PALMARES! EU VOU PRA PALMARES!

Even if I have to cross lands and seas...  
I'M GOING TO PALMARES! I'M GOING TO PALMARES!  
Even if, on the path, my heels bleed...  
I'M GOING TO PALMARES! I'M GOING TO PALMARES!  
Even if there are millions of enemies against us...  
I'M GOING TO PALMARES! I'M GOING TO PALMARES!

I'd been in São Paulo for a couple of months by the time I made it to Cooperifa, and I still felt lost in the city. I'd hung out with some theatre groups, taken advantage of my ICWA budget to go to whatever plays, movies, and concerts sounded intriguing, and embarked on plenty of tenuous explorations of downtown and the chic West Zone, all without feeling like I'd gotten to know São Paulo, to understand it, or to feel at home in it. I wasn't immediately at ease when I made it to Cooperifa, but for the first time, I sensed that I had found a key to the city. On my first Wednesday night at Zé Batidão, I felt São Paulo opening to me, however slightly. By the time I left the city five months later, I felt that, through Cooperifa, I'd been

able to open myself to São Paulo.

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Chácara Santana, where Zé Batidão's bar is located, is in the heart of São Paulo's periphery. Paulistanos who live in the periphery, especially young men, use a *quebrada* — literally, "the broken" — to reference their neighborhoods and the periphery as a whole. Kennya, a local rap artist and long-time participant in Cooperifa's *saraus*, told me that the word came from the beginning of São Paulo's population boom in the 1940s and 50s, when the periphery was a mixture of city and country, largely a collection of disordered shacks. *Quebrada*, Kennya said, was first used by outsiders to disparage the broken-down lives of the poor, but it has long since been reclaimed and taken a place of pride and defiance in local slang.



Jairo Rodrigues, a taxi driver and founder of the rap ensemble Periafricana, holds forth at Music Night during Modern Art Week in the Periphery.

São Paulo's South Zone has long been the most troubled area of the city. A 2000 United Nations report named the sub-district of M'Boi Mirim, which includes Chácara Santana, as the most violent urban region in the world for that year. São Paulo's drug trade is rampant in the South Zone, based around one powerful central cartel (PCC, the First Command of the Capital, mentioned in RS-3) and several smaller gangs, all of whom are quick to resort to violence to claim new turf or to get back at debtors or rivals. The city's Military Police are also notoriously brutal, and often even less discriminating than the gangs in terrorizing poor communities. After the PCC coordinated attacks in May 2006 that effectively paralyzed São Paulo's downtown, cops went on killing sprees throughout the periphery. Officially, police raids killed around 50 people, all connected to the cartel. According to community activists, the number was closer to 600, mostly black men in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In the midst of the violence of the South Zone, Cooperifa's *sarau* provides an outlet of expression, a chance for participants to unite through honest, unflinching visions of life in the periphery. Cooperifa is closely linked to São Paulo's hip-hop movement, which has long been

at the forefront of cultural resistance in the South Zone. Racionais MCs, South Zone residents who are by far the most influential rap group in Brazil, sold over a million copies of their 1998 album entitled *Sobrevivendo No Inferno* — Surviving in Hell. In one track, “Periferia é Periferia,” the group summons images of kids sleeping while their older siblings smoke crack on the street. Meanwhile, mothers work “360 days a year” to support their families, living in a place where “I’ve seen too many tears/enough for a war movie.” The song’s refrain laments:

*Aqui, a visão já não é tão bela.  
Existe outro lugar?  
Periferia é periferia...*

*Muita pobreza, estoura violência  
Nossa raça está morrendo/Não me diga que está tudo bem.*

Here, the vision is not that pretty  
Is there anywhere else?  
A periphery is a periphery...

Lots of poverty, torn apart by violence  
Our race is dying / Don’t tell me everything’s fine.

