



First- Person Narratives in the Performative Practice of Marginalized Women and Decolonial Knowledge Production

Caroline Dias de Oliveira Silva¹

¹Universidade Federal da Bahia – UFBA, Salvador/BA, Brazil

ABSTRACT – First-Person Narrative in the Performative Practice of Marginalized Women and Decolonial Knowledge Production – The essay proposes a dialogue between feminist decolonial thinking and performance art, as they connect to my own experience in these fields. Based on the understanding that the decolonial perspective puts all Western conceptual and methodological categorizations under critical scrutiny, my objective is to advance discussion of performance by marginalized women, seeking to understand their role in the production of shared meanings through disruptive and anti-colonial writing. To this end, I examine performative actions that deploy such practices, which I understand as initiatives toward decolonization through embodied expression.

Keywords: **Performance. Women Artists. Decoloniality. Embodiment. Artistic Practice.**

RÉSUMÉ – Récit à la Première Personne dans la Pratique Performative des Femmes Marginalisées et Production Décoloniale des Connaissances – L'essai propose un dialogue entre la pensée décoloniale féministe et l'art de la performance en lien avec ma propre expérience dans ces domaines. Tout en partant de la compréhension que la perspective décoloniale place un biais critique d'observation sur toutes les catégorisations conceptuelles et méthodologiques occidentales, l'objectif est donc parler de la performance des femmes marginalisées, tout en cherchant à comprendre leur rôle dans la production de significations partagées à travers d'une écriture perturbatrice et anticolonialiste. À cette fin, on présente une discussion sur les actions performatives défendant cette pratique en tant que pouvoir décolonisateur dans la dimension de la corporéité.

Mots-clés: **Performance. Femmes Artistes. La Décolonialité. Corporéité. Pratique Artistique.**

RESUMO – Narrativa em Primeira Pessoa na Prática Performativa de Mulheres Marginalizadas e Produção de Conhecimento Decolonial – O ensaio propõe um diálogo entre pensamento decolonial feminista e performance arte em conexão com a própria experiência da autora nesses campos. Partindo do entendimento de que a perspectiva decolonial coloca sobre todas as categorizações conceituais e metodológicas ocidentais o viés crítico de observação, o objetivo é confabular sobre performance feita por mulheres marginalizadas, de modo a entender seu papel na produção de sentidos compartilhados por meio da escrita disruptiva e anticolonialista. Para tanto, discute-se sobre ações performativas na defesa desta prática como potência descolonizadora a partir da dimensão de corporeidade.

Palavras-chave: **Performance. Mulheres artistas. Decolonialidade. Corporeidade. Prática artística.**

Our speech shatters the mask of silence (Conceição Evaristo, 2011).

The Imperative of Decolonization: from objectivity to embodiment

The decolonization of thought is a prime imperative for knowledge production today. It is a challenge that is pervaded by issues of content and theory, and is taken on by methodologies and epistemologies that undergird the work of scholars, students and researchers across the disciplines. In the fields of art and language, it has become a project of extreme urgency.

The depth of this problem is linked to the fact that, historically, as Grada Kilomba notes (2019, p. 53 citing Irmgard Staeuble, 2007), colonialism not only meant “[...] the imposition of Western authority over indigenous land, indigenous modes of production, and indigenous laws and governments but the imposition of Western authority over all aspects of indigenous knowledge, languages, and culture”. This notion is also discussed in great detail by Antônio Bispo dos Santos (2015, p. 28) in his book on colonization and quilombos. He points out that since the arrival of the European colonizers in Pindorama¹ lands, colonial intentions were founded on a Christian ‘civilizing’ mission that portrayed native people as pagans without souls, legitimizing a generic classification of the land’s population under the label of *Indians*, and assaulting their identities with the obvious intention of their objectification and dehumanization.

Ailton Krenak (2019) also argues that the European colonization was sustained on the premise that there was an *enlightened humanity* which needed to bring light (reason) to the *darkened humanity*, that is, an absurd and violent enterprise “[...] justified by the notion that there is one form of earthly existence, one truth or conception of truth” (and only one) (Krenak, 2019, p. 7) that is worthy of worldwide dissemination. In a similar vein, Maria Lugones (2014) notes that the concept of Coloniality indicates precisely that the colonial past continues alive in the present, hidden under the veil of Modernity. Colonial paradigms were not overcome with the *end* of imperialism. On the contrary, they have persisted through the perpetuation of sophisticated instruments of genocide that universalize the subject of knowledge.

In effect, what has so many times been referred to as the monopoly of the production or the legitimacy of knowledge regarding who may speak in a society that has suffered the impact of colonialism, in allusion to Gayatri Spivak's famous query (2010)² is a mechanism that "[...] generated structures and institutions that produce epistemic racism/sexism, disqualifying other knowledges and other critical voices which pose a challenge to the imperial/colonial/patriarchal projects that rule the world- system" (Grosfoguel 2016, p. 25). This *epistemic privilege* was built through physical genocide against those seen as *Others*.

In her doctoral thesis, Sueli Carneiro (2005, p. 96) defines the concept of epistemicide as identifying "[...] one of the most effective and long-lived instruments of ethnic/racial domination" that has existed, and which consists of "[...] denying the legitimacy of systems of knowledge produced by dominated groups and, consequently, the legitimacy of their members as subjects of knowledge". Furthermore, this "[...] epistemicide, with regard to race" executes "[...] a persistent process of production of intellectual inferiority or the denial of the possibility to exercise intellectual capacities" (Carneiro, 2005, p. 97). One of the facets of this notion is precisely the fallacy of the white European subject as universal, that is, claiming an exclusive intellectual capacity to speak not only for itself but for and about all other human beings.

Regarding the universalization of the Western subject, I give salience to Achille Mbembe's (2001) interpretation of the critique of the so-called *universal self* actually based on the figure of the white colonial Cartesian man. According to the author, the *complex, general problem of otherness* was answered by colonial modernity through its worn-out Enlightenment paradigm. In this sense,

[...] To draw out the political implications of these debates, I should perhaps remark that, for Enlightenment thought, humanity is defined in terms of the possession of a generic identity, universal in essence, from which unfold rights and values to be shared by all. A common nature unites all human beings. It is identical in each human subject because it holds reason at its center. The exercise of reason leads not only to liberty and autonomy but also to the ability to conduct life in accordance with moral principles and an idea of the good. Outside this circle, there is no place for a politics of the universal (Mbembe, 2001, p. 177).

