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The reading of this material should be accompanied by viewing the following video footage:

Interview with Voinha, September 15th, 2018, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Excerpt 1: I needed to change my life. <https://youtu.be/CxxYF34Zn4I>.

Excerpt 2: I am the owner of myself. <https://youtu.be/I9ae-Wdglbk->.

Excerpt 3: Sewing indeed changed my life. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UzAoYrKbS8U>

ESSAY ABSTRACT

In this essay I analyze how the artefacts of questioning and listening became resourceful in the procedure of excavating the personal and political reasons behind the migration journey my maternal grandmother Voinha embarked on in 1945 from Ananindeua and Belém to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Voinha, who turned 100 years old on April 08th, 2021 and passed away on March 06th, 2022, influenced my own migration journey, which started sixteen years ago when I left Rio de Janeiro for Doha, Qatar and later moved on to the Northern European cities of Munich, Frankfurt am Main, Copenhagen, Berlin, and Malmö. Coupling questioning with listening allowed an oppressed woman to speak for herself, fostering in this way dramaturgies that brought awareness to feminist empowerment as a means to tackle the colonial and patriarchal ways in which the Brazilian national identity is constructed.

The writing style is mainly anecdotal and based on conversations I had with Voinha on different occasions. The recordings of our last in-person encounter on September 15th, 2018, became the foundation for the performance *Feliz Aniversário*,¹ created primarily as an opportunity for Voinha to tell the story of her migration journey. Excerpts

of this audio and video footage will be further analyzed alongside this essay.

The methodology adopted is autoethnography with the intention of offering nuanced, complex, and specific knowledge about particular lives, experiences, and relationships (Adams, Jones, Ellis 2014). Within autoethnographical methodological tools, I focus on reflexivity with the aim of troubling the relationship between researchers 'selves' and 'others' and offering a re-examination of the paradigm modernity/coloniality as simultaneously shaped through specific articulations of race, gender, and sexuality (Lugones 2007). The final intention is to analyze how turning back to my ancestors' and my own experiences, identities, and their socio-political implications; how analyzing them according to gender and queer theories and from a decolonial perspective, can potentialize my current practice focused on autobiographical performance.

One last important point to be acknowledged is my role as an artist-researcher examining the complex ethical and creative processes of working with intimate family memories, observing the growing necessity of developing dramaturgies of care and resistance (Malzacher 2008).

KEYWORDS

Autobiographical performance; Autoethnography; Questioning, Listening; Migration, Feminism.

Questioning and Listening: An Attempt to Investigate Voinha's Migration Journey

By: Iury Salustiano Trojaborg



Still from interview with Voinha; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; September 15th, 2018

Cultural identity belongs to the future as much as to the past. But, like everything which is historical, it undergoes constant transformation. Far from being grounded in a mere recovery of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (Hall 1994)

In my artistic practice I concentrate on ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers and viewers to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us (Ellis, Bochner 2000).

The central question of my scholarship is: How can performance art be used as a tool to reconfigure power relations, creating in this way more just and equitable living conditions based on the rule of law, justice, equality, and non-discrimination?

My artistic practice is an attempt to question an allegedly social and

cultural objective point of view that hides a very specific position, namely that of a white heterosexual Western male. This supposedly impartial system enacts a gaze claimed to be immaterial while materializing what it embraces, especially the conditions of certain bodies and if/ how they matter (Butler 1993); their meanings and their capacity of

producing knowledge. Such a gaze claims to have the capacity to see, but is itself unseen, to represent while escaping representation (Haraway 1988). Turning to questioning and listening, I attempt to destabilize such supposedly neutral orders (Siegmond 2006), and to create a performative setting that offers more presence than representation, more process than result, more manifestation than signification, more energetics than information (Lehmann 2006).

The objective of my research is to explore the process of construction of cultural identities in a performative setting according to the intersection and juxtaposition of axes such as gender, sexuality, class, race, and ableism.

The practice into autobiographical performance I have been developing is based on reflexivity as a tool to explicitly acknowledge the relation of art and science (and production of knowledge) to power, skillfully and artfully recreating the details of lived experiences and one's space or implication in control, contradiction, and privilege (Calafell 2013). This practice has led me to a broader understanding of the concepts of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) and assemblage (Puar 2011) as differentiated but not oppositional. I perceive the performative as a fruitful arena to experiment, not what assemblages are, but what assemblages do (Puar 2011), following the critique on intersectionality, by foregrounding its spatial and temporal essentializations (Grosz 1994).

