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**Epistemologies for Conviviality,
or Zumbification**

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Fernando Baldraia

Abstract

This paper, inspired by Frantz Fanon's thought, offers a diagnostic of our present times enacted as a "psychotic reaction" that melts together different scriptural registers to advance the notion of conviviality as a space of analytical experimentation where inequality and difference share the condition of conceptual isonomy. The particular thought experiment performed here tries to accomplish this goal by exploring the vernacular repertoire of the Brazilian junction of an afro-indigenous Atlantic. Its analytical gamble, zumbification, is the sketch of an epistemological subject-position whose labor consists in a kinesics of (at least) three movements: 1) the situatedness needed for effectively making political demands; 2) the decenteredness necessary for attenuating the harmful effects of (even strategic) essentialism as well as of the unavoidable reproduction of hegemonic exclusionary patterns; 3) the willfulness required for amplifying subalternized epistemological approaches so that they may become more pervasive.

Keywords: epistemologies | conviviality | Zumbi | zumbification

About the author

Fernando Baldraia concluded his undergraduate studies in History at the Universidade de São Paulo (USP) in 2003. However, it was his engagement in grassroots organizations in the periphery of Osasco, Brazil, as well as his involvement with Afro-Brazilian culture that brought him to Germany to work as an assistant in a capoeira group. There, he obtained his Master's degree in Interdisciplinary Latin-American Studies at the Freie Universität Berlin (2012) with a scholarship from the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation. A doctoral degree, focusing on the Black Atlantic and recent Brazilian historiography of slavery, came soon afterwards in 2017, concluding his involvement in the International Research Training Group Between Spaces (FU Berlin). He was a postdoctoral fellow at Mecila from 2017 to 2020. Currently, he lives again in the periphery of Osasco, and is Editor for Diversity at Companhia das Letras, São Paulo.

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1. Introduction

This text aims at braiding already interlaced strands of thought that compound a very specific question: how to handle difference, inequality, and conviviality as categories to procure a design of analytical isonomy between them?¹ However, it shall be read as a secondary concern, since it is above all a reaction, namely, a “psychotic reaction”.²

In doing so, priority is given to the situation that triggered the [mental] disorder although here and there mention is made of the role played by the subject’s psychological, affective, and biological history, and that of his milieu. We believe that in the case[s] presented here the triggering factor is principally the bloody, pitiless atmosphere, the generalization of inhuman practices, of people’s lasting impression that they are witnessing a veritable apocalypse (Fanon [1961] 2004: 183).

Apocalyptically, far too many people want to be branded with that mark without which “no one can buy or sell” (Revelations 13: 16-17, King James Version Online, 2019), as if this right to market, to purchase and sale, and to the practice of alienation (in all its senses, including that related to ownership and property), were the ultimate achievement of one’s life. For most of them, however, adhering to these values matters little in mundane terms. With the exception of the small group of those “who had been redeemed from the earth” (Revelations 14: 3), everyone has always been in one way or another a marked (or market) target and will share the fate of the “wretched of the earth”, exposed to painful tribulations and eventually to a violent death.

Thirty-three thousand five hundred ninety: written up and thus read slower and linearly, as a text, perhaps this figure awakens the interpretative engagement it deserves. It refers to the number of young people (between 15-29 years old) murdered in Brazil in 2016 alone, an average of 92 murders per day. The vast majority are male (94.6%) and Black or non-white (71.5%). Two pieces of data related to police violence and violence against women illustrate with other nuances the gravity of the problem: 76.2% of police victims killed were Blacks; the homicide rate of Black women is 71% higher than that of white women. In the last decade, the homicide rate of Black victims increased by 23.1%, while the same indicator shows a decrease in 6.8% of white victims. In some

1 The inspiration for this idea of conceptual isonomy comes from Marcos Nobre’s unpublished Paper “Convivial Constellations and Inequality”. A reduced version of this paper will be published in Baldraia 2020.

2 “But can we escape vertigo?”, Fanon asks. “Who dares claim that vertigo does not prey on every life?” (Fanon 2004 [1961]: 184-5, n. 23).

states, social inequality expressed in terms of racialized exposure to lethal violence is such that local white people live as if in a rich country of the Global North, while Blacks live where they indeed are (Cerqueira 2018: 40-51).

Exposure to violence is the rule, even when not lethal. These figures will find their congeners in the statistics of Brazil's prison system (Borges 2019: 18-21) and their ordinary realization in every police incursion into Brazilian slums. These areas are thought to be "disreputable place[s] inhabited by disreputable people", where you may "die anywhere, from anything". It is a "world with no space, where people are piled on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together" (Fanon 2004 [1961]: 4). In a practical sense, they are besieged sectors, where poor people are constantly harassed by agents of state security who never refrain from having their guns ready to fire at whomever they want. Living there, at any time you could suddenly see a tear gas canister explode in front of your door while police officers wield their truncheons against a small crowd of young people who, minutes before, in search of entertainment that is as inexpensive as reassuring, were having fun at one of the night's block parties, or *bailes funk*.

In light of this bleak situation, which the "psychotic reaction" enacted as this text tries to account for, what is expected from the reader is enough sensibility to understand the demand of an affective-intellectual engagement that does not "animate the troubling fantasy of controlling that world by reducing it to a set of elegant categories" (Gilroy 2004: 31).

