

About occupations and displacements or how to organize fury and theory on the scene

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Abstract | This article proposes a debate based on two works from 2018 with important repercussions for the world of theater: "Is this a Black?" and "When it breaks it burns". These performances blend artistic, aesthetic and political experiences that stage singularities with the potential to spark novel forms of community. Bodies which are typically overlooked and rendered invisible in everyday life, here are united in vulnerability which proves its own form of resistance. In times of great fragility and anxiety, in art we find safe havens for new imaginary.

KEYWORDS: Body. Community. Performativity.

Sobre ocupações e deslocamentos ou como organizar fúria e teoria em cena

Resumo | O presente artigo propõe um debate a partir de dois trabalhos com importante repercussão na cena teatral desde 2018: Isto é um negro? e Quando quebra queima. São experiências artístico-estético-políticas que trazem ao palco singularidades com potência para compor (outras formas de) comunidade. Performances de corpos muitas vezes invisibilizados, unidos pela vulnerabilidade que se converte em resistência. Em tempos de precariedade absoluta, na arte encontramos brechas para a existência de novos imaginários.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Corpo. Comunidade. Performatividade.

Sobre ocupaciones y desplazamientos o cómo organizar la furia y la teoría en la escena

Resumen | Este artículo propone un debate a partir de dos obras con importante repercusión en el panorama teatral desde 2018: ¿Esto es un negro? y Cuando se rompe arde. Son experiencias artístico-estéticas-políticas que traen al escenario singularidades con potencia de componer (otras formas de) comunidad. Performances de cuerpos a muchas veces invisibilizados, unidos por una vulnerabilidad que se convierte en resistencia. En tiempos de absoluta precariedad, en el arte encontramos brechas para la existencia de nuevos imaginarios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Cuerpo. Comunidad. Performatividad.

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*to give up is a hard
bravery
we are programmed
to try
(Fábula, by Jarid
Arraes)*

2020, the year which will not be forgotten. In the first few months of the Covid-19 pandemic, Brazil was bombarded with reports that we were all equally vulnerable to the virus, often expressed as “we are all in the same boat”. This premise has rung ever more hollow if we choose to look at how glaringly social inequality has been exposed by recent events. There are many who have no access to adequate sanitation, who take overcrowded buses to work, who cannot work from home and who are forced to hit the streets because their zero-hour contracts don’t allow them rest or social distancing.

Thus, we have been reminded over and over again of our differences and the importance we give to the lives of some, but not others. While the marginalization of certain individuals is not new (SOUZA, 2017), it is now a gaping chasm open for all to see, and the fight for basic rights is more essential than ever. A colonial mindset, which while receded had never truly gone, now rears its head in times of catastrophe. Yet the greater catastrophe would be if we allowed the status quo to resume as it had before the pandemic.

Driven by the urgency and extremity but also by the doses of empathy that the present circumstances call for, we see new forms of radical expression and affect in response. In detailing the debate on empowerment, Joice Berth (2019) asserts that we should not understand empowerment as power that is ceded to others, and which merely begets patronage or seeks to invert the power relation between the oppressor and the oppressed. Instead:

[...] Empowerment primarily seeks social change through an active or ongoing rupture with the status quo, on both a collective and individual level, and with the power structures built to be hierarchical at the cost of the poverty experienced by the groups on the bottom. (BERTH, 2019, p. 53)

Throughout the 21st century, we have seen an immense desire for social change and collectivity, paralleled by a growing project of segregation. The past is revisiting the present and asking us about the future. A critical figure for guiding our arguments in this direction is the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe:

For much of humanity, history has been a process of habituating oneself to the deaths of others— slow death, death by asphyxiation, sudden death, delegated death. These accommodations with the deaths of others, of those with whom we imagine to have shared nothing, these many ways in which the springs of life are dried up in the name of race and difference, have all left deep traces in both imagination and culture and within social and economic relations. These cuts and scars prevent

the realization of community. And the construction of the common is inseparable from the reinvention of community (MBEMBE, 2017, p. 183).

Ruins, difficult to comprehend. Chaos, difficult to bear. Perhaps a fruitful path for new affect is through art, which invites us to look in other directions and to hear voices which have long been muffled. We think of artistic experiences which help us to reflect on our differences, while encouraging us to respect what makes us unique and allowing us to build on a shared community.

Community is built through common purpose but through shared memories too. Understanding what prevents us from building a community can be a good start for such a project to bear fruit. Henceforth we propose a dialogue between works of art and written theory, as the two pieces we discuss here execute masterfully, each in its own way, toward articulating certain poetic and political points about the social tropes that emerge when unity is achieved through dispossession and the notion of what is, or what can come to be, community, guides artistic manifestation.

IS THIS A BLACK? Or how to tell the same story different this time

*Is this a Black?*¹ The show begins. We see only a jumble of white chairs. Four black performers enter on stage, view the scene and take off their clothes – which remain on the floor until the end of the show. Together they start to move this mountain of chairs to the back, so as to open a space for them to continue. The mountain gradually loses its shape, an analogy for the hegemony of white people which is also in the process of crumbling and being reassessed. The chairs fall, scatter and break as they are moved. A black person's body moves around a white space... nothing will be as it was before.

With no costume, no makeup, a scene composed only of chairs; we begin to understand the focus on the body, the artist's body, the black artist's body – both male and female, the naked black artist's body. The nudity in the work seems essential as a counterpoint to the problem of hypersexualizing black bodies through the reiteration of stereotypes (PIE DADE, 2017). In these times of conservative backlash and the recurrent attempts to delegitimize contemporary art by justifications which seek to censure bodily expression, one can only applaud the courage to bare that which is under constant assault.

As/os The performers move through the dark holding only a flashlight and we don't know who is who. At certain moments they seem terrified, crawling across the stage; from the sounds we can tell they are in physical contact. When the theater lights up, their bodies are in a heap on the ground and they begin to move and narrate the movements they are doing.

¹The show debuted professionally in 2018, at a Social Trade Service (community center) in São Paulo city (Sesc Belenzinho). It has subsequently been performed at several festivals, including the São Paulo International Theater Festival (MITsp), the Santiago a Mil International Theater Festival (Santiago, Chile), and at the MEXE - International Art and Community Festival (Portugal). The show was directed by Tarina Quelho, written/choreographed by Quelho and Mirella Façanha, and performed by Ivy Souza, Lucas Wickhaus, Raoni Garcia and Mirella Façanha..

Their descriptions of their feet are as follows: “foot on the bridge, on foot in the holds, unexpectedly on foot”².

This is the first show by the group *E quem é gosta?* (And who likes it?), founded in 2016, through creative collaboration at the Drama Arts School of the University of São Paulo (EAD/USP). Their work arose from one central question: what is it to be a black man or woman in Brazil today? Through their many theoretical studies they have sought to answer this question, often by literally incorporating them into drama. These include such black writers as Achille Mbembe and Grada Kilomba, who discuss negritude and racial issues. The show is an embodied study of the performers’ experiences, which inadvertently became a must-see event in Brazilian theatre in recent years, despite having had no explicit intention for it to become a play. The director has said³ that literary research has played a central role in the creative process involved in its inception. As such, the show is a theoretical *mise-en-scène*, helping to put words to the experiences which the performers convey, either of a biographical or non-biographical nature.

The evocation that we treat social groups through a binary perspective is one of most relevant points of the work; where we often fail to perceive the singularities of each individual. We speak of homogeneous groups such as *women, students or blacks*. But identity is a forced construct. The performers’ nudity displays not only the physical differences of their bodies, but affirms the uniqueness of each artist in the scene. The artists frame the challenges we face, not merely hold up truths to be observed. As the critic Soraya Martins, states in her review of the play (2019):

[...] Cultural bodies, with vivid and pulsing memories, which serve as a register of what we know, as individuals and as a group, without having to resort to verbalizations, leaving behind the epistemological artifice of needing to transcribe experiences in documents. Bodies which spin tales. Not fiction as lies, but as the possibility of building a sense of identity, ways of living this world through black irises, of speaking/performing, much more than producing words: being able to exist..

Questioning is a recurrent theme of the show, with some questions often more rhetorical than others. The strategy serves to provoke the audience to reflect on racism, not so as to point fingers directly at another’s fault or crime, but to make us see other perspectives and to perceive our own prejudices. As the artist, writer and scholar Grada Kilomba states:

²This instance combines the descriptions of the performers when observing their bodies’ movements with the poem by Aimé Césaire: “And the negritude rise to their feet / the negritude / lowered / unexpectedly / on foot / on foot in the / hold / on foot in the / cabins / on foot on the / bridge / on foot to the / wind / on foot beneath the / sun / on foot in the / blood / on foot / and / free”. A poet and politician from the French overseas territory of Martinique, Aimé Césaire (1913-2008), was a fundamental reference for the research behind the show, according to the artists themselves. The debate held at the Process Sharing Workshop – Cast of Is This a Black? at the Heightened Melanin Theater festival was highly informative about the artistic processes behind the show: <https://melaninadigital.com/atelie-de-compartilhamento-de-processos-i-equipe-de-isto-e-um-negro/>

³Entrevista concedida às autoras em 29/09/2020.

In this sense, instead of asking the classic moral question 'Am I racist?' and awaiting a comforting reply, the white individual should ask themselves: 'How can I deconstruct my own racism?' Such a question then, in of itself, begins this process (KILOMBA, 2019, p. 46).

People, both black and white, constantly questioning themselves: that is the play's device. An endless inquiry into our places in the world and how they came to be. And further: what can we do, better yet, what are we ethically obliged to do to deconstruct this web of feelings and affect subject to a racist social structure?

Is this a Black? The scene now shifts to the questions asked of the audience (who participate in answering them). The performers take turns in setting a question and there is compassion between those who have the same answer. What they want to know is who identifies with statements such as: "We, the granddaughters of black women", "We, Brazilians", "We, the working class", "We, gays", "We, who have doubts when encountering racism", "We, who are made scapegoats for others", "We, who die in the corridors of public hospitals", "We, the children of public schools".

The choice to repeat the first person plural pronoun "we" brings the audience and artists together but also pulls them apart. To speak of "we" highlights that which unites us but also makes manifest our differences. At times it is impossible to see ourselves in others, but that doesn't mean we can't share the same struggle – but it means recognizing our differences so as to show all the diverse forms of engaging with the world⁴.

The mention of public schools gives them a space to share their recollections of history classes. With a *berimbau*⁵ in hand and two performers swinging back and forth in the background, they speak out about the classes which represented the history of the country as progress, and that today, as a result of black epistemologies, we recognize as the annihilation of many forms of life under the aegis of colonialism.

The performer speaking is interrupted by Mirella Façanha, who comes running from the back of the stage and announces that she has something important to say. There is laughter as she says she doesn't mean to interrupt, as her arrival is not at all subtle. Yet, the audience's reaction changes as she says she has been running for 500 years and didn't know when others would let her speak. She says that no one has ever offered the stage to her before – a kindness that she accepts with a mixture of excitement and irony.