From Personal to Political

I start my analysis by drawing from the concept of performative (or performatory) utterances, where it is appropriate that the participants involved in the situation where such speech acts are uttered should have the intention to execute them (Austin 1962). While listening to the sentences articulated by my grandmother during our encounter, I recognized a paradigm shift concerning the basic reason for her migration from Ananindeua and Belém to Rio de Janeiro amidst WWII. Within this shift, I witnessed my grandmother constructing a narrative that placed

herself at the centre of her story, interpreting her actions as not dependent on any external masculine intervention. The strength and courage that it took for my grandmother to cope with the hardships of chauvinism from an early age have always been widely proclaimed among members of my family. This is the story I heard from them: Voinha's father died in a horse accident when she was only three years old. Her mother soon re-married and Voinha, the youngest of five siblings from the first marriage, ended up living with a severe, macho-type stepfather who could not deal with a strong-willed stepdaughter, who refused to subjugate herself to his authority as the head of the family. Her stepfather then forced her into an arranged marriage when she was fourteen years old. Her husband, another macho-type, believed a wife should strictly obey her husband. Not only that, but according to Voinha's recollections, he had alcohol and aggression issues and tried to beat her on several occasions. Despite loathing the man, she was forced to have sexual intercourse with him on a regular basis, which generated three daughters and one son during four years of marriage. Finding no other way out of an abusive relationship, Voinha (with the support of her mother) secretly embarked on a steamship in 1945, and sailed to Rio de Janeiro during WWII, leaving behind her husband, four children, and the world as she'd known it. Within such discourses, I recognize an entanglement of individual and collective desires and their cooption by arrangements of power (Deleuze, Guattari 2000) within the way Brazil organized its socio-political structures in the early years following its transitional period of independence from the Kingdom of Portugal into a monarchical political system and finally into a Federal Republic.

Following the premises imposed by the European colonial project, the construction of Brazil as a colony and its subsequent development into a nation-state was based on exploitation and discharge: the initial (failed) attempt to enslave native peoples gave way to the Atlantic slave trade era, where over

four hundred years Brazil imported more enslaved African individuals than any other Western country (an estimated total of five million).

The use of this human resource following an inhumane perspective, extracting all possible energy from a body, extenuating it and finally discharging it, is ingrained in the Brazilian structural concept of labour. Once the enslavement of African individuals was officially abolished, Brazilian elites required cheap workmanship to reassure the continuation of the colonial project. Important to mention is that there were no reparations provided for the newly emancipated slaves (on the contrary, those who received governmental economic reparations were the slave owners). This provoked a mass exodus of freed slaves and peasants from the north and northeast to the rapidly changing and industrializing southeast region of the country from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century and onwards, extending exploitation and subjugation by abusive working conditions to a national level. My maternal grandmother was only one among many individuals who got caught up in this abusive pattern, a pattern very much characterized by the usual contradictions that the history of the formation of Brazil as a country is embedded in. Around the time that Voinha migrated to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil was living the Vargas Era, specifically the Estado Novo period (or Third Brazilian Republic) where, in order to perpetuate his power, President Getúlio Vargas imposed a new, quasi-totalitarian Constitution in a coup d'état, ruling the country in such fashion from 1937 to 1945. Aside from being a dictator, Vargas was an economic nationalist and populist, who favored industrial development and liberal reforms. The nineteen years that Vargas remained in office as president (1930-1945 and 1951-1954) are marked by an attempt to build a national identity through the establishment of the National Press Council, created for the intention of perfect coordination with the government in the control of the news and of political and doctrinal material (Bourne 1974). Important to mention is that militarization of the poor migrant male workforce



“Patriarchy is not simply a psychic, but also a social and economic structure

Listening to Voinha, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, December 09th, 2016.
Photo: Ulrik Trojaborg

played a decisive role in the emergence of a militarized middle-class that culminated in another coup d'état, this time by the Brazilian Armed Forces with the support of the United States government in 1964, immersing Brazil in a violent regime of military dictatorship for twenty-one years and postponing the issue of the then so-called Citizen Constitution. This document that emerged only in 1988 became representative of the re-democratization period that started in 1985 and still strives to exist to this day. Patriarchy is not simply a psychic, but also a social and economic structure. Our society therefore can best be understood once it is recognized that it is organized both in capitalist and in patriarchal ways (Hartmann 1979).

