

Bending death's will, dispossessing violence: embodiment, performance, necropolitics

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Abstract | The aim of this article is to investigate how performance experiences can activate silenced narratives and spectra of realities considered inadmissible. These symptoms usually recur in contexts impacted by necropolitics. To this end, we have conducted our research in dialogue with Achille Mbembe, who coined the term necropolitics, and with Denise Ferreira da Silva, who has been considered one of the international benchmarks in discussions on racism. Then, we analyze the video performance Aiku'è (R-existo) by Zahy Guajajara and the choreographic performance Gente de Lá, created by Wellington Gadelha.

KEYWORDS: Performance.
Necropolitics. Racism.

Dobrar a morte, despossuir a violência: corpo, performance, necropolítica

Resumo | O objetivo deste artigo é indagar como a performance, não apenas responde e ilustra condições necropolíticas, mas pode ativar narrativas silenciadas e espectros de mundos que pareciam inadmissíveis. Para tanto, contextualizamos o debate proposto por Achille Mbembe, em diálogo com autoras como Judith Butler e Denise Ferreira da Silva; e, em seguida, analisamos a videoperformance Aiku'è (R-existo), de Zahy Guajajara e a performance coreográfica "Gente de Lá", criada por Wellington Gadelha.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Performance.
Necropolítica. Racismo.

Duplicar la muerte, despojar a la violencia: cuerpo, performance, necropolítica

Resumen | El objetivo de este artículo es investigar cómo las experiencias de performance pueden activar narrativas silenciadas y espectros de realidades consideradas inadmisibles. Estos síntomas suelen repetirse en contextos afectados por la necropolítica. Para ello, hemos realizado nuestra investigación en diálogo con Achille Mbembe, quien acuñó el término necropolítica; y con Denise Ferreira da Silva, quien ha sido considerada una de las referencias internacionales en los debates sobre racismo. Luego, analizamos el video performance Aiku'è (R-existo) de Zahy Guajajara y el performance coreográfico Gente de Lá, creado por Wellington Gadelha.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Performance.
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The term necropolitics was coined around 2003 by Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe, professor at Witwatersrand University, in Johannesburg, South Africa. Before Mbembe, other authors had already discussed death policies that devalue the lives of individuals who lost their status as persons, transformed into object-bodies and commodity-bodies, zombies on the threshold between life and death. Mbembe's contribution was to point out that this process is absolutely related to the colonality of power, with its incubator of cruel and dehumanized procedures in colonial plantation and, therefore, based on the slavery of African peoples. Another fundamental aspect of Mbembe's research was to identify what he called the world's black becoming, observing a state of extreme precariousness and generalized crisis that extended a situation, until then supposedly characteristic of black racialization, to other vulnerable people in the neoliberal context, whose lives ceased to be valuable.

When the crisis is radicalized, as we have seen increasingly since World War II and, increasingly globally and in the media, since the attack and destruction of the World Trade Center in New York at the beginning of this millennium, it is possible to defend that such consensus constructions on who deserves to carry the political-legal status of person of law are nothing more than necropolitical actions. The proposal, in these cases, is to establish death policies, to produce desubjectivized lives and objectified bodies. In this sense, for at least three decades, Judith Butler has been discussing states of vulnerability and precariousness of the body, showing how performative actions constitute us as subjects imbricated in co-constitutive relations of interdependence, whose exposures to vulnerability are politically regulated and asymmetrically distributed¹.

But how does art, and specifically performance, not only respond to this situation, but feed on these precarious states? How does it make the explicitness of violence emerge from the crisis? How does it encourage the fabrication of silenced narratives and specters of worlds that seemed unacceptable? How does art, by ceasing to be considered a mere illustration of political discussions, starts to deepen discussions, redefining necropolitics beyond discourses and establishing empathy with experiences that came from the crisis in the body. There are several historical examples, such as those by Antonin Artaud and the construction of a body without organs; Tatsumi Hijikata in his conception of a dead body that dances (butoh), and so many other Latin American artists who for decades have materialized stories of disappearance and expropriation of bodies, founded not only by the racial-colonial regime, but also by the terror regimes established in military dictatorships in our countries since the 1960s. Names such as Chilean Escena de Avanzada, Regina José Galindo, Tania Bruguera, Artur Barrio, Cildo Meireles, Antonio Manuel, Paulo Bruscky, Daniel

¹ Although philosopher Judith Butler is widely known for gender discussions in the global discussion about feminism and queer, she has published numerous books and articles that discuss the issue of the vulnerability and precariousness of life in different contexts, reconfiguring the way of understanding the discursive production of the "subject" and of the "other," the attribution of "humanity" and "inhumanity," and the politically differential distribution of the right to protect life. See, BUTLER (2015, 2019), BUTLER and ATHANASIOU (2013) and BUTLER, GAMBETTI and SABSAY (2016), BUTLER and SPIVAK (2018).

Santiago and, more recently, Jaime Lauriano, Clara Ianni, Rafael Pagatini, the collective *Aparecidos Políticos*, Zahy Guajajara, Jota Mombaça, Musa Michelle Mattiuzzi and Wellington Gadelha are some of the references that explain the destabilizing power of art and its aptitude to deepen political issues through the performative actions they engender.

There are different possibilities of connecting the dots between the mobile forms of necropolitics and the sensitive forms of art. A first way would be to present the art system as a reproduction of capital in its perpetual reenactment of the cycle of racial-colonial violence, a cycle that the art system itself claims to be able to criticize and interrupt. This analysis, based on general information, would form a sort of political-epistemic framework of art as a necropolitical device in itself, that is, as an adaptive arm of colonial power that continues to replicate itself in its ever renewed movement as accumulation of capital. A second step, perhaps more complex, would be to identify some works of art and contemporary performances that are organized, themselves, as regimes of confrontation and redistribution of racial-colonial violence, taking over its capturing power in a kind of autophagy of the principles of violence. We could call this second approach a critical-performative reading of the works, whose signification processes are always precarious and provisional, but also endowed with an intervening force, effecting reconfigurations of the political economy of the signs of coloniality.