"There is only one world!"⁶ This is what she wants to speak about. What she has to say will change us: "Even if borders are drawn, if walls are raised, if enclaves are formed, if we are hierarchized, classified or if some try to suppress all those who don't look like them, there is only one world and we all have a right to it."

⁴ This insight was made through a conversation with Ivy Souza, one of the performers in the show, on 09/10/2020.

⁵ "A single-string percussion instrument (musical bow), commonly used to accompany capoeira movements in Brazil.

⁶ "There is only one world" is the name of the epilogue to the "Critique of Black Reason" (2017), by Achille Mbembe.

Furthermore, she reminds us that humanity must be given back to those who have been wronged, that we must restore those who have been objectified and to redress the scars which prevent us from forming a community. The whole text of this scene by Mirella Façanha⁷ is directly inspired by the 2017 book by Achille Mbembe.

Is this a Black? The question refers to an object, not a subject. The question itself launches us into a realm in which it becomes an urgent necessity to face how Western eurocentric history has produced the figure of the Black as a form of subordinate humanity. According to Mbembe (2017), the Black is a fabrication which has been internalized, and this operation is something which concerns all of us, as a part of humanity. This recalls Vilma Piedade (2017) who wrote: "I am. We Are or we still need to Be. And when we Are, and not always encounter the delight of knowing Who we are... Racism declares in a voice which is sometimes soft, sometimes harsh, violent... No... you Are not..." (p. 20).

The question which forms the title of the show assumes a separation between the subjects, indicating the valuation of some with respect to others. The possibility of asking oneself "Is this so?" makes it clear that there are parameters for the affirmation of existence and that, by asking the question, an apartment was allowed.

Is this a Black? One of the performers tells us of their experience in a private school in 1996. The teacher asked the only black child in the class to stand up before his classmates and show them what a black body is. The teacher described a supposed difference between the color of the elbows and knees, and the size of the hips. The narration is punctuated by the other performers, who lift their arms and elbows so as to create a type of expositional choreography – exposition of history told from a different perspective, but also exposition of bodies as a way to objectify them. In this narrative, we recognize hegemonic history and the construction of negritude by whites.

When Mirella Façanha tells us the story of colonization by "white saviors" who invented the Black, the chattel-person, who "could" be enslaved, she shines a light on a historical perspective and more. She also makes the past an immediate concern, one which impacts our current necropolitics. Official slavery in Brazil ended less than 150 years ago and this past protrudes on contemporary life, a legacy that projects the place which each one of us occupies in the present. It is for this reason that Achille Mbembe (2017) defends reparations, restitution, and justice for slavery as political flashpoints, which will force us to create something else. This is not a case of victimizing one part of the population, but of shouldering responsibility by another. To mobilize the history of colonization is not merely to mobilize a history of pain and dispossession, but also one of movements, revolt and struggle. Mbembe's work represents the proposal of new forms of political imagination in favor of decolonization from European thought and against the subordination of the figure of the Black – just as the performance illustrates.

⁷The structure of the play is presented in episodes. That way each performer is the protagonist of their own episode. As such, we name the scenes according to the performer playing the protagonist at that moment

As Kilomba states (2019), someone can talk only if their voice is heard. She defends the act of writing as an effective tool against historical distortion. Some realities are often not even mentioned in mainstream historical accounts and books like Kilomba's can resurrect much-needed narratives which act as counterpoints reflecting white and black experiences. For Kilomba, opposition in itself is not enough; reexamination and opposition must act in complement, as only then can racism be effectively challenged and make visible those seen so far as the others.

Is this a Black? The screen behind the stage shows a succession of celebrities: Pelé, Michael Jackson, Neymar, Barack Obama, Beyoncé. What defines each one as Black? Why do we need to make this judgement? This scene illustrates the generation of discourse about the other, that which I consider different from myself. By engaging in definitions, we differentiate some from others and that which is expected of each one, white and black. For Sueli Carneiro (2011), racism "imprisons others with fixed and stereotyped images, while it reserves the privilege of being represented in all their diversity only to the racial hegemony" (Carneiro, 2011, p. 70).

The scene which follows was inspired by "Rize", as Tarina Quelho informed us⁸, a 2005 documentary by David LaChapelle about the dance forms developed in the outlying neighborhoods of Los Angeles. How to channel anger without giving in to violence? Perhaps by dancing. But a dance which is born from this energy, with no predefined shapes. This is also how the performers danced in the show: frenetically to electronic music. They tire but they persist and seek to support each other to keep the dance going. They move around in this shared dance, each symphonized differently to the pulse, until they sit down tired.

From fatigue comes a new episode – the scene by Raoni Garcia, an "ex-white" who testifies in the same fashion of shared support groups for former drug addicts. The performer tells us that he has always been white and that he only identified as a black man as an adult. In the same way, the theater director José Fernando Peixoto de Azevedo⁹ states:

As a nigga¹⁰ Brazilian, I didn't know what I was for a long time. Just like you can only lose your way if you had a path to begin with, I needed to leave, move around, with no plan in mind, so that I could run into myself along the way. (AZEVEDO, 2020, p. 5-6)

According to Azevedo (2020) this refers to a new form of productivity. Before, Blacks were subjected to processes of objectivation, now they are the protagonists in the scene. The black acts as a counter-device which "draws out the image of whiteness". This device and its exposition are powerful means for the audience to hear other voices and to be personally affected by problematic issues which seem like distant concerns. With the myth of racial democracy and the supposed Brazilian receptiveness to foreigners, there is an implicit understanding that there are no

⁸ Interview with the authors on 29/09/2020.