From this point of view, Mbembe (2001, p. 180) asserts that since the beginning of the era of colonization “[...] the principle of ontological difference has persisted” in such a way that Western discourse uses *civilization* as a category that “[...] authorized the distinction between the human and the non-human, or not-yet-sufficiently-human that could become human with proper training”. This marks the development of a project of objectification and secular domestication that was carried out through “[...] conversion to Christianity, introduction to the market economy and adoption of rational and enlightened governments”.

In the same sense, Muniz Sodré (2017, p. 102) is categorical in affirming that “Ontological *Semiocide* perpetrated by evangelists was the premise of physical genocide”, further arguing that

The civilizational violence of material appropriation was, in truth, preceded by the cultural or symbolic violence of monotheist catechism, an operation of ‘*semiocide*’, in which the sense of the Other was exterminated and the ‘exotic body’ deprived of spirit, seen as an empty vessel that could be filled by the representative inscriptions of the Christian word (Sodré, 2017, p. 102).

Therefore, as María Lugones makes clear (2014, p. 936), “Hierarchical dichotomy as a mark of the human being also becomes a normative tool to condemn the colonized”. She goes on to remind us that

Indigenous peoples of the Americas and enslaved Africans were classified as non-human species - as animals, uncontrollably sexual and wild. The modern bourgeois European colonial man became a subject/agent, fit for rule, for public life and ruling, a heterosexual Christian being of civilization, a being of mind and reason (Lugones, 2014, p. 936).

Grada Kilomba carries out a brilliant discussion of this situation by drawing analogy to *the mask*, a symbol of the policies of silencing imposed by modern colonialism. In her words, the mask “[...] symbolizes sadistic conquest and domination policies and their brutal regime of silencing the so-called ‘Others’: ‘Who may speak? What happens when we speak? What can we speak about?’”. I emphasize this metaphor because it will be central in the second part of the present essay.

Kilomba goes on to argue that, given the revelation of the dehumanizing historical wounds caused by *colonial trauma*, the only possible response is recognition and reparation. It is an uncontested fact that exposure of the

colonial *secrets* that have been kept under the guise of modernity, *order*, and *progress* pushes the colonizer (white men as constructed by phallogocentric heteropatriarchy) of our days [...] to an uncomfortable confrontation with the truths of the ‘Other’. Truths that have been denied, repressed and kept quiet, as secrets” (Kilomba, 2019, p. 32).

In the context of the need expounded above to decolonize knowledge, I would like to emphasize that white Western man’s legitimacy to speak for all other human beings in a generic and superior way was also called into question by the rise of feminism. As Cecilia Sardenberg (2002 p. 90) explains, the women’s movement not only denounced “[...] women’s exclusion from and invisibility within the field of science” but also “[...] challenged the very premises of Modern Science, turning it upside down by revealing that it is not and has never been ‘neutral’”.

From a similar perspective, Donna Haraway (1995, p. 18) had already asserted the need to understand that the supposedly objective, neutral, and uncompromising point of view of the men who had been awarded legitimacy to speak was, in truth, a rhetorical allegory that irrationally “[...] allows the category that is not marked by difference to claim the power to see while not being seen, to represent while escaping representation”.

As she puts it, “All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies that govern the relations between what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility, [a critical understanding that is] present in feminist understandings of the subject of science” (Haraway, 1995, p. 21).

In short, it is evident that the feminist approach has already “[...] demonstrated the historical, social and political nature of so-called scientific constructions”, edified by and revolving around man as “the measurement for all things”, a matter which justifies the “[...] questioning its supposed ‘neutrality’” (Sardenberg, 2002, p. 9).

Given the fact the feminism itself has, can, and must be questioned for its modern and colonial genesis, along with other forms of Western knowledge, I would like to emphasize that although I initially take inspiration from the post-structuralist feminist *tradition*, over the course of my argumentation I increasingly align myself with its decolonial strands, built

from the critique and even self-criticism carried out by other women thinkers. .

At this juncture, as Catarina Martins reminds us (2016, p. 179), we are no longer able to ignore the fact that “[...] the imperative of the ‘decolonization of gender’ has been a persistent demand made by African feminists since at least the 1980s”. In fact, from its very *beginnings*, feminism should be thought of in the plural, as the political thinking and practice of women on the African continent as well as Afro-American feminists (Patricia Hill Collins, Bell Hooks, Angela Davis, and so many other Afro-Latin-American intellectuals) have long been engaged of a thorough critique of the Eurocentric and imperialist bias of its white liberal bourgeois currents. Here, the legacy of Afro-Latin-American, Caribbean and Brazilian thought should also be brought to bear, with names such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Ochy Curiel, Sueli Carneiro, and Jurema Werneck, as well as the Africans, as Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, Amina Mama e Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, whose voices are part of the complex web of diverse black feminist perspectives of the diaspora.

Therefore, once we understand the “[...] immense heterogeneity of women’s concrete experiences, of subjectivities, needs and desires that are silenced and rendered invisible” (Martins, 2016, p. 179) by the homogenization of the subject *women*, it becomes essential to avoid the reductionism and naturalization of the word *women* that emerges from white, colonialist versions of feminism. This rings clear in Martins’ assertion that the decolonization of feminism requires “[...] a critical analysis of western feminism from the perspective of its own conceptual and methodological assumptions”.

Since it is clear that decolonial thought offers a critical perspective for the scrutiny not only of theories of gender but for all western conceptual and methodological categorizations, it provides the framework that inspires the present essay on performance art of contemporary marginalized women from the territory of Bahia, Brazil – at least to begin with. I examine its role in the production of meanings shared through disruptive anti-colonialist writing which is, following the trail mapped out by master Carla Akotirene (2019, p. 21), “[...] averse to the modern tools of scientific validation”.

