



NOTES FOR THINKING ABOUT BLACK QUEER POETICS IN BRAZIL TODAY

APONTAMENTOS PARA PENSAR EM POÉTICAS QUEER NEGRAS NO BRASIL DA ATUALIDADE

NOTAS PARA PENSAR LAS POÉTICAS QUEER NEGRAS EN EL BRASIL ACTUAL



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ABSTRACT: The text emphasizes that in recent artistic productions by LGBTQIA+ individuals, an indissociability between sex, gender, and race is being constructed. This intersection is also present in the most recent academic studies, which foster a dialogue between black feminism, queer studies, and decolonial perspectives. The central objective of the text is to promote a reflection on these intersectionalities and provide some insights for understanding contemporary black queer poetics.

KEYWORDS: Art. Artivism. Feminisms. Intersectionality. Poetics.

RESUMO: O texto enfatiza que nas recentes produções artísticas de pessoas LGBTQIA+ está sendo construída uma indissociabilidade entre sexo, gênero e raça. Essa intersecção também está presente nos estudos acadêmicos mais recentes, que promovem um diálogo entre feminismos negros, queer e decoloniais. O objetivo central do texto é proporcionar uma reflexão sobre essas interseccionalidades e fornecer alguns insights para a compreensão das poéticas queer negras contemporâneas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Arte. Ativismo. Feminismos. Interseccionalidade. Poéticas.

RESUMEN: El texto argumenta que las recientes producciones artísticas de las personas LGBTQIA+ construyen una inseparabilidad entre sexo - género y raza. Esta intersección también se está produciendo en los estudios académicos más recientes que producen un diálogo entre los feminismos negros, queer y decoloniales. El propósito del texto es reflexionar sobre estas interseccionalidades y producir algunos apuntes para pensar la poética queer negra hoy.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Arte. Activismo. Feminismos. Interseccionalidad. Poéticas.

Introduction

Over the past 15 years, there has emerged in Brazil what we initially referred to as the "artist scene of sexual and gender dissidences" (COLLING, 2019, our translation). In previous texts, researchers from the Research and Extension Center for Cultures, Genders, and Sexualities (NuCuS) at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA) have defined the concept of this scene, addressed some of the conditions that allowed its emergence, and established dialogues and learning experiences with various collectives and artists and their works.

In brief, it can be concluded that this scene has consolidated in Brazil for several reasons, with the following vital factors standing out: 1) Response to the conservative and fundamentalist wave that strengthened the country around 2011; 2) The strength of social movements, which successfully increased the visibility of LGBTQIA+ individuals, primarily through parades, media, and the arts; 3) The expansion of access to new technologies and artists' systematic and strategic use of social media; 4) The remarkable growth of gender and sexuality studies in Brazilian universities, particularly those situated within the perspectives of black feminism, queer studies, and decolonial approaches, was also influenced by the overall expansion of access to higher education and the impact of greater student diversity resulting, for example, from quotas for Black, Indigenous, and transgender individuals; 5) The proliferation and broadening of various trans, non-binary, bixas², sapatonas³ and other identities. Notably, individuals with these identities play a significant role in the production of this scene (COLLING, 2019).

Combining these five aspects has enabled the emergence of another artistic scene in the country. This scene has its roots in the history of Brazilian performing arts, as exemplified by theater groups such as Dzi Croquettes, Vivencial Diversiones, Teatro Oficina, and Os Satyros, which bring innovative elements. In any case, it is clear that in the last decade, these activist productions of dissidence have flourished in various regions of Brazil and in multiple forms of artistic expression created by a multitude⁴ of individuals with a consciousness of the political and activist nature of their works.

² The term in English that references this word is "fag"; however, in the text, the author does not use this word in a derogatory manner. Brazilian members of the LGBTQIAP+ community widely use it as a way to self-identify without carrying negative connotations.

³ The term in English that references this word is "dyke"; however, in the text, the author does not use this word in a derogatory manner. Brazilian members of the LGBTQIAP+ community widely use it as a way to self-identify without carrying negative connotations.

