



Existence Narratives and the Small Everyday Deaths: Notes of a Black *Sapatão* in Santa Catarina¹

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Abstract

This article presents reflections on the lesbophobia aimed at the bodies of *sapatonas* in the academy, and how these aggressions occur similarly in different hierarchical spaces. It also discusses the bathroom paradigm as a gender barrier, as the white gaze regime, which operates as a locus of structural advantage, imprisoning and eliminating bodies considered unsuitable for the male-female, white-black binary scheme. I aim to insert trajectories of black *sapatonas* from the south of Brazil in the field of discussions in order to destabilize the official narrative that popularises this territory as a legitimate European colony: white and heterosexual.

Keywords: *sapatão*, black lesbians, coloniality, sexuality, whiteness.

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I write this paper to speak out about scenes that have happened to a black body. A woman's body that produces narratives even before the historical negation of its existence and freedom of being. Black *sapatonas* exist in knowledge spaces and have their traces/trajectories constantly erased from those places. This text is a manifesto about the place reserved to black *sapatonas* in bodies and in alliance processes that have been trying to rise in Brazil.² To make alliances possible, it is necessary to name the bodies abandoned to precarity, the ones that need support. Thus, supporting black lesbians within social and political genocidal contexts must be a priority in the realm of social struggles.³

Body

Political body

Colonial body

Due to the implementation of affirmative actions in public universities, Brazil has been introduced to a new group of undergraduate and graduate students: black students became an expressive number in the student body and yet, facing the lack of public policies, they have been occupying and building academic spaces while still facing structural and epistemic racism.⁴ I stand among the results of those affirmative actions and part of the less than 15% of black women in graduate schools in the country.⁵ The academy is the place where I spend an important part of my time and I claim this space as mine in the process of thinking a new world.

It was the beginning of the semester, I picked a nice striped polo shirt, a pair of jeans and a pair of sneakers. I went to the barber shop to have my sidelines shaved and to reduce the volume of my afro. On my cell phone, my girlfriend calmed me: "don't worry, my love. Everything will work out fine. This place is yours." I prepared my body, I was tense! In addition to being an academic black woman, I am a visible lesbian, here I am called *sapatão*. At the university,

I look from side to side and hardly see other visible black *sapatão* women. This fact gives me the impression that we do not exist.⁶

Invisibility increases the sensation of unsuitability, making it evident that there is a “wrong way of existing,” leading non-feminine women into permanent anxiety, since we have to search for strategies to exist outside femininity patterns while trying to escape violence in case we are mistaken for and treated as men.⁷ At the same time, we struggle internally with the idea that there is a right way of existing. That is to say, black *sapatonas*, must deal daily with the aches and pains caused by racism and sexism. We need to take a deep breath and tell ourselves that our way of existing is not wrong.

During the students' introduction on the first semester meeting, I screamed the markers of difference between my body and the other bodies in the classroom, compelling my colleagues to think: “Black, *sapatão*, admitted under affirmative action's criteria and a PhD student, what kind of body is that?” I breathed peacefully when my gaze met and connected with Jefferson, Jorge and Flávia's looks. They were other sexual dissident black people in the classroom. Jefferson identified himself as a black gay man, Jorge as a *bicha afeminada* and Flavia was coming out as *sapatão* or bisexual – I am not sure which, announcing the breach with the heteronormative contract that forces lesbian and gay bodies to hide under a universalist performance.⁸

Generally, gender and race in Brazil are structural axes of inequality and patterns of social exclusion. Specifically, the State of Santa Catarina is one of the places in the country known for not having black people. The truth is that, in these lands, there is a legend forged by colonialism, validated by historiography, and massified by the media. According to this legend, it is believed that southern Brazil is some kind of Brazilian Europe, a colonized region thought by and structured only by European descendants. In this colonial fairy tale, indigenous and black people are the intruders. People who believe in this colonial legend make southern Brazil an especially difficult region for black

people to live in.⁹ We are here, but daily we are expelled. They expel us in a symbolic way, through local TV advertisements with only white characters, exalting the cities with greater influences of German and Italian cultures, and they exclude us directly, by denying us service in their establishments, for instance. I could keep going on and on in detailing all the forms of exclusion used by the “Brazilian Europe” to exterminate black people from their past and present history.