Considering the essay genre as the form that best aligns with critical thought that is endowed with autonomy (both aesthetic and disciplinary), I highlight my intention as an embodied researcher (Messeder, 2018) to experience a *escrevivência*³. And here, I must refer to Conceição Evaristo (2011), who is responsible for coining the term *escrevivência* to refer to the writing that starts from the daily life, memories, and experiences of people of African descent, which includes her own. In doing so, she highlights the specific social condition of Black women in Brazilian society.

It is worth mentioning here that, by using the analytical and methodological category of *embodied researcher* as developed by the Grupo Enlace (UNEB/BA), I attempt to build a dialogue between the decolonial foundations of knowledge as a whole (and feminism in particular) and my own life/art path, highlighting performance as a decolonizing power. I understand that scientific research

[...] unfolds from the realities, thoughts, feelings, and experiences of ourselves and people around us, afflicted by the pains and wounds of daily life, engendered by traumatic dimensions of chauvinism, sexism, LGBT phobia, and racism that would appear to mute us. In truth, there is a recognition of researchers' biographical paths and the themes of their scientific research, focusing largely on way social markers influence our corporeal subjectivity (Messeder, 2018, p. 123).

At this point, I attribute particular salience to one of the aspects inherent in this theoretical-epistemological position, namely the dimension of embodiment, as a step above conventional notions of scientific objectivity. Taking off from Haraway's perspective (1995, p. 21) in which "[...] situated knowledge" involves the exercise of a critical practice of "[...] embodied objectivity", I align myself with her notion that "[...] we need to learn through our bodies [...] how to connect our objectives to our theoretical and political instruments in order to name where we are and where we are not, within the dimensions of a mental and physical space for which names do not come easily".

Muniz Sodré's valuable work (2017, p. 101) aids our understanding of the complex idea of embodiment. He resorts to *nagô* cosmovision to explain the importance of the embodied "self" as a new form of subjectification which recognizes the [...] great importance granted to the body, which

flows not from subjectification anchored in logical structures of representation but in the force of territorially-situated bodies”.

It is important to keep in mind that rather than *having a body*, we are embodied selves, and thereby freeing ourselves from dualist Western logic “[...] where thinking has to do with ideas, while the body limits itself to the senses” (Sodré, 2017, p. 103). Instead of the Cartesian universal *self*, the body is understood here from the perspective of the “[...] embodied ‘self’, expressed through its affective power of action, in tacit dimensions rather than as sign” (Sodré, 2017, p. 103).

In light of the above considerations, and speaking from my thinking-body, there is a veritable plethora of performance events being enacted on the contemporary Bahian scene that have resonance within our theoretical framework. In fact, each one of them would deserve in-depth treatment, wielding specific importance at the current historical juncture in which the military has taken over many segments of (inter)national (mis)government. However, in this text I will limit myself to but a few of them, placing greater emphasis on a performance of my own, in order to maintain a focus. Thus, for the explicit purpose of highlighting women’s presence on the contemporary art- activist scene of sexual and gender dissidence (Colling, 2018), I will look specifically at narratives of self or first-person narratives through practices of performance, as I am able to perceive them in the performance art of marginalized women. For these purposes, I turn to the infinite life fragments stored within bodily memory, for a discussion of the performance art of women amongst whom I am included, through a type of mirror in which I see myself and with a multi-focus lens through which I can observe the experiences shared by a group of women that is undetermined in its greatness and particular in its specificities.

Through my reflections on performance art, I hope to reveal how others relate to me, a dialogue with embodied dimensions as the “[...] very condition of the sensitive” Muniz Sodré (2017, p. 106). Uncovering what moves the performative acts that this paper encompasses may provide clues as to what moves us as dissident and/or marginalized women artists of our times. I thereby attempt to use writing to reflect upon what these performances bring out in me, as well as carry out research drawn from dimensions of my own experience.

Nonetheless, I do not seek to interpret or analyze performance events. I intend to present them only within the context in which new modes of making an anti-colonial and feminist art are carried out. This sets the pace for my attempt to reveal the experience that is inherent to performance art as process in which agency and subjectivity are produced, choosing the word as their instrument or force. At a later moment, I will speculate as to how they have influenced the context of a movement based on connection, resignification and network formation among women and engaging with other groups of marginalized artists.

In other words, this essay takes off, in the first place, from the premise that all the artistic practice carried out at a distance from academic research is as relevant and legitimate as that which is carried out within it. In the search to establish a connection between performance art, women's experience and decoloniality, I maintain that there are forms of knowledge that only the art is able to capture and diffuse. Art brings to writing the affective memory of that which has been lived, as well as a place of belonging and the dimension of embodiment.

My second premise is the claim that it is not possible to dissect performance art and understand all it wants to transmit, since a considerable amount of its meaning flows from the way it is enacted and the experience of watching it. Sensitivity is situated on the body, in here-and-now action; performance, as Tania Alice tells us (2014), is an artistic language that goes beyond the logics of representation.

Another discussion that is worth mentioning comes from Eleonora Fabião (2009, p. 237), who argues that the power of performance is to “[...] galvanize the relationship between the citizen and the polis, the agent and its context, the living being and its time, space, body, other, self”. According to Fabião (2009, p. 237)

This is the power of performance: to de-accommodate, de-mechanize, to move against the current. It is about searching for alternative ways to deal with the establishment, to experiment with altered psycho-physical states, to create situations that disseminate diverse dissonances: economic, emotional, biological, ideological, psychological, spiritual, identitarian, sexual, political, aesthetic, social, racial [...].

In this sense, I understand the effort to search for an interpretation of the performing actions I mention in this work as inappropriate, insofar as they speak for themselves as acts of knowledge production. Indeed, I affirm and accept the challenge of bringing my own experience to light, positioning myself a subject of processes of creation and observation process, in order to describe how such performative actions affect my own thoughts and sensations and thoughts, activating my own writing of the self from within the frame of my own experience as a racialized and marginalized woman.