In this article, we are mainly interested in the second approach. To that end, we look for performances that intertwine in the semiotic excess secreted by the regime of signification of violence to fabricate necropolitical corporealities capable of reversing the agenda of death and generate new political potentialities of aesthetics.² It is essential to scrutinize how necropolitics structures itself not only as a discursive regime, but also as a corporal and sensitive regime. The socio-historical violence of racialization and the total expropriation of value – that is coloniality – engages the body not only as its material support, but also as its vital substance. Therefrom emerges the performative force of performance works that engage and unrealize necropolitical violence. By acting in the very space of death that seeks to arrest and decimate the power of the body, performance shows itself capable of modulating the affective currents that pimp the body, canceling the dispossession that constitutes it.

² What we have chosen to call here “semiotic excess” will be better detailed below, but we have already clarified that this is a fundamental overflow of the meaning of the categories postulated by the political and discursive arsenal of colonialism and raciality since it was implemented. As we will see, both Achille Mbembe and Denise Ferreira da Silva identify delusional structures in the ontoepistemology of the European “universal reason” that produced white self-consent for the realization of colonialism and imperialism at the expense of the lives, bodies and lands of the different “others” whose phantasmatic presences have never ceased to haunt the colonial project itself and the European philosophical thought that served as its basis. In fact, the “other” fabricated by European universal reason continued as an enigma, always proving to be “in excess” of the very categories of that reason. This semiotic excess – which we could also call “affective” excess – was, in fact, often recalibrated by the colonists themselves into perverse operations to reverse the violence, that is, into projections on this “other” of distorted mirrors of the original violence inherent in the colonial enterprise. For a political anthropology of colonialism in South America, in its double dimension of delusion and terror, see TAUSSIG (2007; 2010).

Colonial expropriation, semiotic excess and necropolitical corporeality

Denise Ferreira da Silva explains that the ontoepistemological pillars of the world ordered by modern thought – in which colonialism made sense, and in a way still does – were organized by a program of thinking about the relations between matter and form, supported by several European thinkers, mainly from the 17th century onward.³³ The first, linked to natural philosophy and classical physics, were Galileo (1564-1642), Descartes (1596-1650) and Newton (1643-1727). According to Ferreira da Silva, the three inherited the view of Antiquity on matter, that is, that notion that “understands the body by means of abstract concepts that would be present in thought, such as solidity, extension, weight, gravity and movement in space and time” (FERREIRA da SILVA, 2019a, p. 37). This episteme that structures human perception in modern times, comprehends and depends on what Ferreira da Silva calls “separability”:

The idea that everything that can be known about the things of the world must be understood by the forms (space and time) of intuition and the categories of Understanding (quantity, quality, relation, modality), all other categories about the things of the world remain inaccessible and, therefore, irrelevant to knowledge (idem, p. 39).

As one of the main epistemological bases for the perception and analysis of bodies, separability will also organize the notion of sequentiality, which will condition famous descriptions of the Spirit as “movement in time,” as a process of “self-development” and History itself as the path of the Spirit. In this thought program, the Eurocentric versions of temporality ferment, which, throughout the colonization process, will postulate the “cultural difference” as a representation of the ways in which the development of the Spirit is updated differently in different parts of the world, especially in that one moment when the extractive trips of the colonial project helped European reason to classify the social configurations of post-Enlightenment Europe as the apex of the development of the Spirit. It is precisely from this confluence between scientific knowledge and colonial expropriation that the “invention of the black” occurs (MBEMBE, 2014, p. 43) as a sort of mirror that projects the delusions organized by the Eurocentric universal reason: a fabulous and performative action that Mbembe will call “the black reason.”

Black reason designates both a set of discourses and practices – a daily work that consisted in inventing, counting, repeating and putting into circulation formulas, texts, rituals, with the aim of making the Black happen as a subject of race and savage exteriority, susceptible, in this respect, to moral disqualification and practical instrumentalization (MBEMBE, 2014, p. 58).

³³ Brazilian Denise Ferreira da Silva is a theorist, artist and activist, a professor of political science at the University of British Columbia, Canada, where she heads the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice. Her first book, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (2007), centers race in modern post-Enlightenment thought, taking it as a significant human difference that acts in order to institute globality as the ontological horizon. To access part of her work in Portuguese, see FERREIRA da SILVA (2014; 2019a; 2019b).

"Blackness" (FERREIRA da SILVA, 2019) emerges, therefore, as a specific category in the arsenal of raciality-coloniality. As a modern and colonial episteme, the task of "raciality" is to capture/express in a table of identity and difference the temporal effects (or the "development") of what Hegel called the "productive capacity of universal reason" among human collectives that the table comprehends and maps (idem, p. 104). This means that the ontoepistemological mobilization of the category of Time that supports the notion and perception of what "development" comes to be is central, as it transubstantiates a legal-economic effect into a sort of natural "defect": that is, it subsumes what emerges from political relations (from legal, economic and symbolic architectures that authorize the use of total violence for the expropriation of the productive capacity of occupied lands and enslaved bodies) in effects of the effective causality of scientific reason – that is, of "racial knowledge" in itself, the supposedly empirical doctrine that signals a "natural" deficit in intellectual and moral terms in the physical, practical and institutional differences of the peoples "found" and enslaved (idem, p. 91).

