

DUAS CASAS: A CREATIVE-CRITICAL COMMENTARY ON ROMEO AND JULIET

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Abstract

Adaptations created in pedagogical contexts are creative-critical commentaries which produce concepts about adaptational relations unavailable through traditional academic works. The aim of this article is to describe and analyze the short film *Duas casas*, a creative-critical commentary on *Romeo and Juliet* produced in a pedagogical context. After presenting the production's context and describing the fourteen-minute film, the article will analyze the short film's cultural and social significance by approaching the discussion through Huang's concept of cultural location. In conclusion, producing creative-critical commentaries legitimate readers to appropriate the text dealing with it as a living organism, persistently being revisited and recreated.

Keywords: Adaptation; Romeo and Juliet; Cultural Location

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The field of Adaptation Studies has become increasingly popular since the 1960s and it is commonly acknowledged to have originated from literature on screen criticism. For some time, the field's main concern dealt with the degrees of faithfulness to the source text (source-text oriented approach). However, issues such as the relationship to a variety of media adaptation formats besides film, multilevel relationship, transcultural transformation and the dialogic process, and the question of how to use adaptation creatively and effectively in the classroom have been recently and increasingly discussed by adaptation scholars such as Jørgen Bruhn, Kamilla Elliott, Lars Elleström, Thomas Leitch, Dennis Cutchins and Lawrence Raw, among others. Most importantly, since the 1990s, the field has acknowledged a target-oriented approach (adaptation as end product), thus, allowing adaptation to be perceived as an autonomous cultural product, i.e., looking at adaptation *as adaptation* (Hutcheon 21).

Although an adaptation is a repetition, repetition is not analogous to copying. The popularity of literary adaptation in the film industry can manifest several intentions, address different target publics and utilize different media. This transcodification can involve a change in medium, an alteration in genre, or a shift in context. "Whatever the motive, from the adapter's perspective, adaptation is an act of appropriation or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new" (Hutcheon 20). In other words, the novelty is not in the material itself, but in what will be *done* with it.

Shakespeare's works have been an endless source of inspiration for adaptations in different cultures and media across centuries. Each generation adapts Shakespeare's works as they wish, projecting their own anxieties and desires onto them. For instance, the Broadway adaptation *West Side Story* relocates the story of Romeo and Juliet in the 1950s New York, highlighting the issue of racial prejudice against Puerto Ricans, through the Jets versus Sharks rivalry. In Michael Almereyda's adaptation of *Hamlet* to the cinema in 2000, the prince of Denmark is transported to contemporary New York. In this version, Hamlet is the heir of his father's empire, the Denmark Corporation. Other examples are the adaptations of his works to teenage audiences, such as *O* (2001), placing Othello in an almost exclusively white boarding school, and *10 Things I hate about you* (1999), a version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, which is set in a traditional American high school and addresses bullying among teenagers.

Therefore, the availability of Shakespearean works for rewriting "means that they are texts constantly in flux, constantly metamorphosing in the process of adaptation and retelling" (Sanders 62). As a result, Shakespearean archetypes are reinforced by frequently reappearing in diverse cultural contexts, enduring across cultural and historical boundaries. The new frontier when it comes to adaptations is the immersive World Wide Web. Certainly, Web 3.0 and its social networks have been expanding new ways of interaction and communication while providing new forms of expression. How will the Bard be adapted in the New Media age?

New media is developing user-generated content based on Shakespeare's works. The blog *BardBox*, created by Luke McKernan, a media historian who is

the lead curator of news and moving images at the British Library, has taken the step of looking at the thousands of Shakespeare-related videos posted on sites like YouTube and Vimeo. The website, which archives videos from May 2008 to September 2012, contains an incredible ten thousand videos available on the web related to Shakespeare's works. It includes animations, parodies, recitations, auditions, promos for theatre production, amateur records of stage productions, student works, school productions, mashups, and more. The emergence of video hosting sites and the spread of broadband have led to an explosion in Shakespeare video production and distribution online.