The difficulty to talk about the present moment, while living it, activates the risk of falling into overly impassioned interpretations. At the same time, the opportunity to speak from current perspectives activates the construction of a situated and embodied knowledge, according to the previously mentioned ideas of Haraway (1995). My writing is not neutral, my research is not neutral, on the contrary. I write a living story and, in doing so, pose questions regarding the goals of philosophic commitment itself, following a path carved before me by thinkers and intellectuals such as Lélia Gonzalez, Djamila Ribeiro, Carla Akotirene, among many others.

Unmasking the Colonial Silencing Imposed on Marginalized Women

With the goal of speculating on my issues through the essay form, I move on to expound some considerations on the urban performance *Desmascarar o Abuso – Sair do Silêncio*⁴ which performance artist Talita St and I created in early 2016 and has been kept alive until today through subsequent re-enactment by other women. These are women I want to mention here, given the wealth of interchange and contributions over the process of (re)enactment: Morgana, Kécia, Shirley, Jussana, Márcia, Daniela, Dairi, Manoella, Tuti, Marina, Beatriz, Thaís, Abigail, Drica, Vanessa, Letícia, Sávia, Mafá, Bruna, Mirli, Luar, among the many other brought it to light again.

Desmascarar o Abuso – Sair do Silêncio [Unmasking Abuse – Emerging from Silence] began as a proposal for aesthetic-political intervention, as the title itself indicates. It consists of a woman who walks down the street, her face covered with tags on which words spoken by harassers have been written, forming a mask (Image 1). More than words, these are symbols of subtle and naturalized (but not less violent) abuse, that silence and objectify

her; ideas that are reproduced through undesired gaze, demeaning comments about her looks and unconsented touching, all of which refer to the ways in which women's bodies are treated within public spaces, denied of autonomy, identity and dignity. The challenge to the audience is direct: Have you ever heard these words spoken? And now, will you leave quietly and contribute to the persistence of this reality or will you help peel off this mask attached to the body and memory of all women? With each tag that is removed from the mask, the performer takes one step forward, makes one movement, lets out a cry, dances. What will the result be, will the woman then walk freely down the street?



Image 1 – *Desmascarar o Abuso-Sair do Silêncio* in Vitória da Conquista (BA, Brazil), 2016. Photo: Carol Dia. Source: Personal Archive.

It is important to state here that this action was also the creation of the fruitful and provocative development processes carried out within the context of the *Laboratório Corpo-Criação-Performance-Interferência (LCCPI)*, resulting from Talita's and my participation in a Program on the *Aesthetics of Silence*, proposed by another one of my teachers, Morgana Poiesis. For around four months of meetings, body experiments, readings, discussions and urban performance actions during the year 2015, we examined the question of silence and its effects on the body, time, the other, the city, etc. The performance took place for the first time in March 2016, during the

first edition of *Conquista Ruas: Festival de Artes Performativas* [Taking back the streets: Performing Arts Festival] in the city of Vitória da Conquista, state of Bahia. At that time, I made the mask on Talita's face, and she went out into the streets wearing it. As we had planned, the mask was gradually removed with the help of bystanders. With each tag that was taken off, the woman took a freer step, until her face was totally uncovered and she walked away, bringing the act to its conclusion.

It is crucial here to describe the process through which we reflected upon and chose the words for the performance, since the phrases written on the mask emerged from real situations, ones that we and other women to whom we had spoken over the weeks preceding the action had been through. As we worked on the tags, writing down words we had heard from harassers, we were obliged to revisit memories of violence whose weight and emotional content also became part of the performance, transformed through body language. The act of walking, as words were being removed with the help of people who felt moved to do so, emphasized, in turn, the process or search for resignification of daily forms of harassment.

In fact, this action demonstrated the imagistic, provocative power of performance, especially for women. The attitude of unmasking daily abuse – exposing spoken violence in the form of a mask that hides women's identity – becomes a revelation of the *secret* of objectification within harassment, that is, something that is naturalized and invisible and causes discomfort and/or reflection.

I believe that the excitement and power of the performance was also confirmed in the aftermath of our presentation, when other women sought Talita and I out to express their identification with it and to request its re-enactment in other locales. This led to other stagings and reconstructions, at the *Escola de Dança da Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA, Salvador, BA)*, in 2016, and in the *Universidade Estadual do Sudoeste da Bahia (UESB, Vitória da Conquista, BA)* in 2018, at the initiative of other women artists (Image 2).



Image 2 – *Desmascarar o Abuso-Sair do Silêncio* Belém (PA), 2018. Photo: Dairi Paixão. Source: Personal Archive.

Given the great impact of the performance, in May of 2019 I put out another call to gather women and organize collective action, particularly targeting women marginalized by cis-straight colonial structures of society, culture, and art itself: Black, indigenous, lesbian and transgender. The purpose here was to reconstruct the performance together, expanding its range and contents, embracing the bodily experiences, subjectivities and experiences that are silenced by multiple forms of harassment to which we are subjected on a daily basis.

Gathering a group of eleven women interested in staging the performance enabled me to engage in dialogue, interchange and experiment with each one of them in many ways on our diverse experiences with harassment and violence, culminating in my presentation of the collective act *Desmascarar o Abuso – Sair do Silêncio* alongside Beatriz Borges, Manoella Pedra, Vulpi and Agibail Nunes in June of 2019 at the São Joaquin Fair (Salvador, BA), during the (71)*Interferências – Mostra Itinerante de Performances e Intervenção Urbana* (Image 3).



Image 3 – Collective Performance *Desmascarar o Abuso-Sair do Silêncio* performed in Salvador (BA), 2019.
Photo: Breu. Source: Personal Archive.

As we had expected, the performance revealed itself even more provocative, something inherent to collective work. From our conversations on the feelings, experiences, memories and discomfort it triggered, new elements were added to the staging, such as the mirror - at Abigail's suggestion - to display parts of her body that become the object of undesired gaze on the streets, reflecting back the image of the person who is looking at them. Also, Manuella came up with the idea to ask those who removed tags from the performer's mask to write their own words on the performing body.