Therefore, in this analysis, instead of laboring meticulously to produce categorial distinctions and theoretical jurisdictions, those three concepts – difference, inequality and conviviality – will be arranged in a para-disciplinary and contingent manner. This is a somewhat defensive position, which is not afraid of suggesting no work either of intelligence or of thought. But it is also a posture that avoids ignorance, as in Stela do Patrocínio's verses (Patrocínio 2004: 62):

I don't work with my intellect

Nor with thought

But neither do I resort to ignorance³

This is not the same thing as saying that violence will no longer have a place herein. No, because in the shelter of the academic asylum there is no such choice: one remains violent even when "bandaging [the] countless and sometimes indelible wounds"

3 "Não trabalho com a inteligência/ Nem com o pensamento/ Mas também não uso a ignorância".

inflicted by the combined effect of racism, sexism and economic exploitation on one's own ability to relate to the world (Fanon 1961: 181).

2. Conviviality: Experiencing Conceptual Experimentation

The three concepts put under scrutiny here bear quite distinct semantic-theoretical charges. The first two are concepts of old stock in the Western tradition of thought. They can activate an analytical memory that, once stimulated, evokes a vast repertoire of associations which nourish deep-seated explanatory schemas. Inequality calls on analytical muscles that may promptly put tendons and skeletons of different lines of classic sociological thought to work in its favor. Something alike happens with the concept of difference, which would exhibit similar resourcefulness concerning mobilizing the philosophical arsenal of existentialist, post-structuralist, and deconstructivist approaches. The third category, conviviality, possesses this ability in a far reduced degree. This is not only because its appearance as an analytical tool is a much more recent phenomenon, but mainly because it has established itself by opening a conceptual rainbow that has sheltered an assemblage of consistent and multifaceted critical approaches within the humanities and social sciences (Costa 2019).

Not unexpectedly, this task has, at times, implicated a refreshing retrieval of ideas that have played a seminal role in the development of these fields of knowledge. An exemplary case of such an effort can be found in Frank Adloff's re-elaboration of Marcel Mauss' social ontology based on the notion of gift.

In his *Gifts of Cooperation, Mauss and Pragmatism*, a book normatively aligned with convivialism, an approach presented as something that "can be regarded as a translation of the gift paradigm into a social and political philosophy of living together", Adloff (2016: 11) puts ontogenesis where in Mauss' prose was anthropology *tout court*. This intellectual operation works as follows: by establishing a contrast to the "so-called primitive societies", Mauss derives the "eternal morality" synthesized in the paradigm of the gift, which serves as the basis for his mordacious critique of utilitarianism (Mauss [1950] 2002: 89). Adloff, in turn, arrives at a similar normative element through an ontogenetic analysis that aims at developing some undertheorized points related to what could be understood as a principle of potential transparency in human interaction (Adloff 2016: 52). Transparency was hardly a problem for Mauss, but it is nowadays – in different but strangely related acceptations – a crucial topic in discussions on the issues of (the right to) difference and democracy.

There is still plenty of room for extending the theorization around conviviality so as to constitute the term as a field of conceptual work where the scholastic – but nonetheless strategically necessary – exercise of critique takes place in the space of creative conceptual experimentation that might be called the *performative pragmatics of theoretical translation*.

This task can be understood as the unfolding of possible points of entry for making a scriptural use of the analytical thinking articulated in non-enunciative elements integral to the vernacular performances of what Paul Gilroy named expressive cultures of the Black Atlantic World (Gilroy 1993: 77), or, in a kindred modus, the historical archives of Lélia Gonzalez' *amefricanity* (Gonzalez 1988).

In what follows, the imagery of *capoeira* and the *quilombos* will be explored. At the same time, the argument is an extrapolation of what Gayatri Spivak proposes when she talks about:

the importance of rereading the historical dismissal of the Indian tradition as containing the possibility of moral philosophy. In other words, I was learning about using the performative ethical strand in Indic philosophies, both popular ethical performances and its rational critique within the tradition, the scriptural tradition of authority in religion. We met with a great deal of resistance, because it is all right to use these things as cultural artifacts, even for the sake of resisting, but to use them as real instruments of philosophizing is not on the agenda (Spivak et al. 1993: 6).

This elaboration, in turn, given its raw material – the vernacular repertoire of the Brazilian junction of the Afro-indigenous Atlantic, especially the *capoeira*⁴ – takes the form of Leda Martins' oraliture: "Oraliture belongs to the scope of performance, it's its anchor; a spelling, a language, whether it is drawn in the written performative effect of words or in the swing of the body" (Martins 2003, p. 77). In this sense, Martins points out:

In one of the Congo Bantu languages, the same verb, *tanga*, designates the acts of writing and dancing, whose root also derives the noun *ntangu*, one of the designations of time, a plurisignificant correlation, implying that the memory of knowledges is inscribed, without illusory hierarchies, both in the calligraphic letter on the paper and in the body in performance (Martins 2003, p. 77).

The reason why this translational exercise shall be understood as a pragmatics stems, first, from its working within a "three-tiered notion of language (as rhetoric, logic, and

4 Keep in mind these verses of a *capoeira* song, I will come back to them later: "Nego nego nego nagô/ Troca língua comigo, nagô/ Nego nego nego nagô/ Corta a língua do nego nagô" [Black Nago man/ Exchange tongues with me, Nago/ Black Nago man/ Cut out the Black man's tongue, Nago!].

silence)”⁵ (Spivak 1993b: 203), which, as a consequence of these very grounding terms, necessarily deals with the room for contingency produced by contexts of utterance and inference, non-truth conditionality and others issues assumed to be canonical topics of pragmatics.

Given that this room for contingency arises from painful inquiries into the sober hallucination of living through a systematized negation of one’s self, it also points to a second and much more mundane sense of pragmatic, namely, the one that forces one to keep in the line of sight the effects of such theorizations on the practical apprehension of and conceptual interaction with concrete events that are a matter of life or death and which happen at arm’s length.

