

Women of the Sea: performative practices as a critique of Brazilian patriarchal colonial myths

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ABSTRACT – Women of the Sea: performative practices as a critique of Brazilian patriarchal colonial myths – The text analyses the *Mulheres do Mar* (Women of the Sea) project, conducted with elderly women from the Serviluz community in Fortaleza (CE). Through performance workshops, the colonial myth *Iracema*, by José de Alencar, was challenged. Feminist analyses in conjunction with Diana Taylor's approach to archives and repertoires underpin the critique of the novel. Next, aspects of the methodological approach to creation are shared, with an emphasis on cartographies of the self. It reflects on how the collective development of a counter-narrative to the patriarchal heritage summarised in *Iracema* contributes to the debate on decolonial artistic-pedagogical practices.

Keywords: **Performative Practices. Feminism. Decolonial. Memory. Archive.**

RÉSUMÉ – Mulheres do Mar: pratiques performatives comme critique des mythes coloniaux patriarcaux brésiliens – Le texte analyse le projet *Mulheres do Mar*, mené avec des femmes âgées de la communauté Serviluz à Fortaleza (CE). Par le biais d'ateliers de pratiques performatives, le mythe colonial *Iracema*, de José de Alencar, a été remis en question. Des analyses féministes articulées avec l'approche des archives et des répertoires de Diana Taylor étayent la critique du roman. Ensuite, des aspects de l'approche méthodologique de la création sont partagés, en mettant l'accent sur les cartographies de soi. La réflexion porte sur la manière dont l'élaboration collective d'un contre-récit à l'héritage patriarcal résumé dans *Iracema* contribue au débat sur les pratiques artistico-pédagogiques décoloniales.

Mots-clés: **Pratiques Performatives. Féminisme. Décolonial. Mémoire. Archives.**

RESUMO – Mulheres do Mar: práticas performativas como crítica aos mitos coloniais patriarcais brasileiros – O texto analisa o projeto *Mulheres do Mar*, realizado com idosas da comunidade Serviluz em Fortaleza (CE). Através de oficinas de práticas performativas, questionou-se o mito colonial *Iracema*, de José de Alencar. Análises feministas articuladas com a abordagem dos arquivos e repertórios de Diana Taylor fundamentam a crítica do romance. Em seguida, compartilham-se aspectos da abordagem metodológica de criação, com ênfase nas cartografias de si. Reflete-se como a elaboração coletiva de uma contranarrativa à herança patriarcal sintetizada em *Iracema* contribui para o debate sobre práticas artístico-pedagógicas decoloniais.

Palavras-chave: **Práticas Performativas. Feminismo. Decolonial. Memória. Arquivo.**

Introduction

Can creative processes and the learning of performative practices challenge standardised archives in the contemporary imaginary that still reveal shadows of a colonial past? How can we stimulate and enable counter-narratives to the patriarchal heritage summarised in colonial myths? How can participatory art projects carried out with women in territories traversed by social, economic and political tensions question the colonial patriarchal structure and allow devices and platforms to share these counter-narratives?

These questions inspired the creation of the performative practices workshop project that resulted in the participatory cartography *Mulheres do Mar*¹ (Women of the Sea), held in the community of Serviluz, in Fortaleza/CE, between 2019 and 2021, involving women² aged between 65 and 90, novices in the Performing Arts. This article aims to explore some of the theoretical and methodological principles of these workshops and their outcomes in an attempt to answer the following question: how do performative games connected with an autobiographical approach make it possible to create a cartographic counter-narrative to the colonial patriarchal archive *Iracema*, written by José de Alencar?

The novel and its author have been elements of national canonical culture for decades. It's part of the school curriculum, has been adapted into films, samba school themes, comic strips and the main character has been the inspiration for monuments and street names in Brazilian cities. In Ceará, the author's homeland, the encounter between the indigenous Tabajara woman and the Portuguese invader, Martim Soares Moreno, was considered the founding myth of the local culture by the state government³. However, the constant repetition of this narrative, which symbolises the colonisation process in a romanticised way, reiterates gender policies imposed on women, marked by the perversity of slavery and patriarchal domination.

Initially, we discuss the notions of patriarchy and coloniality in the light of decolonial feminist theories, articulated with Diana Taylor's (2013) notions of archive and repertoire, in order to analyse the novel *Iracema* (2019). Next, we explain the reasons for choosing the Serviluz territory and discuss the main procedures carried out in the performative practice work-

shops, with an emphasis on the approach to the cartographies of the self, as well as commenting on the results of interviews with project participants.

The presence of feminist and gender studies in Performing Arts research dismantles epistemological hegemony, questioning the submission to patriarchal discourse to which women have been subjected in activities linked to the production of knowledge. In Brazil, the intersection between these two fields is found in the studies of Dodi Leal, Lúcia Romano, Marta Baião, Nina Caetano, Sarah Duarte, Stela Fischer and Yasmin Nogueira, among others. The multiplicity of research resulted in the creation of the *Mulheres da Cena* (Women of the Stage) Working Group at the *Associação Brasileira de Pesquisa e Pós-graduação em Artes Cênicas* (Brazilian Association for Research and Postgraduate Studies in the Performing Arts) (ABRACE).

Our goal is to contribute to a reflection on the creation and learning of participatory performance practices carried out in the Northeast by analysing a practice with women who formulated a counter-narrative to a Ceará myth that took on national dimensions. In this sense, we would also like to highlight the focus of the research group *Mito, Rito e Cartografias Feministas nas Artes* (MOTIM – Myth, Rite and Feminist Cartographies in the Arts), coordinated by Professor Luciana Lyra, which addresses the complexity of the power of myth and seeks to dilute the boundaries that make work from the Northeast invisible.

Iracema, myth of the Colonial Patriarchy's formation

Iracema, a novel published in 1865 by José de Alencar from Ceará, depicts, through the meeting of two characters, an idealised plot based on the colonisation process that unfolded on the Brazilian coast. In a metaphorical plot, we are introduced to Martim Soares Moreno, “a young warrior whose white complexion is not coloured by American blood” (Alencar, 2019, p. 15), a Portuguese coloniser with a first name that refers to the Roman god Mars, whose characteristics are aggression and violence. Then there is Iracema, a Tabajara Indian, whose name in Guarani means “the virgin with the honey lips” (Alencar, 2019, p. 16), an explicit reference to the sexuality and *sweet* personality of the Brazilian natives.