Indeed, user-generated content websites, social networking and interactive sharing have promoted an unprecedented revolution in the way we experience the world. Thus, the persistent prominence of Shakespeare's work continuously being adapted to different media not only reveals the impact of digital culture in our sense of drama, but also expands and alters the practice of research and our understanding of Shakespearean drama itself (Worthen 229-230). The decentering of Shakespeare and the contemporary adaptations focused on local value in various cultures worldwide have been raising questions that are not exactly about Shakespeare. Instead, they point to questions about the adaptation itself.

In the face of these technological innovations, readers become writers and adapt Shakespeare's work to their own socio-cultural context. This is the premise of this paper's object of analysis: the short film adaptation *Duas casas*. The docufiction, created by young students from two at-risk communities under the supervision of undergraduate students from Universidade Federal do Pampa (UNIPAMPA), was motivated by the context itself and by the people making the adaptation. The fact that *Romeo and Juliet* was chosen as inspiration for this enterprise was no coincidence. The communities involved in the making of the film present a history of clashes and struggles, demonstrating a sort of Montague-Capulet brawl. Hence, adapting Shakespeare's fictional material was a way of telling their own story and promoting individual and collective identity awareness.

In fact, the result was a creative-critical commentary. According to Kamilla Elliot, when "doing adaptations", adaptors create a critical commentary, which produces concepts about adaptational relations unavailable through the thesis-argument-conclusion structure of traditional academic works. Furthermore, Elliot points out, "every movement between forms or media can be an act of theorization 'about' intermedial relations" (37), including creative responses to theories or methodologies through the construction of new stories in different media. Elliot believes that "adaptations need to talk, write, film, dance, sculpt, game, compose, costume, photograph and computer program (etc.) back to the theories that have colonized them" (37) in order to produce concepts that are unavailable through the structure of academic essays. *Duas casas* provides a contextualized critical commentary and accesses the star-crossed lovers' story creatively.

The production's context

The object of study of this paper is the short film *Duas casas*. The adaptation was produced by a group of students and collaborators within an extension project, called *GLADs – Gêneros Literários em Ambientes Digitais* (Literary Genres in Digital Environments), at Universidade Federal do Pampa (UNIPAMPA) in Bagé, a city in the very south of Brazil. UNIPAMPA in Bagé is located far from the city center, in a rural area between the districts of Malafaia and Ivo Ferronato, where we lay our scene. It is a low-income area that has received more public attention after the university started its activities in 2008. Although the university has been established in the region for ten years, it is still an economic underdeveloped area with practically no shops, industrial properties or offices. Most families lead a very simple life cultivating their food in their own backyards or buying and trading from and with neighbors. Many parents work in shops in the city center while their children go to the schools around the neighborhood.

There is no written material about the history of the neighborhoods, but in oral interviews registered in the film (which will be further described below) we can point out some important facts. According to the dwellers, Malafaia was populated around the 1980s and it was said to be a strictly horticultural area with few houses, while Ivo Ferronato was created to become a housing development in 1992 but ended up being invaded/occupied by the homeless. According to Jandir Paim, chairman of Ivo Ferronato resident's association, Ivo Ferronato was supposed to be a governmental housing project but because the prices were so high, people signed up but could not afford the houses. Therefore, in 1994 the population decided to occupy the houses that at this point were already deteriorating. Later in the film, Ivo Ferronato's dwellers describe the difficulties of living in a place with no infrastructure whatsoever and having to fight for basic living conditions. The dichotomy "invasion versus occupation" is what calls most attention in the dwellers' speech throughout the film.

The subjects involved in the adaptation process were students, ranging from 13 to 15, from both schools in the two neighborhoods, EMEF Professora Creusa Brito Giorgis in Ivo Ferronato and EMEF Peri Coronel in Malafaia, formed a single group in order to adapt *Romeo and Juliet* closer to their reality and to make sense of Shakespeare in the pampa gaucho.