This translational effort is thus intrinsically concerned with the possibilities of ethics stemming from the care of the self (Foucault 2002: 43-75), or, more precisely, with creating a choreography which, to use Sueli Carneiro’s interpretation of the Foucauldian idea, is not just about

constructing a subjectivity centered on free adherence to a style that it wants to give to its own existence but, above all, [about] turning to the construction of collective subjects freed from the processes of subjugation and subordination. Self-care takes place for these subjects in the care of the other, whose liberation is the aesthetics of their existences (Carneiro 2005: 303).

3. Zombies

Achille Mbembe has stressed that “blacks remember the colonial potentate as a founding trauma” (Mbembe 2017: 120) that will instantiate a historical trajectory in which they emerge as slaves again and again. The *commandement* – Mbembe’s term for the colonial and postcolonial form of state sovereignty in sub-Saharan Africa – represented the unfolding of a rationality based on the “right to dispose”, a system in which the colonized, having no rights against the state, “was bound to power structure like a slave to a master”.

The indigenous people living in Brazil’s national territory may have access to the experience of remembering an event whose founding traumatic nature seems to be very much like that of the African colonial potentate. Ailton Krenak is emphatic that the commonsensical idea that the Portuguese colonial enterprise in Brazil needed the African slave trade because the colonizers did not manage to systematically enslave indigenous people is a “tremendous lie”. He adds: “the Indians were enslaved

5 As Spivak remarks: “That takes a different kind of effort from taking translation to be a matter of synonym, syntax, and local colour” (Spivak 2009: 203).

to exhaustion, killed by thousands, being exploited by slave labor” (Krenak 2018). A concrete piece of historical information may corroborate this remark: as late as 1831, the Empire of Brazil was still passing legislation aimed at abolishing the enslavement of indigenous people (Souza Filho 1992).

This condition of being “like a slave to a master”, or to use Orlando Patterson’s expression (Patterson 1982), of being “socially dead”, has been experienced by a myriad of human groups throughout history. Still, it is only with the emergence of Western modernity that an entire race stands socially dead to the rest of humanity *a priori*, that is, before any historical or transcendental transgressive act. Such an event allows distinguishing the experience of slavery (to which anyone can be subjected) and the ontology of slavery, which in the frame of modernity became the sole purview of Blacks. Far from being a mere historical event among others, slavery became an “access to (or, more correctly, banishment from) ontology” (Wilderson 2010: 18).

“Banishment” also expresses the paradigmatic form of the subject position of indigenous people:

As [Ward] Churchill points out, everyone from Armenians to Jews have been subjected to genocide, but the indigenous position is one for which genocide is a constitutive element [...] without which Indians would not, paradoxically, “exist” (Wilderson 2010: 10).

They exist thus as “soon dead” or, using once more Ailton Krenak’s words, a “people believed to be in the countdown to extinction” (Krenak 2019).

The becoming subject of both the “soon dead” Indian and of the “socially dead” Black stems irremediably from their subjection to what Mbembe – adjusting Foucault’s notion of biopower to consider the combined work of racism and colonialism in the exercise of sovereignty – conceptualizes as necropower and necropolitics: “new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*” (Mbembe 2003: 40).

“Genocide” and “slavery” as ontological markers are properties of these unique forms of social existence. By delimiting the possibilities of registering the ontological subject position of these groups, these notions are, in turn, subjected to a constant but not always conscious investment as a “desire-producing machine” (Mbembe 2017: 120).

The inquiry into the experiential product of such an investment could be called, as in a farce, the Phenomenology of Spirit. This time, instead of the metaphysical Hegelian move towards incorporeal, transcendental reason, the “spirit” would be a trajectory of being with no *raison d’être* beyond its absolute immediacy; it would aim at unfolding the irreducible immanence of the irremediably ontic “living dead”.

If subjected to an intersubjective shift in the fashion of Axel Honneth, this phenomenology comes close to the famous Fanonian construction which, taking Hegel's dialectics of the master and the slave as a contrast foil rather than as a model (Teixeira 2018: 108), preconizes a radical lack of reciprocity in the intersubjective dialectic of recognition (Fanon 1952: 191-197).

In this case, eruptions of suffering are to be expected from those fundamentally disrespected for living their lives under the spell of ontological negativity.⁶ These eruptions would hardly amount to Honneth's kind of "loss of self-respect", for their lives basically consist of facing a consistent "denial of rights", even in contexts where there is a high degree of universalization and a broad and substantive scope of institutionally established rights. Neither would this suffering provoke Honneth's particular "loss of self-confidence", for the "living dead" had never quite trusted "[...] the reliability of the social world". And, finally, it would certainly not imply his "loss of self-esteem", for they are, as a rule, kept hostage of "collective traits", thus hardly having "individuality" ascribed to them (Honneth 1995: 133-134).

Thus, in its prodigious "spiritual adventure" (Fanon 2004 [1961]: 235), the living dead would march in all abnegation towards nowhere. Or else, as Ailton Krenak phrases it: "We have the pretension, first of all, to think that we are here to do nothing" (Krenak 2015: 48).

When the living dead adopt this stance, they almost automatically reinforce, or instead accomplish, what for Fanon is a lack of ontological resistance: "their metaphysics, or less pretentiously their customs and the agencies to which they refer, were [either] abolished because they were in contradiction with a new civilization" or, at best, pragmatically redressed so that they manage to confront the white gaze without fear of feeling an unusual weight descending on them, of having their share of the world robbed from them, of facing difficulties even to keep the elaboration of their own body schemas (Fanon 1952: 90).