⁹ José Fernando Peixoto de Azevedo is also the head of EAD/USP, and participated in the show *Is this a Black?* through a collaborative process during the rehearsal, which helped in the dramaturgical construction of the play.

¹⁰ Note translation: the author refers to himself as "crioulo", an offensive word against black people in Brazil – in this case used in a provocative manner.

conflicts between those who arrive and those who already live here. Yet the show indicates that prejudice and the construction of discourse about others has many gradations. A light-skinned black person has privileges, but she or he is still black, that is, she or he will still be labeled as black within the logic which separates whites and blacks. According to Piedade (2017), speaking of skin color: "The blacker you are, the more racism, the more pain" (p. 17).

And so we witness the story of someone born from a conjugal visit by his mother to his father in prison. Lucas Wickhaus' scene, in which he sings and dances the song/poem/manifesto "Negro Drama" by Mano Brown in the style of a cabaret star: "Negro drama / Curly hair / And dark skin / The wound, the sore / In need of a cure". The Brazilian hip hop group Racionais MC's are always cited as an example of the political power of rap, as they articulate the universe of negritude and the struggle against racial discrimination through their lyrics. By appropriating the narrative of Negro Drama through their personal experience, the performer shows us the way that racist practices operate. And while the performer exposes the wound, it is surrounded by the affirmation of a theater and a show, by lights and a platform – the telling of the story is as important as the content.

Is this a Black? Racist jokes are told to the audience in the style of a stand-up comedy act by the performer Ivy Souza. There is great discomfort when thinking about what people laugh about in social circles and about degrading the butt of entertainment for privileged groups in society. While the jokes make us uncomfortable they seem to be tolerated, as we have already heard this kind of discourse so many times before. It's common enough to hear others say these things, yet we are all made complicit and witnesses to it, especially when we silence those who speak out.

Everyday racism is not a 'single attack' or a 'discrete event', but a 'constellation of life experiences', a 'constant exposure to threat', a 'continuous pattern of abuse' which repeats itself incessantly over someone's life story – on the bus, at the supermarket, at parties, at dinner, with family. (KILOMBA, 2019, p. 80)

The barbarity is so named, but it doesn't upset or shame us as much as other forms of barbarity. Differently from what the word Nazism does to us. There is a heavy silence in the theater. Why is the Jewish genocide so much more painful than Black genocide? Why are we shaken by the terrible methods which were used against the Jews and not shaken before by the terrible methods used against black and indigenous people? Ivy Souza lobs us these questions and acknowledges: "Whoa, I guess I brought us down... I shouldn't have talked about Nazism. The problem isn't crimes against man, but crimes against white men. But we were in such a good mood, I shouldn't have said anything". No one is laughing anymore. The performers look out at the audience. And us, how should we respond to this?

As Aimé Césaire has highlighted, Europe flinches at Nazism in response to the perception that murder and torture could be repeated as political practices on European soil, against whites and not merely in colonized lands, against 'uncivilized' peoples' (ALMEIDA, 2019, p. 117).

The show nears its end. The performers share their ideas for how to end it with

the audience, which involve explosions, setting fire to the theater or placing a bomb underneath the audience's seats. The final decision is for the cast to leave by jumping over the seats and walking out through the audience and leaving the theater through the front doors, where we entered from, and not through backstage. The breach of this space leaves its image in our mind and helps us to think how the world and society could be reconstructed if we all could enter and occupy the same space.

At the end there is the recital of one of the most famous passages in Hamlet:

To sleep! perchance to dream: ay, there's
the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may
come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who could bear the whips and scorns of
time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's
contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns ...
(SHAKESPEARE, 2007, p. 688)

The tragedy written by William Shakespeare between 1599 and 1601 is still a powerful legitimization of dramatic art. While the monologue above tells us a great deal, its appearance here leads us to think of Hamlet's desire for revenge, as well as enabling reflection on the distance between what is considered art, challenging prejudice, and elitist readings which we are often no longer capable of. Hamlet's monologue, like other classic texts from classic theater in the white Western world, has been digested by the memorable song "Faraó Divindade do Egito" ("Pharaoh Divinity of Egypt") by Olodum, a rhythm percussion group, which tells "the epic of the Gebi code", that of the Egyptian earth god Geb, which tells of community and asks for equality for black people. And as the music increases ever greater in volume, the performers advance on the audience.

It is not through swapping the sidelines for the center that a new statute of knowledge is reached, they say. Nevertheless, it would be necessary to warn about the fact that the operation is different here. This is not a substitution. Margins are veins of a system, and they pulse. Blood circulates in them. When they move, the so-called marginal bodies move the margins of the system, showing the provisionality of any and all centralities. In effect, what is at stake, above all, is to exceed the design of the boundaries that neoliberal reason imposes. (AZEVEDO, 2020, p. 17)

Experiences shared on stage, whether lived or invented, and the theoretical elaborations performed before us do not offer us answers, nor are they intended to. Speaking as black subjects in a structurally racist world, the

performers demand that we take a stand because we are all involved in this society. And we, the white female authors of this text, feel obliged, then, to think about our responsibility in face of all this, of our daily practices, of the language we use, of the theoretical references we adopt, of the themes on which we choose to write and the from which perspective.