At the beginning of the novel, in a moment of rest, Iracema realises that she is being watched by a strange warrior; she, in her naked vulnerabil-

ity, and he, dressed not only in cloth, but armed with weapons. Feeling threatened, she immediately protects herself with the arrow of her bow and hits him. Alencar recounts Martim's disappointment that this act should have been committed by a woman, since "the young warrior was taught in his mother's religion, where women are symbols of tenderness and love" (Alencar, 2019, p. 17). However, as is to be expected from the narrator's perspective, Iracema soon becomes the character to whom loving affection and docility belong, and she takes care of the foreigner, tending to his wound and welcoming him into her culture.

Continuing the Alencarian plot, Iracema breaks her vow of chastity when she becomes amorously involved with the foreigner and has to abandon the Tabajara people. Refugees on a deserted beach, she is saddened to realise how much Martim misses his homeland. Alone, Iracema gives birth to the first Brazilian mestizo: "You are Moacir, son of my suffering" (Alencar, 2019, p. 76). At the end of the story, Iracema is unable to feed her son, claiming that her "ungrateful breasts no longer had any food to give him" (Alencar, 2019, p. 81), handing the child over to Martim shortly before her death. Symbolised in Iracema's death, we can see that the fate of the native peoples, from the perspective of the colonising white man, was to disappear, and for civilisation to succeed, a new nation had to be founded and guided by the European hand.

The first encounter between Iracema and Martim, the birth of their son Moacir and Iracema's death are three moments that we consider decisive in our dialogue about the work being a formative myth that perpetuates the interests of patriarchy through the modern colonial system. The novel in question is a publication from the Second Reign period, in which Emperor Pedro II financed the shaping of an Indianism that aligned with the nationalist ideas of the time, whose political project involved the construction and consolidation of a Brazilian cultural identity forged in racial democracy⁴. Based on these elements, our aim is to approach Alencar's novel in the light of various analyses of colonial and patriarchal violence and the masks attached to this national mythology.

In her book *Sobre o autoritarismo brasileiro* (2019) (Brazilian Authoritarianism), historian and anthropologist Lilia Schwarcz, introducing us to one of the first engravings depicting the *discovery* of America, dating from

around 1580, points out the intrinsic relations between race and gender, perpetuated from the very beginning of colonisation. In the engraving, as described in the first section of *Iracema*, the European is portrayed as a clothed white man, in contrast to a naked woman, who is allegorised as America. Sitting in a hammock, she gestures towards him, disposed to having a relationship with the *discoverer*, who in turn holds in his hands symbols that refer to the idea of civilisation: a staff with a crucifix, an astrolabe and a Southern Cross flag.

The engraving portrays the encounter between *explorer* Américo Vesúcio and America, which bears a feminised version of his name. The passage taken from José de Alencar's work also places Iracema in an encounter with the coloniser, her name being an anagram of America. As such, both readings are aligned with a representation of Abya Yala⁵ as a woman who awaits, desires or accepts this encounter, in a domination of the Old World over the New, of the masculine over the feminine and of civilisation over nature.

This process of forming the cultural identity of the *new* continent, through different archival processes, was aligned with a Christian, racist, patriarchal, heteronormative and Eurocentric perspective, highlighting a determined temporal narrative to the detriment of that of the native peoples. In this sense, Schwarcz (2019) stresses the importance of critically illuminating these archives in order to understand how they create a rhetorical battlefield by inventing and elevating certain memory rituals, classifying them as the authentic model and the others as dark, uncivilised and in need of control or elimination.

The thinking of decolonial, Black and anti-capitalist feminism contributes to this discussion by conceptualising gender hierarchies linked to race as fictional categories, created in the embryo of historical colonialism, which consolidated a patriarchal regime exercised with violence and state intervention against women. In addition to the authors Aura Cumes, Silvia Federici, Sueli Carneiro and Yuderky Espinosa Miñoso, used in this text, we draw inspiration from Angela Davis, Julieta Paredes, Lélia Gonzalez, María Lugones, Ochy Curiel, Oyèrónke Oyewùmí, Rita Segato and Patricia Hill Collins.

The studies carried out by philosopher Silvia Federici (2017; 2019) help us to understand that the colonisation process in Abya Yala brought with it a form of patriarchy forged in European societies. The author argues

that the transition from European feudalism to capitalism is a key period for understanding the redefinition of productive and reproductive tasks in Western male-female relations, and she does so through extensive documentary research of historical moments. One of these was the persecution and execution of thousands of women in the *witch-hunt*, which served as an instrument to subjugate their bodies, labour, sexual and reproductive capacities under the control of the State, giving them an essential function for the continuity of the system: the reproduction and creation of the workforce.

In line with this dynamic, the closure of communal lands, followed by the process of privatising and fencing them off, had the symbolic-social consequence that women became substitutes for the land that men had lost: “their most basic means of reproduction and a common possession that anyone could appropriate and use at will” (Federici, 2017, p. 191). This gradually established a system of domination in which men took political, economic, social and cultural control, not only having more access to common property, but also making women one of these assets.

Activist and researcher Aura Cumes (2019) defends and deepens this perspective by engaging in a dialogue with the writings contained in the *Popol Wuj*, one of the most important ancient documents from Abya Yala, which contains Mayan cosmogony, history and genealogy, from which Cumes descends. In her analysis, she presents arguments according to which, in Mayan culture, the genders were treated in such a way as to complete each other, defending the importance of the meaning of parity in horizontality. This understanding arises both in the recovery of the expression *winaq*, which means *person* or *people* without gender attribution, contrary to the Western notion of *man*, and in the observation of the Mayan myth of origin and its idea of pairs that relate to each other – “man and woman, heaven and earth, mother and father, animal and people” (Cumes, 2019, p. 300) – who have the same capacity for action and relevance.

According to the author, these relations of parity were radically modified as a result of colonial-patriarchal domination which established a regime of subordination of women through a hierarchy between them and men and the project of dominating nature itself. In colonial thinking, “[...] nature is a woman, she is wild, capricious, unintelligible, irrational, and rebellious. She requires a superior force in order to be dominated, subjugated

and placed at the disposal of those who know how to make use of it” (Cumes, 2019, p. 303). Therefore, the colonisers warned that the *Indians* had not learnt to dominate nature, because they did not dominate their women. In this relationship, in order to affirm his questioned virility, the indigenous male subject began to reproduce and display his ability to control women, weakening the strength of the Mayan sense of existence.