⁴ Used here multitude in the sense of Paul B. Preciado (2011).

These artistic productions highlight both dissident sexualities and genders and other social markers such as race, class, and body standards, along with their intentions and political struggles for a society that values and learns from diversity. The artistic productions inseparably operate with activism and art. The interpretative key to activism, already present before these new productions, can be activated and enhanced. In this sense, we advocate that activism is not an identity attributed to artists or works but rather an analytical approach that emerges from analyzing results in which the artistic and activist dimensions are intertwined, interconnected, and inseparable.

As pointed out by Rose de Melo Rocha (2021, p. 18, our translation), in her reflections on activism, she states that "more than an interweaving, it constitutes an initiative of reflection and action whose guiding principles are of non-separation. [...] It is about defending an irrevocable connection between art and politics, proposing not to separate the two poles."

After elucidating the origin of this artistic scene, our attention is directed toward its creative expression, exploring the languages employed, its connection with contemporary art, and how the artists are conceiving their works. A notable characteristic is the strong affinity of the artistic productions within this scene with queer perspectives and what is known as contemporary art: 1) The criticism of gender binarism, widely present in queer studies, is skillfully manifested in the song lyrics, dramaturgy, performances, and gender performativities of the artists, emphasizing the synergy between the blending of artistic languages and a fundamental element of contemporary art; 2) The purpose of these creations is to provoke estrangement and mobilize the audience, meaning that the intention is to produce art that questions standards and norms, whether related to gender and sexuality or to the "art cis-tem" itself (SOUSA, 2022). The approach is not aimed at adhering to a respectable representation within the cisheteronormative context (VERGUEIRO, 2018).

Queer Poetics

Could we then conclude that this scene presents us with queer poetics? When considering literature, the researcher Anselmo Peres Alós (2010) made pertinent reflections in the text *Narrativas da sexualidade: pressupostos para uma poética queer*, discussing the changes in the notion of poetics over time and presenting his conception of a queer poetics. Within the field of literary theory, Alós explains that,

[...] The notion of poetics has at least two meanings: one of a normative nature and another of a descriptive nature. Historically, the first notion of poetics is associated with normative models of literary creation. Consider, for instance, the poetics of Aristotle and Boileau, which normalized literary production through a set of rules. After the rupture provoked by Russian formalism and French structuralism, the term 'poetics' was applied not to normative studies but to descriptive ones. Just as structural linguistics sought to describe the functioning of language, structural poetics sought to explain the functioning of literature, particularly narrative texts. [...] With the downfall of the myth of a universal structure upon which structuralist thought was based, the term "poetics" lost its universalist pretension and acquired a new connotation. Instead of seeking the "universal constants" that would define the novel, the short story, poetry, or theater, the term is now used in more specific contexts, addressing more or less comprehensive issues without aspiring to universalize these recurrences (ALÓS, 2010, p. 842, our translation).

When discussing queer poetics, the author emphasizes that we should consider a poetics that transcends the realms of a purely authorial approach. "The foundations of queer poetics, in this sense, are not only to describe narratives; they also enable an accurate analysis of how the text reflects, subverts, and questions the reality of the social world in which it is inserted" (ALÓS, 2010, p. 843, our translation). By following Anselmo Alós's (2010) concepts of what would constitute a "queer poetics" – that is, thinking about how artistic expressions of dissidence have reflected, subverted, and questioned our reality – we realize that the word is not sufficient to encompass the entire complexity of this creative scene. This is not only due to the existence of multiple poetics, as highlighted by Alós (2010), who advocates against adopting universalizing objectives when approaching poetics but also because the artists in this scene are already in a phase that we could call post-queer.