It is problematic, tense and conflicted and, for this reason, we can no longer delegate to the future, nor can we blame the past. Wounds, injuries and scars are part of bodies, mainly black bodies, colonized bodies, bodies converted into merchandise. They will not be cured without recognition and responsibility, restitution and reparation. We need to change the operators to “overturn the racist spectrum that haunts our society” (HARNEY & MOTEN, 2019, p. 113).

Life without rights and marked out as the other is established as a new place of power. This comes from subverting established order and proposing another narrative, in which your experience is not only desired, but is what guarantees the nexus of the story that is intended to be told. Not the history *of*, but the history *for* and *from*. For this, it is also necessary to join forces and voices to guarantee its reverberation.

As such, the arts of the body seem to be powerful strategies to mobilize new readings and make corporealities visible. Another example we showcase here is that of *coletivA ocupação* (occupation collective), which not coincidentally has shared the stage with the collective *E quem é gosta?* (And who likes it?) on countless occasions. We must place our faith in the strength of what can be done in partnership. By bringing together those who can no longer accept the *status quo*.

WHEN IT BREAKS IT BURNS or how to jump over walls and occupy the world

*When it breaks it burns*¹¹. People sit in chairs cluttered around and placed close together. A buzzer signals it’s time to begin, the same buzzer we grew up hearing at school for those who went to public school. It could be the sound for the end of yard time at a prison, too. Schools, prisons and psychiatric hospitals are some of the first institutions that architecturally remind us of the rules that we must follow if we want to be part of society, built as they are to watch and punish us for transgressions (FOUCAULT, 1987).

The performers are among the audience too, yet we remain unaware of their presence. Little by little they stand out by beginning to dance¹². And they will continue to dance until the end of the performance as joy is also a revolutionary act when everything around us is geared towards dulling desire. “Erotic connection calls

¹¹ “When it breaks it burns” is a show by *coletivA ocupação*, created and performed by Abraão Santos, Alicia Esteves, Alvim Silva, Ariane Fachineto, Beatriz Camelo, Gabriela Fernandes, Ícaro Pio, Letícia Karen, Lilith Cristina, Marcela Jesus, Matheus Maciel, Mel Oliveira, Mayara Baptista and Pedro Veríssimo; directed by Martha Kiss Perrone. The show has been performed many times in São Paulo city including at São Paulo International Theater Festival (MITsp), and at festivals in Brazil and abroad, such as at MEXE - the International Art and Community Festival (Portugal). For its production at the Battersea Arts Center (London) it received a Debut Stage Award in the Best Direction category for Martha Kiss Perrone, who emphasized the “victory of *coletivA ocupação*, for their tenacity in being and creating together” in her acceptance speech.

¹² “The only revolution worth going to is one where I can dance” was the name of the first performance by *coletivA ocupação* for the forum Performing Oppositions at MITsp, in 2017. For further information about the troupe, go to: <https://www.coletivaocupacao.com/>

from isolation and alienation into community” (2020, p. 136) as the American feminist bell hooks writes. The high school teenagers who participated in the school occupation movement in 2015 and 2016 know this well. An erotic relationship with the world is not mayhem: it is a power of life that extends to all bodies as a way of resisting the death drive of the violent Brazilian police state, currently nearing a fascist endpoint.

The school occupation movement (2015-2016) was a mobilization by secondary school students attending public schools against cuts to public education due to budget constraints, but also in response to ongoing reforms to secondary education made with not consultation or authorization from the groups concerned. In São Paulo city, the state government planned to close many schools, leading to longer journeys to and from school for many students, and to pack many more students into already full and understaffed classrooms. Over a thousand schools were occupied throughout Brazil, which led many to dub the movement a “Student Spring”, in allusion to the Arab Spring, a wave of revolutionary protests which took to the streets in the Middle East and North Africa between 2010 and 2012.

When it breaks it burns. The performers are young, having participated in the school occupation movement which transformed their lives. They pass between the chairs, packing themselves tightly into a wall of backs turned toward the audience. They are the wall and they are the jump. They help each other to jump over the wall, which will put them inside the school buildings. Occupation. A concrete experience of microresistance which questions political architecture and the potential for generating new spaces of defiance.

The modern school, as a structure of authority and the hierarchical reproduction of knowledge, still conforms to a patriarchal definition of male sovereignty. After all, women, sexual and gender minorities, non-whites and the functionally divergent have only had access to it recently: a hundred years in the case of women, fifty or even twenty in the case of racial segregation, and barely ten years in the case of functional diversity. (PRECIADO, 2019, p. 184)¹³.

In this excerpt, Paul B. Preciado characterizes schools as a violent and exclusionary battlefield for young people who do not fit, as an institution that teaches conformity above all. Faced with this school, he sees the urgency of imagining “a micro-revolutionary school where it would be possible to stimulate a multiplicity of processes of singular subjectivization”¹⁴ (PRECIADO, 2019, p. 186). Who could imagine such a school?

When it breaks it burns. “We came from the secondary student movement. We occupied more than 200 schools in São Paulo”, they say. They show photos as fragments -

¹³ Tradução nossa: *L'école moderne, comme structure d'autorité et de reproduction hiérarchique du savoir, relève encore d'une définition patriarcale de la souveraineté masculine. Finalement les femmes, les minorités sexuelles et de genre, les sujets non blancs et à diversités fonctionnelles n'y ont accès que depuis peu de temps : cent ans, si nous pensons aux femmes, cinquante, voire vingt si nous parlons de ségrégation raciale, et à peine une dizaine si l'on pense à la diversité fonctionnelle.*

¹⁴ Tradução nossa: *Une école micro-révolutionnaire où il serait possible de favoriser une multiplicité de processus de subjectivisation singulière.*

of memory to show us, not facts, but how to discover another kind of school, one of affection and autonomy, self-management and a sense of community, care and acceptance. Through collaboration, one's sense of fear decreases and other emotions rise to the forefront - pride, dignity, solidarity, joy. Artistic pursuits reaffirm the power of placing oneself in the world as a political actor. Occupation as a social form of resistance. Performance as a way to reactivate it. In an interview with the authors, Martha Kiss Perrone, Lilith Cristina and Marcela Jesus¹⁵ stated that the show is a consequence of the political movement's success, and that it was due to their desire to remain banded together, the pleasure of wanting to stay together and share the unfolding of experiences in other fields. As Lilith put it: "wanting to exist in the world not in the way that they want us to exist".