Questioning and Listening

The reflection I propose on questioning and listening is generally informed by a lifetime of observing my grandmother's attitude of questioning structures of power; and specifically illuminated by what she told me last time I encountered her alive. Crucial to mention is that during this encounter she had just been admitted to an assisted living facility as her mental health had rapidly deteriorated. Having lived her entire life as an independent woman, being under

the care of others was something that my grandmother was neither used to, nor willing to easily accept. During this encounter, I incorporated an ethic of care in my methodological interviewing practice. Following the theorization on attentiveness (Tronto 1998), I cared about my grandmother's well-being by actively listening to her stories and being receptive to her needs throughout the time we spent together.

Every time I had questioned my family members about the reason that prompted my maternal grandmother to leave Ananindeua and Belém, I received as an answer a long and romanticized story that placed not the feminine, but instead the masculine in the centre: Voinha migrated to Rio de Janeiro in 1945 to follow “the love of her life”, Armando, my future grandfather, whom a couple of years earlier had been allocated a new position in the army general headquarters in Rio de Janeiro, back then the capital city of Brazil. Despite the enormous struggles undertaken by that feminine body to break free from the structural gendered violence within the society she inhabited, I could still perceive that the actions taken by my grandmother against patriarchal structures could only go so far. The feminine was still surviving according to a violent structure

that did not allow a woman to exist individually, without the masculine presence, away from the Catholic institution of marriage that hovers like an ever-present ghost over Latin American nations. The subsequent marriage with my grandfather in Rio de Janeiro did not prevent Voinha from continuing to suffer a type of violence that became normalized within such context and, therefore, difficult to make the perpetrators accountable. After the second marriage and giving birth to nine children, my grandmother was abandoned by her second husband with no alimony. She then put into practice the sewing skills she had gained from her mother and became an industrial seamstress in order to financially sustain herself and her children. She executed this professional activity during the rest of her life, well into her nineties, and never married again. In Latin America as a whole, feminist and women's movements made alliances with broad-based popular movements and human rights movements, organizing across class to fight the authoritarian regimes, and making use of a conceptual link between authoritarianism and patriarchy in pushing for their demands. Feminists in Brazil joined forces with other social movements in fighting for re-democratization of the country, thus carving out a space to join with the opposition forces, gain access

“**Listening to Voinha's recollections meant not only listening to her words, but also to the moments of silence, tones and fluctuations of voice**”

to political arenas, and lodge their demands (Sardenberg Costa 2017). What I witnessed during this interview with Voinha was a woman who, despite suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia, was still able to construct a new persona who allowed the production of a never-before heard narrative that allocated the masculine a peripheral position. She embodied and performed a cyborg goddess-like persona right before my eyes: The former (cyborg) hails the future in a teleological technological determinism—culture—that seems not only overdetermined, but also exceptionalizes our current technologies. The latter (goddess)—nature—is embedded in the racialized matriarchal mythos of feminist reclamation narratives (Puar 2011). Living in a body intersected and understated by issues of class, gender, sexuality and race, my grandmother developed an ability of reorganization and re-arrangement in a way that she, before, when in a state of complete physical and mental health, had never voiced. When faced with questions concerning her migration path, she made use of the scarce memory and language available, turning speech itself into a bodily act. We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is the name for our doing: both ‘what’ we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences (Butler 1997).

Although Voinha was 97 years old, she still recalled being called a bossy lady by her own mother during her childhood in Ananindeua. During the interview, she

regained and performed her bossiness by not hesitating to make bold statements regarding her decision to migrate: “I went to Rio de Janeiro to look for a job (...). I wanted to get out of that place (Ananindeua and Belém) because I couldn't find a job there. I couldn't find anything. I needed to change my life.” While attentively listening to Voinha I realized that she repeated certain phrases as an attempt to affirm the new positionality she was taking regarding her own story. “I came by myself” or “I didn't meet anyone” emerged as an empowered counterpart to the previously masculinized version of her migration journey. A point to be observed here is that the concept of performativity cannot not be limited to performance: a singular performing act. Performativity is a much wider notion that comprises the idea of iteration, which means repeating a process with the aim of approaching a determined goal. A performative act could only work as an essential tool against a number of dated social/cultural standards and usual models of political identity, if it is based on the process of repetition and resignification: every time one repeats such an act, something new emerges from it (Butler 1997). Listening to Voinha's recollections meant not only listening to her words, but also to the moments of silence, tones and fluctuations of voice, patterns of emphasis, facial expressions and gestures, resounding images, movements, and bodily stances (Pollock 2006). To be able to mindfully listen to her, I brought along memorabilia that would somehow guide her fragile memory back into her past experiences. Her original sewing machine played a vital role as she made it clear by stat-

ing that “sewing indeed changed my life”. The things of the world are not simply neutral objects which stand before us for our contemplation. Each one of them symbolizes or recalls a particular way of behaving, provoking in us reactions which are either favorable or unfavorable. This is why people's tastes, character, and the attitude they adopt towards the world and to particular things can be deciphered from the objects with which they choose to surround themselves, their preferences for certain colors or the places where they like to go for walks (Merleau-Ponty 2004).