Two English major students were responsible for the group and created the lessons which later would lead to the adaptation. In addition, volunteer collaborators from different areas such as cinema, design, photography, fashion, dance and advertising performed short workshops for the students and helped developing the project as a whole. The literary sources used in the process of adaptation were four versions translated to Portuguese by Elvio Funck in 2011, Beatriz Viégas-Faria in 2012, Barbara Heliodora in 2006, and Carlos de Almeida Cunha Medeiros e Oscar Mendes in 1978. The sources introduced to the students were Pedro Gongaza's 2010 abridged version entitled *Romeu e Julieta: Versão para*

neoleitores. and two cinematographic adaptations *Romeo and Juliet*, by Franco Zeffirelli, and Baz Luhrman's *Romeo+Juliet*.

The adaptation

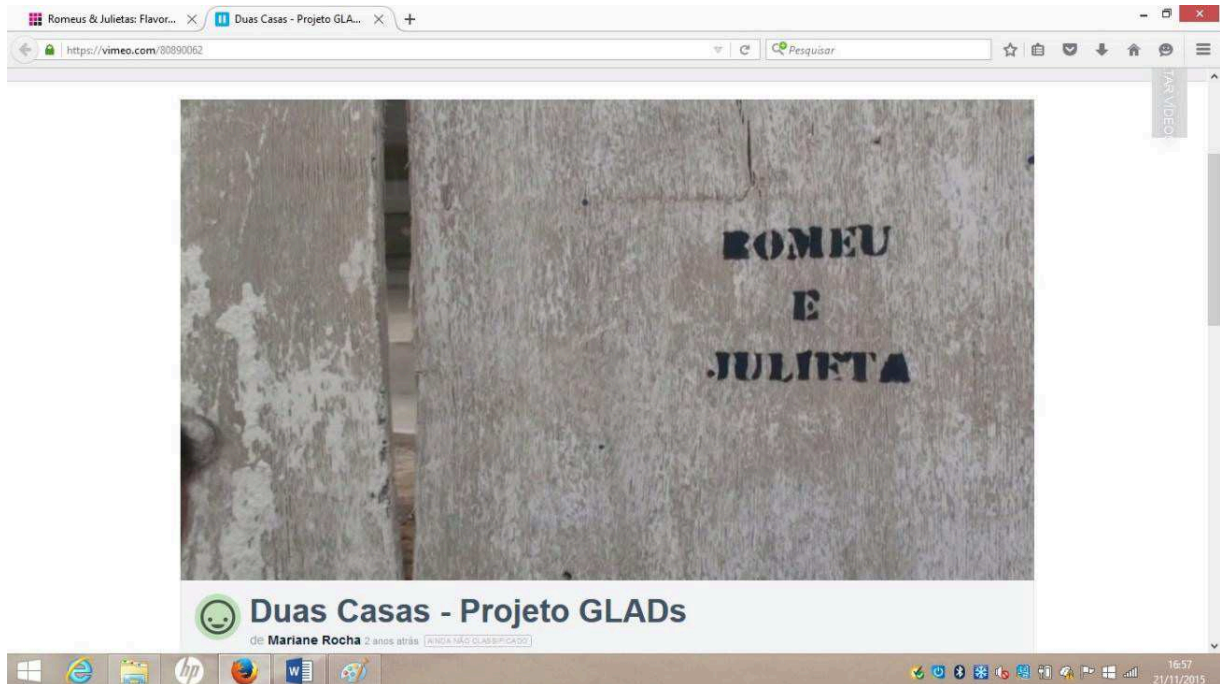
The fourteen-minute film *Duas casas* starts with a sequence of fragmented images that form a disproportionate face, each time with a different mouth or a non-matching eye, representing the faces of several Romeos and Juliets. The projection of fragments of eyes and mouths gradually accelerates until turning into a frenetic rhythm along with the score, suggesting a confluence of several faces into a single one (figure 1).