Similar to the European dynamic that privatised communal lands and women’s reproductive labour, the colonial process imposed a form of patriarchy that disempowered and murdered women.

The capitalist patriarchy embodies the condition of the human predator, a status constructed in the face of the expropriation of women, peasants, other non-Catholic and non-Western men of colour, and the domination of nature. This patriarch, as a coloniser, is the owner of indigenous families and communities, as well as enslaved Black men and women, and assumes himself to be the owner and master of nature itself. This colonial patriarch rules and exerts violence under this legitimacy (Cumes, 2019, p. 306).

In dialogue with these authors, we see *Iracema* as the romanticised story of a violent structure perpetrated against indigenous and Black women who were enslaved during colonisation. In his thesis entitled “*Iracema, horizonte do mito incessante*” (*Iracema, horizon of the incessant myth*), Professor Tiago Parente (2019, p. 132), in dialogue with the concept of violence proposed by Heleieth Saffioti, states that “*Iracema* is a book that tells a highly violent story. A colonial violence”. And he warns that repeating this story uncritically exalts the process “that raped women and exterminated non-white ethnic groups” (Parente, 2019, p. 28). In this sense, philosopher and activist Sueli Carneiro (2020) points out that colonial violations resulted in miscegenation, which was the basis for the formation of the myth of cordiality and racial democracy:

This colonial sexual violence is also the ‘cement’ of all the gender and racial hierarchies present in our societies, configuring what Angela Gilliam defines as ‘the great theory of sperm in our national formation’, through which, according to Gilliam: ‘The role of Black women is denied in the formation of national culture; inequality between men and women is eroticised; and sexual violence against Black women has been converted into a novel’ (Carneiro, 2020, p. 1).

Given that colonisation was mostly male, the indigenous and Black women were relegated to their roles in agriculture, the mansions, cities and mining, but they also “served their owners as instruments of pleasure and enjoyment” (Schwarcz, 2019, p. 203). White women were assigned the model imported by the coloniser of the delicate housewife, distanced from *productive work* and politics, leaving her with the domestic sphere. In other words, just as the construction of gender separated men and women, there was also a racial and class construction that made it possible for white women to have more privileges in life (Cumes, 2019).

Even with the so-called legal-political independence, brought about by the end of the European metropolises’ administration of colonial territories – in the case of Brazil, in 1822 – relations of exploitation, domination and conflict over race-sex-class-gender privileges have persisted in aspects of life today. It is in the criticism of this continuity, of the transition from modern colonialism to global coloniality, that decolonial feminism produces its thought and practice.

In an explanatory summary, philosopher and writer Yuderkys Espinosa Miñoso (2017) points out that the term *decolonial feminism* was proposed by Argentinian sociologist María Lugones. Her proposal comes from the intersectional perspective – which constituted the work of Black feminism and Third World women – and dialogues with the concept of coloniality, articulated by Aníbal Quijano (2009, p. 73), who succinctly defines it as follows:

Coloniality is one of the constitutive and specific elements of the global standard of capitalist power. It is based on the imposition of a racial/ethnic classification of the world’s population as the cornerstone of this system of power and operates on each of the planes, means and dimensions, both material and subjective, of everyday social existence and on the societal scale. It originates and is globalised from America.

Artist and researcher Stela Fischer (2017) explains that colonialities are categorised as those of power, knowledge and being. These colonialities establish discriminatory processes based on dichotomous relations (civilised white Eurocentric subject over non-white, subaltern, non-civilised subject), which “[...] use race as the main way of granting legitimacy to relations of domination and exploitation” (Fischer, 2017, p. 18). María Lugones makes this analysis more complex by proposing what she calls a *modern colonial*

gender system, stating that the race-gender categories are “[...] constitutive of the modern colonial episteme and cannot be thought of outside this episteme, nor can they be thought of separately from each other” (Miñoso, 2017, p. 8). In other words, coloniality also dictates a gender hierarchy, in which men have more power and contaminate political, economic, sexual, spiritual and epistemological relations with chauvinism and misogyny.

Considering the discussion about the permanence of coloniality, *Iracema* reveals racial and gender privilege linked to epistemic privilege, as it reaffirms a valued and universal model that is white, Eurocentric and patriarchal. Hence, by treating the archival memory of the work as one of the founding myths of the Brazilian people, we are favouring a narrative that subordinates women. In line with these stimuli, in the *Mulheres do Mar* (Women of the Sea) project process, we draw on Diana Taylor’s (2013) discussion of the distinction between archive and repertoire⁶, and how artistic practices can affect the fabrics of normative sharing, helping us to reflect on the emergence of myths and their ability to serve the interests of maintaining powers.

Taylor analyses how societies produce and transmit knowledge based on these two systems, which operate in different ways, work together and are sources of information, whether in literate or semi-literate societies. The problematisation that runs through her research is in relation to the degree of legitimacy that Western epistemology has invested in the archives (written) in relation to the incorporated practices (“repertoire”) of the original peoples of America. In doing so, the author provokes us to shift our focus from the transmission and production of literary and historical documents to the performative, in order to perceive other memories and struggles and also to question what the archives normalise in our ways of seeing, doing and being.

Based on the notion of performative practices worked on at the Laboratory of Performative Practices (Universidade de São Paulo), which seeks to investigate collective ways of establishing islands of poetic and critical disorder inside and outside the art system, we propose to share these decolonial reflections in the field of learning and artistic creation. The *Mulheres do Mar* (Women of the Sea) project came about from the questioning of the colonial myth in the novel *Iracema*, in which autobiographical performative devices were proposed and worked on in partnership with a group of wom-

en who live in the territory known as Greater Mucuripe, in the city of Fortaleza. Below we will discuss the guiding reasons for choosing this territory and share some of the aspects of the methodological approach developed, as well as the political implication of understanding that not only literate and powerful people can lay claim to the organisation of shared culture.