To make such a violent interaction work ontologically, that is, to turn the ascribed lack of ontological resistance into the ontology of ontological lack, these subject positions must live up to their positioning as *living dead*, that is, as *zombies*.

4. Zumbification

⁶ "The idea of disrespect is [...] central to the perspective developed in *The Struggle for Recognition*. Honneth has elaborated the concept of recognition on three levels (love, rights and solidarity), which correspond to three positive relationships of the individual with herself (self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem), and these, in turn, are affected by three forms of disrespect or misrecognition (violation of the body in the primary sphere of personal relationships, exclusion and denial of rights in the legal sphere, and degradation in the social community of values)" (Teixeira 2017: 594).

Lorand Matory remarks that “hardly any Afro-Atlantic religious concept has been more generative in its interpellation of hierarchy than the term *zombi*” (Matory 2007: 410). Matory himself uses the term conceptually when he defines “zombification” as how Marx dealt with the “Black slave” in *Capital* as well as how Freud did with the “savage” in *Totem and Taboo*. He argues that, similar to what happens in Afro-Atlantic religions, some objects possessed by Marx and Freud (Marx’s piano and coat and Freud’s notched rings and cigars) seem to have been animated by their owners, whose ideas were, in turn, animated by the objects (Matory 2018: 4).

Achille Mbembe also explores the term conceptually. He uses it to describe postcolonial regimes of domination in which the grotesque and the obscene constituted an essential feature both of state power and of people’s reaction to it. The state makes use of the grotesque and the obscene to make a spectacle of its own magnificence and legitimize an exercise of power that, guided by colonial rationality rested on different sorts of violence, is deployed in a fundamentally authoritarian and arbitrary manner. People’s response could consist of acts of resistance in which obscenity and mockery were parodies that undermine state power by turning it into an object of ridicule. But they fail to do so. As a result, Mbembe argues, both dominated and dominating poles rob each other of their vitality: they become mutually impotent. This is zombification (Mbembe 2001: 104).

Matory and Mbembe’s analytical transfigurations of the “zombie” into a process, that is, into zombification, both point to what in social theory would be generally called “alienation”. Ironically, *zumbi* – the Portuguese word for zombie – also refers to one of the greatest symbols of emancipation in the Brazilian junction of the indigenous Afro-Atlantic world: Zumbi was the last leader of the biggest and most long-lasting *quilombo* ever settled in Brazil, the Quilombo de Palmares.⁷

Scholars agree that, “strictly speaking, very little is really known” about Palmares (Reis and Gomes 2014: 14). Archaeological studies have made advances in this terrain, however, as Pedro Paulo de Abreu Funari observes, they do not bring enough data to account for the political organization of Palmares. The outlook is more encouraging with regard to the cultural universe, but even there, Funari warns, “the challenges to the interpretation of the quilombo’s material culture and its appropriation by social groups are immense” (Funari 2014: 46-47).

Given the patent difficulty – perhaps even impossibility – of coming to know Palmares, it is striking that one of the few things we know for certain is that in 1696 the government determined to put Zumbi’s head on a stick in the most public place of Outeiro da Barriga,

⁷ Brazilian composer Jorge Ben (Ben 1974) mentions Zumbi in prophetic tones: “Quando Zumbi chegar/ O que vai acontecer?” [When Zumbi comes/ What will happen?].

where it was located, “to satisfy the offended and justly complainers, and to frighten the Blacks who superstitiously considered him almost immortal; reason why it was understood that with this enterprise [Zumbi’s assassination] Palmares was completely finished” (Gomes 2011: 70-71).

Such a pedagogical exercise of racial terror leaves no room for doubt: see yourselves as Zumbi, and fear for your lives! It is precisely the way how Zumbi died that authorizes us to say that he, in fact, represented all the inhabitants of Palmares, people who knew well – and from inside – that quilombo: *zumbis* from Palmares. These *zumbis*, by the same kind of political metaphoricity that allows for talking about “Black Jacobins” (James 1963), provide an analytical nickname for all inhabitants of *quilombos*, maroons, and *palenques*.

If, as Richard Price says, “*we really know little about Palmares*, compared to what we would like to know” (italics in the original), a “how it could have been-path” (Price 2011: 52) that deviates from any uncomplicated “anthropologist’s dream”⁸ is the one painfully glimpsed in what Saidiya Hartman calls “critical fabulation”. It is a method that consists in “flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers” so as “to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices”. The aim of the maneuver is to result in a “recombinant narrative’, which ‘loops the strands’ of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in retelling” the *zumbis* from Palmares’ history as the one of our present time (Hartman 2008: 12).

Fabulating critically, we can imagine that these *zumbis* were to the gears of the global slave system as the *capoeiristas* of the *gingada* city were to the Eurocentric culture of the lettered city (Acuna 2017): their expertise was to move back and forth, up and down, in and out to interweave a choreography with the hegemonic strands of the social fabric. Thus, more than an analogy, the *zumbis* – as well as the *capoeirista* – become a “melanodermic conceptual character” (Noguera 2011: 2) for thinking about the scope for agency in restricted conditions. They create, protect and, where possible, expand territories in which freedom and equality exist as unstable and precarious relations, demanding at every time even more skillful and uninterrupted movements, preferentially prone to evasive maneuvers.