Figure 1: *Duas casas* – opening scene



Source: *Duas casas* – shortfilm on Vimeo

In the following scene, we see GLADS project's coordinator explaining the motivation for choosing to work with *Romeo and Juliet*. She reports that there were rumors that there might be some sort of brawl between the neighborhoods that surround the university. Therefore, studying and appropriating the story of Montagues and Capulets would make sense, since the students would be able to confront their identity as individuals and as a community. Meanwhile, we see inserts of cutaway shots of hands applying stencils (a visual art technique also known as *pochoir*) on walls with questions such as “What do you mean?” and painting a question mark on a wall (figure 2).

Figure 2: Stencils

Source: *Duas casas* – shortfilm on Vimeo

The use of these cutaway shots, i.e., shots peripherally related to the main shot (we can call it main shot because the voice of the coordinator persists throughout the scene), might function as a commentary to illustrate the questions that motivated the creation of the project. The following scene shows a young girl wearing a school uniform in a library reading the play *Romeo and Juliet* (figure 3).

Figure 3: Girl reading the play Romeo and Juliet

Source: *Duas casas* – shortfilm on Vimeo

While she turns the pages of a version of *Romeo and Juliet* in Portuguese, we hear birds singing in the background. The sound effect might be a reference to the lark/nightingale passage in Act 3, Scene 5:

Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.
 It was the nightingale, and not the lark,
 That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.
 Nightly she sings on yon pomegranate tree.
 Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.
 (Shakespeare 80)

In the subsequent scenes, we learn about the dwellers' perspectives on the history of their neighborhoods. The speeches of Malafaiá's dwellers are shown first. They tell about the origins of the region and how quiet it all used to be. After that, Ivo Ferronato's dwellers present their perspective on how they occupied (and not invaded) the area and how they had to struggle with the municipal government to secure basic living conditions. At all moments, the interviewer is implicit, i.e., the interviewer does not appear on screen, but viewers understand that there is somebody questioning and monitoring the outcome. Interviewee's utterances are characterized by informal language statements and conversation mode. Interviewees are shot in medium close up, which does not show the subjects in the broad context of their surroundings, and there are no camera movements.

After two shots of Malafaiá's dwellers and two shots of Ivo Ferronato's dwellers, there is a cutaway scene, which interrupts the interviewee's statements with the insertion of a parted screen with an extreme long aerial shot of Malafaiá (on the left) and Ivo Ferronato (on the right) (figure 4).

Figure 4: Extremely long aerial shot



Source: *Duas casas* – shortfilm on Vimeo

These establishing shots set up the context and the location “where we lay our scene”. In fact, we can read the passage “Duas casas, iguais em seu valor, em Verona, que a nossa cena ostenta”, a translation of Shakespeare’s text by Barbara Heliodora. At this point, we can also hear a score with a clear hip-hop influence.

The cutaway scene is quick and returns to the interview scenes in which the interviewees discuss separately the possible rivalry between the neighborhoods. Again, there is an interruption and the insertion of a cutaway scene in which we see a parted screen showing the schools from both neighborhoods, Malafaiá’s EMEF Peri Coronel (on the left) and Ivo Ferronato’s EMEF Creusa Brito Georgis (on the right) (figure 5).

Figure 5: Schools from both neighbourhoods



Source: *Duas casas* – shortfilm on Vimeo

The schools are very much alike. We can read the prologue passage “brigam de novo, com velho rancor, pondo guerra civil em mão sangrenta”, and we hear a hip-hop score and a gunshot at the end. The scene returns to the dwellers’ statements in single shots in which, separately, they describe the differences and similarities between the two neighborhoods.

The following scene shows a sequence of shot/counter shot in which we see two groups of angry teenagers with heated body language approaching the same area as we read “Os capuletos estão por aí! Não vamos escapar de uma briga! Esse calor faz ferver sangue insano em nossas veias!” (figures 6 and 7). Meanwhile, we hear a score that resembles what might sound like a Western film score, but eventually it turns out to be a remixed hip-hop score and the teenagers start a street dance battle.