Vicente Pinzón and Iracemas of Greater Mucuripe: territorial and gender choice

Located between the Cais do Porto and Vicente Pinzón neighbourhoods, the Serviluz community is surrounded by the most expensive land⁷ in Fortaleza. Its location makes it a symbol of resistance to the growing hegemonic expansion of the Avenida Beira-Mar property market, the tourist dynamics of Praia do Futuro, the industrial activity that takes place behind the containers of Porto do Mucuripe and the public authorities focused on the economy of competitiveness.

In his thesis on the production of Fortaleza's coastline, Eider Cavalcante (2017) explains that until the beginning of the 20th century, land by the sea was undervalued in economic and social dynamics, and was mainly a refuge for fishermen and rural retreatants. As the elite of Fortaleza began to savour their seaside encounters, the government put measures in place to ensure that this area was inhabited by this segment of the population. The logic of the coastal space began to be inverted and urban and moral zoning strategies were applied with the aim of forging a new image for the area.

In the vicinity of Serviluz, there began the construction of Avenida Beira Mar, with the aim of turning it into an upper-middle class residential neighbourhood, with luxury shops and hotels. In order to do this, the fishermen were expropriated, forcing them to move to more distant neighbourhoods; the prostitution zone along the coastline that spanned Avenida Beira Mar and Praia de Iracema was compulsorily transferred to the vicinity of Porto do Mucuripe.

Unfortunately, attempts to remove people from the Serviluz community are constant. In 2010, the dispute centred on a project to set up a shipyard, which would have removed more than 400 families from Cais do Porto. The project did not materialise due to the actions and mobilisations undertaken by civil society and artistic collectives. As an alternative, the municipal government of Fortaleza approved funding for the Aldeia da Praia

project in 2011, and since then the population has united to prevent the removal of the residents of Rua General Titã for the construction of a square⁸. By highlighting these examples, we can see that the strategy of removing the most vulnerable populations for economic gain is a practice inherited from the colonial period and, despite the resistance of the communities, continues unabated.

In the symbolic field, during a visit to the Mucuripe Archive⁹, Diêgo de Paula presented us with a map that includes seven neighbourhoods that have been divided up and renamed, a region that used to be known as Mucuripe. For the founder of the archive, this division of the region into different administrative areas was a planned strategy to segregate the people who lived there, their cultures and identities. By no coincidence, part of what used to be named after an indigenous etymology is now called Vicente Pinzón, a 16th century Spanish navigator and explorer. When we look at the map, we notice that Diêgo's proposal – painting the neighbourhoods in the same colour – is to establish possibilities for mapping the city using an intuitive approach, as opposed to traditional authority. In this sense, the construction of the territory from within the population is taken into account, and this choice of narrative guided the discussions with the women taking part in the project.



Image 1 – Map of Greater Mucuripe, Fortaleza (CE).
Source: Mucuripe Archive, courtesy of Diêgo Di Paula.

The *Mulheres do Mar* (Women of the Sea) project took place in different neighbourhoods of the city, but we chose to start with the community of Serviluz because, in addition to the fact that it is a territory in significant dispute with the modern capitalist world-system, its origins have been marked by the protagonism of women. As we have seen, for more than five decades women have been arriving forcedly from *prostitution zones* in different areas of the city. In an article that analyses the trajectory of elderly ex-prostitutes, Érika Pinho (2012) highlights their importance in the demands for a modicum of public infrastructure in the neighbourhood, which, along with shellfish gatherers, fishermen, dockworkers and workers from nearby industries, built the community.

In addition to the founding process, Pinho addresses the issue of the sex trade that took place in the region, fuelled by its location close to the port area. In an interview, Pinho says that because of the relationships established with foreigners – Dutch, Danish, American, Japanese and German – these women had access to countless consumer goods, highlighting the 1960s and 1970s as Serviluz's *golden age*. However, when we analyse the historical process of the region, we can't help but notice that this narrative implies a continuity of the Alencarian perspective stamped on *Iracema*. Because the representation of the *golden age*, made possible by the encounter with the foreigner, without providing social and economic autonomy for them a posteriori, reinforces the "hierarchisation of relations that expropriate and promote discriminatory processes", as Fischer (2017, p. 17) explains with regard to colonialities.

As we delve into local histories, we realise how the myth of Iracema becomes entangled in many of the dynamics contained in official archives – theses, articles, newspapers. However, as a result, repertoires – incorporated culture – aligned with these dynamics are also produced and transmitted. Inspired by the Alencarian work, the show *Tudo passa sobre a terra*, by artist Rosa Primo, has the following synopsis: "We all are. We become. Life after life. [...] It was an invasion, not a discovery. That's why we are. A movement that never ceases to repeat itself in differences. Iracemas are many of us"¹⁰. In this sense, we become, we compose, we form Iracemas. In fact, in this historical cross-section of the coast, we highlight the traces that dialogue with this archive: the sexual exploitation of women and real estate

speculation on the coastal strip, which expropriates communities from their land.

In contrast, the project proponent prioritised a few questions: how could one access what remains forgotten in the unspoken words of a character who almost doesn't speak, written by a man? What would the Iracemas who are scattered around the city of Fortaleza say? What repertoires could we create to counter what the hegemonic archive has produced in our bodies? To this end, the proposer chose to start in this territory and to dialogue through artistic workshops and interviews with women who live in the neighbourhood, not necessarily former prostitutes, but who experienced the process of forming the neighbourhood and the community.

Mulheres do Mar: performative practices as methodological approach to creation and learning

In developing a project to create and learn performative practices based on a critical approach to the colonial myth of Iracema, participatory and contextual in nature, in the sense attributed by Ardenne (2002), outside institutionalised spaces, the researcher faced the challenge of making her initial assumptions more flexible, adopting an attitude of constant porosity in relation to the context of the Serviluz territory. It also became necessary to establish listening spaces in order to establish a collaborative, non-hierarchical relationship with the group of women who answered her call, in terms of action planning. Below we will comment on some of the strategies for approaching and negotiating with the participants, as well as some of the project's limitations, adaptations, procedures and developments.