The kind of despair in “Periferia é Periferia” has long characterized insiders’ representations of the periphery. In 1960, Carolina Maria de Jesus — a trash-collector and single mother who taught herself to read — published *Quarto de Despejo: Diário de um Favelado* (published in English as “Child of the Dark”). De Jesus’ book, the first text to chronicle life in the *quebrada* from the inside, ends with Carolina and family leaving the favela in a horse-drawn cart en route to a new life in a middle-class neighborhood, while their neighbors look on, cheering, jeering, or shocked into silence. The book’s happy ending reflects a vision, still pervasive throughout São Paulo, that leaving the *quebrada* behind is the key to success.

Though many of Cooperifa’s authors cite *Quarto de Despejo* as the book that inspired them to begin writing, the movement has a different vision of success in the periphery. Sérgio Vaz, the group’s founder, urges Wednesday night audiences to “change the periphery without moving away from it.” In a city where the vast majority of cultural resources like bookstores, theatres, and art galleries are clustered around downtown and the West Zone, Cooperifa is part of a growing movement to create cultural institutions in the periphery, using whatever locations are available. In a radio interview, Sérgio spells out the simple vision that led to the Wednesday night crowds in Zé Batidão: “The only public space we have [in the periphery] is the bar, so let’s use the bar as a cultural center.”

Sérgio readily admits to being envious of much of the West Zone. “I want what they have,” he said this past November during Cooperifa’s first “Modern Art Week in the Periphery”. “Big houses, trees, universities.

I want to celebrate my neighborhood’s birthday, like they do in Vila Madalena,” an upmarket, artsy enclave in the middle of the West Zone. Vila Madalena’s celebration, a giant block party held every August, draws folks from throughout the city. Cooperifa manages the same feat every Wednesday. The group has led *saraus* at São Paulo’s City Hall, in the heart of the city’s downtown, as well as sessions in neighborhoods throughout the city. With each venture outward, and with each newcomer who winds up in Zé Batidão on a Wednesday night, Cooperifa is moving closer to Sérgio’s vision of creating a “periphery, united, in the center of everything.”

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Though Sérgio imagines a periphery with the trees, big houses, and public universities of the West Zone, he doesn’t hope to transform the periphery into a clone of São Paulo’s middle-class neighborhoods. By holding the Wednesday night *sarau* at Ze Batidão — recognizing the centrality of the bar in the life of its neighborhood — Cooperifa celebrates the traditional social structure of the periphery. But Sérgio’s not afraid to take on orthodoxies at any level of Brazilian society. When he opens the *sarau* at the beginning of each Wednesday night, he’ll walk the crowd through upcoming events, and firmly remind us of the importance of what we’re doing. Wednesday nights start at 9 p.m. sharp, and Sérgio loves to point out that we’ve all come out — usually in the rain — for poetry, instead of sitting at home in front of the TV, tuned into yet another *novela*.

He’s especially thrilled when the *sarau* takes on a bigger competing event and still succeeds in drawing a huge crowd. On November 21, the *seleção* (national football team) hosted Uruguay in São Paulo’s Morumbi stadium, leaving the city’s traffic even worse than usual. Sérgio grinned as he welcomed us. “It’s 9 o’clock,” he began, “and instead of the football game, we’re here watching poetry. And that’s good, because the *seleção* can’t win.” It’s a testament to Sérgio’s charisma that Cooperifa managed to gather almost 300 people on the night of such a major football game, but it’s astonishing to watch anyone in



Sérgio Vaz multi-tasking for yet another packed house.



Brazil diss the *seleção* like that without being chased out of the room, or even being boo'd. (Brazil won that night, but the press eviscerated the team for playing an ugly game, which seemed to vindicate Sérgio).

Sérgio's opening statements frequently take on a sharply political tone, like the night he led a group of poets in a Portuguese translation of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, reminding the crowd of the forces of racism still alive and well in São Paulo. He often refers to Cooperifa as the "movimento sem-palco" (the stage-less movement), an expression of solidarity with national rural and urban landless workers' movements. Sérgio's politics are intertwined with his sense of humor, and with his talent for mass mobilization. For the past five years, on International Women's day, he's gotten all the male audience members in the *sarau* on their knees, groveling and begging Cooperifa's women to forgive all of the past year's sexist blunders.