After the performance, we were motivated to explore and develop it through further actions. This meant creating new ways to confront the issue of harassment, highlighting the needs that were awakened in all of us throughout the process and generating ways to deal with the painfulness of *breaking the silence*, exposing abuse related to the violence against our bodies and subjectivities within public space. We came to identify this as the most relevant aspect of our enactment⁵.

As I mentioned earlier, I would like to make reference to several performance activities that bear a relationship to the theoretical approach I put forth within this text. They all address issues of women, objectification, and silencing, and build embodied narratives of self that counter the *single story* of passive subordination that Chimamanda N. Adichie (2009) has de-

nounced. At this point, I evoke my performing sisters who remain outside the renowned circuit of contemporary art, exemplary in their creations of performing actions that use the word: *Desbunde*, by Val Souza, *Corpo que sangra – Corpo palavra* by multi-tasked artist Tusi Camb, *Com-partilha* by Shirley Ferreira, *Escandalosa* by Brisa Morena, *Cualquiera! Cualquer cosa sobre todo en mi* by Maria Tuti Luisão, among others.

In all these works, silencing, obliteration of subjectivity and objectification are issues revealed with sharp and embodied power. I am thus reminded of the lesson provided by artist and researcher Grada Kilomba (2019) who, in her text, *The mask*, help us to understand historical process that renders Black women invisible, demonstrating the persistence of *colonial trauma* and how it has been unmasked through the voice of the colonized subject and unveiled by the action of performing women.

It is important to remember that the performances I discuss above took place prior to theoretical reflections and independently of them. In the case of *Desmascarar o Abuso – Sair do Silêncio*, I built my theoretical efforts as a branch of the action, a dialogue between practice and theory that could clear a path for further reflection on these complementary relations within the performing arts.

Performing actions put issues of discourse, power, and subordination into practice. These questions may then be examined from the perspective and the experience of women who have been marginalized by the colonial project, once they resist it and position themselves as autonomous subjects who oppose, question, and say no to the cis-heteropatriarchal colonial logic that perceives their bodies as publicly available objects of desire. They thereby resist the space of dehumanization/objectification that allows harassment to happen.

Performance thus functions as a language for creating first-person narratives that cast light on the presence of women as a subject of voice and knowledge, endowed with multiple subjectivities. Not the Western universal subject, but voices that recover their own territory of memory and produce their own ways of doing-knowing-living because they speak for themselves, based on their own life experiences. These facts lead us into the following discussion, as a preliminary, transitory and constantly-shifting conclusion, recognizing the power that decolonization plays in the art of per-

formance when it is enacted by women such as these, from a first-person embodied- self narrative perspective.

Performative Practice: self-narrative through the body

In the performance actions discussed here, words work together with the body as an instrument that reflects the need to speak about oneself, resignifying experiences of silencing and dehumanization. Undeniably, performance art bears this potency to bring out the authorial narrative, as Glusberg sustains (2005, p. 100), asserting that “[...] *performances* recover the body as a vehicle of artistic expression”, making use of the “[...] artist’s own body since most *performances* have their own creators as protagonists”.

To move ahead, I return to my intention of apprehending performative actions as a propelling force of the body-word as creative tool. This leads me to the preliminary conclusion that the action of speaking and/or writing our memories and experiences, proposing dialogue between them, means looking at ourselves and the world, interacting with it, resignifying experiences and thereby transforming them.

In this sense, Audre Lorde (1984) defends the power of transformation that exists in the exercise of writing, arguing that for us, as women, *poetry is not a luxury*. This applies even more to those of us who are Black, lesbian, transsexual, travesties, non-binary, that is, the group that I have been referring to as marginalized women.

When we write, when we speak with our own words, we share our unique experiences because, as Haraway says (2009, p.47) “[...] there is nothing about being female that naturally binds women together into a unified category. There is not even such a state as being female”. As the author explains, the category *woman* itself symbolizes a highly complex theoretical effort, “[...] constructed in contested sexual scientific discourses and other controversial social practices”, in such way that “[...] gender, race, or class-consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism”.

The exercise of embodied self-narrative, whether spoken or written, shows that we are here! We exist, we are many and diverse and, with our complex subjectivities, we resist. Thus, the practice of self-narrative reveals

the need to expose *truths* previously kept hidden as secret in the only possible place for women in Western society and culture, within the *refuge* of the private. These are truths experienced on a daily basis by female bodies that secularly suffer the effacement attempts of mind-body colonization, training and the structures and strategies of conditioning. Truths such as the dehumanization, objectification, and invisibility to which we are submitted, and to Black women, in particular. Performance art carries the power to give deep expression to these situations.

Performance practice with words impacts an art-making form that is essentially embodied, emphasizing corporeal dimensions of expression, especially when dealing with bodies marked – on skin and spirit – by violence. After all, we are talking about actions performed by women who are Black, lesbians and transgender, and thereby bear the intersecting traumas described by Kilomba (2019). Moreover, the central role played by the body in performance art is notably amplified when these bodies are dissident.

By casting light on the use of the written word in performance, as a form of resistance and resignification for marginalized women, my intention is not to minimize anti-colonial experiences of people, culture, and languages that have no alphabet. In their own way, they also build knowledge, art, and resistance. However, they are outside of the specific scope of this text, in which I examine the subversive use of a written language historically imposed by the colonizer, when mobilized against the system of domination it is wed to, when fissures and tension are created in forms of language and discourse.

As Grada Kilomba (2019, p. 27) has put it, language has imposed our silence within “[...] a history of tortured voices, disrupted languages, imposed idioms, interrupted speeches and the many places we could neither enter nor remain to speak in our own voices”, but we have now begun to speak in first person “[...] about resistance, about a collective hunger to let our voices emerge, about writing and recovering our hidden history”.

It is not a matter of awarding the word a place that diminishes other forms of communication. On the contrary, within performance, it is the body and the performer’s experience that are placed center stage, yet the use of the word is a part of the experience of these marginalized bodies within

the colonial: it must be appropriated. This is because we not only want to speak, but to have our demands heard and understood.