The *Mulheres do Mar* (Women of the Sea) performative cartography began with the collaboration and receptiveness of three women working in the community towards the project, which at the outset was open from the point of view of the exact actions, having only the decolonial conceptual argument. Various social and cultural institutions working in the area were contacted in order to make it possible for the artist and the women of the region to connect and engage in dialogue. However, it wasn't until the proposer met with coordinator Maria do Socorro, social worker Ivone Lima and psychologist Carolina Teles that the cartography was able to begin at the Luíza Távora Community Centre. Group activities were carried out in

January and February 2019 and January 2020, in partnership with the elderly people's socialising and bonding service group, which is made up of an average of 60 elderly people aged between 65 and 90, 85% of whom are women.

At first, the proposed workshop was adapted to the group's ongoing schedule of activities. At the time, one of the main activities was the partnership the Community Centre developed with physiotherapy students, including talks on health, as well as a few hours set aside for conversations with the group's coordinator. For two months, twice a week, it was possible to follow these activities and establish the initial dialogues on the themes discussed in the *Iracema* colonial archive, such as the characteristics of the territory and hierarchical gender relations. However, before starting to map possible repertoires through their memories, it was important to build a relationship of closeness, affection and security, which took place not only in the meetings at the Community Centre, but also over shared breakfasts, car rides to the bus stop, conversations that weren't recorded, rehearsals of carnival songs and visits to the participants' homes.

The first meetings were essential for establishing a place of listening and understanding the strategies that would help in the process of de-hierarchising the figure of the artist and breaking the racial-social-epistemic privilege that was shown in her white, middle-class, academic corporeality. One example was in a lecture on the content of feminist criticism regarding the term *sorority*. For most of the women, the lexicon sounded strange, and they also showed little interest in the historiographical approach that had been taken. In the dialogue about the meaning of the term, however, in relation to the union between women, involving empathy and solidarity, we saw in several reports the activation of a theorisation – not in academic terms – about the relationship built between them, in a way that was close to feminist theories.

Accordingly, as Professor Helena Vieira explains to us in the virtual class *Introdução à História dos Feminismos* (Introduction to the History of Feminisms) (2022), not all women's struggles will be thought of within feminist struggles because there is a set of movements and knowledge that circulate and strengthen beyond feminist critique and political practices – despite the discursive encounters between the two. This approach has be-

come a critical operator in the sense of breaking with the thinking of a dominant epistemology that is seen as unique, as Linda Alcoff points out in relation to the dominance of discursivity in the West:

Epistemology presumes the right to judge, for example, the knowledge claimed by midwives, the ontologies of native peoples, the medical practice of colonised peoples and even first-person accounts of experience of all kinds. Is it realistic to believe that a simple ‘master epistemology’ can judge all kinds of knowledge originating from diverse cultural and social locations? (Alcoff, 2016, p. 131).

Following this line of reasoning, the proposer sought to deviate from this dominant logic, and was willing to change strategies. In the second year, after consolidating the dialogues, understanding the context and some of the participants’ limitations and desires, the meetings took place more frequently. The dynamics of lectures and theatrical editing, as they were used to, were rethought, and the specific devices of performance art were prioritised. Eleonora Fabião (2008, p. 237) provokes us by saying that the power of performance lies in “de-habituating, de-mechanising, brushing against the grain”; in other words, this potential for subverting normative social systems was important in establishing a counter-narrative to *Iracema’s* perspective. Another important element of this artistic language is the interest in exploring one’s own characteristics through autobiography and/or corporeality, allowing participants to position themselves as agents of their own narratives.



Image 2 – Classes and exercise in performance, *Mulheres do Mar*.

Source: Photographs by Ivone Lima (2019).



Image 3 – Exercises in class, *Mulheres do Mar*. Source: Photographs by Ivone Lima (2020).

Instead of proposing an already formatted performance image, the proposer took on the role of producer who would start from the relationships established within the collective, as elements for formulating and experiencing performative practices. One of the first motifs arose when we observed the empowerment strategies that were being formed among the women in the group, in the face of the precariousness that was being established structurally, due to issues of gender, ageism and social class. In interviews with some of the participants, the proposer realised the importance of these support networks:

Francisca França: There's respect from the whole community here, no one goes into anyone's house, but if anything happens, everyone runs. Nobody leaves anybody. No one needs anyone, but when they do, everyone comes together. It's nice, I like it.

Maria Ester: I don't like being in anyone's house for hours and hours talking. But if I need Maria, if I need something, I'll go and chat and everything. There's another thing: I visit the sick a lot. I like to know how they're doing; I help in any way I can. I communicate a lot with people to find out what they're going through and help them. I go to one person's house and another's house to find out how they're doing. I have this gift, which I inherited from my mum. (oral report)¹¹.

Ivone Lima, the social worker who co-ordinates the group, when asked in an interview what her biggest concern was in relation to this stage of life's development, explained:

In my opinion, the biggest concern for the elderly is when they no longer have the autonomy to leave the house. They usually lose this autonomy when they fall ill, lose their bonds of friendship and society, and start to feel sad. When they lose contact with their friends, they may even have contact with their family, but we find a lot of lonely elderly people without much contact with their family or friends. And this bond of friendship does a lot of good. When they get ill, they can't go out, they can't attend groups. [...] It's a loss of autonomy (Oral report)¹².

Ivone's account confirmed the research process that was being carried out into the support networks they maintained among themselves, and the perception that the Community Centre was a space where these alliances could be formed came to light. The satisfaction that these integrative practices give many of them is shown in Maria do Carmo's speech:

I really like it there. There we have fun. We listen there, we find out about life, and after we leave it's back here (home) and that's it. Then we don't like it when we don't have it, because I'm a person who just stays indoors (Oral report)¹³.

After discussion, the materialities and images that could represent this alliance between them were collectively devised. In this way, the group came up with the idea of the performative use of the fishing net object. In the subjective field, the net brings the meaning of weft and networks of relationships; and from a historical perspective, fishing is linked to the formation of the cultural identity of Greater Mucuripe. The territory, which has been a fishing community for many decades, is still home to those who

make a living from this activity. In this way, the symbolic charge of the fishing net is also attributed to a resistance to the property speculation that surrounds the region and that seeks to remove the community, as participant Maria Ester emphasised:

Because there (Serviluz) they can go and fish, they have things to eat, there's crab, there's swordfish, there's camurupi, all that. And for them to remove those houses that are marked, these people, who knows where they'll go afterwards. If it's somewhere far away where they have nowhere to fish, there's no work, as it stands, right? [...] Half the people of Serviluz live from fishing. They have their nets, they fish, there are times when there are so many sardines, there are times when there are swordfish, and they themselves say that they don't want to leave. They don't want to leave to go far away (Oral report)¹⁴.