Each *sarau* begins with Sérgio, usually jumping up and down, leading the crowd in shouting Cooperifa's mantra:

*Povo lindo!*  
*Povo inteligente!*  
*É tudo nosso, tudo nosso, tudo nosso!*

Beautiful people!  
 Intelligent people!  
 It's all ours, all ours, all ours!

"Tudo nosso" is a common refrain in popular movements throughout Brazil, and in Cooperifa's case, it's especially revealing of the group's power. São Paulo abounds with NGOs that aim to create opportunities



*Thadeu Zuco, 13, the youngest regular sarau participant, shows his stuff.*

in the periphery by importing West Zone culture to the South Zone. Many of these groups create noteworthy results, but almost all rely on outsiders — usually white folks, and frequently foreigners — teaching limited vocabulary to locals, who are usually dark-skinned. In contrast, the largest *sarau* in São Paulo is by and for the South Zone community. Outsiders are welcome, as long they arrive without pretension and condescension.

As soon as I'd made my way to Cooperifa, I knew I wanted in. I was struck both by the sense of the *sarau*'s importance in Chácara Santana, and by how representative it was of the region's diversity. More to the point, I fell in love with the poetry, with the exuberance at the bar in the back room that Sérgio, Márcio, or Salles (his right-hand men and fellow hosts) have to shush every five minutes or so. ("We're the most annoying, well-behaved *sarau* in São Paulo, and we want to stay that way," Sérgio explains. "Silence is a prayer!")



*Sérgio rabble-rousing at Modern Art Week in the periphery as Jaír Guilherme, a painter and Cooperifa poet, looks on.*

I'd already worked at an international NGO in Brazil by the time I arrived in São Paulo, and had come quickly to recognize the limits not so much of what, but of how I could contribute here. I found that my insights were frequently welcome, as long as I didn't assume that they provided a complete solution. As an outsider, my ignorance of what was going on at ground level was always at least as significant as any expertise — artistic or otherwise — I had to offer. I spent my first month at Cooperifa as a wallflower, soaking up the vibe and shouting the opening mantra along with about 299 other folks, most of whom I still hadn't met. After each *sarau*, and for most of the week leading up to the next one, I would go home to Pinheiros, in the West Zone, to struggle

over a notebook, trying to figure out not only what I wanted to say, but how to say it in Portuguese.

I realized eventually that hanging out near my apartment made it harder to think exclusively in Portuguese. The visual landscape of the neighborhood is heavily Anglophonic. The hip boutiques along Oscar Freire in neighboring Jardins, about a five minute walk from my house, almost all had names in English (many are owned by international companies), and preferred to advertise a “Sale” to a “Liquidação.” The newly constructed condos throughout the West Zone, outfitted with high walls, electric fences, and armed guards hidden discretely behind smoked glass windows, advertised themselves as “special residence place(s),” or guaranteed a “happy fun time.” Even when I went out to hip-hop shows downtown or in the periphery, one of the rappers would inevitably shout into the mic that the group was “in the house.” The English didn’t always make sense, but it was inescapable. It also wasn’t doing me any favors, either in the Portuguese poems I was trying to craft, or in the ICWA newsletter that was a mess, and several weeks late.

Ultimately, I decided to put the linguistic struggle to use. At the last *sarau* in August, I showed up early, and finally got the nerve to put my name on the list about 10 minutes after the session began. There was no guarantee I’d get to read, Márcio told me — the list was very full that night — but he called my name with about 15 minutes remaining. I made my way up to the mic, introduced myself as an American poet trying out my first verse in Portuguese, and began:

*eu estou tentando escapar dos idiomas!  
estou tentando fugir das linguas!*

*i’m trying to escape from languages!  
i’m trying to run away from tongues!*

My first poem, “A Puta Lingua Mãe Que me Pariu” (“The Whore-Mother Tongue that Birthed Me,” which makes a bit more sense in Portuguese), was my attempt to explore the linguistic conquest that’s a natural outgrowth of the Ameri-



*Seu Lourival, a migrant from the northeastern state of Bahia, At 69, he is the sarau’s oldest regular poet.*

canization of São Paulo. Much of the city seems to believe automatically and unquestioningly in the sophistication and superiority of anything that comes from the United States. These exports range from pop music and shopping mall culture to sensationalist TV programs that re-run clips from shows like “Cops,” assuring viewers that, “This is what happens in places where the law works,” as an all-white SWAT team somewhere in Texas flips a Latino man over the hood of his car and cuffs him. It pissed me off, I explained, to see my native tongue and personal frame of reference plastered all over storefronts as a cheap shortcut for hipness, and to hear it every day in lamentably awful songs on the radio, or in clips of George Bush’s speeches on the nightly news.