Perhaps the main feature of this zombifying subject position is its lightness and dexterity in not making any articulated synthesis of those elements (freedom and equality)

8 In “Palmares como poderia ter sido”, Richard Price writes: “So my dream is this: I, entering Palmares today – with its cassava, sweet potato and banana fields –, address in Saramakano [a Surinamese quilombola language] the first person I see, and this person answers me and we understand each other – two *quilombola* languages, crossing forests, crossing time” (Price 2011: 58-59).

a formula of auto-sufficiency that prevents constructing the concept of humanity as “simultaneously an epiphany and an ecumenical gesture” that, firstly, abolishes the world of the inhuman and, as a consequence, makes the world of humans and the world of nonhumans no longer reciprocally external to each other (Mbembe 2017: 180). No one, such an ontology of being would state, shall be thrown from humanity’s ship.

This openness is reminiscent of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivist multinaturalism, which is also based on the idea that “*humanity* is the name of the Subject’s general form” (Viveiros de Castro 2002: 325). But whereas his analysis ends up in a placid philosophical prognosis (Viveiros de Castro citing Levi-Strauss 1955), the one presented in this paper urges the unsettling epistemological gesture that José Steban Muñoz (Muñoz 1999) calls “disidentification”.

The term is a figuration that stands for “dissing identity” and conjugates at least three meanings: first, strengthening the belief that the act of identifying (with or as) is the type of phenomenon that, rather than exhausts, proliferates subjective resources in such a way that makes identities open projections or fictions, in Muñoz’ words (Muñoz 1999: 5). In this sense, disidentification implies, secondly, deliberately evacuating the “politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the ‘harmful’ or contradictory components of any identity” (Muñoz 1999: 12). The purpose of such analytical measures is to minimize the risk of keeping clear the path that makes difference to be consumed either as a commodity or as a pleasurable analytic asset, packaged for fast academic consumption, for this would be the best way to escape the issues of power, knowledge and the reproduction of inequalities raised (Minh-Ha 1992: 83). To be or not to be a *zumbi* is, therefore, a quest distanced from any search for authenticity, purity, or nativeness. It proceeds instead by handling hegemonic codes as raw material to project disenfranchised knowledges.

As a disidentificatory practice, zumbification shall be attentive and ready to enact the conceptual attitude it preconizes, which means, for example, to start accounting for “a Fanon [...] who would not be sanitized” (Muñoz 1999: 9). His homophobia and misogyny must be denounced while his anti-colonial discourse is engaged as a “still valuable yet mediated” possibility of affirmation.⁹

9 “Let me mention in passing that we have never observed the overt presence of homosexuality in Martinique, the reason being the absence of Oedipus complex in the Antilles. The schema of homosexuality is well known to us. There are, nevertheless, what they call ‘men dressed as women’ or *makoumè* [...] But we are convinced that they lead a normal life” (Fanon 2008 [1952]: 157). As Muñoz remarks, this passage of *Black Skins, White Masks* is “for any contemporary antihomophobic reader an inflammatory utterance” (Muñoz 1999: 9).

5. Zumbifying

Paradoxically, zumbifying approaches are vital to the conceptual ecology of conviviality.¹⁰ The unfolding of epistemological standpoints constituted by the combination of experienced ontological negativities sprung from lived, rather than abstractly conceived, philosophical categories is an analytical asset of great value for dealing relationally with problems of complex configuration. Some of these problems have newly gained invigorating formulations. The political problem of diversity, for example, takes some distance from the pivotal term “multiculturalism” if analyzed through the lens of José Rodrigo Rodriguez’s notion of multinormative democracy (Rodriguez 2019); in another quadrant, there is the conceptual work being done around the notion of inequality, whose analytical breadth gains high elasticity if dealt with in the terms proposed by Sérgio Costa (Costa 2019).

A sensible way of addressing these problems may require approaches whose constitution enables them not only to admit or concede but also to emulate the possibility of not being able to solve them. Put differently, to find those answers, one should live up to the desire of not having the power to answer them, which is not the same as shirking the responsibility of answering such questions. It is instead a stance that faces these questions under the same risky and compulsory conditions that Appadurai associates with Mumbai’s slum dwellers, who, in this respect, as he notes, are to a great extent similar to those of Latin America (Appadurai 2018).

An inextricable aspect of the argument developed in this text is the desire to be a written enactment of shared experiences and anguishes as well as reflections thought out loud, together, by, and with the slum-thinkers Kelly Cristina dos Santos, Cláudio P. Leite Junior and Cíntia Fernanda Marques.¹¹ The subject at stake: “apocalyptic life” and its possibilities of being.

¹⁰ Brazilian composer Luiz Carlos da Vila (Vila 2005) evokes the transforming convivial powers of Zumbi when he sings “Zumbi valeu/ Hoje a Vila é kizomba” [Zumbi prevailed/ Now the Vila is *kizomba*].

¹¹ For this working paper, they presented themselves as follows: “Assim apresento essa coisa emprestada que sou eu, me chamo Kelly, mulher negra fruto de uma periferia de revides. Me foi emprestada oportunidade de viver e reviver muitas histórias através da minha história, por tanto eu insisto em pensar, pensar sobre minha gente nessa terra, pensar sobre mim mesma” [So I present this borrowed thing that I am, my name is Kelly, black woman, offspring of a periphery of ripostes. I was lent the opportunity to live and re-live many histories through my own history, thus, I insist in thinking, thinking about my people in this place, thinking about myself]; “Nesse mundo contemporâneo é assim que eu me vejo. Ouvindo certas histórias fundir com as minhas. As descobertas que a escrita e o estudo me trazem é de saber que tem uma Cíntia dentro de mim que sonha, e que quer lutar” [In this contemporary world I see myself like that: listening to certain histories (con) fused with mine. The discoveries that the writing and the learning bring to me is to know that there is a Cíntia within myself who dreams, and who wants to struggle.]; “Claudio Pereira Leite Junior: Negro, morador da cidade de Osasco – SP” (“Cláudio Pereira Leite Júnior: a Black man, resident of Osasco City, SP”).