It is not superfluous to repeat here that existing colonial circumstance still determines who may or may not speak, which voices are legitimate and which are not, and within which spaces such openings or denials occur. Citing Kilomba (2019, p.27), in this perspective, “[...] writing emerges as a political act. [...] writing as an act of becoming, and as I write, I become the narrator, and the writer of my own reality, the author of and the authority on my own history”.

I return here to bell hooks (1990, p. 152) who reminds us that “[...] language is also a place of struggle” and the single history that is repeatedly told about us “[...] can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice”. Thus, the challenge is to use language and performance that uses words as acts of decolonization, through the opposition and reinvention that makes us subjects, creating a

[...] space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the oppressor [...] And one can only say no, speak the voice of resistance, because there exists a counter-language. While it may resemble the colonizer’s tongue, it has undergone a transformation, it has been irrevocably changed. When I left that concrete space in the margins, I kept alive in my heart ways of knowing reality, which affirm continually not only the primacy of resistance but the necessity of a resistance that is sustained by remembrance of the past, which includes recollections of broken tongues giving us ways to speak that decolonize our minds, our very beings (hooks, 1990, p. 225).

Learning with Lelia Gonzalez via Djamila Ribeiro (2017, p. 26), there is evident room for the criticism that brings “[...] reflections on how dominant language can be used as a means of maintaining power, insofar as it excludes individuals who were denied the opportunities of a fair educational system”, that is, how “[...] language, depending on the way it is used, can be a barrier to understanding and create places of power rather than sharing, besides being – among so many other things – an impediment to transgressive education”.

I also recognize, along with Djamila Ribeiro (2017, p. 90), that

[...] to think of places of speech for these thinkers is tantamount to destabilizing and creating cracks and tensions through which not only counter-discourses emerge... because to be ‘counter’ is to oppose something in par-

ticular. Defining oneself as counter-hegemonic still uses the dominant as a gauge [...].

In this sense, it matters that

[...] yes, these discourses brought by these authors are counter-hegemonic in the sense they intent do destabilize norms, yet they can also be seen as powerful discourses built from other references and geographies; they seek to envision other possibilities of existence, beyond the ones imposed by the dominant discursive regime (Ribeiro, 2017, p. 90).

Thus, based on the teachings of González, Ribeiro and hooks, it is highly relevant to uphold the intellectuality of colonized groups. This attitude firmly opposes the colonial idea that we are not capable of building knowledge within fields of thought, writing, theory and intellectuality. And this is not achieved through an arbitrary imposition of an epistemology of truth, but by provoking reflection on it (Ribeiro, 2017).

It is not a matter of an opposition between the use or non-use of words by choice or cultural circumstances and so forth, but about words that erupt as resistance in the context of struggle “[...] against the violence of destruction – racist, heteronormative and Eurocentric – to ensure our active participation in managing life conditions for ourselves and for the larger group to which we are connected”, as Jurema Werneck has argued (2010, p. 10).

In her view, these are

[...] connections that were developed despite (and from) the ambiguities and limitations of identities founded in external attributes imposed by dominant gaze, with strong phenotypic (visual) marks and whose amplitude of annihilation extends to include genocide and epistemicide [...] (Werneck, 2010, p. 10).

I return, once again, to the crucial contribution of Sueli Carneiro (2005, p. 10) on the subject when she explains that epistemicide is a mechanism that uses “[...] strategies of intellectual devaluation of Black people [along with other individuals situated in groups subordinated to colonial rule, such as women] or their cancellation as subjects of knowledge”, in other words “[...] forms of kidnapping, devaluing and denying their reason. At the same time, and furthermore, this is done while the white intellectual supremacy is consolidated”.

It is in seeking to confront this narrative that I gather women artists who use the word to question social established places of inferiority and objectification, as seen in the performance *Desmascarar o abuso – Sair do silêncio*, which challenges the taken-for-granted harassment of our patriarchal colonial society, through the use of the harassers' own words. Let us not be naive enough to believe that we are living in a world where knowledge and its multiple forms of production are perceived equally. Quite to the contrary, and as I explained at the beginning of this text, our context continues to be that of past and present epistemicide, built from the denial of colonized people as subjects of knowledge, from the devaluation of their ways of seeing the world. Certainly, the imposition of colonizer's language has been a major means to that end. That is why, by appropriating such a tool, other peoples have demonstrated their power to resignify and resist, neither denying their original orality nor legitimizing the colonizer, but standing on equal footing with them by using it to reveal their own life experience and their vision of the world.

As Djamila Ribeiro (2017, p. 45) and Patricia Hill Collins have reminded us, we must “[...] stake out possibilities to transcend colonizing norms”, that is, to use the power of speech to recognize the “[...] importance for Black women to make creative use of their marginal place in society in order to develop theories and thoughts that reflect different gazes and perspectives”. In sum, the theory we expound here is contrary to the useless rhetoric that does nothing but reinforce knowledge hierarchy: the inaccessible and ostentatious speech that excludes the common experience of people outside the academy. It is also counter to theory that only reaches a small number of people who take part in certain academic or artistic circles, moving closer to theory *escrivivida* in *pretoguês*⁶, referring here to concepts coined by Lélia Gonzalez (1983) and Conceição Evaristo (2011). And in speaking of languages, this is a good moment to remember Anzaldúa's statement (2000, p. 230) that, when within the academy, she felt “[...] her native language had been stolen from her”, I similarly feel it takes from me my own ancestral history. And this is precisely what I try to recover by telling another story narrated from the body. This is also what Jota Mombaça is getting at (2016, p. 351) when he considers “[...] theory as a form of art” capable of “tracing the limits of the form (of thinking, articulating, and

writing theories within the framework of so-called social sciences) of another way of new thinking”.

In light of all I have written above, to understand performance art as a language and also a way of thinking that moves through the body of the performer is to understand this body as a unity, where feeling is not separate from thinking; ultimately, it is bodily experience which moves thinking. It becomes, then, a feeling-thinking, since rather than *having a body* we are bodies. This counters dualistic Western logic which opposes thought and feeling, the former as the terrain of ideas and the latter as limited to the senses.

