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Futuress • Against the Grain Fellowship

mother/LANGUAGE @ *ancestry*
as form of
fiction

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The quarantine as a result of COVID-19 pandemic was decreed in São Paulo in mid-March 2020, and from the 21st of that same month, my family began a strict social distancing, in addition to restrictions on other activities. The last year was mostly about being away from the older people in our family, considering that only recently I could encounter my mother, because she is a healthcare professional and was vaccinated with priority — even in the midst of the vaccination crisis due to government irresponsibility in Brazil. But, it has been more than a year since the last time I saw my grandmother.

Along with the feeling of **saudade**, sometimes I feel as if we are increasingly separated by different paths of time and space. And recently, some days this perception of emptiness made me feel also distanced from a sense of ancestry as well. Shall we say, the relationship with women in my family has not been perfect; In fact, it's even more difficult after the recognition of my gender identity, queerness and other political positions. Not to mention that my grandmother is an extremely difficult person. But just now I see how this difficulty does not represent who she is, but the life in which she was forced to live. Perhaps, being "difficult" is a complex form of praxis to engage with the world around you. That being said, I can consider myself extremely difficult too. We all are, especially when opposing and challenging the status quo. That's why these relationships are so ambiguous and even

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non-binary, for being full of challenges, and full of possibilities, at the same time. When a separation of cultural relations becomes a separation of ourselves, maybe, the departure from ancestry is a form of homesickness. But, **seria a ancestralidade uma forma de ficção?** If you have it, how do you keep it? If you don't have it, how do you invent it?

During this period, phone calls were the only possible means of contact in such a context of global pandemic, then my mother became a bridge of translation and language that connected three generations. Especially when my grandmother, nearing her 90s years old, finds herself in a process of deafness that intensifies the difficulty of understanding conversations in Portuguese language, so she is increasingly communicating only with her mother language: Japanese. These kinds of alternative strategies for communication and preservation of an oral memory in extraordinary times alludes to the ethnographies conducted by Veena Das, in her quest to reconstruct the fabric of relationships and everyday life. So, continuing this performative archive through the maintenance of memory in midst of what we're experiencing, reinforce a commitment to continue becoming visible, whatsoever facing a reality impose; But, I also can realize how this analysis is already a form of failure, but denying the linearity of filled gaps could be a form of counter-hegemonic epistemology. As **Grace Cho** said about the impossibility of tell stories in their entirety: "**[...] há muitas incertezas, e o próprio ato de contá-las de uma maneira que faça sentido envolveria suavizar as lacunas. Em vez de preencher as lacunas, sou obrigada a entrar nesses espaços vazios para descobrir o que surge, o que se pode aprender ouvindo o silêncio.**" (CHO, 2019, p.22). With that in mind, I keep listening to the silence. And being guided by the unspoken.

The thread, the needle and the sewing of time

In dialogues with my mother, I tried to understand how her racialization processes occur. And to produce a dialogue through her own terms, I choose to name our ethnicity as "Japanese", instead of "Asian" (because this is a recent ethnic self-determination mainly used by younger generations of Asian-Brazilians). Then I asked, "When do you understand yourself as **uma mulher japonesa?**" Initially, she reacts as if she doesn't understand the question. So I rephrase: "What was around you remarkably different from *non-Japanese* families?" And she replied: **A baquinça**. The chosen term expresses her sensorial experience in words, when she grows up surrounded by various objects accumulated and grounded by

time. A cluttered museum of palpable narratives that no longer exist, but at the same time pulses a form of culture and tradition. And even these sediments of something that has ceased to exist provokes discomfort and grief, the maintenance it's not a choice. Actually, it's the ghost of something that aches, but cannot be left behind.

Then I asked, "Mas se a acumulação era ruim, porque então era mantida?". And to answer, my mother changes her intonation when she says, "É a guerra. Everyone that lived in war times starts to keep things for fear of running out. We are not sure if there will be even a needle or thread when you need them. So we keep everything". In conclusion, the control over assets through accumulation informs an unwillingness to dispossession of self. Still, it manifests a sense of agency contained in a non-action: if you refuse to undo, you are simultaneously agreeing to preserve. However, I would like to rescue the objects that my mother highlights as the ones not to be lost: The thread and the needle. Between these lines, it is also continually about repairing the fabric of life torn by the production of bodies through violence, and looking at this patchwork of broken memories weaved together by the seams of time, as Anna Tsing said, can be a place to start.

Rewriting bodies-territories and transgenerational memories

The clutter communicates with the space, when it builds notions of territory in an attempt to reassemble certain concreteness. I find how the nature of these figures personified by grandmothers and great-grandmother remain suspended in time: connected to their motherland, solemnly, still in flux. The mother is a bridge of transmission, and the heir embodies an inheritance by weaving present, past and future. We're instruments of reception, in an act of collective archiving. At the end of our conversation, I asked my mother, "What did you think that obachan left us as a memory?". She replied that didn't know, and asked what I thought. This surprised me, actually, I received this question very strangely. After all, how could I better understand such narratives when "I didn't even speak the same language of my grandmother"? However, perhaps this counterargument is an invitation to challenge the narrative put forward, when it's not that simple such as translating words from one language to another; But she was trusting me with the greatest potential for understanding the memory of women in our family and the construction of an alternative narrative.

