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Decolonial Coalitions: Afro-Brazilian Feminisms and the Poetic-Politics of Quilombo

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This Is Not the Beginning

This paper begins by recognizing that this is not the beginning.¹ As a relational movement, this research is an ongoing process engaged with an assemblage of repertoires. Such an assemblage, or better, “encruzilhada” (Martins 2003, 69) involves counter-archives, historiographical genealogies, political strategies, anti-colonial, anti-racist and feminist praxis. The erasure perpetuated by modern slavery constitutes, as the poet Dionne Brand (2001, 15) elaborates, “the end of traceable beginnings”. Along these lines, the current ‘apocalypse’ is perceived as a symptom of an ongoing regime of violence, produced and reproduced by colonialism and racial gendered capitalism. In interrogating the colonial legacies of violence, this analysis brings attention to the political and cultural concept of “América Ladina” coined by the writer and founder of the Unified Black Movement in Brazil (Movimento Negro Unificado, MNU) Lélia Gonzalez. Written in pretuguês (Blackguese),² the category of *amefricanidade* moves the gaze from the white Eurocentric canon to the African-Latin-American narratives, and in particular, to the knowledge produced by Black and Indigenous women in the region (Gonzalez 1988a, 77-79; Pires 2020, 73; Rios 2020, 77).

While striving not for only being-in-the-world, but for articulating other modes of being and living together, Afro-Brazilian and peripheral women have been, in the words of the activist Silvia Baptista, “reconstituting quilombos as a *rede* (a web)” (Baptista/IPACS 2020). But what does it mean to reconstitute a “quilombo”?

The quilombo has been conceived by traditional historiography and legal rhetoric either as communities formed by runaway enslaved persons during the colonial re-

gime, or as a modern juridico-political collective/group identity, namely the “quilombo remnant communities” (1988 Constitution of Brazil, art. 68/ADCT – Act of Transitional Constitutional Provisions).³ Moving beyond the mainstream definition and inspired by the work of the historian, poet, and activist Beatriz Nascimento, the quilombo is understood in this paper as a theory and a practice that is not limited to the historic runaway slave communities, but encompasses the continuity of memories, strategies, and everyday political practices.

In Nascimento’s theorisation of quilombo, the body is conceived as a privileged political site (B. Nascimento 1989, 333 et seq). Engaging with her work, I propose the notion of “living archives” as a form of vitalizing what she calls “methodology of the oral history” (B. Nascimento 1982b, 253 et seq). To speak of the archive as a process, instead of as a thing, implies the destabilization of its institutional enclosure. The living archive presents an experience-based perspective of history and politics, in which the body is perceived as a document, as a map, as the territorialization of memory. It embodies the interplay between the oral and the written (Glissant 1990, 34; Martins 2003).

Drawing on the theory and practice of quilombo, this paper elaborates on the living archives of three Afro-Brazilian thinkers and activists: (i) Beatriz Nascimento’s fundamental contributions on the political, material and symbolic dimensions of quilombo; (ii) the legacy and vision of Marielle Franco focusing on the necessity to ocupar (occupy) the institutional politics like a growing seed; and (iii) the work of Erica Malunginho through the praxis of aquilombar (quilombo as a verb) the constitutional democracy.

The Living Archive of Beatriz Nascimento

In 1949, at the age of seven, Beatriz Nascimento migrated from Aracaju, Sergipe, to the suburbs of the city of Rio de Janeiro. There, she became a historian researcher and activist who played a relevant role in the MNU (Ratts 2007, 27). Despite her ground-breaking research focused mostly but not exclusively on quilombos, Nascimento’s work has been significantly understudied not only in the international community, but also in Brazil.

The extermination of Indigenous, African and Afro-diasporic epistemologies configure what is called epistemicídio (epistemicide), a term that became known in Brazil by the work of Sueli Carneiro (2005, 61). Epistemicide configures a crucial dimension of the geographic spatialization of whiteness within academia and beyond (Gonzalez 1984; Bairros 2000; Ratts 2007, 42).

In the period of the Brazilian dictatorship (1964-1985), Nascimento faced not only the political terror of the civil-military regime but also the epistemic antiblackness violence. She openly mentioned in interviews how racism impacted both her professional and personal vitality (“Força Vital” or “axé”) – a term preferred here to avoid any normative diagnosis from the domains of ‘mental health’. In Nascimento words: