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IRACEMA DULLEY 
JULIANA M. STREVA 

Invitation, To Exi(s)t

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ABSTRACT: This joint piece aspires to be a dialogue. In a dialogue, people speak and, most importantly, listen, from their respective positions. Drawing from Trinh T. Minh-ha's notion of speaking nearby, Dulley and Streva reflect on the relationship between authorship, authority, and authoritarianism; the parallel between listening and reading, on the one hand, and speaking and writing, on the other hand; the entanglement between disciplinary systems of knowledge and colonial structures of power; the opacity of others and the imperialistic drive to reduce them to transparency; the supposed subject of knowledge and the void. As they converse on these matters, they speak nearby authors from both the so-called Global South and the so-called Global North who are thus juxtaposed, further developed, and displaced towards a politics and ethics of fugitivity. What follows is an invitation to exi(s)t.

KEYWORDS: dialogue; fugitivity; opacity; colonialism; knowledge production

Invitation, To Exi(s)t

IRACEMA DULLEY AND JULIANA M. STREVA

Iracema: This joint piece aspires to be a dialogue. In a dialogue, people speak and, most importantly, listen, from their respective positions. It can take the form of questions and answers, of a jointly developed train of thought, of respect in disagreement, of fragmentation. Openness is a fundamental key: to discovery, to difference, to the other's desire. Dialogues do not always happen. But we strive.

Juliana: Indeed, a fragmented and yet persistent dialogue. In response to what you just said, Iracema, we could perhaps speculate on the very notion of dialogue. We are not at a bar now, but we could still imagine a Brazilian *boteco*, the kind of sidewalk bar where we have the most unexpected kinds of conversation, right?

Iracema: Agreed. And since this is the work of imagination, it should be sunny.

Juliana: A sunny afternoon it is. And we are sitting on red plastic chairs while sharing some fried manioc. With this scenario in mind, I can follow up on my initial divagation on the concept of dialogue. The fact that a dialogue

involves both the act of speaking and the act of listening is a relevant point of departure that should not be taken for granted. It reminds me of a performative exercise proposed by Grada Kilomba in which she invites the audience to speak at the same time that she does, and asks: 'Would I still have the authority as the speaker?'. Afterwards, she concludes that '[l]istening is, in a sense, like an act of authorization towards the speaker. One can only speak when one's voice is listened to'.¹

Moreover, speaking is not merely the sonic vibration of one's voice. The notion of voice encompasses not only the oral sound, but also the voice in the form of written expression and the corporeal performative gestures conceptualized by Leda Maria Martins as *oralitura*.² Instead of reinforcing the colonial binary hierarchization of the written over the oral form, I follow Martins in addressing them in relation: the speaker and the writer, the act of listening, and the act of reading. Therefore, speaking-writing refers to a relational movement that is possible only when listening-reading is its counterpart.

1 In her piece 'Decolonising Knowledge', Grada Kilomba described her interaction with the audience as very shy. I imagine that the audience might not have spoken loudly enough to create a proper cacophony that would have prevented Kilomba's voice from being heard through a microphone. Nevertheless, it still worked as an exercise. Cf. Grada Kilomba, 'Decolonising Knowledge', in *The Struggle Is Not Over Yet: An Archive in Relation*, ed. by Nuno Faria, Filipa César, and Tobias Hering (Berlin: Archive Books, 2015), pp. 191–208 (p. 194).

2 By displacing the European rhetoric that privileges written archives over oral sources, Leda Maria Martins recalls how in one of the Bantu languages of the Congo, the verbs 'to write' and 'to dance' derive from the same root, *ntanga*. According to Martins, this makes reference to other possible sources of inscription, preservation, transmission, and transcription of knowledge, practices, and procedures anchored in and by the body in performance. Cf. Leda Maria Martins, *Afrografias da Memória* (São Paulo, Belo Horizonte: Perspectiva, Mazza Edições, 1997).

Three words have been appearing and reappearing in my thoughts, and even in my dreams: author, authority, and authoritarian. I became intrigued by the repetition of 'author' and decided to check the semantic roots of these words. The term 'author' comes from the Latin *auctor*, which refers to the promoter, producer, or founder, literally, the one who causes something to grow — *auctus* is the past participle of *augere* (to increase).