But what is post-queer? Suppose the queer movement produced significant intersections between sex, gender, and sexuality. In that case, the post-queer in Brazil has expanded intersectionality that we may not fully comprehend yet: it encompasses the intersection between sex, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnic-racial identities, among other social markers. This development is partly due to the influence and strength of Black feminism in our country and the proliferation of its activism and studies within and outside universities. Therefore, the most appropriate expression to describe this artistic scene is the "activist scene of sexual, racial, and gender dissidences." This choice is not only based on the fact that a large part of this scene is produced by Black and mixed-race individuals but also because the racial dimensions in the works are intrinsically linked to the sexual and gender dimensions.

Resistances

How are Black LGBTQIA+ artists challenging prejudices related to sexuality, gender, and race? Clearly, this is being done in many diverse ways. Initially, a reflection was proposed on "resistance with joy (COLLING, 2022, p. 21, our translation). We observe how the artists invoked and developed the idea of resistance. Let's look at some examples: On October 26, 2021, during the blind auditions of the TV show "The Voice Brasil" on Rede Globo⁵ WD sang, "I am/ The voice of Black resistance." His performance enchanted the judges, who turned around eagerly to listen to him. The song's lyrics narrate the story of a boy who faced abuse during childhood, was stigmatized due to his voice and skin color, abandoned by his parents, and raised by his grandparents, developing an excessive admiration for white people. The powerful chorus⁶ conveys, "Everything started to go right when I learned to love myself." Through this song, WD denounces racism, and his stage performance simultaneously highlights his willingness to question social norms related to gender and sexuality. This stance becomes even more evident in the subsequent release of the official music video for the same song, where the opening emphasizes that Brazil has the highest rate of LGBTQIA+ murders in the world.

In January 2022, Rede Globo decided to include singer Linn da Quebrada as one of the participants on the reality show "Big Brother Brasil." Previously, in 2017, Linn and other members of the group As Bahia e a Cozinha Mineira starred in an advertising campaign for Absolut vodka, with the slogan *Art resists*, which featured a music video and a massive mural on a building located in downtown São Paulo⁷. Linn has self-identified as a black bixa, *bixa travesty*⁸ and on BBB, she presented herself as a transvestite. In the song *Corpo sem juízo*, in collaboration with Jup do Bairro (2019), Linn activates her body as a space of resistance and expresses, "It's like facing death and remaining immortal / It's like leaving it to chance and not having equal rights / But I resist, I insist, I exist / I don't want the control of this reckless body."⁹.

In April 2021, the *Corre Coletivo Cênico* from Salvador released the series *Para-iso* on their YouTube channel, consisting of eight episodes¹⁰. The story revolves around a group of Black bixas who come together during the Covid-19 pandemic following the death of one of

⁵ Available at: <https://globoplay.globo.com/v/9985057/>. Accessed in: 6 Feb. 2022.

⁶ Available at: <https://globoplay.globo.com/v/9985057/>. Accessed in: 6 Feb. 2022.

⁷ Available at: <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/mercado/2018/04/vodca-faz-anuncio-artistico-em-defesa-da-diversidade.shtml> e https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uunq-c97qexU&feature=emb_title. Accessed in: 5 Feb. 2021.

⁸ Reference to the song Bixa Travesty and the homonymous film by Linn da Quebrada.

⁹ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6il3RIZSlgM>. Accessed in: 09 Feb. 2022.

¹⁰ The episodes are no longer available, but the profile is: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHxaYE9UEZTTlqaLVK3_7Hg. Accessed in: 15 Jan. 2022.

them due to HIV-AIDS. The characters Leka, Tito, Miguel, Rogério, and Paul, portrayed by Anderson Dantas, Igor Nascimento, Luiz Antônio Sena Jr, Marcus Lobo, and Rafael Brito, respectively, gather in a house described as a kind of *cuíerlombo* (NASCIMENTO, 2018), where the deceased bixa lived and welcomed the others.

In one of the most touching scenes of the performance, the characters looked out of the window of a mansion in the Comércio neighborhood in Salvador, next to other semi-abandoned buildings, and observed some plants growing tenaciously in the cracks of the old houses. At that moment, they connected the image of those plants and the idea of resistance. Through this symbolism, the vegetation, growing in difficult and abandoned places, demonstrated its capacity to resist adversity. In response to this, the character Leka expressed to her friends, "We are like those plants, we are resistance."