Here, the constitutive parts of my being – black *sapatão* woman – as well as my status as a PhD student, are seen as stigmas by this society and subjected to different forms of domination and discrimination.¹⁰ The common stereotype associated with black women is that we are aggressive. *Sapatonas*, in general, carry the stigma of being violent. Within this colonial imaginary, as black *sapatonas*, even when we stay silent, we are already wrong. In this sense, the silencing endured by a black body occupying a white prestige’s space is huge. At the university, they see us as a threat, and not as historical subjects who need to gaze critically upon the narratives that are being constructed and discussed. Almost always, silencing leads to political demobilization. Usually, in academic spaces, black experiences are only possible from a white heterosexual perspective which silences and whitewashes us so they can use our black and *sapatão* bodies as symbols of inclusion. So, when it is no longer interesting for their purposes, they put us back in that place of silence and loneliness. Whiteness organizes itself by maintaining these and other violent stereotypes to ensure a systematic practice of silencing.

Separating bodies – Part I

Scene 1: I, a fat, black *sapatão*, together with two colleagues: a straight, cis, thin woman and Jorge, a self-identified *bicha afeminada*, decided to go to the toilet before our class began. We were happy because we had just started our graduate courses. On the floor where we were, there was just a male toilet. To be quick, we decided to use this male toilet. After all, almost nobody has access

to this floor. I stood in front of the door, while my colleagues used the toilet. The seconds they were coming out of the bathroom were enough to separate our bodies and mark them as unsuitable. I looked in the direction of the stairs in front of the bathroom and I noticed a young woman coming down. She was white and fit the hegemonic standards, which means she was thin and dressed according to what Brazil's hegemonic culture understands a woman should wear. Her look showed despair as she stared at my white colleague coming out of the bathroom. When the latter returned the look, the woman from the stairs approached me, as I was by the door. She looked at me from top to bottom, with disdain in her eyes. Soon after, she also noticed Jorge. Then, she looked at my white colleague and said with a hurried voice, as if offering help: "Girl, this is the men's restroom," to which we all answered simultaneously: "we know."

When she heard my thin and soft voice, she looked directly at my breasts. At that moment, I believe, she realized that I am a woman. What makes me think this way is that, when she noticed my breasts, she put her hand over her mouth, showing she was even more scared. At that moment, the white woman coming from the stairs also realized that neither I nor my other black friend offered any danger to the white woman whom she seemed to be willing to defend. After some seconds, my colleagues and I looked at each other and started laughing. The woman left with her hand over her mouth, whispering: "but it's the male toilet..." We didn't comment on the episode, we just exchanged glances and went to our class.

Historically, discourses on the body were crucial to establishing racism, as well as to the construction of femininity. Both created a gaze regime and projected a series of classificatory elements (in)to the body.¹¹ It was through black bodies, mainly female black bodies, that the colonialist project legitimized its objectification practices. Lélia Gonzalez in the 1980's denounces that, within the world project designed by white people, black women exist to fit in three existence possibilities: the *mulata*, the *doméstica*, and the *mãe preta*.¹² All of which correspond to colonial matrices built on heterosexuality that, if not real,

have to appear real through a heterosexual performance, translated through decorative elements for the body and through the colonial power given to white men.

In the realm of this gaze regime, whiteness constitutes a place of structural advantage, a place from where the white subject sees others and themselves (Ware 2004), using their very own place of enunciation to act as gender police and as a racializing subject. Through these gestures they elaborate a whole imprisonment and elimination scheme for bodies they consider unsuitable in the female-male, white-black binary scheme. The white girl's frightened look is the materialization of this racializing gender police, for in the hegemonic colonial matrix, a non-feminine black woman does not exist, nor does a black *bicha afeminada*. If we don't exist, she must have seen two ghosts. That would explain her shock.