If according to Hegel the "productive force" behind Human History is what he called Spirit, Ferreira da Silva explains that this Spirit accentuates a process of apprehension of the World "as an exhibition hall of something that belongs to *time*, that is, an interior thing" (idem, p. 103, emphasis added). And it is precisely there that Hegel will "discover" that the Spirit (i.e., scientific reason) "had not affected and would not carry out its work in African minds and territories, as the Black did not have the ideas that register its presence" (idem, p. 103). Perceiving the black body and territory as immune to the internalization of separability and sequentiality, which would allow the Spirit to carry out its work of realizing universal reason; Hegel postulates an episteme based on which the category of blackness could never mean "development." Featuring outside the primordality of time – a fundamental category that sustains the Subject's architecture – blackness emerges "disarticulated from self-awareness" and "detached from the entrails of Thought," always "in excess in relation to subjects and objects" (idem, p. 98).

It is important to remember Mbembe, once again, when he explains that the social situation of modern European philosophy, in which all these principles are forged, is the commercial slavery of blacks from Africa. This is the economic and legal process that makes the "black" not as a subject, but as a commodity or thing. According to Ferreira da Silva, the transubstantiation carried out by the tools of raciality is a Siamese invention of European modernity and of the coloniality that shifts the effects from the colonial mechanisms of total expropriation (existential registration) to the perception of an intellectual and moral underdevelopment signaled by difference (formal registration). It organizes a logic of racial subjugation embedded in representation. This is the primary technology of modern and western epistemology that arranges the infinite diversity of life forces on developmental space-time scales of the matter-form relation, always conditioned by separability and sequentiality. As a sign dynamic, raciality is confused with semiotic racism, since its

representational nature occludes the way how the total value expropriated from enslaved bodies and looted lands constitutes (since the primitive accumulation triggered by colonialism) the very structure of global capital (FERREIRA da SILVA, 2019, p. 91). In short, “race” is the very structure of capital, its “blood” and its “flesh” (idem), supported by both practices and categories of thought.

Necropolitical counter-corporeality and surface aesthetics: *Aiku'è*, by Zahy Guajajara

The video performance *Aiku'è (R-existo)*, by Zahy Guajajara, an artist of the Guajajara/Tenetejara ethnicity from Maranhão, operates in two simultaneous registers: image and sound. These run in parallel, generating different possibilities for synthesis, among which stands out a reading of the female indigenous body as existence/resistance (verbs alluded to in the title) of life, language and native lands before the necropolitical turn triggered by the colonial modernity that continues to expropriate value from the economic coupling between land and capital. As previously stated, the expropriation of value from native lands is nourished by the equivalences that this same expropriation creates between land and capital. This is the legal-economic pillar of the European colonial project that started in the “long sixteenth century.” As we explained earlier, this colonial project is described by Achille Mbembe as the trigger for necropolitics, as it is based on a reason that distributes death geopolitically in different degrees of killability. In *Aiku'è*, it is the female indigenous body of Zahy Guajajara that becomes a paradoxical index of life and death, and in the audiovisual grammar that she develops each axis of this paradoxical intersection is legible through its opposite.⁴

With the exception of the final shot, the video is entirely composed of closed shots and detail shots. What this visual language enables, at first, is to generate an opacity that blurs the perception of the boundaries between body and earth: the first image seen is precisely a small piece of land covered with dry leaves, but this land expands and contracts to the rhythm of breathing. Gradually a body covered with clay or dry mud is revealed under the leaves. The body rises and we see the artist, naked, who looks up releasing a shout. A documentary soundtrack then invades the image of Guajajara looking at the sky and then lying in a fetal position on the ground, while dry leaves fall on her: the documentary soundtrack is a recording of shots, tear gas bombs, screams, sirens, pepper sprays and helicopters, along with a voice-over that reports the forced eviction of 50 indigenous people from the building of the former Museum of the Indigenous, in the Maracanã village, by the Shock Troop of the Military Police of Rio de Janeiro, in the early hours of March 22, 2013⁵. Then we see Zahy Guajajara washing her face under running water, sitting on a rock at the banks of a stream or waterfall. While her face is washed, earth separates from the skin, and it is in this image of disintegration between body and earth that we hear a voice-over,

⁴ The work is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WE6kj6JFbpQ> (Accessed on: Sep 19, 2020)

⁵ The eviction had the stated objective of enabling the resumption of the renovation works on the Maracanã sports complex, for the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

in her native tongue (tenetehara): "I am a species in danger," but "I r-exist." In a *voice-over*, the artist explicitly denounces colonial violence over the indigenous territory and body: "I was born from the womb of the earth, but I became a bastard."

Audio and image always in parallel lines, Guajajara's voice-over speaks about the land, object of death for many of her ethnicity, but her visible body is painted with traditional patterns. "This was my land. (...) I don't want anything from you. (...) Murder, genocide, massacre? Which do you prefer?" Her silent face in closed shot is painted by the artist with the products of the very land alluded to in the audio. Body and earth collide in one sign, and we start to read one through the other. The face painting is complete: red foundation on the entire face, with geometric patterns in black lines.

However, looking directly at the camera, the artist rubs her hands over her face, erasing the face paint while we hear a song in her native language in the soundtrack. She spreads the shiny black of the geometric lines and smears it on her face, then splashes water and, on the still stained skin, starts applying westernized makeup. Lipstick, eyeliner, mascara. When applying the eyelash curler, in a close-up shot of the eyes, a brief, cutting sound of scissors covers the vocal music. The face of the indigenous woman occupies the entire screen, adding the traces of traditional painting and western make-up on the earth-skin. In the audio, she identifies herself as an "urban indigenous." Adapted to the "system," she says that she is no longer recognized as an indigenous person, that she has become "an invader of my own land." A tear falls from her eye. "Nobody listens to me. If they shut me up, then they bury me alive. Do you listen to me? (...) I just r-exist."