After establishing the materiality of the fishing net as a collective image, strategies were organised to collect the participants' individual memories. Two methodological approaches guided the performative practice that took place at the end of the meetings in January 2020. The first refers to the "*Cartographies of the Self*" training system, developed by Professor Sumaya Mattar from the University of São Paulo, which proposes the development of an autobiographical account through reflective and creative writing. The sharing of this among the participants and the use of this cartography of stories acts as a device for developing artistic works or actions.

In an article published in 2018, Mattar explains that, in addition to officialised history, there are stories that are built up over the course of a lifetime, and which gain relevance and a social dimension when told. In our view, by identifying the act of mapping stories as a political act, the proposal of the *Cartographies of Self* system engages in a complementary dialogue with Taylor's (2013) archive and repertoire studies. Both understand the centrality given to archival records in Western societies, but propose a change in focus by promoting a discussion based on personal memories. As such, we sought to adapt this methodological perspective to the *Mulheres do Mar* project, with the aim of bringing together other narratives in a decolonial counterpoint to the *Iracema* myth.

The second approach emerged as a complementary guide to the first, in order to flesh out the repertoire aspect. Realising that many of the participants did not have writing skills, another procedure for accessing their memories was proposed. Performance art has used autobiographical materi-

als to construct actions since the 1960s. As inspiration, we used the procedure of the La Pocha Nostra group, coordinated by Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who asks participants in his workshops to bring propositional objects – *props* – to be used in the creation of performance actions.

Following this proposal, the participants were asked to bring objects from their homes and, from these objects, choose a memory to share as a group. They were then asked to place the objects in a fishing net, with the aim of unifying a kaleidoscope of narratives in one image. Antônia Alves Teixeira, Francisca França, Francisca Almeida, Francisca Pereira, Francisca Rodrigues, Geralda Evangelista, Julia Agostinho, Libania Alves, Lourdes Leocadio, Marlucia Maia, Maria do Carmo, Maria das Graças, Maria Vidal, Maria de Lourdes, Quintela, Raimunda Gonçalves, Raimunda Nonata and Rosa Muniz took part in this performance experience.



Image 4 – Organising a performance exercise, *Mulheres do Mar*.
Source: Photographs by Ivone Lima (2020).

Personal photographs, as well as those of sons, daughters, husbands, records of their participation in *maracatu*, items of personal adornment, fishing net weaving needles, a plush toy given to them by a son who lives in Paris, trophies for best Avon saleswoman, handicrafts that were sold on the Beira Mar promenade. These were some of the objects that materialised and fuelled the beginning of the sharing of oral discourses and their memories. For Schwarcz (2019), while history contains gaps and misunderstandings about the past, being a field of clashes and disagreements, memory brings a subjective dimension to analysis. Memory translates the past into the first person and focuses on the memory of the person who produces it, “thus, it recovers the ‘present of the past’ and makes the past also become present” (Schwarcz, 2019, p. 13).

When presenting their object, each participant formulated a return to the past, in an attempt to present this imagined place in the present moment through the objects; even if they were individual materials, they dialogued with the cultural identity of that community. As Professor Gabriela Monteiro (2016) explains in an article on the choice and appropriation of autobiographical materials and personal objects in contemporary theatre,

[...] the documental character and improvisation that arise from dealing with documents and objects recapture the sense of belonging to a particular community, triggered by the idea of social memory, which in many cases exposes pressing ethical issues, such as the presentation of biographical archives which, in addition to revealing ‘images of oneself’, reveal images of Other(s) who are indirectly part of the narrative and are not always aware of its realisation (Monteiro, 2016, p. 81).

Examples of the performative practice carried out at the Community Centre speak to the point made above. The first refers to the object brought by Rosa Muniz: a photo-painting of her with her mother. When she presented the object, she said: “here’s my mum and me when I was younger... my mum taught me how to raise myself in the mangroves, baking things to sell, I was raised without a father [...] and she didn’t raise just me, she raised five, purely through her own will” (Oral report)¹⁵. In an interview after the exercise, she added: “My father abandoned me when I was very young. She was the one who brought me up. Working, washing clothes, collecting manioc until the wee hours of the morning, she would come home with a little money and go to buy our food” (Oral report)¹⁶. In sharing this

memory, Muniz dialogues with the issue of parental abandonment which, according to data released by the IBGE (Caldas, 2023), states that more than 11 million women cannot count on the participation of fathers to look after and educate their children.



Image 5 – Objects, participants and fishing net, *Mulheres do Mar*. Source: Personal archive (2020).

As a project that arose from the desire to retell Fortaleza by criticising one of its most important formative colonial myths, the sea emerged in

many stories, becoming a symbolic marker of the ways in which patriarchal structural contexts traversed the singularities of these women. Below are fragments of the stories that evoked memories in this context:

Maria do Carmo, when speaking of her relationship with daughters and sons:

In this photo I was 25 years old at Praia do Mucuripe, I was already a mum, I had two children. I had 10 children, two died young, and then another, he was 33 and they killed him. I was left with just seven. Five women and two men. In this other photo they called to me: 'Mum, let's go to the beach', so I went, and when I got there, there was a man who took this photo of them (Oral report)¹⁷.

Lourdes Leocádio, talking about her wedding:

I married a fisherman, here are his photos, he was a skipper, we got married and spent 35 years married, only in civil law, I didn't get married in the church, but I got married in civil law, I have my documents. During this time together I had five children, here's proof (shows photo) that he was a fisherman, that he worked on a fishing boat, at the time he caught fish, lobster and he was also a cook on the boat for his crew. [...] 35 years together, we've never split up (Oral report)¹⁸.



Image 6 – Women with objects brought along for a performance exercise. Left to right: Rosa Muniz, Maria do Carmo, Lourdes Leocádio. Source: Personal archive (2020).

Like Lourdes, other women shared how their partners worked at sea. Because it required long periods of distance between the couple, the work ended up generating conflicts, mainly because the men were jealous of their

wives. According to some of them, while they were at sea, they weren't allowed to make friends with men or spend much time away from home, even when they needed to go to the doctor or the market.