After appreciating how the idea of resistance is addressed in various artistic works, we return to the reflections made by Michel Foucault, Spinoza, and Paul B. Preciado¹¹ on this theme. Additionally, we draw references from various Black authors who emphasize how resistance, often manifested in subtle ways, characterizes the history of the Black community (as exemplified in BONA, 2020). To discuss joy, we need to analyze the book *Pensar nagô*, by Muniz Sodré (2017), highlighting that for the Nagô people, joy is not merely a passing emotion but a way of facing and conducting life. This suggests that the celebration and joy present in Nagô culture are (re)connected with the history of the formation of LGBTQIA+ identities and the achievement of greater visibility¹². This perspective prompts the following reflection: is sadness an emotion linked to whiteness and heteronormativity?

Black theater, queer, and sorcerer

The previously mentioned question will remain open, as it can promote a critical dialogue with more recent productions from anti-social queer and Afro-pessimist perspectives. In contemporary theater plays staged and exhibited in Salvador, some elements of the inseparability between dissident sex, gender, sexuality, and race are presented. Through

¹¹ These ideas and authors are developed in Colling (2022).

¹² Despite the official history of the gay movement having the Stonewall Riots as a foundational myth sparked by the right to gather and celebrate, historiography and other studies on policies for respecting sexual and gender diversity seem to focus mainly on the sad emotions and challenges faced by the LGBT community. Reclaiming joy as an essential aspect of LGBTQIA+ identities, both in activism and academic pursuits, is vital. Exploring the perspectives presented in the mentioned book *Militancia alegre. Tejer resistencias, florecer en tiempos tóxicos*, de Carla Bergman y Nick Montgomery (2023).

research¹³, it has been evident that the Black theater in Salvador has gradually explored themes beyond racism, distinguishing itself from the early plays of the Teatro Experimental do Negro (TEN). In Salvador, the Bando de Teatro Olodum, heir to the TEN, expanded its discussions beyond race, addressing, for example, the empowerment of Black women, and in some plays, included transgender characters, as seen in the 1997 play *Cabaré da rrrrrraça*.

By tracing a brief genealogy of the new Black theater in Bahia, we identify how the productions of Teatro da Queda radicalized the proposal by placing sexual, racial, and gender dissidence at the center stage. One example of this movement is the play *Rebola*, written by Daniel Arcades and directed by Thiago Romero, which portrays the history of Beco dos Artistas through the sorrow of the owner of the Xampoo bar in having to close its doors, as well as the struggle of the *drags*, many of them Black, to preserve the space where they work. The play delves into the individual experience of each *drag*, with the scripts being developed based on the actors' experiences. It premiered on June 8, 2016, at the Beco dos Artistas in Salvador.

Among the various characters in the play, one that stood out was Koanza, portrayed by the Bahian actor, a Black man named Sulivã Bispo. Koanza, a Black Afrocentric ¹⁴ *drag*, was one of the Black characters who stood out in the play for being a Candomblé follower and engaging in dialogue at various moments of the performance, with another evangelical character expressing her religious intolerance. Sulivã described Koanza as a character created based on numerous references to Black women (JESUS, 2019).

Simultaneously, members of Teatro da Queda also participated in various productions by the Núcleo Afro-brasileiro de Teatro de Alagoinhas (NATA), known for bringing narratives inspired by the myths of the orixás to the stage. Under the direction of Fernanda Júlia Barbosa (Onisajé), NATA has been dedicated to researching Black theater and its connections with Afro-Brazilian cults since 1998.