On the make-up, she reincorporates yet another layer of clay, covering the entire face and hair with wet, shiny earth, also gluing some dry leaves on the face. In a poetic resource of continuous overlap, the layers of earth, natural pigments, make-up and mud add different materials on the surface of the skin, without exactly erasing the traces of the previous materials. In the end, with the mud already dry, detail shots of a slow millipede walking over her skin fill the screen: like a caterpillar in the forest, climbing her finger resting on her leg, her shoulder, the millipede travels the soil of her skin, exploring the surface of this land that breathes.

Full-screen shots show the image of her skin covered with dried mud, evoking the aerial shot of a dry, desert geography. After that, for the first time, the video shot opens completely and reveals the naked artist, lying on the banks of this stream, almost a waterfall, whose current ends in a stone pit in the middle of the forest. She gets up and we realize that she is pregnant. This is the final image of the videoperformance: Zahy Guajajara standing in the distance, stroking her pregnant belly, in a side view: her earth-colored paunchy body seems to signify her paunchy body-colored earth. Death and life, genocide and pregnancy: this impossible coupling of opposites concludes the performance of the female indigenous body that is organized with and beyond the very necropolitical reason.

If we understand colonialism not only as an adventure of a handful of male explorers, but, founded on with Denise Ferreira da Silva and Achille Mbembe, as a “legal-economic architecture” (FERREIRA da SILVA, 2019) that authorizes the use of total violence to extract value and expropriate the productive capacity of indigenous lands and enslaved bodies; the body of the indigenous native emerges as one of the primordial narratives of capital itself. After all, it is capital as a grammar of the modern world that sustains the syntax of racial difference and imposes it on the bodies that cross the colonial enterprise. This fabrication of racial difference, as we saw above, justifies the use of total violence to expropriate the value of native lands. Therefore, the native body and earth were, since the beginning, intertwined in the work of capital, and it is this intertwining that is reconfigured in the performance of Zahy Guajajara. Working with the overlapping of materials on the body itself, the work already seems based on the “implicated world” vision, as proposed by Ferreira da Silva, where the laws and forms of universal reason, previously supported by the formulations of space and time in terms of separability and sequentiality, are abolished. From this suspension of categorical and circumspect notions of space and time, the female indigenous body emerges featuring as a transversal overlapping crossed by past, present and future, as well as by colony, forest and metropolis.

As a result of the very structure of colonial knowledge that mobilized identity and difference to postulate a table of man and a supposed Natural History, the “indigenous woman” is not a subject, but a delusion projecting the European thought that endorses total violence in the expropriation of native lands and bodies, a fundamental condition for the primitive accumulation of capital. This same capital follows its mechanics of violence, pushing her into urban centers, making her “bastard of her own land” and evicting dozens of other urban indigenous people in situations of social and housing vulnerability from Aldeia Maracanã. The owners of the land are converted to landless and homeless. Obviously, the colonial plundering of native lands in the 16th century is not the same as the FIFA World Cup, but the capital boosting the second is intrinsically linked – overlapped – to the capital accumulated in the first.

As a performative poetics of the body, the overlapping of earth/skin/leaf/makeup in this video performance produces the female indigenous body as a surface where the tensions between violence and attraction are negotiated. The epidermal emphasis on the “surface” should not seem random. Our understanding of surface – a two-dimensional ex-tension, therefore resistant and even opposed to the premise of “depth” of the *Ego cogito* – is, according to Uri McMillan (2018), informed by the historical events of slavery, colonialism and imperialism. As an aesthetic strategy, the emphasis on the surface is built on (and consolidates) the Baroque pictorial traditions that highlighted the texture, tangibility and brightness of the world they represented.

These practices contradict the Cartesian perspectivism characteristic of the nascent European modernity, especially seen in the pernicious historical link between the first photographs and European travels, which favored a distant observation of the

world-as-image and that, therefore, reaffirmed European superiority. (MCMILLAN, 2018, p. 2)

According to McMillan, a reframing of the focus of visual representation mobilized by the colonial grammar of the look to the proximity of the surface mobilizes another perceptual regime, a “sensual immediacy” that can provide new political potential in reading the works. Interestingly, in the performance of surfaces and overlaps – of skins, materials and geographies – conducted by Zahy Guajajara, this sensual immediacy is never transparent. The woman’s skin and the native land are surfaces that have always been represented visually as material and perceptual excesses. The materiality of the leaves, the texture of the dried and cracked mud on the skin, the shine of the wet clay on the face and hair, the mathematical shine of the mascara and eyeliner, both exaggeratedly applied to the eyes, as well as the shine of the black pigment with which the artist draws geometric patterns on the face and then spreads on the skin; all these textures function as triggers of viscerality, experimenting with life forms that are not always translatable by language, and therefore of another nature, a sign of what we hear in the sound track. Strictly speaking, even the language, so important in accounts and songs – both in Portuguese and in the Tenetehara language – never directly reflects the images, also acting in order to create yet another surface layer. Guajajara's body is not amid these surfaces, but entangled in them, co-created by them, camouflaged in the crossings of their layers. And, although naked, this body never surrenders in a transparent manner.

The apparent narrative of the artist “indigenous woman” who places herself and uses the aesthetic production as a way of representing her ethnic identity, in reality, is camouflaged by the sensual layers of surfaces that overlap over her. The affective and tactile dimensions of the textures create counterpoints of abstraction to the representative and identity narrative, and that which appeared to be an account or autobiography is converted into a relational encounter. The skin itself turns into as a porous locus of encounter between multiple materialities, a potentially tense site of encounters and political negotiations. As spectators, we are catapulted into this image, in which another body is formulated. And this new body, although heir to the legal and economic architectures of colonial dispossession, is never resigned to confirming its expectations – be they ethnic-racial, of gender, or even of humanity.