On stage, the microphone goes from hand to hand. "Pasta is not cooked in cold water." "(...) because dialectical materialism". "Angela Davis". They begin to discuss ways of debating, of organizing, of creating a world on the margins of the neoliberal individualistic fiction of "every one for her/himself". The margin can hold such power. Onstage, in this space, the observation is truer than ever. In this collective landscape, like an assembly, the construction of a common brings to the fore new forms of existence and through networks allows us to imagine other possible systems to implement.

Thus, the margin is a place that nourishes our capacity to resist oppression, to transform and imagine alternative worlds and new forms of discourse. To speak of the margin as a place of creativity can undoubtedly give rise to the danger of romanticizing oppression. To what extent are we idealizing peripheral positions and in doing so, undermining the violence of the center? However, bell hooks argues that this is not a romantic exercise, but the simple recognition of the margin as a complex position that incorporates more than one location. The margin is both a place of repression and a place of resistance (hooks, 1990). Both places are always present because where there is oppression there is resistance. In other words, oppression forms the conditions of resistance. (KILOMBA, 2019, p. 68-69).

Once again, Kilomba invites us to start dismantling our racism, an exercise that is at the same time a process in favor of decolonization, questioning authority, legitimizing forms of knowledge, and of asking who is at the center and who remains on the margins of our social structure. "But who defines which questions deserve to be asked?" (KILOMBA, 2019, p. 54). The body and its practices. And now is the time for other bodies, other voices, not just the same ones we always see, to ask the questions, to try out new solutions.

When it breaks it burns. We see the social changes that lie ahead, but we must act to make them apparent to all. The play, the dance-struggle, as the performers call it, is staged as both an ethical and aesthetic work, a policy of social and artistic resistance, a collective force. We are invited into these student performers' universe, one of a fundamental dimension; these young people who teach us to transgress through engagement, freedom, change, giving value to

¹⁵ Interview with the authors on 22/09/2020.

experience, feminism, the struggle against racism, eroticism, another form of *grammar*¹⁶. This in itself all represents an exercise in decolonization and the de-hierarchization of knowledge.

Intimidation, violence and fear of police repression are also present onstage. The transition between performers generates movement within the space, forming a social choreography of proximity and distance that explodes to the sound of the French rap song *La Rage* by Keny Arkana¹⁷, and flooded by a red light over the whole space. Break, boil, burn. Anger helps to organize the resistance.

O que aconteceria se nos permitíssemos sentir a fúria causada pelo racismo? O que deveríamos fazer com essa raiva? Ou com esse desespero? E o que o sujeito branco teria que ouvir? Nós investimos fortemente na fantasia de que devemos ser compreendidas/os a fim de evitar um sentimento de desilusão e conflito. De modo geral, porém, não somos compreendidas/os, especialmente quando nos pronunciamos contra o racismo. (KILOMBA, 2019, p. 231)

In the performance, they speak out against racism in the words “Black lives matter”, but there is an even stronger affirmation of black culture and beauty. Be it in the personal testimonies given in small groups, or when young people testify to the importance of accepting their curly hair for what it is and reveling in their own beauty and that of other black women. We see this also on the musical accompaniment to the show comprised mainly of black artists, with songs that speak to non-hegemonic narratives that pour “gasoline on them”¹⁸, on the heteropatriarchal empire, sustained by the capitalism which colonizes lands and minds.

When it breaks it burns. Fury allows us to dance, to be silent, allows our bodies to be placed on each other with care, from whence the small narratives of occupation tell us: “if the shock troopers come in, the Black will be the first targets”. They know, and we know it too, but it still needs to be said. “(...) the notion of race is still an important political factor, used to normalize inequality and legitimize the segregation and genocide of groups that are sociologically considered as minorities” (ALMEIDA, 2019, p. 31). Silvio Almeida explains how the white “civilizing” ethos legitimized a racist structure, sustained not only by individual behavior but also, and above all, by institutions. The systemic nature of racism causes it to be reproduced in all instances of life, legitimizing the long cycle of violence and social disadvantages suffered by the black population.

¹⁶ In this section we have taken the liberty of freely citing excerpts from bell hooks in her book “Teaching to transgress - education as the practice of freedom” (2013), in which she narrates her journey as a student and educator and the importance of the educator Paulo Freire in the elaboration of her own thinking.

¹⁷ Keny Arkana is an Argentine-French rapper who is active in several civil disobedience and anticapitalist movements, inspired by insurgency movements such as the Zapatistas. Together with other artists, she founded a music collective named *La Rage du Peuple* in 2004, in the historical neighborhood of Noailles in Marseille (south of France).