An example is the play *Exu, a boca do universo*, written by Daniel Arcades and Fernanda Júlia Barbosa, which premiered in March 2014 at the Vão Livre of the Teatro Castro Alves. In this performance, the set and costumes evoked the image of a vast arrangement of various Exus. In contrast to the famous play *Sortilégio*, staged by Abdias Nascimento's TEN, where the audience did not have access to the orixás' arrangements, these arrangements were exposed with *quartinhas* (small pots), drinks, *alguidares* (earthenware vessels), *farofa* (a

¹³ I refer to works I developed explicitly with the researcher Deivide Souza de Jesus (see COLLING; JESUS, forthcoming). Part of the reflections presented below are discussed in this text.

¹⁴ To learn more about the actor, please refer to <https://www.revistafrade.ufba.br/materia.php?revista=15&materia=18>. Access: 15 Jan. 2022.

traditional Brazilian dish), and other elements. The atabaques (drums) were positioned on one side of the stage and played during the performance's soundtrack, which featured several songs in Yoruba. At least during the performance at the Vão of Teatro Castro Alves, the audience remained around the stage.

The five artists involved in the play (Daniel Arcades, Thiago Romero, Fernando Santana, Marcelo Oliveira, and Fabíola Julia) constantly moved around the arrangement, performing a kind of xirê (a Candomblé dance), and focused their attention on an Exu representing life, falling in love with Oxum (an orixá associated with beauty and love), experiencing sexual desires, drinking, and smoking. At a particular moment, the actress explained that if asked who Exu is, we should look to the side and within our bodies.

After portraying an Exu in NATA's play in 2014, Thiago Romero gifted us again in 2022 with another version partially inspired by the same orixá. In *Dengo: uma carta ao amor preto*, Romero takes on the role of the *afrodrag* character Barbárie Bundi, directed by Daniel Arcades. The character Barbárie Bundi made its first appearance in June 2021, releasing the album *Aquátika*, and premiered on July 14, 2022, during the 2022 Palco Giratório, broadcasted on Sesc Bahia's channel, which described it as follows: "The word 'dengo,' of Bantu origin, is a request for comfort in the other amidst the harsh everyday life. This comfort permeates through the various notions of love. In this new solo performance, the *afrodrag* Barbárie Bundi, created by multi-artist Thiago Romero, delves into the construction of Black affectivity, especially in Black LGBTQIAPN+ affectivity."¹⁵

Dengo is a performance that defies easy definition, a kind of visual album that blends various music videos with songs performed by the artist, interconnected by texts that ultimately narrate a story. Much of the footage was recorded at the Feira de São Joaquim, where Bundi (and Exu) drink, converse with people and acquire the utensils to perform their Candomblé rituals. In one of the scenes, she holds a goat in the market corridors (Figure 1).

¹⁵ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u6BJrrWc6aM>. Accessed in: 10 Dec. 2022.

Figure 1



Source: Screenshot of the show's teaser *Dengo: carta ao amor preto*¹⁶.

This is a symbolic image for the argument we will present here: it is where the black bixa sorcerer and *afrodrag* asserts their identity¹⁷ in the Teatro Negro da Bahia. For this reason, I argue for the importance of a black, bixa and sorcerer theater in Salvador. The *afrodrag* Barbárie Bundi created a symbolic image that demonstrates the inseparability between sex, gender, sexuality, race, and Candomblé in the context of the new Teatro Negro da Bahia.

This inseparability is not limited to the arts alone but is also present in Brazil's various fields of knowledge production. If, at some point, issues of sex/sexuality and gender were distant and came closer through queer studies, just as issues of sex/sexuality/gender and race were once separate, we now observe a vital intersection between these various dimensions, both within the artistic realm and beyond it. This leads us to conclude that queer studies are no longer the same, just as ethnic-racial studies have evolved. Therefore, these elements are fundamental to reflecting on queer and black poetics in contemporary Brazil.

¹⁶ Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_QjGHeWQl0g. Accessed in: 20 Nov.2022.

¹⁷ *Dar o nome* is a widely used expression among the sorcerer in Salvador and refers to the moment in the Candomblé initiation ceremony of the *yaô* when the *orixá* reveals their name to the audience present in the *terreiro*'s. It is the ceremony's climax; typically, all the present *orixás* manifest themselves.

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