In my everyday interactions, the figure of the author is commonly understood as a way of naming the person who writes (*she is a writer, she is an author*). In the academic sphere, for instance, the acts of reading and writing have been granting authority to the figure of the author as the knowledge producer *par excellence*, who Trinh T. Minh-ha named the 'voice of knowledge'.³ As I attempt to reassemble my train of thought in the form of speculative questions, the voice and the writer return in a spiral here. Since the birth of modern colonization until today, has the imbrication between author and authority been merely reduced to etymology? Or has it rather manifested itself in the form of material and historical entanglements that continually legitimize academic research in order to speak *about* or even *for* others (researched subjects, who have been violently framed as objects)? How can one liberate the act of speaking-writing from the colonial structures of othering and ownership that are continually reinscribed by the disciplinary system of knowledge? Far from aspiring to elicit a how-to recipe in response, these questions are an invitation to interrogate (and unlearn) what we today know as theoretical knowledge, detached from the empirical and from experience, as well as to learn from and with

3 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 63.

the continual insurgent attempts at thinking, moving, listening, and speaking *nearby*.⁴

Iracema: I was drawn to both anthropology and psychoanalysis because I wanted to answer an impossible question: What do others think? Anthropology and psychoanalysis have historically provided an explanation for otherness: in terms of sociocultural and psychic difference, historical development, or positionality within a structure. Through categories such as culture, structure, society, subject, or symptom, they attempt to circumscribe difference. Such differences are, as I have argued elsewhere, constituted in the very act of their naming. For, as Jacques Derrida reminds us, names precede and exceed what they name.⁵ In anthropology, units of analysis have been traditionally constituted through the emic gesture, which consists of the act of naming the difference to be described.⁶ In (Lacanian) psychoanalysis, the unit of analysis is the subject that emerges in relation to a chain of signifiers.⁷ Units of analysis are fictive, for the borders that constitute them are the product of implicit theory, that is, of disciplinary common sense. This is not to say that differences do not exist. They do. But their existence is inseparable from the

4 Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Speaking Nearby": A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Visual Anthropology Review*, 8.1 (1992), pp. 82–91. These gestures attempt to not be equated with what Jota Mombaça describes as the benevolent narratives of the white alliance, perpetuated within the formulas of 'giving space', 'giving visibility', and 'giving voice'. Cf. Mombaça, *Não Vão Nos Matar Agora* (Rio de Janeiro: Cobogó, 2021), pp. 38–40.

5 Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 61–171.

6 See Iracema Dulley, *On the Emic Gesture: Difference and Ethnography in Roy Wagner* (London: Routledge, 2019).

7 Iracema Dulley develops this further in 'The Case and the Signifier: Generalization in Freud's Rat Man', in *The Case for Reduction*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Jakob Schillinger (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 13–37.

processes through which they are named — processes in which authorship and authority become imbricated. Differences in the world are inseparable from differences in language. And yet, the relationship between language and the world is one of displacement.

One can only have access to the thoughts of others through what they say. The invitation to speak, think, and listen *nearby*, proposed by Trinh T. Minh-ha, has to do with the recognition that the language of others, in whatever form, will remain opaque to us.⁸ There is no possible method through which one could claim to know what others actually think. And yet, one can listen to them, talk to them, and think about what one has heard from them. In short, one can listen to what others say without claiming to understand and represent them, which would be tantamount to speaking *for* them, the ultimate colonial gesture. Rather, when one speaks *nearby*, one can speak and be heard from a position that does not aspire to authority. The opacity of others can be uncanny because it reminds us of a more elementary opacity: that of the language in and through which subjects are constituted. For one knows very well that there is always a gap between what one does say and what one wishes one could formulate. If one cannot be equal to oneself as one speaks, how could one expect to speak for and about others?