Thus, in what concerns the argument of this text, following Appadurai, “greater than the risk of misunderstanding [...] is the risk of excess understanding”, for the latter is “the way in which false universalisms can erase true differences” (Appadurai 2018: 5-7). Given the grave tensions and power asymmetries within which the dialogue conducted here takes place, it is easy to guess which elements are exposed to the real danger of being epistemologically erased.

In a distinct but uncannily related sense, what is wanted here is to bring about that which causes the new to be born, in Marcos Nobre’s terms. This “newborn” – birthed by *zumbis* through disidentificatory moves – shall have the incredible (Hegelian?) skill of maintaining “the mismatch between a consciousness that is not yet up to the real novelty of its time and that form of consciousness that has reached an understanding of its time in all its potentials” (Nobre 2019: 18). Like all babies, to use Nyamnjoh’s fond metaphor, this one is inadequate and incomplete (Nyamnjoh 2013: 254-255).

As stated above, for *zumbis*, it is a dangerous affair to expose themselves to the white gaze. Sarah Ahmed remarks “that the enslaved and the colonized were positioned as children [or babies], as those for whom discipline was moral instruction, who were not supposed to have a will of their own; who must be willing to obey” (Ahmed 2017: 80). It is in this sense that they are all at once infantilized and feminized.

It is also in this sense that willfulness, a word used to judge a girl who is becoming feminist (Ahmed 2017: 71), might also be used to consider how zumbified subject positionings are liable to be easily “diagnosed as a symptom of failed subjectivities, assumed as a consequence of an immature will, a will that has yet to be disciplined or straightened out [...]. To be filled with will is to be emptied of thought” (Ahmed 2017: 66, 71).

After such a diagnosis, anything one says might hardly seem credible. Therefore, paradoxically, reclaiming willfulness becomes a reasonable way – if not (again) a compulsory choice – of asserting that that very willfulness is above all an unwillingness: when women and Blacks are not willing to participate in sexist/racist culture, they are willful. Once reclaimed, willfulness turns a pathologizing diagnosis, which, as usual, is systematically employed as a technique of dismissal, into a normative self-description that implies an elaboration on “how just is not to adjust to what is unjust” (Ahmed 2017: 77-84).

But there is a price to be paid, which is to live a life at the edge of mental disorder, or, in Shayda Kafai’s words, to parade “mad border bodies”:

I now inhabit and claim the mad border body as a positionality that questions the implications of undoing social ideologies and stereotypes, particularly those that construct madness as categorically distinct from sanity. If dominant

culture begins to acknowledge the mad border body, that individuals can exist simultaneously in states of sanity and madness, then it must also question the belief that sanity is stable (Kafai 2013).

Beginning with the next word I will now double my positionality and briefly rephrase my argument, as if to take control over my own words so as to “normalize” them: I was not playing with words when I wrote that this text is a “psychotic reaction”. In the months I spent working on it, I went through many moments of insanity.

In a process that ran parallel to the rise of the far right to state power in Brazil, and after the murder of Mestre Moa do Katendê, I began hearing voices: “The invasion of Brazil is not over; we are being invaded at this exact moment” (Krenak 2018).¹² The principles of the invading power are still conspicuously white, proudly masculinist-misogynist as well as heteronormative-homophobic, piously Christian, and apocalyptically capitalist. Combined, they state that everything else will be at most tolerated, but not recognized and, of course, by no means given any chance to change the big picture.

The effect of this state of affairs has largely surpassed a petrifying perplexity. Many Black and sexually dissident people have started talking about the statute of normality. There were those who thought of killing themselves or tried to. Some succeeded. We felt we were just beginning to re-situate the political meaning of suicide, for, if we do not see it this way, how could we come to terms with the disproportionately high suicide rates among indigenous populations (Oliveira et al. 2008; Souza et al. 2012) as well as with the meaning of its practice by enslaved, freed and free people of African descent in the times of slavery? (Oliveira et al. 2013)

Since the times when enslaved Black people had to have a license to transit in public spaces, the rule of law and the codes of urbanity were designed to codify as “normal” the perception of these persons as potential threats. As such, they needed to be “pacified”. This is as true for the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, as shown by Marielle Franco (2018), as it is for the place from which I am writing right now, the periphery of the city of Osasco, São Paulo. There are perhaps too many places in Brazil and around the world where Blacks and blackened people ascertain every day that this truth is as certain as death. Marielle was one of them.

Even though this situation urges us to ask how we could have possibly become accustomed to such a life, what we ultimately want is to live, not just survive. When I walk on the street where I live and have to feel it’s “normal” that police officers feel more authorized than ever to commit all kinds of abuse, when I think that this normalcy

¹² Romualdo Rosário da Costa (1954-2018), known as Mestre Moa do Katendê, was a musician, craftsman, educator, and capoeira master with a long history in the Brazilian Black movement. He was murdered for political reasons during the 2018 presidential race.

is not even close to what happens daily in Brazilian prisons, whose population includes friends and the friends and relatives of friends of mine, when I am reflecting on all that, to declare myself insane – at least temporarily – is nothing less than one of my best means of accessing to an intelligible reality.

The political climate in Brazil has caused larger and larger groups of “pacified” people to come together to talk explicitly about these issues. It is hard because it is too easy to see as our sole failure the lost lives of loved ones who died of poverty and sadness and who have been systematically killed on the streets or in prisons. Of course, it would be outrageous to be happy or satisfied merely for not being one of them. We cannot stop wondering: might we still have such a fate? Are we still one of them, and it is just our (in)sanity which prevents us from seeing so?

My lifetime has been massively invested in reading and thinking about these issues, which I have come to elaborate in written form for the appreciation of my peers. A pretty “normal” academic life. Maybe that is why, when interacting in academia, this place I am so familiar with, I often feel that the integrity of my cognitive and intellectual being is as threatened as the integrity of my bodily being when, on my street, in front of my home, this place I am so familiar with, a police cruiser comes towards me in the night.

Throughout my academic life, I have transited in academic milieus where scholars put forward arguments whose strategic mobilization I consider quite suspicious. I remember an event in Germany in which a renowned Brazilian sociologist, not before reminding us of her academic credentials, protested the presentation of the “Brazilian” slavery system as a regime of terror. It seemed to me the typical attitude of a particular elite, especially when abroad: to use slavery to reproduce a positive image of itself as being responsible for a kind of “moral superiority” of Brazil over other slave countries, the United States being the implicit point of comparison (Moreira 2019: 102). Interpellated, she argued that the term “terror”, because of its historical roots in the French Revolution, does not apply well to Brazil. I objected by asking if we could think of terror in another sense, a Fanonian one perhaps.¹³ She promptly replied that Frantz Fanon was an activist rather than a theorist.

If I understood this viewpoint well, the notion of terror is correctly applied when referring to the period of intense violence during the French Revolution but loses its truthfulness entirely when employed to describe centuries of systemic and systematic violence against millions of enslaved people in Brazil. Moreover, while ensuring that the French Revolution’s “terror” remains tied to a specific historical conjuncture, its trinity-motto

13 What I call the Fanonian acceptance is the fusion of two moments: ontological negativity, which this text is about, with the politics that institutes and effectuates it, necropolitics. In fact, Mbembe argues that “any historical account of the rise of modern terror needs to address slavery, which could be considered one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation” (Mbembe 2003: 21).

has been sold, without noteworthy conceptual concern, as a universal principle of political institutionalization. As for Fanon “as” a theorist, I could not help but ask why the criterion of activism did not apply with such exclusionary potency to Marx, Sartre, or Foucault.

Something similar happens when you point Fanon at Hegel where scholars have read the latter’s famous writings on the philosophy of history, entirely inebriated by the richness of their abstract categories while raising a tenacious objection to any serious discussion on issues such as racism and colonialism. To address these points, as Mariana Teixeira writes “does not mean to ‘add colour’ (quite literally, in this case) to an otherwise untouched framework. It means rather to be able to see that colour has played, from the outset, a key role in the very composition of that framework” (Teixeira 2018: 109). Nevertheless, I have witnessed many a time an enormous effort to make that framework untouched.

If I had not had the enormous privilege of listening to the speech “What does it mean to be a black intellectual?” by Felipe Alves de Oliveira (Oliveira 2018), it would probably have taken much longer before I began to believe that to tell a few (of the many) episodes drawn from my academic life could be of some value in a strictly epistemological sense. Now I know that telling such stories matter and that they are telling enough.

6. Zumbified

The episodes narrated above expose arguments impregnated with what Gloria Wekker calls “white innocence”, that is, “an important and apparently satisfying way of being in the world” derived from an unrecognized reservoir of knowledge and affects based on centuries of imperial domination (Wekker 2016: 2).

Colonial slavery was a central element in this process, and its effects extend to a greater or lesser extent, depending on the configuration in question, to this exact line that I now write. This “innocence” encapsulates a way of thinking that, without the slightest embarrassment, presents itself as the embodiment of the good, the beautiful and the just and, as such, “as being inherently on the moral and ethical high ground, thus a guiding light” to the others (Wekker 2016: 2).

The relations between this way of placing oneself in the world and the aspiration of objectivity in science, of impartiality in justice, of laicity in state affairs, in short, of the various ways in which the paradigm of neutrality in Western thought is presented, are well known.

In Brazil, the idea of racial neutrality, namely, the principle that any notion of race should be taken as irrelevant in actions aimed at promoting equality, has been a

strategic tool used to perfect and perpetuate the social mechanisms pivotal to the reproduction of inequality (Moreira 2017; 2019: 98-99). It is this neutrality that underpins the “presumption of righteousness of state agents” and allows judges to argue – even in the face of blatant racism – that “police officers always operate neutrally in the fulfillment of their duties” (Moreira 2019: 105). We have here the same effort to subtract “colour” to render untouched a scenario in which race has, from the outset, played a key role.

Thus, it seems that Hegel’s writings, police action in Brazilian favelas, as well as the sociologist’s denial of the terror of slavery, all participate in the same general configuration of domination. To rephrase, one can say that the path that leads from the hand of the Enlightenment philosopher when he wrote to the hand of the policeman when he shoots runs also, if not above all, through a common intellectual attitude.

This is a paradigmatic example of the work done by what Charles Mills calls the “epistemology of ignorance”. To paraphrase him, it could be said that the signatories of the intellectual contract – whose ethics advocates a careful consideration of others’ ideas – as soon as confronted with epistemological positions that displace them from their essential position, activate a dysfunctional cognitive model that diverts them from the will of understanding the social realities discernible from a decentered standpoint. The ironic outcome of the “epistemology of ignorance” is that its adherents “will be in general unable to understand the world they themselves have made” (Mills 1997: 18).

As can be seen, it is a potent and pervasive phenomenon quite tricky to neutralize. Arguments like the one advanced in this text – an intellectual exercise that takes the notion of conviviality as a space of conceptual experimentation where Afro-indigenous archives of an América Ladina are explored so as to braid in an isonomic manner pressing issues in the study of inequality (poverty, spatial segregation, exposure to violence) with crucial topics in works on difference (reason, intersubjectivity, identity) – have the purpose of, among other things, trying to accomplish this task.