Separating bodies – Part II

In the week after the violent situation I described above, I looked for the female toilet on the second floor in the Department of Anthropology building because it is even more isolated. I was happy I found it empty, so I entered the sanitary cabin. When I was leaving, a white young woman looked at me in panic and shouted: “AHHH! Jeeez, there is a man in my bathroom!” I could not react to that, I just stood there. The white woman gave me a second look, targeting my breasts and proceeded to say, angrily: “I thought you were a man in the women’s bathroom.” Nope. No apologies. She just gave me a dirty look and said that. So I asked her with my thin and soft voice – apparently not matching my body –, “Why did you think I was a man?” The white woman just walked towards the toilet as she answered, “I do not have the obligation to know what you are. This is the women’s restroom.”

After I left that restroom, I went on with the day’s schedule without talking to anyone about that violent experience. It was not new to me, but I noticed that

it had been happening more frequently. I attended the classes, got in touch with different theories and different world projects; yet, there I stood, feeling unspeakable colonial pains. There is no theory capable of dealing with what coloniality does to us. When people perceive my black body passing through places unauthorized to me by codes of whiteness and heteronormativity, they stare at me. Fixed looks and staring are not new to me, and neither is my reaction to them: I swallow the bitter pill, collect their perceptions and keep walking. We find ourselves in a colonizer world's project, the colonized body has no autonomy. It does not have the same freedom of construction or deconstruction that the white body possesses.

Brazilian universities, where just recently it became possible to exist as a black person, but only within what racial and gender colonizers understand and legitimize, have a very small black academic body. Countless university norms, mainly the symbolic ones, are used to deny and invalidate the knowledge produced by bodies that do not fit in a universalizing project. The academic journey requires alliances, visibility and recognition, because it is designed to legitimize ideas, thoughts, projects and people. In this journey, however, university classifies as unproductive any expression that modifies the space and reconfigures its environment. Therefore, for black people, university means an everyday construction of the self as part of a minority – when it comes to the access to rights – that is constantly negotiating with very white and very heterosexual colonial spaces. In this sense, black women's existences are always processes in negotiation, but there is no negotiation with non-feminine black women, since the few ways of existing within the colonial project involve negotiating with heterosexuality.

Once Black *sapatonas* become visible in prestigious spaces, we dismantle the heterosexual black woman body ideal planned for them by whiteness, for their bodies and subjectivities are inconceivable as free, i.e. beyond the binary matrix and heterosexual aesthetics in white eyes. The white racializing subject needs to express their discontent through various types of violence, including shouting

that they are not obliged to know “what I am.” What am I? The possible answer to this question posed by whiteness is that I am a body divided into parts, that is why there are several of me, forced to exist in alignment, to reinvent “themselves” strategically in order to occupy spaces that they say are not mine. I have learned to be many in one with other *sapatonas*, who were forced to feminize themselves to work. They suffered and cried but they put that make-up on. And on their days off, in secret, with the chosen woman, then, yes, they had the looks they wanted. We, black *sapatonas*, are what they try to kill, annihilate. We are prevented from being, from existing, because we challenge the project whiteness created for us. But, to the same extent, we are also the reality that will contribute to destroying the fiction they invented.

In the same week that my body was sliced for the second time, I heard that, almost a year ago, Thais de Paula, a cleaning employee at a supermarket chain, was forced to use the men's bathroom due to her non-feminine appearance.¹³ Evidence of a similar reality for *sapatonas* in different spaces. I am interested in thinking why Thais and others like us should split our subjectivities into two parts: one consisting of “how we really are” and the other consisting of “how whiteness sees us.” Why is it only inside our heads that a *sapatonã* is a whole person? The feeling of inadequacy to the world is part of the colonial political project in which race, sex and sexuality work together to produce a specific type of “non-human.” Therefore, the farther from the heterosexual matrix we are, the more inadequate, strange and animalized the colonial structure considers black *sapatonas*.