Figure 6: Shot/counter shot of angry teenagers



Source: *Duas casas* – shortfilm on Vimeo

Figure 7: Shot/counter shot of angry teenagers



Source: *Duas casas* – shortfilm on Vimeo

This scene is mostly a sequence of long shots and full shots (or medium long shots) so the subjects, in this case, the teenagers, are placed in relation to their surroundings. We can notice the battle takes place on a road, but in a rural open area at the same time. The road on which the battle ensues is the one that divides

the neighborhoods and leads to the university that we can see far away in the background (figure 8).

Figure 8: Battle scene



Source: *Duas casas* – shortfilm on Vimeo

After the battle scene, we have another cutaway scene, this time, a parted screen showing both health centers, again very much alike, and we read a passage from the prologue in Act 2: “ele leva à inimiga o pranto seu e ela tira do ódio doce amor”, which might suggest the healing power of love (figura 9).

Figura 9: Health centers Source: *Duas casas* – shortfilm on Vimeo



Source: *Duas casas* – shortfilm on Vimeo

The cutaway scene quickly returns to the interviews in which the dwellers are describing the relationship between the people from Malafaia and Ivo Ferronato. In different and separate statements, they all conclude by saying that their relationship is mostly peaceful and that the region nowadays is a single community. We have another insertion of a cutaway scene; this time we see the parted screen showing both soccer fields in a full shot; a boy hits the ball trying to score a goal. Also, we can read another passage from the prologue in Act 2: “ir encontrá-lo, seja onde for, e a paixão os faz vencer” while we hear a score that remixes hip-hop and samba (figure 10).

Figure 10: Soccer fields



Source: *Duas casas* – shortfilm on Vimeo

The epilogue shows the coordinator explaining the importance of the project to the students and communities involved. She elucidates that more importantly than having an answer to the initial questions on whether there is or was a brawl between the neighborhoods, are the discoveries throughout the process and the involvement of the participants in the act of constructing their own history and telling their own story. Cutaway shots of students painting, talking and laughing are inserted while we go on listening to the voice of the coordinator until the image dims to the final credits. In the final credits, videos produced and edited by the students are shown on the left while the credits slide up.

Analysis

Duas casas (2013) focuses on a possible brawl between the neighborhoods Malafaia and Ivo Ferronato. In terms of adaptation, the film chooses to concentrate

the reinterpretation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* on the clash between Montagues and Capulets, possibly in an attempt to understand and explain the origins of the rivalry. Like Verona's inhabitants, whose lives are subdued by the conflict between Montagues and Capulets, similarly, Malafaia and Ivo Ferronato's dwellers have their identities overwhelmed by violence.

Shakespeare's play resonates through textual inceptions along the short film. Most passages come from *Romeo and Juliet's* prologue, which reinforces the idea that the film is, indeed, focusing on the origins of the rivalry between the two families, or, in this case, neighborhoods. According to Hutcheon, "adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing" (9). *Duas casas* is an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet's* prologue, which, in a sense, makes the short film adaptation a prequel to the star-crossed lovers' story.

If *Duas casas*, as end product, is a prequel adaptation to *Romeo and Juliet's* prologue; as process, the short film is criticism in the highest sense of the word. In the essay "The Critic as Artist", Oscar Wilde discusses criticism as artistic creation. Considering Wilde's perspective, Kamilla Elliot suggests adaptation as criticism. "[...] there is another way to study the aesthetics of adaptations: the way of *doing* adaptation, in which the aesthetic practice of producing adaptations functions as a form of criticism – even theorization" (Elliot 74). The creative criticism in *Duas Casas* lies on *Romeo and Juliet's* prologue recycled in a new local context. Placing *Romeo and Juliet* in the Pampas promotes local reading positions rather than discussions about Shakespeare's original play. By watching *Duas Casas*, we discover where Shakespeare's reader/adaptor is.