If it is true that there is no capital without the plundering of native lands, then in this particular overlap of body and earth echoes a “r-existence.” Reconfiguring herself as a game of multiple surfaces, Zahy Guajajara detaches the indigenous female body from the necropolitical structures of modern thought that imprison all imagination in a single subject, endowed with reflective depth – as a supposed manifestation of the Spirit. Performing an image that blurs the border between body and native land, between face painting and makeup, between past and present, Guajajara exposes and confronts the colonial violence that named her “indian,” which usurped her land and which authorized the murder of her family. This violence – which also attributes gender and race to

her and makes her vulnerable in her urban diaspora – is not separated from Capital itself, legal and economic infrastructure for dispossession of lands and bodies that, since the long sixteenth century, has ensured global economic domination in the hands of some chosen ones.

Thus, Zahy Guajajara's performance produces a necropolitical counter-corporeality, detaching itself from the structures of the *Ego cogito* and putting itself in excess in relation to the supposed “subjects” and “objects” assumed by them, revealing on the horizon a criticism of capital. This excess performance is emphasized not only aesthetically, but also culturally and biologically when, in the end, we perceive that she is pregnant. The indigenous female body appears in yet another paradoxical overlap: dispossessed of her land, with a death target on her back, she nevertheless carries a surplus life in her womb. Far from exhausting the multiplicity of readings that this final image stimulates, the pregnancy performance in Guajajara actually challenges us. Although silent, the image of the pregnant indigenous woman echoes the question that she herself asked us minutes before: “Do you listen to me? I just r-exist.” And if we listen to her, in fact, what do we do so the life reproduced in her womb is not just another turn in the reproduction of capital that the coloniality inaugurates and perpetuates?

“Making death dance – death needs to dance”: the periphery-body in *Gente de lá*, by Wellington Gadelha

The historical, philosophical, mythical and aesthetic implications between dance and death are ancient and multiple.⁶⁶ An itan of the Yoruba peoples says that the only ones who managed to defeat Iku (death) were the Ibejis, the twin Orixás who represent childhood.⁷⁷ According to the narrative, Iku decided to kill all the people in a village early, spreading traps everywhere. No one was able to stop her, and every day some innocent person was taken away. Then they asked Orunmilá to intervene. In consultation with Ifá, Orunmilá discovers that only the Ibejis could stop that killing. The Ibejis, twin children of Oxum, were famously mischievous children, so the Ifá oracle caused a huge surprise. But following Orunmilá's advice, the adults asked the twins to defeat Iku and in return promised them sweets, okra and gifts, as well as eternal authorization for them to never stop playing. After the agreement was made, the Ibejis set out on Iku's path with a drum. While one played the drum, the other hid. Finding the beat beautiful, Iku started dancing, singing and clapping. She did not know that the drum had a charm that enchanted the body, which was trapped in the dance. Iku danced so much that she did not even notice when the twins switched positions, to keep playing non-stop. Death just danced, exhaustively. Exhausted, Iku begged for the drum to be stopped, as she could not take it anymore. It was

⁶⁶ An ontological link between dance and death is identified in the modern genealogy of choreography, for example, in *Exaurir a Dança*, by André Lepecki (2017). ⁷⁷ The eviction had the stated objective of enabling the resumption of the renovation works on the Maracanã sports complex, for the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

⁷ Itan is a fundamental narrative that constitutes the Yoruban worldview in myths that are orally disseminated, generally by the elders. Ibejis are Orixás that, in Bahia for example, are celebrated on the day of Saints Cosmas and Damian, in a party with plenty of sweets, candies and the traditional caruru, an okra dish with dried shrimp and palm oil.

then that The Ibejis made a deal with death: they would only agree to stop the drum if she removed all the traps from the village. By defeating death with dance, pranks and an enchanted drum, the Ibejis began to be recognized as great Orixás, receiving sweets, *caruru* and playthings as offerings.⁸⁸

In a country like Brazil – on whose historical heritage of more than three centuries of mercantile slavery a cracked society has arisen, both temporally and spatially – there is an urgent need to concretize, in some way, the sense of violence that underlies us and the naturalized proximity of death in the lives of all those who have inherited the abusive mark of modern raciality.⁹⁹ There is much talk, for example, of the “favela” or the “periphery” as black territories. These words carry a very heterogeneous multiplicity of meanings related to dispossession, exclusion, poverty, violence, daily proximity to death, as well as potential, resilience, and even the effervescence of the new “popular” languages.” We understand the weight that the word “periphery” carries, in its

Siamese proximity to the very concept of necropolitics, and we employ it frequently in the metropolitan artistic context, without necessarily experiencing the surplus life (and death) produced by the experience of living in the periphery.

It is known that in the periphery of large Brazilian cities live the bodies with the greatest deficit in access to the tools that enable the subject to fully exercise citizenship: education, employment, urban infrastructure, housing, expression platforms. We access our historical consciousness and even make a correlation with the colonial heritage of dispossession and racialization that resulted in the “periphery” as an inevitable shadow of economic prosperity in capitalism. However, despite all the discursive and media efforts – and all the “representation”

– that which takes the name of periphery remains for many of us in the field of arts predominantly without intensive materiality, without flesh, without body. A “yonder there” that is used to give meaning to the exercise of political analysis on the “over here.”

Giving a body to necropolitics under the sign of periphery is not a simple task, as it would demand the engagement of language with aesthetic experience in a total agency of bodily senses with the materiality of death and violence that characterizes this territory in its economic subordination. *Gente de Lá* [People from yonder], choreographic performance created by Wellington Gadelha, artist, activist and resident of the periphery of Fortaleza, Ceará, commits precisely to overcoming this challenge: bending death’s will and shifting its senses, in order to conduct not a metaphorical representation of the periphery, but a set of biases that we could understand as the singularization of a periphery-body.¹⁰

⁸ This version of the legend was recorded by Luiz Antonio Simas, in a column of the *Jornal O Globo* newspaper, on September 11, 2018. Available at: <https://oglobo.globo.com/rio/os-ibejis-a-morte-23057103> (Accessed on Sep 19, 2020).