*uma lingua não nasce pra conquistar  
uma lingua é pra saborear, para sentir, para guiar*

*a tongue isn’t born to conquer  
a tongue is to taste, to feel, to guide...*

“A Puta Lingua Mãe Que me Pariu” didn’t bring down the house, exactly, but it got a very warm round of applause. More importantly, it left me with the gratifying feeling that, at least in Chácara Santana, there were *paulistanos* interested in what I had to say. That night, Rose, one of the *sarau*’s earliest participants who’s known as “the Muse of Cooperifa,” welcomed me, and said that she liked my accent, which I’d disparaged in the poem. Mavot Sirc, a long-time Cooperifa member who shows up each week in a different Pink Floyd t-shirt, came up to congratulate me. Mavot assured me that even though he hated the Bush government, he held no grudges against the American people. “I’m the most American guy you’ll ever meet here,” he told me in what would become a repeated motif in our conversations. “You want to eat a *churrasco grego*?” (a mystery meat sandwich; literally, a “Greek barbeque.”). “That’s your problem — I’m going



*Rose, “the muse of Cooperifa,” in action.*



to McDonald's. You want to listen to samba? That's your problem — I'm going to listen to Pink Floyd!"

My major breakthrough came a few weeks and a couple poems later, when I was finally ready to premiere "O Gringo Que Fala" (The Gringo Who Speaks), my first attempt at a rap in Portuguese. I asked the crowd to bear with me, and solicited their help in the chorus, which requires audience participation.

*Eu sou assim...*  
**O GRINGO QUE FALA!**

That's the way I am...  
**THE GRINGO WHO SPEAKS!**

And off we went. The rap was, in some ways, a tighter, more polished version of my first poem, a love letter to Brazil. Riffing off of Mavot Sirc's welcome, it was also a reminder that plenty of Americans are not in lockstep with the Bush administration, or with our country's history of meddling in South America's affairs.

*Tem gringo que mexe na vida dos outros  
Tem gringo que rouba o que deve ser nosso  
Tem corporação, que é gringo sem rosto  
Mas tem outro tipo, em carne e osso*

*Já sei falar, eu não olho pra trás  
Também sei escutar, o que vale bem mais*

There are gringos who mess in the lives of others  
There are gringos who rob what must be ours  
There are corporations, which are gringos without faces  
But there's another type, in flesh and blood.

I already know how to talk — I'm not looking back  
I also know how to listen, which is worth much more...

This time, the house came down, the city opened up, and several other untranslatable English idioms occurred all at the same time. What felt like at least half of the *sarau* introduced itself to me that night, and I went

*Me, taking  
the mic at  
Zé Batidão.  
Photo  
courtesy of  
Vicentinho*



*Mavot Sirc rippin' it up.*

home feeling triumphant. The baffling part, though, was seeing over the course of the next week exactly how broad Cooperifa's reach was. A few bites into my lunch at a non-descript downtown restaurant the next day, a group of people sat down next to me. "Hey — it's *o gringo que fala!*" They were City Hall employees who had been at the *sarau* the night before, and we spent the next half hour discussing popular movements and going over conspiracy theories. A few nights later, as I caught the last bus heading south from Praça Roosevelt, a voice from the back called out "Hey, gringo!" before I'd even made it through the turnstile in the front. There was Kenya with a group of friends, who asked me to do a couple verses in the five minutes before we reached my stop.