According to Alexa Huang, Columbia University professor and MIT co-founder of the open access Global Shakespeares digital performance archive, the rewritings of Shakespeare have evolved into a genre manifested at festivals, performances, courses and research centers. In her article "Global Shakespeares as Methodology," Huang argues that facing global Shakespeares as methodology places us "in a postnational space that is defined by fluid cultural locations rather than by nation-state", which enables us to debate archival silences and cultural exchange and articulate "new approaches to performances in marginalized or polyglot spaces" (273).

In another article, Huang explains that rather than simply translating a master narrative into a new language, "the *fabula* of the foreign play—or its cultural location(s) — is recycled and reassigned to a new local context" exposing the cross-cultural encounters. "In this sense, cross-cultural stage translation resembles the making of a palimpsest" ("Shamlet"). She continues to explain:

[...] because of the multiple layering of texts, contexts, translations and performances that grows larger every year, 'Shakespeare' has become a palimpsest on which performers constantly erase, re-write and gloss. These performances present a layered intertextuality and refer to one another, as well as to the barred 'original'. On a palimpsest, new writings can never quite conceal the old writings that have been partially erased.

The point at issue is how new layers permeate the old, and how all these new texts refer to the original Shakespearean text and to the Elizabethan field of reception, which is referenced but intentionally lost. (“Shamlet”)

For instance, the influence of Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet* in *Duas casas* is astounding, denoting the palimpsest-like nature of both adaptations. Baz Luhrmann’s adaptation sets the lovers’ story in a modern-day environment, changes locations of monologues and pairing of certain dialogues, but uses Shakespearean language. Filmed in Mexico City, Los Angeles and San Francisco, the natural sunshine, the vibrant and over saturated colors and the frenzied editing provide a Latin ethnicity to the adaptation. The film, which was released in 1996, is a Shakespeare story for the attention span of the MTV generation. There are several contemporary filmic adaptations of Shakespearean plays, but few are as representative of a certain generation as Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo+Juliet*. *Duas casas* presents a clearly layered intertextuality to Baz Luhrmann’s creation especially in the hip hop battle scene with spaghetti-western-like score. The hip hop battle scene evokes the gang fight in the opening scene of *Romeo + Juliet*. Montagues versus Capulet’s rivalry have been adapted in different ways along the eras in order to emphasize certain aspects of the story and highlight social clashes, religious or racial tensions. In Luhrman’s *Romeo + Juliet* opening scene we notice that the Montague and Capulet clans belong to different ethnic backgrounds, which presupposes the director’s intention to discuss ethnic tensions in the USA.

The hip hop battle scene in *Duas casas* raises different matters. First of all, it is a dance battle, meaning that creativity, art and empowerment might overcome social obstacles imposed by society. Secondly, both groups portrayed in the scene come from similar social conditions and have a similar ethnic background, and although it is a dance *battle* they are dancing *together*, which means they have to compromise in order to create a consistent and balanced choreography. Finally, the university is portrayed in this scene as a road between the two neighborhoods, which symbolically, might be interpreted in this context that education would be a way out, in other words, the road to socio-economic success.

It is pretty clear that the adaptation *Duas Casas* also fulfills a certain ideological agenda, because its production context is constantly reinforced along the film. *Duas Casas*’ adapters conscient decision to focus on the play’s prologue denotes an attempt to approach political tensions, public policies and social struggles in a space that was long forgotten by the public power but has been reconfigured since the construction of the university. For instance, the dwellers refer to the region as *university macroregion*, which shows the relevance of the university as a strategic target for the reorganization of society. Undeniably, the university played an important role by promoting the salvaging of the neighborhoods’ history through the shooting of the short film within *GLADS* project. Simultaneously, it simply carried out its duty by reaching the three aspects that form the basic tripod for public higher education in Brazil: teaching, research and outreach projects. Indeed, it seems that the local context in which the adaptation was created is much more relevant than the source text itself.