Colonial discourse reiteratively misrecognizes its own epistemic (in)capacities whenever it claims to speak for others. Whenever academic discourse does the same, it reinstates a colonial gesture. The reason why such a claim is not understood to be delusional is that it is uttered from a position of authority. This is especially relevant when one thinks of the relationship between theorization and the places that are now fashionably said to pertain to the Global South (be-

8 Trinh, 'Speaking Nearby'.

fore they were given other names: periphery, third world, the margins). Theory aims at generalization, which is a significant process if one wants to make abstract claims — a process that is necessary for politics, ethics, and science. Yet, theory frequently dismisses its vernacular expressions either as minor instantiations of its greater potential for abstraction or as mere examples for its proof or disproof. In view of this, we invite our readers to unsettle the distinction between theory (what has historically been understood to be produced in the Global North) and the empirical, the ‘stuff’ or ‘matter’ to which it is related (what has historically taken place just anywhere, that is, both in the Global North and in the Global South). From this perspective, ethnography is understood to provide the empirical matter of anthropology, whereas the clinic does the same for psychoanalysis; the contents thus produced are expected to be analysed from the perspective of theories that have the North as their centre and reduce the South to the role of content provider. Thus, undoing the distinction between the theoretical and the empirical poses the possibility of knowledge produced in the Global South not only unsettling commonsensical assumptions held in the Global North, but also blurring the very divide between North and South, the general and the particular. If one undoes the hierarchy between the theoretical and the empirical, a space might emerge in which the very language of abstraction materializes in its opacity. In this sense, opacity is to be understood both in relation to the materiality of signifiers — whose coupling with signifieds remains unstable (an understanding of language shared by both Derrida and Lacan) — and as unquantifiable alterity, as proposed by Édouard Glissant. (As I understand it, this kind of alterity cannot be exoticized by acts of naming.)⁹

9 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

Juliana: Theory is indeed not essentially authoritarian, but *can* be performed in an oppressive manner. This happens when it is designed to maintain the existing power relations, or used to exert authority, as in the obvious cases of social Darwinism and supposedly scientific racist theories. But not only in these cases. The traditional, 'objective', and Eurocentric definitions of knowledge and scientific methods have persistently employed theory in order to legitimize extractivist regimes and structural privileges. As Denise Ferreira da Silva highlights, this is because the 'arsenal designed to determine and to ascertain the truth of human difference already assumed European-ness/whiteness as the universal measure'.¹⁰ By naming the author as the expert, the Western system of knowledge consolidated the figure of the author as authority, as if writing were not necessarily a relational exercise of tacit or explicit dialogue. Who has historically embodied this author/ity position?

Instead of opening and broadening the conversation, as suggested by the semantics of *auctus*, academia, in its colonial genealogy of existence, has historically perpetuated the monopolization and homogenization of the conditions of enunciation. Such a political economy of knowledge has produced a monologue, what Trinh designated 'scientific gossip',¹¹ in which one speaks about or for others, instead of speaking with them, as would be desired in a dialogue.¹²

10 Denise Ferreira da Silva, '1 (Life) ÷ 0 (Blackness) = ∞ - ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value', *E-Flux Journal*, 79 (2017), p. 8 <http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_94686.pdf> [accessed 13 August 2023].

11 Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other*, p. 68.

12 On the concept of a 'political economy of knowledge', see Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, 'Ch'ixinakax Utxiwa: A Reflection on the Practices and Discourses of Decolonization', in *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: On Practices and*

Iracema: Embracing opacity is a possible strategy to challenge authority as the place from which one is certain about the knowledge that one supposedly possesses. In Lacanian terms, one speaks about the supposed subject of knowledge in relation to transference, that is, the analysand's belief that the analyst possesses a kind of knowledge about her that she herself does not.¹³ Transference, which is fundamental for analysis to occur, rests on this supposition. Yet, whenever the analyst actually believes that she occupies this position of knowledge, hers becomes a position of narcissistic deafness, from which imaginary projections silence the opaque alterity that resides in the other's discourse. From the perspective from which one speaks, listens, and thinks nearby, however, the narcissistic 'I' is erased by the kind of invention that results from non-ego-based engagement with the imaginary, such as happens in dialogues or dreams. In this respect, it would be interesting to extend the notion of a supposed subject of knowledge to academic discourse. As one relinquishes the drive to possess knowledge, 'I' becomes the provisional, fictive, aspiring position from which desire can be ethically enunciated. For one desires the other's desire, which is unknown to oneself and does not conform to the projections of the imagined, narcissistic 'I'. From such a position, opacity sends us back to that which is material in language, in other words, that which resides beyond meaning and yet resonates and displaces it.¹⁴

Discourses of Decolonization, trans. Molly Geidel (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), p. 102.

- 13 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1971).
- 14 Iracema Duley engages with these questions in more detail in 'The Voice in Rape', *European Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 9.2 (2022) <<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/the-voice-in-rape/>>.

Juliana: *Isso!* The psychoanalytical figure of the supposed subject of knowledge has also been elaborated by Lélia Gonzalez, who worked on and displaced this Lacanian concept. In view of whiteness as a structure of power, Gonzalez proposes a racialized reading of the figure of the supposed subject of knowledge as a means of unsettling the fabrication of what she calls ‘internal colonialism.’¹⁵ A few weeks ago, I was writing precisely on Gonzalez’s extension of the notion of a supposed subject of knowledge to academic discourse.¹⁶

Iracema: I was thinking of how the supposed subject of knowledge, whose position can be imaginarily conceived as that of the old, white, male academic who holds a professorship, can be undone by embracing the void. Maybe one can think of the void as one of the possible instantiations of opacity. In ‘The Plural Void: Barthes and Asia’, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Stanley Gray seek inspiration in Barthes’s understanding of writing as a kind of *satori* to dwell on the loss of meaning that is necessary for writing as that which is based on a ‘speech-void.’¹⁷ The void can receive names and yet remain devoid of meaning, for it is matte, opaque. The relationship between language and the world or its experience is mediated, which is to say

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- 15 Lélia Gonzalez, ‘Por Um Feminismo Afro-Latino-Americano’, in *Por Um Feminismo Afro-Latino-Americano*, ed. by Flavia Rios and Márcia Lima (Rio de Janeiro: Zahar, 1988), pp. 139–50 (p. 142).
- 16 Reverberating Frantz Fanon’s notion of sociogeny, I engage in the mentioned paper with Lélia Gonzalez’s (re)conceptions of the Lacanian terms of the *infans* and the supposed subject of knowledge as a gesture that both renders suspicious the a priori defined social roles of subjects of knowledge and disputes what has been defined as valid, legitimate, and ‘scientific’ knowledge. Juliana M. Streva, ‘Fugitive Dialogues: Speaking Nearby Lélia Gonzalez and Frantz Fanon’, *Philosophy and Global Affairs Journal* (forthcoming, 2024).
- 17 Trinh T. Minh-ha and Stanley Gray, ‘The Plural Void: Barthes and Asia’, *SubStance*, 11.3 (1982), pp. 41–50 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/3684313>>.

that it is indirect. Trinh and Gray remind us of Barthes's admonition against treating directly a structure that functions through indirection. In so doing, it either 'escapes, it empties out, or on the contrary, it freezes, essentializes'.¹⁸ When talking about this structure that basically demands to be engaged with through indirection, Barthes gives a name to what he phrases as the reservoir of empty signs that allows for indirection: Japan. His reflection on the undecidable nature of the relationship between the signifier and the signified, form and content, is shaped by this name. It is as if Japan could provisionally stand for indirection and undecidability. In this reductive move, Japan stands simultaneously for a structure to be opposed to the structure in which the (Western) author originally operates and for the kind of structure towards which one should strive. This proposition is not devoid of totalizing exoticization. And yet, Barthes also claims that writing 'undoes nomination',¹⁹ the logical consequence of this affirmation being the undoing of the juxtaposition between the name Japan and the structure of indirection with which it is juxtaposed.

If in writing one embraces the void of language, one also undoes the authority, authorship, and authoritarianism that are associated with the position of the 'I' as that of the supposed subject of knowledge, understood as the sovereign originator of discourse. From the perspective of colonial anthropology, the position of authority is one from which the author claims to state what is and what is not Japan. Yet, in writing, one allows oneself to be estranged in and through language. As Trinh and Gray put it, 'the ego-mirror is the equivalent of a polite host who allows "thousands of subjects" to make themselves at home

18 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 41.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

in his dwelling and to speak through him. His/her portrait, structural and non-psychological, dramatizes an *utterance* (*énonciation*).²⁰ Maybe this is, as such, the condition of possibility for dialogue to happen.

With this invitation, we strive for the kind of dialogue that happens between structurally positioned writing subjects who, while acknowledging their place in a given structure, do not fiercely identify themselves with a privileged position and allow for the language of the other to displace them. Of course, words alone will not do the work of transformation that is needed to surpass structural inequalities, authoritarianism, and the supposition of knowledge. This kind of transformation often involves and even requires confrontational gestures, since the holders of privilege do not usually relinquish and share them willingly. But since we are giving free rein to our imagination, let us embrace utopia for a change. In the kind of dialogue we aspire to, writers 'for[m] and [are] formed by a layering and separation of the 'I' [...] a plurality of subjects of speaking and of speech, and of the denunciation of these.'²¹ As such, invaded by language and the possibilities it entails and forecloses, the writer is and is not the void. The writer aspires to go beyond the name that grants authority as she merges with language.

Juliana: She merges with language... Resonating with what you just said on the subject of the writer, I find it both poetic and political how Trinh reads the act of writing as a process of becoming. Diverging from the idea of becoming a writer or a poet, she conceives of becoming as an intransitive verb: to become. The process of becoming is said to take place only when the writer 'traces for itself

20 Ibid., p. 48.

21 Ibid.

lines of evasion.’²² In her work, these lines are presented as an excursion, the act of walking that could take one where one is not expected to be, a speculative movement with no fixed trajectory, formula, or prescriptive procedure to be mechanically applied.

Perhaps these lines of evasion have the potentiality to reverberate an even more radical gesture than that of a mere excursion. Here, I hear the echo of Frantz Fanon’s words: ‘I leave methods to the botanists and the mathematicians. There is a point at which methods devour themselves. I should like to start from there.’²³ In my view, these lines should not be disconnected from the anticolonial tactics of fugitivity, of escaping, and of refusing the ontological and epistemic pact imposed by colonialism.²⁴ Differently from a metaphor or a utopia, it designates a historical praxis that is a continuum. As we learn from Beatriz Nascimento, *quilombo* fugitivity in the context of slavery and its aftermath should not be understood as the incapacity to fight or as an event constrained by the past.²⁵ *Quilombo* fugitivity refers

22 Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other*, p. 31.

23 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 14.

24 Streva engages with the notion of the pact in more detail in Juliana M. Streva, Ana Luiza Braga, and Lior Zalis, ‘Speculating Pacts on the Common’, *La Escuela* (2022) <<https://laescuela.art/en/campus/library/mappings/speculating-pacts-on-the-common-ana-luiza-braga-juliana-streva-and-lior-zisman-zalis>>.

25 Beatriz Nascimento, ‘Transcrição do Documentário Ori [1989]’, in *Beatriz Nascimento. Quilombola e Intelectual. Possibilidade nos Dias da Destruição*, ed. by União dos Coletivos Pan-Africanistas (Diáspora Africana: Editora Filhos da África, 1989), pp. 326–40 (p. 329). Historically, these ancestral strategies have been protagonized by Afro-diasporic persons who created *quilombos*, involving also Amerindian peoples and a few poor white persons, in order to live otherwise in the plantation system. Spread throughout the territory today known as Brazil, *quilombo* refers to Afro-diasporic communities confronting and resisting colonial-slavery regimes. Across the Americas, they are also known as *cumbes*, *palenques*, *mambises*, *ladeiras*, *bush negroes*, *cimarrones*, *cima-*

to an ancestral and ongoing practice of radical contestation of the colonial order and to the organization of other ways of living together. In a system in which there is no way out, fugitive gestures take place from the inside.

Glissant remarks that 'the writer, entering the dense mass of his writings, renounces an absolute, his poetic intention, full of self-evidence and sublimity', and that '[t]he text passes from a dreamed of transparency to the opacity produced in words.'²⁶ Author, authority, authoritarian. The attempt to speak and listen nearby is not equivalent with losing one's voice or remaining in silence. For the act of listening, silence is crucial. But absolute silence can also entail the absence of dialogue, engagement, and response. It might even express the convenience of retaining privilege or imposing authority. In striving for dialogue, there is the possibility of displacing theory and unsettling colonial legacies. In short, of exi(s)ting together.

Iracema: Yes, this is how we started this conversation: an invitation to exit is sometimes an invitation to exist.



This is a fragment of an ongoing dialogue. So let its closure be an opening to what is to come.

Our epigraph comes at the end:

'The closure here, however, is a way of letting the work go rather than of sealing it off.'²⁷

ronaje, marronages, and maroons. Cf. Gonzalez, 'Por Um Feminismo Afro-Latino-Americano', pp. 76-79.

26 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p. 115.

27 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

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