Consequently, through the absence of specific public policies combined with psychological, aesthetic, physical and economic violence, two options are systematically and subjectively given to us: we live either at the margins until we face total elimination or we must compulsorily approach heterosexuality. Taking part in the heterosexual game directly means reinforcing institutional tools that discredit women's freedom, because this world's project survives through speeches that reinforce the idea women are men's emotional and sexual

properties and that women's full autonomy threatens social institutions dominated mostly by white men, such as family, state and religion (Saunders 2017). For non-heterosexual black people, freedom is a constant struggle, as well as for other subalternized groups.

Colonial silence denies our existence and pushes us to a non-place. We become then more vulnerable to prejudices, harassment, aggression, depression and suicide. Given these circumstances, this narrative has subjective and collective value to debate coloniality issues, for we, black *sapatonas*, produce knowledge in our everyday life. The knowledge that has been historically orally produced and reproduced by black people has been historically hidden and classified as irrelevant by the colonial matrix. This matrix classifies this kind of knowledge as worthless, unfit to be taken into consideration in the upbringing of new world perspectives forged in spaces of power, such as the universities themselves. Such narratives are left aside because they carry within the power of black women's liberation from colonial ties. Black *sapatonas* narratives about our lives contribute epistemologically, methodologically and centrally in the perspective of shaking the colonial proposal and shaking historiography, so that the movements of our bodies "change the places of enunciation" (Preciado 2014, 27) that, today, are guided by violence.

Historicizing black *sapatão* experiences in southern Brazil, demonstrating the hostility of some spaces, is a way of destabilizing the historical memory that has been built about the racial and identity landscape of Santa Catarina. In addition, I aimed to call attention to the importance of localized history and to the micro histories produced by a population that does not even exist in the official history. The dismantling strategies of the colonial configuration must also come from the ignored, muted and erased historical characters. Lesbian/dyke/*sapatão* resistance is in the very act of being and existing in the world as one desires, facing the structures, and becoming visible in search of liberation, as a collective struggle to confront colonial systems. Recognizing these experiences means gazing upon beauty, wisdom and real opportunities to exist in freedom,

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dream up our fictions, refound what we deem possible in these violent spaces, and devise knowledge in a structured way without having our horizons being shaped by and defined within a colonial white and heterosexual project.

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¹ T.N.: *Sapatão/sapatona* is preferably used in this article rather than "lesbian" in order to differentiate the lesbian experiences in Brazil from those in other national contexts. As with "dyke," *sapatão/sapatona* used to be a derogatory term to refer to lesbians; however, it has gone through a resignification in the Brazilian lesbian community and is now used as a term of pride and self-definition.

² The contemporary Brazilian political context has highlighted the need for alliance politics that protect subalternized bodies, which are exploited and killed by the necropolitical structures that are being institutionally expanded in the country. The utterance of the phrase "Ninguém solta a mão de ninguém [no one lets go of anyone's hand]," a historical reference that recalls survival strategies applied by politically persecuted people during the official dictatorship that began in 1964, has strongly brought up the idea that only through the formation of alliances can these precarious lives be preserved in the critical situation that the black Brazilian people find themselves. Obviously, the more hyphens are marked in the existence of black bodies, the greater the social damage and the imminence of death. And, as a body in danger of extinction: a black-*sapatão*-woman, I trigger this reflection.

³ In the book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2018) Judith Butler presents the concept of "bodies in alliance" as a survival strategy to bring together bodies that are at greater risk of violence. The theorist states that the movements fighting for the rights of sexual and gender minorities must ally themselves with the population subjected to "a shared condition of precarity that situates our political lives." (Butler 2018, 77), however difficult it may be.

⁴ The creation of the Special Secretariat for the Promotion of Racial Equality (Seppir), the approval of the law 10.639/2003 and the approval of affirmative actions, including the guarantee of racial quotas, happened in 2003, with the goal of promoting the access of groups that are or may become victims of racial discrimination. These are a few legislative examples created to modify the curricula, the universities and Brazilian education, in general.

⁵ The number of black students in graduate programmes more than doubled from 2001 to 2013, according to data from the National Household Sample Survey (Pad). Although black people represent the majority of the population (52.9%), black students represent only 28.9% of the total graduate students. From this total of black graduate students, 15% are black women.

⁶ Leaving the university walls and looking for underpaid jobs, mainly in the telemarketing field, we are there, a diversity of black *sapatonas*.

⁷ I emphasize that being "treated as a man" here refers only to the field of violence, not to the privileges that masculinity produces and maintains. The privileges of masculinity are reserved only for white and heterosexual cis men and their most real simulacra. When masculine lesbians hear such a phrase, we know that we are being exposed to physical violence, in Brazil, possibly to a threat of murder. See "Liana Barbosa's case," a black *sapatão* murdered by the police moments after hearing the phrase "Do you want to be a man? then, you will be treated like a man." In Brazil, to be treated as a black man is to enter into genocide statistics.

⁸ T.N.: *bicha afeminada*: feminine identified *bicha* (faggot).

⁹ Although the south of the country is famous for being extremely racist among Brazilians, there are just a few published studies dealing with specific racism in southern Brazil. The popular website "Pragmatismo Político," published data from a research led by the anthropologist Adriana Dias. Her survey data show that Brazil's South is the region in the country where Nazi content is downloaded the most from the internet. The state of Santa Catarina is the champion of interest in accessing these contents, allowing us to draw an overview of the region. See: <https://www.pragmatismopolitico.com.br/2018/09/sul-conteudo-neonazista-internet.html>

¹⁰ Black intellectual women and feminists from the Americas, in an attempt to express the embodied experiences of race and gender, questioned and expanded the discussions about body and belonging, creating space to reflect upon the subjectivity of black women and their wisdoms from their own experiences. See: Bairros 1995; Carneiro 2005; Crenshaw 2002; Curiel 2007; González 1988.

¹¹ I understand femininity as an essentially violent project, organized in hierarchies in which white women are the models. In this project, the role of simulacrum is reserved for black women, so their femininities are developed within walls, with boundaries of assisted and restricted liberties.

¹² T.N.: The *mulata* is a hyper-sexualized black woman, it is a racial stereotype; *doméstica*: a domestic worker. In Brazil, this term refers to what could be considered a contemporary Mammy; *mãe preta*: Mammy. Note that a translation of Lélia Gonzalez' essay (Translated by Bruna Barros, Feva Omo Iyanu, Jess Oliveira and Luciana Reis, all members of the Research Group Translating in the Black Atlantic at Federal University of Bahia) is forthcoming in a special issue on *Solidão and Black Women's Affect* that Tanya L. Saunders, Sarah Olhmer and Luciane Ramos are guest editing.

¹³ "I was working when a new employee said she was embarrassed to see a 'man' cleaning the restroom. I had already left work that day, but my supervisor asked me to go back to the supermarket and told me to start using the men's restroom, adding that I really looked like a boy. At first, I was afraid to use it. I run the risk of being raped, and it is embarrassing. I put the uniform over my clothes. A young man asked the chief to stop treating me differently and heard that, regardless of what was said, as I do look like a man, I would remain in the men's bathroom. So I was in a situation where I either accepted, or would be sent away," said Thais in an interview published in newspaper *Jornal Extra*. Available online at: <https://extra.globo.com/noticias/economia/funcionaria-lesbica-entra-na-justica-apos-ser-proibida-de-usar-banheiro-feminino-23482406.html>.