In these narratives, we see the maintenance of the modern colonial gender system, which made women's bodies a common property in which men could exercise their domination through psychological and physical violence. Along these lines, participants Rosa Muniz and Geralda Evangelista reported that:

We have no value to men, they can do whatever they want, we have no value. He wants to boss us around, he wants to step on us, he wants to beat us, he wants to kill us. We're nothing to men (Oral report)¹⁹.

The worst thing in the world is these men killing women every day. [...] They're killing a lot of women, some of them so young, beautiful, working to survive, they want to be the owner, they want to have the right, to be the owner of that person [...] they don't let the woman stand up and live her life. [...] no one has the right to own anyone, it didn't work out, everyone goes their own way, it's about being free, you don't have the right to kill, that's what I think is most wrong, men killing women, every day they kill three, four of them (Oral report)²⁰.

The memories resulting from the performance practices, as well as the interview reports that have been highlighted here, show that the singularities of these women are similar – in urban territorial violence that causes mothers to lose their children, in parental abandonment and in psychological gender violence – or opposes it – on reporting femicide – to Alencar's mnemonic archive, in relation to the colonial patriarchy that the work reveals.

The initial proposal was to use this procedure to create images and performances that would unify these memories. Unfortunately, however, the Covid-19 pandemic put a stop to all the meetings at the Community Centre, as this is a group of elderly women at high risk of viral contamination. Nevertheless, we managed to produce an image that united the objects, the fishing net and the sea at Praia do Titanzinho, as a way of strengthening the bonds that they defend so much in relation to belonging to this community: "I live here, I value it here, [...] I love living here and I built my house here. [...] I'll only leave here when God takes me away" (Oral report)²¹.



Image 7 – Image produced from the performative exercise. Source: Personal collection (2020).

At the end of 2020, produced by the Ceará-based contemporary art research and circulation platform *Imaginários*, we held the performance installation²² *Mulheres do Mar* in a container on the sands of Praia de Iracema. This territory, as well as being named after Alencar's work, is also home to the expropriation of a fishing community and constant property speculation due to tourism, which is one of the region's major attractions. Therefore, the decision to place the performative installation there was an attempt to critically question the extractivist narrative established between tourism and the local population.

The aim of the project was to strengthen our ability to tell, through our memories, other historicities, beyond those imposed socio-historically through performative practices. However, due to the limitations imposed by the pandemic, the discussion around the ephemerality and permanence of artistic actions became latent. Despite the divergence between authors, rather than defining the ontology of performance in this respect, we are interested in seeing the debates as fostering a political questioning. Diana Taylor (2013, p. 30), in asking who has claimed history, "if performative practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?", encourages

us to think about the project in a new dimension. If the archive operates as the central axis of Western epistemology, from performative practices we can weave critical strategies to the archival supports that perpetuate these colonial histories.

From performative practices to the decolonial archive and repertoire

We can consider the concept of decoloniality based on the struggle against the logic of coloniality and its economic, epistemic and symbolic effects. As the philosopher Maldonado-Torres (2019, p. 36) explains, since coloniality is a constitutive element of capitalist modernity, the decolonial proposal seeks to create a world “where many worlds can exist”, including different conceptions of time, space and subjectivity that relate to each other productively. This mode of agency played an important role in the formulation of the performative practices and archival supports in the *Mulheres do Mar* (Women of the Sea) project.

Given the impossibility of carrying out the corporeal action with the women of Serviluz, due to the sanitary rules imposed by the pandemic, the *Pescaria* (Fishing) performance was proposed. For six days, at sunset, at various tourist attractions in Praia de Iracema, the researcher sat in a rocking chair next to a speaker that carried the voices of Francisca, Lourdes, Maria do Carmo and Geralda telling their memories. Based on these verbalisations, the performer filled in pieces of fabric and sewed them onto the fishing net. Next to her, another chair was available as an invitation for women who live and work in the area to sit down and continue the cartography. In this way, the action was seen as an act of rupture from the modes of visibility constructed in that landscape.

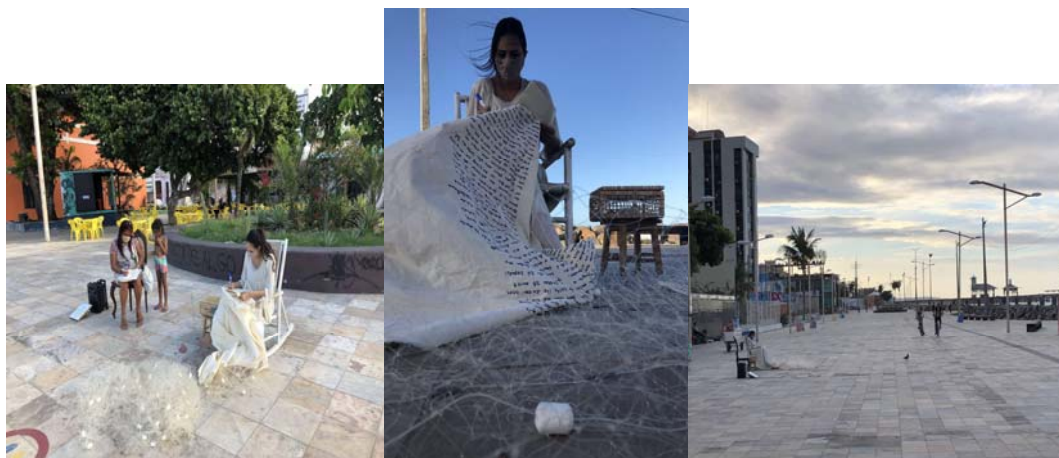


Image 8 – Pescaria Performance – Praia de Iracema beach, 2020.
Source: Photographs by Tu Moon Ming Junior personal archive (2020).

Another outcome of the project, which dialogues with archival strategies such as the power to endure in history, was the publication of the virtual exhibition platform. Based on the idea of an affective map as opposed to a GPS map, the proposal was to chronicle Fortaleza through the fictionality proposed by the participants, enabling global access to these stories.



Image 9 –Mulheres do Mar Site. Source: Personal archive.