Haraway (1995, p. 30) speaks of “[...] feminist embodiment” seeking to develop a “[...] feminist writing on the body”, a form of committed and situated critical thought that is built “[...] from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structured and structuring body”. This contrasts with “[...] the view from above, from nowhere, a simplified vision”.

Thus, we see that the embodiment dimension based on the lived experience of women who are performing artists goes way beyond mere use of the body. Rather, it is able to galvanize an artistic practice that can become a decolonial feminist writing of experience. I see performance as an art form that is capable of revealing this complexity creating imagetic references and counternarratives of another way of *being woman*. As Tania Alice (2014, p. 34) puts it “[...] performance does not represent, performance is; it transforms, recreates, reshapes current models, making visible and tangible the unseen and the intangible, and proposes alternatives for transformation. It believes. It pushes forward”.

When I emphasize the *word* connecting these performative actions, I am giving salience to its power as a tool to express subjectivities, against epistemicide. As Haraway (2009, p. 85) describes in her brilliant *Cyborg Manifesto*, literacy has crucial importance to marginalized women, and “[...] they risk their lives to learn and to teach how to read and write”. This observation reminds me of Maria Bethânia, when she sings out, with all her sensitivity, “I will learn to write to teach my comrades [...]”.

Thus, I make Haraway’s words (1985, p. 86) mine when she states that

[...] writing has a special significance for all colonized groups. Writing has been crucial to the Western myth of the distinction between oral and written cultures, primitive and civilized mentalities, and more recently to the erosion of that distinction in ‘post-modernist’ theories attacking the phallogocentrism of the West, with its worship of the monotheistic, phallic, authoritative, and singular work, the unique and perfect name. Contests for the meanings of writing are a major form of contemporary political struggle. Releasing the play of writing is deadly serious. The poetry and stories of US women of color are repeatedly about writing, about access to the power to signify; but this time that power must be neither phallic nor innocent.

According to this new decolonial-feminist-cyborg perspective, the use of the word “[...]” has to do with the power to survive, not on the basis of original innocence, but on the basis of seizing the tools to mark the world that marked [these women] as others.”

At this point, I invite the readers of this text to return to the performance *Desmascarar o abuso – Sair do Silêncio* and engage in their own autonomous reflections on the *theoretical* commitments expounded here. I believe there is no mystery to decipher in Djamila Ribeiro’s argument that

The use of the place of speech does not take the isolated experience of individuals as its premise, but rather, the multiple conditions that result in the inequalities and hierarchies that generate subordinated groups. The experience of these groups, socially located in hierarchical and non-humanized places, causes their intellectual production, knowledge and voices to be treated as subaltern. Furthermore, their social condition keeps them in a structurally-silenced position. However, this does not mean that such groups do not create tools to face institutional silencing. On the contrary, there are many forms of political, cultural, and intellectual organization. The point is that social conditions limit the visibility and legitimacy of these productions (Ribeiro, 2017, p. 63).

Desmascarar o abuso – Sair do Silêncio, as well as the other performance actions that I have mentioned, find resonance in the brilliant words of Djamila that summarize what I have attempted to express in the intellectual thrust of this essay: “Speaking does not limit itself to the act of pronouncing words; it means to be able to exist” (Ribeiro, 2017, p. 64).

It is also worth returning to the teachings of Audre Lorde (1984, 2017, p. 64) when she speaks of “[...]” poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the distorted meaning

that white patriarchs have given to it – in order to respond to a desperate wish for imagination without insight”.

I do not believe it is an exaggeration to identify performance art as a *revelatory distillation* of experience and, embracing Lorde’s view of poetry, consider it meaningful to approach performance art in a similar way,

[...] For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives (Lorde, 1984, p. 1).

Given all that I have expounded above, through words, memories, and feelings, I believe it is appropriate to conclude this essay which examines the performance of women artists as a decolonizing power that begins with embodied self-narrative by citing Conceição Evaristo’s (2011) work *Insubmissas Lágrimas de Mulheres* [The Irreverent Tears of Women]. As she so eloquently puts it, “And, when one writes, the commitment (or lack thereof) between what has been experienced and what has been written is dug even deeper. Yet I assert that, in writing these stories down, I am continuing my deliberate act of mapping out my *escrevivência*” (Evaristo, 2011, p. 9).

Notes

- ¹ Pindorama is a Tupi-Guarani expression that means Terra das Palmeiras (Land of Palm Trees) and designates all the regions and territories that we call South America today.
- ² See the book *Can the Subaltern Speak?* written by this Indian postcolonial critic and theorist.
- ³ A portmanteau of the Portuguese words *escrever* (to write), and *vivência* (that which is lived, roughly equivalent to lived experience).
- ⁴ Unmask Abuse – Leave Silence
- ⁵ Available at: <<https://youtu.be/qTstutI-Z0Sg>>. Accessed on: Mar. 02, 2020.
- ⁶ A portmanteau of portuguese words *preto* (black) and *português* (portuguese) coined by Lélia Gonzalez (1983) to exalt a trace of Africanization of the Portu-

guese spoken in Brazil as a political claim for the effective contribution of black African culture to Brazilian linguistic identity. The expression is culturally analogous to the a reference to blackenglish.