A couple of weeks later, I showed up nearly an hour late on Wednesday night. Sure that the list was already full, I shuffled to the bar at the back, where several of the friends I'd made since first presenting "Gringo Que Fala" were already waiting with beers. The *sarau* ended about 15 minutes early, and Sérgio came up to me soon afterward. "Why weren't you on the list, gringo?" he asked me. I explained that I didn't want to be presumptuous after showing up so late. Sérgio looked at me a little sternly. "Whenever you come to the *sarau*, you put your name on the list. We want to hear your poetry. We want to hear what you have to say."

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On Wednesday, November 11, at least 500 people



Allan da Rosa plays berimbau and recites during the Literature Night sarau at Modern Art Week in the Periphery. Allan is the founder of Edições Toró, an independent publisher with a focus on poetry from the periphery. Toró has published over a dozen authors, many of them Cooperifa members.

mobbed Zé Batidão, with the excess spilling out the entrance toward the nearby praça. In the bar's large front room, fancy lights and paper cut-outs decorated the walls; kites hung from overhead; and books and hand-drawn pamphlets dangled from the ceiling, updating the north-eastern Brazilian tradition of *literatura de cordel* ("cord literature;" *cordeis*, in the plural). *Cordeis* are inexpensive pamphlets, filled with rhyming verses, that hang from chords at booksellers' stalls. At Zé Batidão, the *cordeis* included lyrics from national hip-hop artists, as well as the work of several poets in attendance. Those who got to Zé Batidão early sat at the bar's plastic tables, while the rest of us crammed together by the smoky glass sliding doors that divide the bar from the main room, craning our necks so as not to miss any of the action unfolding at the front. The poetry started an hour early, at 8 o'clock, and kept going long past 2 a.m., with each apparent climax—the premiere of a video clip; Márcio's Batista's signature poem, recited by different poets from different corners of the room; and several *a capella* songs that had the entire bar dancing — followed by something even bigger.

November 11 was "literature night" during Modern Art Week in the Periphery. The event was modeled on 1922's Modern Art Week, a modernist extravaganza for members of São Paulo's elite. The first Modern Art Week was organized by a small group of white, mostly European-educated writers and artists like Mario and Oswald de Andrade, and was based at the gilded Municipal Theatre in the city's downtown. Cooperifa's version, which united over 200 artists from throughout the city, took place in locations throughout the South Zone,



Looking out from the entrance to the inaugural visual arts exhibit at Modern Art Week in the Periphery. The opening was held in an abandoned municipal market, where a coalition of local groups, including Cooperifa, has recently begun coordinating events.



including an abandoned public market building for which Cooperifa had recently gained the lease. Planning began months in advance, with Monday night meetings at Zé Batidão. True to Cooperifa form, anyone who wanted to participate became a de facto member of the planning committee, and I eventually made my way into the group coordinating a full day of theatre.

Each day of Modern Art Week began with a reading of Sérgio's "Peripheric Anthropofagy" manifesto. ("Anthropofagy" was the theme of Cooperifa's Modern Art Week. Also a central conceit for 1922's modernists, it refers to the — usually metaphorical — practice of cultural absorption through cannibalism). Sérgio, speaking for the movement, lashed out:

Against the art patronized by those who stifle the freedom of choice.

Against the art manufactured to destroy the critical sense, emotion, and sensibility born out of multiple choices.

The art that liberates cannot come from the hand that enslaves.

The manifesto ended with Sérgio's hope for a "periphery that unites us in love, pain, and color," followed by the *sarau's* refrain: "É tudo nosso!" That sentiment — it's all ours! — echoed through each day of Modern Art

Week. During a planning meeting in late October, Sérgio emphasized the importance of advertising the event city wide, but also of keeping the focus on the periphery, on Cooperifa's public. As the week went on, I was moved to see how expansive Cooperifa's vision of the periphery was. Cooperifa members came up to me at every event I came to, thanking me for my participation, and letting me know that I was part of this "tudo nosso".

Modern Art Week in the Periphery showcased this generosity of vision. The week was divided by genre, with each day devoted to a different art form: visual arts, dance, literature, cinema, theatre and music. Although several common themes emerged from the artistic smorgasbord — such as Black pride, fusions of folk (especially Northeastern) and contemporary traditions, and numerous calls for better investment in the periphery — Modern Art Week's most powerful effect was to show how diverse and sometimes divergent manifestations of "peripheral culture" are. José Neto, a longtime *sarau* participant, puts it succinctly in his most popular poem:

*Sou da periferia e daí?*

I'm from the periphery — so what?

Ultimately, the week — like most of Cooperifa's work — served to show that there's no such thing as "peripheric art." Instead, there is a community of art-



*Zé Batidão's on Literature Night.*





*"Caboclo punk," a fashion piece mixing traditional northeastern motifs with punk rock aesthetics at Visual Arts Day during Modern Art Week in the Periphery*

ists who are keenly aware of the *quebrada's* position in the city's social structure, and who are unwilling to be pigeonholed by it.

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On Wednesday, December 12, Zé Batidão was stuffed beyond capacity yet again for the final Cooperifa event of 2007 (though not the final *sarau*, which was held the week before). For the third consecutive year, the group held an awards ceremony "for all those who, directly or indirectly, help transform the periphery into a better place to live." The regulars were almost all there, as were family members, journalists, and award-winning authors who rarely make it to the *sarau*. Much of São Paulo's hip-hop cognoscetti was also out in force (Mano Brown, the founder of Racionais MCs, huddled under the awning for about an hour). A table at the front, under the white-and-red plastic sign reminding us that "Silence is a prayer," was covered with over a hundred bronze and copper statues of a bearded figure holding a sword high in the air and a book in his left hand. This was "Don Quixote de la Perifa" (Don Quixote of the Periphery, in fake Spanish), the trophy for this year's awardees.

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The trophies go to some famous activists, rap artists, and reporters, but most are destined for poets from the *sarau*. I was on the list, scheduled to get one of them, the first time a gringo received a Cooperifa award. The awards, Sérgio says, are the Oscars of the periphery; if Hollywood actors get their own night of celebration and elegies, shouldn't we?

The commute from my West Zone apartment to Chácara Santana was always a pain. As a general rule, it took me 15 minutes longer than I'd allotted myself to get to the *sarau*, whether I left the house at 6:30 or 8 o'clock. For the awards ceremony, I caught the subway earlier than ever before, but when I transferred to a bus at the end of the line, the skies opened, and the crowded, sweltering ride took almost an hour longer than usual. At least I wasn't alone: as we began to pull out of the bus stop at Jabaquara station, I noticed Robson, a community organizer and Cooperifa poet, calling Zé Batidão on his cell phone. "Traffic's terrible, but I'm on my way," he said. "And the gringo's here, too."

Zé Batidão was already packed by the time Robson and I made it up the hill, and Sérgio was in rare form. "Forgive our errors," he said. "We're not a perfect movement — we make mistakes. So we want to apologize to anyone we've offended this year, and invite them back next year, when we'll make the same mistakes all over again!" Reflecting on Cooperifa since leaving São Paulo, I realize that this is one of the most important factors distinguishing Cooperifa from other arts groups. The movement never claims to be perfect, and never endeavors to speak for the periphery as a whole. It is first and foremost a literary movement that encourages its members, wherever they're from, to speak up, and to represent themselves honestly.

When Márcio called me to the front of the room to receive my award, he led the crowd in the opening lines of the rap that brought me into Cooperifa:

*Eu sou assim...*

*O gringo que fala!*

That's how I am...

The gringo who speaks!

Rose, "the muse of Cooperifa," presented me with my trophy and a huge hug. In my acceptance speech, I tried to explain how being part of the movement helped me grow as an artist, and had made me feel at home in São Paulo. Hours later, as I got ready to leave after an uncountable number of beers and *gostinhos*, I realized that my trophy wasn't where I left it. Some other poets chided me for thinking that anywhere in São Paulo, even Zé Batidão on a Wednesday night, could be a safe place to leave something so important lying around. After a panicked search, I found the trophy with Sérgio, who'd been hanging on to it for an hour since another poet brought it to him, saying that someone had lost it. I apologized to Seu Zé, the



*Barbara and Lila open Literature Night performing Sérgio's Peripheric Anthropofagy Manifesto.*



*Receiving my Don Quixote de la Perifa trophy from Cooperifa's year-end awards ceremony. Photo courtesy of Ricarda*





*Sérgio, flanked by sarau veterans, gives the closing remarks at the awards ceremony.*

bar owner, for even insinuating that something like that could go wrong in his bar. It may be that nothing is ever completely safe in São Paulo, but Cooperifa tends to be an exception to the city's rules.

