I. The Borders of the Avant-Garde
“Not Reactionary, Just Late”: The Case for Ariano Suassuna as Brazilian Modernist

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Abstract: Ariano Suassuna (b. 1927) is a controversial figure in contemporary Brazilian culture. His work as a playwright, poet, novelist, professor, and secretary of culture has established him as the voice of northeastern Brazil and a “warrior” in defense of Brazilian vernacular traditions. While critics have followed Suassuna’s own lead in excluding his aesthetics and cultural politics from the multiple currents of Brazilian modernism, this essay argues for reconsideration of Suassuna as a late modernist. Specifically, it examines the temporal frameworks and valorizations Suassuna employs in his refashioning of folk traditions to categorize his work as an example of the primitivist strain in modernism. This approach allows for a better understanding of the critical role tradition plays within Brazilian modernism. More complexly, it also reveals the connection between the flaws inherent to the primitivist gesture and the tensions, contradictions, and imbalances within the wider experience of Brazilian modernity.

Detesto aquilo que se chama ‘arte de vanguarda.’ Não dá dois anos, a arte de vanguarda vira retroguarda.
(Suassuna 1962: 483)¹

I hate what is called ‘vanguard art.’ Barely two years go by, and vanguard art becomes rearguard.

For those familiar with Brazilian literature and culture, the idea of including Ariano Suassuna in a consideration of the popular avant-garde may appear discordant or even downright absurd. Yet the example of Suassuna highlights the apparent paradox that results from the union of the terms “popular” and “avant-garde” and demonstrates the way in which a staunch alignment with the popular can preclude easy identification with cultural modernism—let alone the avant-garde. Suassuna himself has effectively barred his reception as a modernist by vociferously rejecting this categorization (1973: 15). Seeking to differentiate his work from the modernist currents