They are the constant enactment of the paradox of subalternized knowledge: the power to institute the tabs of their *Weltanschauungen* depend increasingly on how much they master the hegemonic language and code of conduct, self-named erudite.¹⁴ But this proficiency in the master’s code takes place precisely where the work in progress is

14 As in Brazilian hip hop icon Mano Brown’s verses (Brown 2013): “Enquanto a vanguarda negra e a vã/ Filosofia sã/ Fundão, meu divã/ Inédito em avant-première/ Não durma no barui, né?!” [While the Black avant-garde and the vain/ Sane Philosophy/ Fundão [*favela*], my divan/ Unseen, in avant-première/ Do not fall asleep to all this noise, okay?].

not ly the exercise of exposing its impropriety – to deny or negate it – but also an act of appropriation aimed at conjuring other ways of knowing: to *denegate* it.¹⁵

To *denegate*, on the one hand, assumes that its epistemological gamble is not “to make theory popular, but to render the popular theoretical. Enough of *petit-négre*, as if we could not understand Kant ... [or Hegel]” (Barros 2019: 42). But it must be recognized that mastering the “theoretical” entails the enormous risk of reproducing with even greater vigor the pressures of which theorizing is an inertial force. The exercise is then to induce a decompensation of theory, to turn it upon itself by moving it in circles to distort the directionality of its power and thereby suspend its propensity to engender sordid hierarchies and the most atrocious forms of exploitation. On the other hand, it is also necessary to execute the coeval maneuver of adopting “an anti-intellectual attitude as a tactic to avoid the realization of the self-fulfilling prophecy” that reifies the hegemonic (Carneiro 2005: 118).

This double movement implies that, at any given moment, there is the possibility of developing the shrewdness of avoiding the dubious task of seeing the exercise of consciousness – both one’s own and the other’s – as a repository to be brought repeatedly to a series of recursive awakenings. Or, to put it in a more incisive and perhaps more exciting way, it is the act of successively thwarting the attempt to constitute a prescient cognitive instance that acts as a meta-position relative to another.

Conducted in this manner, *denegation* becomes a *zumbi* epistemological stance, through which one denies self-denial. A tremendous flow of zumbifying labor can be generated and released by these strategies of knowing, whose expressive modus resembles Trinh T. Minh-Ha’s “speaking nearby”: “A speaking in brief, whose closures

15 Spivak discusses the Freudian concept of “denegation” to address the “access of the colonized [...] to the heritage and culture of imperialism” (Spivak 1999: 59-60). As a first step in the work of producing analytical constructs based on Afro-Atlantic vernacular thinking, I articulate Spivak’s philosophical digressions with *capoeira* language to suggest this approximation. It is a translation of the verb “*negacear*”, which refers to a specific aspect of capoeira movements but whose meaning also works as a play on words with the verb “*negar*” (to negate). The word “nega” is a feminine informal form of “Black” in Portuguese. The capoeira song mentioned above [ote 4] playfully brings about the same interpretive operation: The word “nego” (informal for Black man) is the masculine form of “nega”, which also means “denies”. When sung, a slight change in the pronunciation transforms the “Black” (person) into the verb “to negate”. “Nagô”, in turn, was the name given to the enslaved Yoruba people who came from the region of today’s Congo and Benin. The first verse, which reads “Troca língua comigo, Nagô” [Exchange tongues with me, Nago] may be read as an attempt at communication between enslaved persons who speak different languages. It is an effort of translation. The second verse represents the slavery system reaction: “Cut out the Black man’s tongue, Nago!”. The deprivation of the right to speak, accomplished through manifold forms of violent disenfranchisement, is one of the most present themes in the affective economy of the Black diaspora. This is also one of the reasons why many repressed ideas and feelings still find their course to the surface of life almost exclusively through bodily-based expressions such as Afro-Brazilian capoeira. To translate these thoughts – which have been conceived, unfolded and performatively discussed for centuries – is a hard and risky enterprise. In this paper I am attempting a first approximation to the issue.

are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition – these are forms of indirectness well understood by anyone in tune with poetic language” (Mihn-Ha 1992: 87).

Very few would be willing to admit that Gayatri C. Spivak is a poet, but I would like to suggest that she relies on a certain “speaking nearby” when, evoking an awkward positionality, she asks *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, and, highlighting the precariousness of her position, she unravels from it (Spivak 1988: 271). This text, with its speaking nearby the concept of conviviality, is an idea-braiding akin to Spivak’s.

It is no coincidence that the argument developed here has taken the form of a diagnosis of the present time, whose most recent conjuncture has highlighted events that have given us reason to be quite pessimistic. However, borrowing the words of James Baldwin, “I can’t be pessimistic because I’m alive. Being pessimistic means that you have agreed that human life is an academic issue” (Baldwin 1963). It is not.

Therefore, already *zumbified*, I allow myself to close this very academic text with the poetic words by Kelly Cristina dos Santos:

It is I who introduce myself

How to present this borrowed thing that is me?

On loan to myself, a person who walks into a valley of insufficient interpretations.

What to say about me that they haven’t already said, already written, already studied or appropriated many times. Probably all of that.

How to maintain or acquire the fine ability to perceive simple things like love, or delicate things like the concept of alienation?

Thinking now, I can’t write, let alone about myself. I can’t write about the anguishing slavery that crushes us, that mistreats us.

I don’t know how to write about the people we run over every day on the streets, and mostly I can’t write about the flowers that pierce the asphalt.

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