References

- AKOTIRENE, Carla. **Interseccionalidade**. São Paulo: Pólen, 2019.
- ALICE, Tania. **Diluição das fronteiras entre linguagens artísticas**: a performance como (r)evolução dos afetos. Catálogo Nacional do SESC - Reflexões sobre a linguagem da performance no Brasil. "O que é performance?", 2014. Available at: <http://taniaalice.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/palco2014_Artigo_Tania.pdf>. Accessed on: July 15th, 2019.
- ANZALDÚA, Gloria. Falando em línguas: uma carta para as mulheres escritoras do terceiro mundo. **Estudos Feministas**, Florianópolis, v. 8, n. 1, p. 229-236, 2000. (originally published in 1981).
- CARNEIRO, Sueli A. **A construção do outro como não-ser como fundamento do ser**. 2005. Tese (Doutorado em Educação) – Programa de Pós-Graduação em Educação, Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo, 2005.
- COLLING, Leandro. A emergência dos ativismos das dissidências sexuais e de gêneros no Brasil da atualidade. **Revista Sala Preta**, São Paulo, v. 18, n. 1, p. 152-167, 2018.
- EVARISTO, Conceição. **Insubmissas lágrimas de mulheres negras**. Belo Horizonte: Nandyala, 2011.
- FABIÃO, Eleonora. Performance e teatro: poéticas e políticas da cena contemporânea. **Revista Sala Preta**, São Paulo, v. 8, p. 235-246, 2009.
- GLUSBERG, Jorge. **A Arte da Performance**. Translation by Renato Cohen. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2005.
- GONZALEZ, Lélia. Racismo e sexismo na cultura brasileira. In: SILVA, Luiz Antônio Machado et al. **Ciências Sociais Hoje 2**: movimentos sociais urbanos, minorias e outros estudos. Brasília: ANPOCS, 1983. P. 223-244.
- GROSGOUEL, Ramón. A estrutura do conhecimento nas universidades ocidentalizadas: racismo/sexismo epistêmico e os quatro genocídios/epistemicídios do longo século XVI. Translated by Fernanda Miguens, Maurício Barros de Cas-

tro and Rafael Maieiro, revised by Joaze Bernardino-Costa. **Revista Sociedade e Estado**, Brasília, v. 31, n. 1, jan./abr. 2016.

HARAWAY, Donna. Saberes localizados: questão da ciência para o feminismo e o privilégio da perspectiva parcial. **Cadernos Pagu**, Campinas, v. 5, p. 07-41, 1995.

HARAWAY, Donna. Manifesto ciborgue: Ciência, tecnologia e feminismo-socialista no final do século XX. In: TADEU, Tomaz (org.). **Antropologia do Ciborgue: as vertigens do pós-humano**. 2. ed. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2009. P. 33-118.

hooks, bell. **Yearning: Race, Gender and Culture Politics**. Cambridge: South End Press, 1990.

KILOMBA, Grada. **Memórias da plantação: episódios do racismo cotidiano**. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Cobogó, 2019.

KRENAK, Ailton. **Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo**. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019.

LORDE, Audre. Poetry is no luxury. In: LORDE, Audre. **Sister Outsider: essays and speeches**. New York: The Crossing Press Feminist Series, 1984. (Tradução de Tatiana Nascimento do ensaio Poesia não é um luxo). Available at: <<https://traduzidas.wordpress.com/2013/07/13/poesia-nao-e-um-luxo-de-audre-lorde/>>. Accessed on: Jun. 21, 2019.

LUGONES, María. Rumo ao feminismo decolonial. **Revista Estudos Feministas**, Santa Catarina, v. 23, n. 3, p. 935-952, 2014.

MARTINS, Catarina. Mulheres poderosas: gênero, raça, sexualidade, classe, nação e outras categorias nômadas na literatura contemporânea de mulheres africanas. In: COLLING, Leandro (org.). **Dissidências Sexuais e de Gênero**. Salvador: Edufba, 2016. P. 179-191.

MBEMBE, Achille. As Formas Africanas de Auto-Inscrição. **Revista Estudos Afro-Asiáticos**, Rio de Janeiro, a. 23, n. 1, p. 171-209, 2001.

MESSEDER, Suely. Memórias e cenas narradas sobre a infância e as relações de gênero na linha de vida da professora universitária e da pesquisadora encarnada. **Periódicus - Revista de estudos interdisciplinares em gêneros e sexualidades**, Salvador, v. 1, n. 9, maio/out. 2018.

MOMBAÇA, Jota. **Rumo a uma redistribuição desobediente de gênero e anti-colonial da violência**. São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016. Available

at:

<https://issuu.com/amilcarpacker/docs/rumo_a_uma_redistribuicao_a_o_da_vi>.

Accessed on: Nov 28th, 2019.

RIBEIRO, Djamila. **O que é lugar de fala?** Coleção Feminismos plurais. Belo Horizonte: Letramento, 2017.

SANTOS, Antônio Bispo dos. **Colonização, Quilombos:** modos e significações. Brasília: UNB, 2015.

SARDENBERG, Cecília Maria Bacellar. Da Crítica Feminista à Ciência. Uma Ciência Feminista? In: COSTA, Ana Alice Alcântara; SARDENBERG, Cecília Maria Bacellar (org.). **Feminismo, Ciência e Tecnologia.** Salvador: Coleção Bahianas, 2002. P. 89-129.

SODRÉ, Muniz. **Pensar Nagô.** Petrópolis: Vozes, 2017.

SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty. **Pode o subalterno falar?** Translation by Sandra Regina Goulart Almeida, Marcos Pereira Feitosa, André Pereira Feitosa. Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2010.

WERNECK, Jurema. Nossos passos vêm de longe! Movimentos de mulheres negras e estratégias políticas contra o sexismo o racismo. **Revista da ABPN**, Uberlândia, v. 1, n. 1, p. 8-17, 2010.

Carol Dia is a Brazilian *sertaneja*, lesbian, wanderer, performer, poet, writer, artisan, consultant on academic writing, cultural agent, and is currently a graduate student in the Multidisciplinary Graduate Program in Culture and Society at the *Universidade Federal da Bahia (UFBA)* at the Master's Level. Her thesis project is the research-performance *Underground – Tracing paths of escrevivência and re-signification of marginalized women through performance art*. She is an anti-colonial researcher, affiliated with research group on Lesbianities, Intersectionality, and Feminisms in the *Núcleo de pesquisa e extensão em Culturas, Gêneros e Sexualidades* at *Universidade Federal da Bahia (NuCus/UFBA)* and the Programa de Pesquisa e Extensão AnDanças at *Universidade da Integração Internacional da Lusofonia Afro-Brasileira (UNILAB-Malês)*.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7513-5642>

E-mail: diasdecarol@gmail.com

This original paper, translated by Maria Victoria González and proofread by Miriam Adelman, is also published in Portuguese in this issue of the journal.



Received on July 29, 2019

Accepted on March 05, 2020

Editor-in-charge: Celina Nunes de Alcântara

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International. Available at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>.