When Sérgio Haddad, the head of a local NGO with close ties to Cooperifa, accepted his "Don Quixote de la Perifa" trophy, he told the crowd that, of all the accolades he's received, this was the most important. "Other awards," he said, "are made to divide people, to create a special group above the rest." A Cooperifa trophy, on the other hand, "shows that you're a part of a community, of something bigger than yourself." Cooperifa continues to expand its vision of community, holding

saraus throughout greater São Paulo, leading outreach programs in public schools in the South Zone, and constructing a small community library in the back corner of Zé Batidão's bar. The movement shows no signs of slowing down: Sérgio's first poetry collection, *Colecionador de Pedras* (Collector of Stones), was published nationally last year as part of the first-ever "Peripheric Literature" collection in Brazil, and other Cooperifa authors are slated to publish as part of the same series within the next several months. Zé Batidão grows more crowded every week, with new poets (especially adolescents) reading their work for the first time. Out of a simple bar in the periphery, Cooperifa is fast becoming São Paulo's literary epicenter. □

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## Current ICWA Fellows

### Elena Agarkova • RUSSIA • May 2008 - 2010

Elena will be living in Siberia, studying management of natural resources and the relationship between Siberia's natural riches and its people. Previously, Elena was a Legal Fellow at the University of Washington's School of Law, at the Berman Environmental Law Clinic. She has clerked for Honorable Cynthia M. Rufe of the federal district court in Philadelphia, and has practiced commercial litigation at the New York office of Milbank, Tweed, Hadley & McCloy LLP. Elena was born in Moscow, Russia, and has volunteered for environmental non-profits in the Lake Baikal region of Siberia. She graduated from Georgetown University Law Center in 2001, and has received a bachelor's degree in political science from Barnard College.

### Ezra Fieser • GUATEMALA • January 2008 - 2010

Ezra is interested in economic and political changes in Central America. He is an ICWA fellow living in Guatemala where he will write about the country's rapidly changing economic structure and the effects on its politics, culture and people. He was formerly the deputy city editor for *The* (Wilmington, Del.) *News Journal*, a staff writer for *Springfield* (Mass.) *Republican* and a Pulliam Fellow at *The Arizona Republic*. He is a graduate of Emerson College in Boston.

### Suzy Hansen • TURKEY • April 2007 - 2009

A John O. Crane Memorial Fellow, Suzy will be writing about politics and religion in Turkey. A former editor at the *New York Observer*, her work has also appeared in *Salon*, the *New York Times Book Review*, the *Nation*, and other publications. She graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1999.

### Derek Mitchell • INDIA • September 2007 - 2009

As a Phillips Talbot Fellow, Derek will explore the impact of global trade and economic growth on Indians living in poverty. He has served for the past year as a volunteer for Swaraj Peeth, an institute in New Delhi dedicated to nonviolent conflict resolution and Mahatma Gandhi's thought. Previously he was a Fulbright scholar in India at the Gandhi Peace Foundation. He has coordinated foreign policy research at George Washington University's Institute for Communitarian Policy Studies and worked as a political organizer in New Hampshire. Derek graduated with a degree in religion from Columbia University.

### Raphael Soifer • BRAZIL • April 2007-2009

An actor, director, playwright, musician and theatre educator, Raphi Soifer is a Donors' Fellow studying, as a participant and observer, the relationship between the arts and social change in communities throughout Brazil. He has worked as a performer and director in the United States and Brazil, and has taught performance to prisoners and underprivileged youth through People's Palace Projects in Rio de Janeiro and Community Works in San Francisco. He holds a bachelor's degree in Theatre Studies and Anthropology from Yale University.

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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