The interaction between Voinha and her sewing machine became increasingly intense and meaningful during the interview. At first, she did not recognize it as her own, and kept repeating the question “Is this my machine?” As she did not seem convinced by my affirmation, I encouraged her to use her tactile senses to check that indeed it was hers. The old alliance of love and companionship between the two immediately unfolded and she then recollected the long and lonely hours spent sewing to survive. The machine, an extension of her physical body, allowed her to become the breadwinner of a family composed of one woman, her then eleven children and no masculine presence. “I got stuck with this machine. It was like that.” Such painful recollections finally blurted out of my grandmother when she, while holding the machine tight, directly addressed it in a loud tone of voice: “You are my husband!” This was not the only human attribute she placed on the object: “This was the second sewing machine I got. The first one was manual. I liked this one much

more. Of course I did! The old one with the manual pedal was really hard on my body. No electric motor, nothing. So, when the electric came around, ah, she became my queen!" The presence of the sewing machine allowed Voinha to foresee a possible future aligned with the independent life she had always led: "And if I could possess it (the machine) again, I would love it. I would even get rid of my normal life and start sewing professionally again (laughs)." By bearing witness to different pasts, one is not a passive observer but is able to turn from interrogating the past to initiating new dialogues about that past and thus bringing into being new histories and from those new histories, new presents and new futures. (Gurminder 2014).

Conclusion

My practice as an artist-researcher focuses on acknowledging individual ways of looking at the world and the societies one inhabits. The production of dialogical interactions based on questioning and listening intends to value multiple perspectives on decolonial artistic practices. This essay is an attempt to question the way stories are told, by whom and from which perspectives. It is an attempt to evince how much their consumption can either perpetuate structures of power or potentialize the emergence of multi-faceted dramaturgies.

While questioning my grandmother about her migration journey and the necessity to re-create herself in order to survive, I could identify similarities between the struggles I went through while migrating from Rio de Janeiro. A natural bond emerged, and this togetherness became an experience of questioning patriarchy. Together, two generations of a family shared experiences of empowerment and resistance. With the recent death of Voinha, the possibility of using language to question and listen to her re-telling and re-creating her own story, was suspended. Our communication, though, transcends the materiality of our bodies. Our conversation therefore continues.

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Excerpt 1: I needed to change my life. <https://youtu.be/CxxYF34Zn4I>.

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2. The Proclamation of the Republic was a military coup d'état that established the First Brazilian Republic on November 15th, 1889.
3. Brazil was so named by the Portuguese Crown after a tree: Brazilwood or Pau-brasil, a tree that grew in abundance in the region and was used to dye textiles in Europe, boosting the Portuguese economy while exploiting a natural resource. The choice of name asserts a clear description of the relationship between Portugal and Brazil: the colonizer and the colonized, this land and its peoples became a product to be exploited and discharged.
4. <https://www.slavevoyages.org/assessment/estimates> Accessed on June 11th, 2023.
5. Brazil was the last country in the Western world to abolish the enslavement of human beings. By the time slavery was abolished, on May 13th, 1888, an estimated 5.8 million enslaved people had been transported from the African continent to Brazil.
6. Both my maternal and paternal grandfathers (as well as my father) were from the army and marine corps.
7. Caselli, Christian; Salustiano Trojaborg, Iury; Trojaborg, Ulrik. (2018). *Excerpt Voinha interview: I am the owner of myself*. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil <https://youtube.be/9ae-Wdglbk->. Accessed on June 11th, 2023.
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10. The French philosopher Merleau-Ponty uses the term world of perception to underline the significance of having certain objects surrounding oneself and how much this choice communicates the image of the world constructed by every human being. He also clarifies that the visual world forms itself through one's gaze, which means that to look at something is a process based on certain criteria, on a series of selections that every person makes. These selections cannot be comprehended only as a one-way process because they also work the other way around: the way a person chooses to look at the world is also a response to the way the world (and, more specifically in this case, the objects) will look back at this person. The way the world presents itself to someone is a consequence of the way they decide to look at it. There is no fixed reality, every person decides which reality one wants or can see. What I see is a result of innumerable conscious, subconscious, and unconscious choices. And what I see is definitely not what the other sees.