⁹ There is an abundant bibliography on this subject. For a striking and definitive documentation of violence as a structuring heritage from mercantile slavery in Brazil, see NASCIMENTO (2016).

¹⁰ An excerpt from the performance “Gente de Lá” is available at: <https://www.premiopipa.com/wellington-gadelha/> (Accessed on: Sep 19, 2020) The performance was presented in several venues in Fortaleza (CE), in the São Paulo Itaú Cultural (SP), and in festivals in Brazil and abroad: Panorama Festival at the Centre National de la Danse, in Paris (France); Atos de Fala Festival, in Rio de Janeiro (RJ) and Tanzhaus Zürich (Switzerland), Itacaré Dance Festival (BA), among others.

Throughout the performance, the audience, seated on the floor around a large rectangle of white linoleum, watches the black performer in a succession of engagements with various objects and sound materials. In the first series of movements, the artist runs in circles, flying a large black colored kite. Between a banner of death and children's play, the black kite now establishes the game of ambivalence and crossed meanings that will characterize the entire performance. The kite revolves around four red T-shirts lying on black bags arranged on the floor at the four cardinal points. The four empty garments on the black bags evoke absent bodies. At the two ends of the white scenic space we see two other large, heavy black bags tied with red ropes and hanging from the ceiling. With a box cutter in his hand directed at the shirts, Gadelha starts to rotate in the center of the crossroads formed by the shirts. He wears a black training suit, of that type made of lycra tight in the body, covering legs and arms, and on that base a loose red T-shirt, with a large X drawn on the front. The crossed colors and shapes evoke a kind of skewed brotherhood between the performer and the absent bodies "arranged" on the floor.

There in the center, he spins slowly with his arm covering his eyes. Two speakers can also be seen arranged on stage, but the entire first part of the performance unfolds in silence. Throughout this first series of actions, Gadelha carefully dedicates himself to folding and wrapping each shirt around its respective black bag, binding them up with a string. The packages are cylindrical in shape, black on the outside and red on the inside. Following a kind of liturgy, he unrolls the packages again, separates the bags, laying them on the floor and attaches the four red rolls of the T-shirts with another string, one after the other like small wagons, which he pulls through the scene. Finishing this first ritual, he puts on the four black bags that were on the floor over his head and starts to move around the scene deprived of sight. Rolling over the white linoleum, we watch his body inside four overlapping shiny black bags. Blind, his body glances the legs of the audience sitting around, and the movement of rolling from side to side becomes repetitive and gradually more violent. On the floor and then on his feet, Gadelha struggles to free himself from the plastic bags, his body rips the thick plastic as he can, and when the fight seems more impossible he uses the cutter to cut through the thick layers of plastic and allow movement to his arms, eventually getting rid of the black plastic for good, letting it stay on the scene like rags.

In this struggle of the artist against the black bags, objects that operate an evident death metonymy for residents of Brazilian favelas, silence is broken and a soundtrack at maximum volume explodes from the two loudspeakers present on the scene (both being black and red, apropos): a succession of "de putaria" [explicit] funk carioca songs.¹¹ Gadelha dances exhaustively while wielding the cutter. The funereal and silent ritual of the beginning is then followed by the rhetoric of explicit sex – "soca nele, soca nele, soca nele, soca, soca, soca" [pound it

¹¹ Recent analyses on funk carioca define the subgenre known as "funk de putaria" as that characterized by clandestine commercial diffusion and by lyrics that explicitly exploit eroticism and sexual performances. See NOVAES and PALOMBINI (2019), MIZRAHI (2014) and RIBEIRO (2011).

on him... pound it] –, and the inter and intracorporal vibration forced by the bass of the music at full volume expands the production of the body on stage, already suggested in some way in the ritual relation with the objects in the first part of the performance.

This vibrating materiality of the sound gradually contaminates the whole scene. At a given moment, Gadelha positions the speakers under the two black bags hanging from each end of the linoleum. With their cones facing upwards, the speakers project the sound to the ceiling. But a visual game starts to unfold when the artist makes incisions in the bottom of the black bags, allowing strands of sand to start pouring out. Moving in a pendular motion, the two black bags hanging from the ceiling start to pour sand over the entire linoleum, and part of that sand ends up being stored in the speakers' cones. The sand intervenes in the soundscape, drowning out the funk sound practically to silence. In addition, vibrating on top of the speakers that it buries, the other sand provides visual representation to the funk bass: the grains jump and oscillate, capturing the eye almost mesmerizingly. At each end of the linoleum, therefore, the two buried speakers vibrate almost muted.

But the silence artificially provoked by the landslide only lasts a few minutes. Gadelha goes on manipulating the speakers, places them in the center of the linoleum and begins to move his fingers in the sand, gradually restoring the stridency and the bass of the *funky putaria*. During the whole scene, the ones who dance, really, are the grains of sand on top of the speakers. The sand dance evokes, in the tiny frame of the speaker cone, the image of a large crowd that jumps and dances, or of earth that boils and bubbles upwards, mechanically suspended in the air by the sound waves that shout the indomitable sexual desire that the *funk de putaria* arouses.

There is a contradictory overlap of affections on stage, however. The performance does not follow and does not reflect the affection of funk or of the party, but maintains a neutral, solemn presence, as an adjunct to the speakers. The funereal ritual that apparently started in the first part of the performance does not entirely disappear, but resists alongside the sand party. We could even say that this willingness to face and work out death remains throughout Gadelha's performance. In a private conversation, he told us that he felt compelled to embody some deaths in the work – not to reproduce or represent death, but to generate life, enchanting death just as the Ibeji did in the famous Yoruba itan.