In the end, a right of memory is still a difficult issue for people who were formerly colonized. The abyss goes deeper when gender issues are related. The historical erasure

through continued colonization allows silence to take the place of memories. We become great metaphors of extinct stories: too painful to be remembered, or unnecessary compared to colonial history. The denied memory is a ghost member that exists even before our birth, but even when redeemed, it will always be a simulacrum. Therefore, all remembrance can be constructed, but not necessarily lived. When we're still framed by hegemonic ideologies, the damages in our history will only be redeemed when the past and present are archived through specific cosmologies from various patterns of culture, ethnicity and identity.

Everything is a kind of fiction when history is a constant element of dispute. And only a transdisciplinary and passionate approach can encompass readings that break with verticalization of hermetic writing in History. For that, we need a decolonial archeology of the future, to review, transform, rewrite, the conditions or models we have about nature, gender, bodies, borders, relationships, aesthetics, and mainly, the way we archive our history.

Migration and social construction of race in Brazil

The historical consequences of **colonialidad del poder** (QUIJANO, 1992) followed and outspreaded through narratives even after the diasporic process, especially when "women" continues to be a global subaltern marker. In addition, a transnational profile of migration is female, so it's crucial denouncing the condition of social vulnerability in which immigrant women face, because in addition to challenges of adapting and integrating into a new social structure, such conditions are aggravated by contexts of xenophobia and adversities for citizenship legalization. The absence of support networks, scarcity of resources and lack of financial autonomy unfortunately are some of the conditions that results in gender-based violence suffered by immigrant women of color. **Migrar é um direito e nenhum ser humano deve ser considerado ilegal** (WARMIS², 2020), therefore, political actions for permanently and unconditionally regularization of immigrants in every chosen destination or locality are urgent, particularly supporting the conditions experienced by women, children, elderlies, people with disabilities, queer, among others.

However, issues of transnational mobility and intersectional violences intrinsic on to this process aren't contemporary, actually, narratives from Asian-Brazilian people constantly activate the stories of struggle lived by their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandparents since the early 19th century. In this case, I can share some stories, when I'm the fourth

²Available on-line: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CAgwMIONb2v/>. Last access: May 11, 2021.

generation of Japanese immigrants that came to Brazil as a workforce in periods characterized by the expansion of coffee plantations, through a political and economic agreement between Brazil and Japan in the early 20th century. And, a third generation of Chinese immigrants that left China in the 1960s, with the first intention of arriving in the United States, but, according to my father, there were travel restrictions to capitalist countries at that time, and this changed completely the final destination of their journey. So, migrating through Macau, a Portuguese colony until the 1990s, my Chinese grandparents discovered this place named "Brazil" — a place that shares a similar Portuguese colonial root as Macau. Despite a greater flow of diasporical routes from 1950, the history of Chinese immigration to Brazil actually began in 1855, when 400 Chinese workers were assigned to green tea plantations and seen by the Brazilian elite as a migratory group instrumentalized for the transition of slavery to free labor.

But even though the stories from Asian-Brazilian communities were marked by discriminatory and assimilative processes, later on were also offered to these groups opportunities of mobility, access and social ascension. When colorism and social inequality are extremely articulated in race relations, the economic privileges of East Asian descendants tensions the logic of Brazilian racial constructions, when function as an apparent "whitening system", that unfortunately affects the ways that Asian-Brazilian are perceived in society, or foremost, the way they understand themselves when the privilege of class brings them closer to a notion of whiteness. The most regrettable of this scenario is how an inequality project designed by white supremacy results in the production of alliances that underlie an Asian-Brazilian participation in structural racism and anti-blackness. Still, how illusory these kinds of pacts are, when Asian communities haven't stopped being continuously discriminated and this process is even more evident within the pandemic context, when so quickly the "model minority"³ turns into "Chinese virus". In the end, the raciality of Asian-Brazilian was historically mobilized to the desires of white supremacy, and because of that is so important to assume this sense of autonomy and presence, with criticism and solidarity, in our own self-determination.

In conclusion, diasporic narratives reveal how ancestry and nationality are constantly articulated, when "race" is not a fixed category or marker, but a result that depends on the historical and cultural constructions of each society. In other words, being Asian-Brazilian is structurally different from being an Asian-American, or even an Asian

³ It's important to mention how the positivization of stereotypes such as the "model minority", or even the representation of East Asian as "crazy and filthy rich", only reinforce the aesthetics of social inequality, and jointly collaborate with these false symmetries that lead to the maintenance of structural oppressions experienced by blacks and indigenous peoples.

national person. Although, looking closely, it's visible how the racism, xenophobia and orientalism experienced by Asian globally is rooted into the same colonial, imperialist, Eurocentric⁴ and hegemonic tracks. So, I'm continually moved by the desire to portray invisible narratives of a decolonial world, but also preserving the sense of subjectivity and uniqueness in each individual, especially when homogenization of Asian ethnicities occurs with a form of neo-colonization. And for that, maybe a decolonial perspective could be an answer with the "epistemological turn", when it's not about making an opposition, but shifting the perspective and healing the colonial wounds.

So, I return to the body as a compass to think about frameworks that are present in my own narrative, or in narratives from chosen families, and how these repertoires were rich and palpable: From building new possibilities of love and affection, to traditional cosmologies in our land, or even rescuing my ancestry as a Asian-Brazilian and queer person. In the end, this work is a continuous investigation on formats of storytelling, archiving and preserving memories. **Um processo que, como a própria forma no qual é possível engajar viver, está para além do início, do meio ou do fim.**

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⁴ Eurocentrism motivates not only the loss of memory, but promotes a continuity of civilizational oppression in our imagination, with great effects on social relations, popular culture, family constitution, repertoires on beauty, affection, and so much more.

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