¹⁸ «Gasolina Neles» (“Gasoline on them”), a song by the band Teto Preto (“Black Roof”), is included on the soundtrack for the play, and can be heard on the Transform Festival website: <https://transformfestival.org/event/when-it-breaks-it-burns/>

Of course there is the power of speech, but there is also the power of physical, bodily performance. One of the strengths of the theory of performativity is that it does not accept the normalization of social norms, nor does it fail to question how they pervade the lives of all those that are erased by them. Judith Butler identifies the street protests that have emerged in recent years such as the Occupy movements and those that took place in Tahir Square, as well as many less-visible protests, as a type of public demonstration that can be considered as “a plural form of performativity”, a form of political representation. Body politics, space politics.

Toward this end, it is imperative that we think of public space as a place of power, and consider who has the right to move through it, to occupy it, to “live in it”.

In a way, the collective gathering of bodies in an assembly is an exercise of popular will, an occupation and seizure of a street that seems to belong to another audience, an appropriation of tarmac with the aim of acting and speaking that presses against the limits of the condition of being recognized in society (BUTLER, 2019, p. 167).

Butler (2019) finds in this form of similarity a performative dimension of politics that insists on the interdependence of living beings, as well as an ethical stance to others. The author argues that, although these protests may be silent, they are able to show an assembly of bodies as a series of speeches crying out for resistance.

When it breaks it burns. Occupy schools and discover ways to be together in these spaces, united by engagement, organized through collective action, politically mobilized, be actors in their own processes of subjectification. The school occupation movement reconfigured these spaces and etched a history of struggle and resistance in its architecture. As Butler reminds us, one must animate architecture to create the conditions for transforming a place into a truly publicly space. It is the political dimension of the school institution that is affirmed in this experience.

The artistic performance appeals to the real as a form of theatrical political affirmation. Maryvonne Saison in her famous *Les théâtres du Réel* (1998) states:

How can we make the world speak today, show us reality, unmask what we would rather not see? There have been many attempts: the will to open your eyes actually associates multiple and heterogeneous proposals, both in their purpose and in their motivation. Two ways are particularly striking: the first consists of setting the scene, through documents produced outside the theater, a certain representation of the world; the second responds to the desire to inscribe theater more directly in social reality, to give the floor to those who were unable to access it (SAISON, 1998, p. 21)¹⁹.

¹⁹The translation of the original French: Comment aujourd’hui faire parler le monde, montrer la réalité, démasquer ce que l’on préférerait ne pas voir ? Les tentatives sont très nombreuses : la volonté de dessiller les yeux associe de fait des propositions multiples et hétérogènes dans leur porpos comme dans leur motivation. Deux voies marquent tout particulièrement : la première consiste à porter su scène, à travers des documents élaborés en dehors du théâtre, une certaine représentation du monde ; la seconde répond au souhait d’inscrire plus directement le théâtre dans la réalité sociale, pour donner la parole à ceux qui n’ont pu y accéder.

Thus we access this reality as spectators, and are called upon to show solidarity with the vindication of the audience as simply an audience, not to allow either economic or symbolic privatizations. Capitalism, patriarchy and colonization march together against popular assemblies of all kinds. The most important thing is to interrupt the reproduction cycle of this structure, and this only works through collective practices. We need the freedom to manufacture other imaginary, ones not colonized by the neoliberal fiction of relentless exclusion.

“We will gather the strength to continue the rehearsals of what humanity will be”, says the *coletivA ocupação*. And then another dance at the end, one to which all are invited. Celebration in the face of the imaginary of exclusion is a way of loosing new meanings, of the collective appropriation of space and of relational experiences beyond individualism. The conditions of the social world impose restrictions on our action, but as political subjects we each and every one of us have the both a collective and individual responsibility to create other conditions. Ways of imagining the commons in common.

When it breaks it burns. In the end, everyone on the street no longer has to be either a performer or a spectator if they want. The words below are those that *coletivA ocupação* end on:

We are organized autonomously as equal and democratic stakeholders, and we continue to fight and survive, here, today, now. We will occupy everything. We will occupy the streets, the schools, the universities, the theaters. We will occupy the world. Rebellion creates a new and collective body, an open body, a free body, a person body, a body collective. We may different skin color, different bodies, different hair, different beauty. And we must resist. What comes next? (*coletivA ocupação*)

What comes next is conflict and disputes, which after all form the basis of our polis. But reflection too, on the common but extraordinary, on that which wants to be shared, and on that which emerges from the corporeal relationship between the me and the us.

In fact, the very conception of human action as universally conditioned implies that when we ask the basic ethical question - how should I act - we make implicit reference to the conditions of the world that make this act possible or, as is increasingly the case in precarious conditions, which compromise the conditions of action. What does it mean to act together when the conditions for joint action are destroyed or collapsing? This impasse can become the paradoxical condition of a form of social solidarity that is at the same time sad and joyful, a meeting represented by bodies under duress or in the name of duress, when the meeting itself means persistence and resistance (BUTLER, 2019, p. 29).

When it breaks it burns. This type of artistic-political-performative assembly reminds us that change is urgent, necessary and must be profound. It reminds us that it is possible to create horizons, that it is necessary to unite in the face of violence and around a common struggle, it reminds us that it is time for “[...]the impossible and the unimaginable. This is our time: the only one we have left” (PRECIADO, 2019, p. 109)²⁰.

²⁰ The translation of the original French: (...) de l'impossible et de l'inimaginable. Ceci est notre temps : le seul qui nous reste.

HOW TO KEEP ON IMAGINING HORIZONS?

*one thousand times over
destroy eardrums
and panes of glass
one thousand times over sink
ships
and their precious cargo
(Songs of Torment, by Angélica
Freitas)*

The plays discussed above stimulate our desire to form relationships and think about new ways of seeing that which surrounds us; of resisting in a world that insists on separating us. Jota Mombaça (2016) refers to this as the *redistribution of violence*. She says it is about self-defense, not about spreading violence or taking revenge, but about studying your opponent's weaknesses and thinking about strategies to counter them. "The struggle for decolonization is always a struggle for abolition from the point of view of the colonizer and, consequently, it is a struggle for the end of the world - the end of a world. The end of the world as we know it." (MOMBAÇA, 2016, p. 15)

Imagining new worlds into being is an urgent task. In 2020, faced with the great indifference and trivialization of death that we witnessed from our government officials in Brazil, one which has a 500-year odd pedigree of death and exploitation, we have an urgent need to build a new ethical imperative. We cannot allow the dulling of desire and destruction to continue. It is the cracks that cause the wall to collapse, it is the dissonances that turn the story toward a new narrative.

With this in mind, Peter Pál Pelbart asserts that "[...] it is in the extreme of naked life that one's life is discovered" (PELBART, 2013, p. 34). In his opening lecture²¹, Pelbart (2013, s.p.) quotes from the Italian philosopher Antonio Negri:

Next to power, there is always potential. Alongside domination, there is always insubordination. And it is a matter of digging, of continuing to dig, from the lowest point. The lowest point is simply the one where people suffer. Where they are the poorest and most exploited. Where languages and the senses are more divorced from any power of action, and where the power to act exists regardless, because all of this is life and not death.

How to keep on imagining horizons? How can we work to bring new worlds into being? Perhaps with less courage and more enthusiasm, as Preciado claims when citing a long line of artists, activists and intellectuals including Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Fred Moten, June Jordan, Pedro Lemebel and Amelia Baggs. Enthusiasm is the affect that beyond all others leads us to the invention of new forms of existence and relation to people and things in the world. Arguing against neoliberal logic, Preciado states:

²¹ The lecture "Living is not surviving: beyond imprisoned life" was given on 10/07/2013, as part of the III International Seminar on "Medicalized Education: recognizing and accepting differences", held from 10 and 13 July 2013, at Paulista University (UNIP).

Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qaHSIm91OII> Accessed on September 4th. 2020

But it is because I love you, my brave equals, that I wish you a lack of courage too. I wish for you to no longer have the strength to keep doing what is norm, (...) to stop believing what your I.D. says about you. And once you have lost all your courage, you joyful cowards, I wish for you to invent a way to use your bodies. Because I love you, I wish for you to be fragile and unworthy. Because it is through fragility that the revolution begins" (PRECIADO, 2019, p. 117-116)²².

Against the imperative to hurry, to succeed and be right. In favor of stopping, failing, making mistakes, dropping out and impossibilities (RAQUEL, 2017). Against sweeping narratives and great monuments. In favor of small gestures, microperceptions and affective microactivities (GREINER, 2017). Life is more complex than the hegemonic and hypersensitive political regimes would have us believe.

The current climate crisis and the emergence of a pandemic seem to reinforce the sense of a common destiny in the face of extreme dangers. Such reality imposes enormous challenges to both thought and imagination, demanding new forms of perception, understanding and strategies for action. How can we keep talking and keep living in the face of such a catastrophe? How do we live between the living and dead? Our charge is to continue in this struggle, through action yes, but also through stopping, through discourse, but sometimes through silence too; one we must shoulder for those who are no longer with us and for those who will come after us.

We are approaching an unprecedented inflection point for questioning colonial and capitalist epistemology, as perhaps never before. It is not only the circumstances in Brazil that expose the contradictions in our global system of inequality, but we are undoubtedly experiencing the crisis in a unique way - the dispute over historical narratives, denialism, misinformation and the war on truth. Horror feeds on chaos.

In times of disorientation and fear, authoritarianism grows. In those times it is necessary to open up spaces and listen to the voices of those who are not usually heard, and to perceive those who are generally invisible, because they are generally not even recognized as lives worth living, people for whom we must cry out.

If I am to lead a good life, it will be a life lived with others; I will not lose that who I am; whoever I am, I will be transformed by my connections with others, since my dependence on others and my confidence are necessary to live and to live well (BUTLER, 2019, p. 239).

²² The translation of the original French: Mais parce que je vous aime, mes courageux égaux, je vous souhaite de manquer de courage, à votre tour. Je vous souhaite de ne plus avoir la force de répéter la norme, (...) de perdre la foi en ce que disant vos papiers sur vous. Et une fois que vous aurez perdu tout courage, lâches de joie, je vous souhaite d'inventer un mode d'emploi pour votre corps. Parce que je vous aime, je vous désire faibles et méprisables. Car c'est par la fragilité que la révolution oeuvre.

We must not only dispute narratives but imaginary too. We will need to break with the false equivalents that disguise hierarchies and inequalities; the exercise of control that not only kills, but lets others die through negligence; the colonial violence that prevails until today (MBEMBE, 2018). We need to care for one another, to comfort, to nurture, but without relinquishing our revolt and fury. To listen to other voices. To draw new blueprints.

Let us devour the map. Let us celebrate invisible births. Let us tell stories. Let us write letters to the future, so that we do not forget where we are now. More than that, so that we never want to go back to living this explicit and rank brand of necropolitics. We need to create the conditions for striving toward the commons, a society that belongs to all of us, a sense of the collective that intensifies life and amplifies the desire. And perhaps to achieve that, we will need to break, to burn and to ask our own questions, innumerable unceasing questions.

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