According to Gadelha, artistic dance retains something of sacred dance, spatializing a crossroads, working on the communication between life and death, as well as between the dead and the living. The performance even starts with a song for Exu, an aphrodisiac entity of communication (and also of sexuality). Living in black territory on the periphery of Fortaleza, the artist has a daily experience of the space as a prohibition, where lines and borders are defined by class struggle, structural racism and the war of criminal factions. Everyday life has become so intertwined with the experience of death that physically moving

and commuting in this territory is described by Gadelha as a "Russian roulette."¹²

In the Russian roulettes of his neighborhood, the artist has already lost two family members who were victims of territorial disputes. The "kids" were executed and there was no wake, nor burial. One of the sparks for his compositional process in this performance was precisely the inability to wake the young people killed in the territorial disputes in his neighborhood. The t-shirts, ritually folded and wrapped around black bags, seem to embody the absences of the lost kids. In this, and in other compositional procedures in the performance, the aphrodisporic notions of "enchantment" and "crossroads" seem to be transformed into choreographic operations. Resorting to the ancestral ways of organizing his scene, on the other hand, is Gadelha's way of facing the other Russian roulette to which he alluded: this crossing of borders that is entering the institutionalized and historically white space of local dance.

Luiz Antonio Simas and Luiz Rufino (2018) explain that one of the strategies found by the Africans launched into the transatlantic journey of non-return and into the "cognitive and identity shattering" of commercial slavery was the reconstruction of themselves and of the world in (and through) the very experience of death (p. 11). In the transatlantic passage,

death's will was bent by perspectives of the world unknown to the limited pretensions of western-European colonialism. They are the experiences of ancestry and enchantment. For a major portion of the black African populations that crossed the Atlantic and for the Amerindian populations of the New World, death is read as spirituality and not as a concept in opposition to life. Thus, from the perspective of ancestry, there is death only when there is oblivion; and from the perspective of enchantment, both death and life are transgressed to a condition of *supravivência* [supraliving, supraexistence]. (SIMAS; RUFINO, 2018, p. 11)

Enchantment, in the way we see it operating in Gadelha's performance, is, therefore, also a "bending of death's will." The everyday tragedy of the burden and disenchantment experienced in the black territory of the periphery – where kids are executed for banal reasons and deprived of wake – is founded on colonialism and the continued dispossession of economic inequality. Bending the death of the non-waked (kids? slaves?) in the act of dancing opens space for the "People from yonder" to practice other paths, activating a political action that ethically and aesthetically repositions the agents involved in this old power diagram that for centuries has defined the necropolitical logics of center and periphery, of life and death, of black and white. When being killed is translated as being enchanted, the poverty of the Euro-referenced dichotomies loses its strength, and the black Amerindian supraliving draws a crossroads.

The crossroads, or the crossing, so present in the performance of

¹² Moving between territories, leaving the favela to solve practical everyday things, is a Russian roulette. There is no guarantee of coming back unharmed. However, in the same way, entering the art spaces 'downtown,' participating in the events

Gadelha ¹³ , is for the aphrodiasporic population the quintessential place of enchantment (SIMAS; RUFINO, 2018, p. 17). And in the black survival/supraliving/experience in Brazil, the most sophisticated spell of all is the epistemological one. When magic is confused with science, knowledge becomes universe of Exu: knowing as charade, trick, enigma. In the aphrodiasporic epistemology, Exu is the principle and power of unpredictability, dynamism and possibility, he is the master of the crossroads, and his ritual colors are black and red. Invoking Exu in his choreographic bending of death, Gadelha uses precisely death to produce life, abandoning any epistemology that is not based on paradox.

Although following some aphrodiasporic religious associations, no scenic elements in *Gente de Lá* can be taken as literal and independent. On the contrary, each element needs to be read in a bias, by the logic of the crossing. There is a policy of bias in the corporal production of this performance. Red and black are worked on visually as poles in crossed relations; death is an act of enchantment for another life. The choice of working with “*funk de putaria*” also suggests a biased policy. The genre suffers a constant process of criminalization by the local power – funk carioca parties were banned and prohibited by the police in Fortaleza, for example.¹⁴ The confluence of sex and violence in the poetics of “*funk de putaria*” links one term to the other, but rarely in a dramaturgy of cause and effect. Providing a reading that we could classify as “*exuistic*” of the pleasure policy in funk de putaria, Felipe Ribeiro (2011) affirms that in this hyperbolic performance of eroticism, as a moral, social and political confrontation, pleasure does not result from confrontation. In a “biased” way, pleasure arises in the very “friction” that confrontation entails: “pleasure is conquered by the rubbing of signifiers,” so both violence and pleasure emerge from each other (RIBEIRO, 2001, p. 175). However, Ribeiro insists that the relation between violence and pleasure in funk carioca should not be confused with dialectics. It would be closer to the dynamics of desire identified by Homi Bhabha in colonial mimesis, in which the difference between the colonist and the metropolitan (“almost the same, but not so much”) is more a “slip” proper to the nature of enactment than to a supposed essence of one side. The difference as slip – and not as essence – in turn opens the way for us to perceive the surplus meaning generated by the colonial regime itself.

From the perspective of the colonizer, the “almost the same” discourse works as a camouflage to the “not so much.” It is a comparative reenacted discourse that consequently purges desire from itself, like a rest. In funk, as the reenactment has no other purpose than the reenactment itself, pleasure arises from a slippage, oblique to the reenacted confrontation. That is why the politics that pleasure entails is biased: because it unleashes the ability to break with the dialectical system without even

¹³ The “crossings” appear visibly in his clothing – a red T-shirt with a big black X on the chest, black lycra jumpsuit, and black and red sneakers –, in the arrangement of the objects on stage, with the T-shirts in cardinal points, and even even in the black and red bicolor of the speakers.