In December 2022, as the Covid vaccination progressed, the artist-researcher was able to return to the Serviluz Community Centre and meet

the group of participants again. In the same room where the project's first performance exercise was held in 2020, photographs and fabric cut-outs with written memories were displayed, and the website was presented. Lourdes and Maria do Carmo took the fabrics with their stories to their homes. Asked about her perceptions of being published on a website, Francisca Rodrigues replied: "It's great, because that way everyone will know who the women of Farol were and we'll be remembered. Because the theme is never about our history" (Oral report)²³. Geralda Evangelista adds when talking about being forgotten: "Our activities, our work weren't exhibited, many people didn't know what we did, but they learnt about it" (Oral report)²⁴. Corresponding to their voices, when women put themselves in a position of power to publish their stories, they oppose a system that has placed a high degree of value on the archive and exercised its dominance based on a white, Eurocentric and patriarchal order.

Final considerations

Colonial and patriarchal archives are the fruit of institutional selection and inscription, serving the interests of an elite made up mostly of white men. The myth of *Iracema* has been endorsed to this day, helping to maintain an idyllic and appeased narrative of the Brazilian people's formation. The romanticisation of the countless forms of violence inherent in colonisation contributes to the persistence of abuses and inequalities that intersect gender-class-race-sexuality, including the high rate of femicide and murders of LGBTQIA+ people in Brazil.

The participants' accounts revealed that the project managed to challenge the logic of narratives that mask relations of oppression. In this sense, developing participatory and performative creative processes with older women who are new to the artistic field and excluded from the dynamics of cultural and academic institutions was fundamental to building and creating new ways of understanding this myth of formation, enabling counter-narratives. Through autobiographical narratives, the participants were able to position themselves as agents of their memories and raised issues of gender, sexuality, race and class.

The interaction, between performative games and cartographies of the self, proved to be an effective approach allowing the project to trigger re-

flections in the sense of establishing new relationships of authorship and an understanding that it is not only literate and powerful people who can produce and share narratives and historical points of view. Even though the initial proposal, which included a workshop phase followed by performances with the participants, was affected by the pandemic and did not include physical actions due to social isolation, the incentive to share the powerful narratives resulted in the idea of an exhibition platform.

By creating a fracture in the thinking of this hegemonic archive as the holder of knowledge, we collectively produced gaps and lines of escape, through decolonial repertoires and archives generated through performative practices, making visible what was not there to see in the history of Fortaleza. We believe that this reflection on the process of creating the *Mulheres do Mar* cartography can contribute to studies on feminist and decolonial participatory artistic practices, as well as the pedagogy of the Performing Arts, an area that is increasingly expanding beyond the boundaries of theatrical language.

Notes

- ¹ This article summarises aspects developed in the dissertation *Mulheres do Mar: um olhar sobre práticas performativas participativas criadas com intersecção de discursos feministas*, by Marie Araujo Auip (2022), supervised by Marcos Aurélio Bulhões Martins, at Universidade de São Paulo in 2022.
- ² The group at the Luíza Távora Community Centre was made up of an average of 60 elderly people, 85% of whom were cisgender women. Because it was a group that already had established and institutionalised relationships, the proposer was unable to make an open call that could include other cisgender women, transgender and non-binary people.
- ³ Information at: <https://www.casacivil.ce.gov.br/2011/04/25/palacio-iracema/>. Accessed on: 02 Sept. 2023.
- ⁴ The myth of racial democracy is contained in the idea that Brazil was built on its ability to link diverse nations and cultures in perfect equality and racial harmony.
- ⁵ A term that has been used by researchers as a self-designation of the original peoples in relation to their territory, as opposed to America, the designation given by the coloniser.

- 6 The archive's standards of cultural expression exist in the form of texts, documents, letters, in materials that, primarily, have the capacity to persist over time; the repertoire consists of the culture embodied through performances, gestures, orality, dance, among others.
- 7 Tourism accounts for 36% of Fortaleza's GDP on average. The seafront is one of the main attractions for tourists, with heavy investment by the municipal government to "requalify" certain stretches of the seafront.
- 8 Information: <https://serviluzquepermanece.wixsite.com/especial/serviluz>. Accessed on: 02 abr. 2023.
- 9 History and memory project for the communities of Greater Mucuripe.
- 10 Available at: <https://cargocollective.com/rosaprimo/Tudo-passa-sobre-a-terra>. Acesso em: 02 abr. 2023
- 11 FRANÇA, Francisca; NASCIMENTO, Maria Ester. Conversa 1. Fortaleza, Jan. 2020. Video 29 min.
- 12 LIMA, Ivone de Oliveira. Entrevista 1. Fortaleza, jan. 2020. Audio 16:45min.
- 13 CARMO, Maria. Conversa 1, 2020.
- 14 NASCIMENTO, Maria Ester da Costa. Conversation 1, 2020.
- 15 MUNIZ, Rosa. Exercise recording 1. Fortaleza, Jan. 2020. Video 2:02min.
- 16 MUNIZ, Rosa. Entrevista 1. Fortaleza, Nov. 2020. Video 9:52min.
- 17 CARMO, Maria. Exercise recording 1. Fortaleza, Jan. 2020. Video 2:18 min.
- 18 LEOCADIO, Lourdes. Exercise recording 1. Fortaleza, Jan. 2020. Video 2:56 min.
- 19 MUNIZ, Rosa. Interview 1, 2020.
- 20 EVANGELISTA, Geralda. Interview 1. Fortaleza, Nov. 2020. Video 10:50 min
- 21 EVANGELISTA, Geralda. Interview 1, 2020.
- 22 At Farol da Juventude (Instituto Cultural Iracema), there were works by participants from the Serviluz and Centro Cultural Belchior residencies. Production and staging by Eduardo Bruno Freitas and visual identity by Kerensky Barata for Plataforma Imaginários.
- 23 RODRIGUES, Francisca. Interview 1. Fortaleza, Mar. 2023. Audio 16:47 min.
- 24 EVANGELISTA, Geralda. Interview 2. Fortaleza, Mar. 2023. Audio 14:50 min.

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Availability of research data: the entire set of data supporting the results of this study has been made available in USP's Repository and on its own website and can be accessed at any time at DOI: 10.11606/D.27.2022.tde-29112022-115532 and <https://www.mulheresdomar.com/pescaria>.

This original paper, translated by Tony O'Sullivan, is also published in Portuguese in this issue of the journal.

Received on April 30, 2023

Accepted on November 27, 2023

Editor in charge: Fabiana de Amorim Marcello