For this reason, the examination of Shakespeare's rewritings should focus on its temporal-spatial-cultural context. According to Huang ("Where is Shakespeare?" 256),

The questions as to what "Shakespeare" is and how "it" functions have been explored from a number of critical perspectives, but relatively under studied is the question of the locality of "Shakespeare" and its appropriations, its "local habitation."

In other words, a local perspective shows re-framings of Shakespeare's plays that reaffirm local reading positions. Rather than discussing whether the locality where Shakespeare authenticity is derived or the locality where global differences emerge, the focus of debate should be on the reconfigured localities within and beyond Shakespeare's plays ("Site-Specific Hamlets" 22). Indeed, "Ultimately, the question 'where is Shakespeare' is connected to the question 'where is the reader'" ("Where is Shakespeare?" 262).

Duas casas' "local habitation" is set in a place of border struggles. A border by definition insinuates limit, differences and segregation. However, at the same time, it suggests circulation, socialization, sharing and mingling. In any case, this hybrid territory manifests linguistically by speaking *Portunhol*, a mixture of Portuguese and Spanish, the official languages of Brazil and Uruguay, respectively. *Duas casas'* readers/viewers live by the margin, on the outskirts of town, by the highway, outside the walls of the university, and far away from the intellectual and cultural centers.

At the same time, the globalized phenomenon of hip-hop comprises the traditional rural gaucho culture. We can see teenagers wearing colorful caps instead of hats, walking by unpaved roads or riding horses while they listen to the latest Beyoncé hit on their mobiles. Martin Heidegger argues that "a boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*" (Heidegger 154). Therefore, *Duas casas'* readers/viewers is on an intersection of Brazilian and Uruguayan culture, and where local rural living meets the globalized hip-hop beat.

According to Huang, these "historical and imagined boundaries constitute the very 'venue' and instances from which 'Shakespeare' as a locus of discourse begins its presencing" ("Where is Shakespeare?" 262-263). Eventually, the outcome of adapting Shakespeare in this specific locality, which is the border region, is producing local meaning by exploring and discussing site-specific subjects through Shakespeare, and consequently, promoting awareness about local identities and ideologies.

Conclusion

The fundamental motivation to develop the adaptation was a possible struggle between two rival neighborhoods, which is explicitly discussed in the film. In terms

of result, it is not clear where the Shakespearean story ends and the real story of the neighborhoods start; in terms of production, fiction was introduced to raise a debate and develop a line of thought, and thus re-construct the neighborhoods' imaginary and discuss their collective identity. By re-telling their stories, dwellers also fictionalize their own story, which enables them to revisit their experiences from a different perspective. By listening to the stories, the adapters historicize their own culture and become aware of their "local habitation".

All in all, any work of self-expression is essentially ideological. Whether it reinforces or challenges the status quo, it is the result of a social and historical context inserted in a specific place and time, because texts do not float above history, politics and local differences. Thus, to investigate language is to explore the ideological phenomenon. Studying cross-cultural adaptations of Shakespeare's works helps us develop critical tools to approach the interaction between Shakespeare and the local culture instead of incorporating local history under Shakespeare or vice versa. If the canon travels far, it is precisely because it allows readers or audiences to tell their own stories and shape their own identities.

By encouraging students to tell their story and expressing themselves through and beyond Shakespeare, this community was finally able to look at themselves and (re)discover their own stories, identifying their own cultural location. When students become adapters, we stretch our notion of literariness, because we connect the teaching and learning of reading and the teaching and learning of writing, promoting creative writing and producing knowledge and interpretations unavailable in the structure of traditional classrooms. By enabling students to "do adaptations" and, therefore, produce creative-critical commentaries, we promote the "de-sanctification" of literary texts and legitimate students to appropriate, remix and transform the text, dealing with it as a living organism, persistently being revisited, reconfigured, reinvented and recreated.

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