¹⁴ For an example, see: “Polícia proíbe bailes funks em Fortaleza,” Folha de São Paulo, Mar 9, 2001. Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/cotidiano/ult95u24097.shtml> (Accessed on Sep 17, 2020).

losing the confrontation. The confrontation is a virtualized residue; pleasure is an updated residue; both come from a conditional reenactment that in itself produces nothing. (idem, p. 176)

Funk demoralizes, betrays any promise of belonging of bodies subordinated to the liberal ideals of political subject, based on transcendental reason and formal understanding (FERREIRA da SILVA, 2019, p. 57). Thus, the sonorous-vibrating presence of *funk de putaria* in the performance cannot be confused with mere evocation of sex to make it a theme or metaphor for the “people from yonder.” There is no direct representation here, but, rather, bias. The evocation of sex operates precisely the slip, making an epistemic crossroads where violence and pleasure cease to be moralizing antagonistic poles and start to express and potentiate each other's biases, revealing, at the same time, the non-totalization of any one of terms. In a private conversation, Gadelha told us that, even when they are in mourning – as is often the case in the black territories of Brazilian peripheries – funk is, stridently, reverberated by nearby speakers. Violence, as death in Gadelha's performance, is politically bent in this sound stridency. Sex is not represented in *funk de putaria*, but rather catapulted into a musical performance that, strictly speaking, reenacts much broader political and social issues, such as the extermination of black youth and economic dispossession in peripheries.

This game between violence and pleasure permeates the entire scene of *Gente de Lá*. Although maintaining a neutral face, Gadelha's body movements are agonized, sometimes spasmodic and, almost always, expansive. There seems to be an intention to explode shapes. Interestingly, Achille Mbembe (2014) equates the slaves of plantations to a phantasmal subject, which is produced in the instability of form and content, in metamorphosis, in risk and in escape from oneself. It was in total instability that the slave was created. Colonialism, as a necropolitical regime, caused for the black a “process of transformation through destruction,” in such a way that only by “releasing oneself from the slave-form, committing to new investments and assuming the condition of a ghost can [black people] assign to this transformation by destruction a meaning of future” (MBEMBE, 2014, p. 224).

Perhaps *Gente de Lá* does not exist without the necropolitical experience of the peripheral territory and without a plunge into the “transformation through destruction” that underlies the black survival/supraliving/experience in this place called Brazil. Wellington Gadelha, a black man, former military and current dance artist on the periphery of Fortaleza, makes the scene a kind of *terreiro* [yard, where rituals for Candomblé and other Afro-Brazilian religions take place], manipulating biased materialities whose relations never come to be resolved in a definitive ending. The performance “ends” with another Orixá song, this time for Oxaguiã, youthful and warrior quality of Oxalá, father and creator of humanity, Orixá of peace. But before the audience gets up, Gadelha brings a microphone to the center of the scene and invites the audience to speak. The ending of the performance, therefore, is actually the open microphone, the invitation to speak.

On the night we watched it, a succession of poets linked to the hip hop movement from various neighborhoods in the city of Fortaleza recited oral poetry (in the style of *slam* battles), bringing to the mouth and to the word other ways of narrating this “transformation through of destruction,” which is black survival in the so-called periphery.

In Afro-Brazilian religions, there is a type of magical evocation that is referred to as “axé de boca” [mouth axé]: vibration, healing magic. The mouth axé presupposes the vibration of the voice to generate transformation. Apparently, the Ibejis, those who in time immemorial played a prank on death, in fact, have never stopped playing: even today, they seem to guide those who in the face of scarcity, extermination and necropolitical destruction have no choice but to invent possibilities, recreate their bodies and bend death’s will, as did their ancestors in the colonial system. Gadelha (like the *slam* poets who follow him) is one of those artists who plunge into death to make it dance and narrate, thus causing a shift in its effects. That is exactly how he answered us, when asked how the process of creating *Gente de Lá* started: “I needed to make death dance – death needs to dance.”

Final considerations

Although the “principle of identity and difference” predominates in the modern episteme, structuring the logical statement that is reproduced in our categories; it is an insufficient starting point for the issue of blackness, according to Ferreira da Silva. This author argues that a radical break with the very categories that support the logic derived from the effects of Space (separability) and Time (sequentiality) would be necessary, thus interrupting the order of modern thought.¹⁵ In other words, it is necessary to emancipate blackness from the scientific and historical ways of knowing that created it. Given the semiotic nature of raciality-coloniality, it is not surprising that art plays a central role in this categorical break with the representation that orders modern thought. As the performances analyzed in this article suggest, resorting to the aesthetic practices of artists who have been bearing the weight of this occluded violence on their own bodies can show us some clues to the performative dynamics that expose, confront and redistribute patriarchal cis-hetero racial and colonial violence. Often, by muddying representational mimesis, Brazilian black and indigenous performance triggers formal procedures and forges corporealities that detach the imagination from the racist infrastructures of modern thought.

Bending death’s will, making it dance, exposing life developing in the womb as semiotic surplus, and unveiling the paradoxes of the necropolitical condition are performative strategies that not only make political discussions more in-depth and complex, but, as proposed by the Amerindian perspectivism, establish new possible worlds.

¹⁵ It should not seem like a coincidence that much of the imaginative force present in black artistic, philosophical and literary production in recent decades finds such a fruitful linguistic and speculative arsenal in Afrofuturism and science fiction. Among people linked to the Brazilian black movements, for example, there has been increasing interest in authors such as Octavia Butler, a female science fiction writer, and Samuel Delany, a literary critic and author of science fiction.

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