

Corpus Infinitum

By Denise Ferreira da Silva

“In the voices we hear,” asks Walter Benjamin in the second paragraph of his *On the Concept of History*, “isn’t there an echo of now silent ones?”¹ Every element in Carlos Motta’s exhibition *Corpo Fechado* replies to this question with another question: in the voices we now hear, isn’t there an echo of the silent ones?” When doing so, it recalls a political question, which could only have been formulated once the subject of History had been fully located in interiority, where the scene of Desire unfolds, but also after the person – now the interior thing as conceived as subjectivity – is found emerging in the web of Discourse. Or, *Corpo Fechado* figures the political question, which emerges when the project of emancipation includes wresting the oppressed from both stages, History and Discourse, where the person, already as subjectivity, emerges as a social subject, that is, as a particular (immanent and yet universal) ethical thing.

My intent is to try and capture how *Corpo Fechado* activates Carlos Motta’s intention to explore how “sexuality and gender intersect with larger topics like class, race, and other ways of understanding the political situation of the moment.”² When doing so I find an urgent question: How do Motta’s images expose and refuse the presentation of the person as an interior thing, as the proper figure of the oppressed in the “political situation of the moment”? Released from the archive – of the Inquisition, of Slavery, and of the Church; the content (the matter which takes the name [form] sexual in the discourse on sexuality) is figured in images and sounds that radiate in the ethico-juridical architecture of the present. Each syllable, each phoneme, each shot – as well as each word, sound, or scene may be absorbed, or it may flicker. In some cases almost exactly (reflected), in others in fragments (diffracted), or almost unrecognized, because unrealized (refracted), and, in many cases all three at once. Or, put differently, in Motta’s presentation I find a figuring of subjectivity that refuses the interior thing presupposed and produced in the linear movement of homogenous time (History) and the abstract forms of language (Discourse).

In *Corpo Fechado*, I find nothing more than the artist’s intention in seizing the moment (*Jetztzeit*), interrupting the unfolding of the homogenous time, that is History’s as well as of the immaterial form that is Discourse’s. By assembling an image which, for a moment, seizes both History’s progression and Discourse’s citation, the work releases the person (ethico-juridical entity) from both. Thereby wresting today’s oppressed from the line of History and the web of Discourse. In sum, in Carlos Motta’s images and words I discover how art can perform a critique of the present that breaks through the limits of representation.

Voicings or subjectivity

Perhaps the greatest challenge posed by Carlos Motta’s work is that of presenting the subject of sexual desire as a person without prefiguring interiority and self-reflection (self-transparency). That is, without featuring subjectivity as something that stands before nothing but itself.³ Furthermore, how to do so by using the very components of the interior thing, the meanings said to signify the sexual subject (of desire)

¹Walter Benjamin (2002), p. 390.

² Carlos Motta – *The Crossing* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5-Bcl-J4J4>). Last accessed on 20 December 2018.

³This is the subject of knowledge, as articulated by John Locke (2004) and Immanuel Kant (1998), which is also Hegel’s (1977) subject in History and Desire as well as Lacan’s (2006) subject in the Symbolic and Foucault’s subject of Discourse (1972). Though differently presented, these four figurings of the subject share the images of the person (ethico-juridic) entity as a mental thing, and because it alone has this quality, it stands before itself in two abstract registers, in Absolute Time (in Locke’s and Kant’s) and as Abstract Form (in Lacan’s and Foucault’s). This entity, which is the subject of History and of Desire, stands before itself in time, that is, its figures sequentiality, which is the onto-epistemological pillar that ensures the continuity of the figure of Subjectivity as an effect of History and Desire.

as an historical entity, such as the ‘voice’?⁴ Evidently, this is no accident. Motta is aware that his works can be (and will be, by many) read as presentations (texts and images) of the voices of the oppressed.⁵

How to confront and refuse such reading of the work? Looking at the pieces in the gallery and watching the video, attending to images and words, I wondered how to read them with Walter Benjamin’s *On the Concept of History*, José Francisco Pereira’s 1731 Inquisition Court case, and Saint Peter Damian’s *Letter 31 - The Book of Gomorrah*. I wondered (and am still wondering) if this is all that the artist asks the viewer to do. It is not. Though it explicitly offers the three possible positions language affords the singular person (first, second, third), *Corpo Fechado* refuses to resolve José Francisco Pereira, the only self-named character in either of them. Instead, he articulates all three – the first person singular, the second person singular, and the third person singular. From each, that person (slave, African, sodomite, sorcerer) radiates athwart yesterday’s colonial and today’s global juridic-economic architectures, mechanisms, and processes that compose the material context of emergence of the Oppressed, as an economic as well as a gender, sexual, racial figure.

In *Corpo Fechado*, these ‘voicings’ compose an image that promptly releases what has happened and what happens from sequentiality (of the line of History) and determinacy (of the web of Discourse). This image is an outline of the social position of the sexual subaltern – the sodomite/slave in *Corpo Fechado* – not as the result or the effect of a certain (temporal or formal) cause but as an unpredicted/unpredictable issue of a given social context. Now this is a *material* – not *formal* (abstract) or *final* (temporal) – rendering of subjectivity in a juxtaposition of ‘voicings’ (and ‘silencings’) of the sexual that is triggered from distinct moments and through different “objects” (the body, the leash, the amulet, the building, the river, the tree, etc.).

Athwart apposed images, bodies, buildings, and words (but overwhelmingly through voiced words), in Motta’s *Corpo Fechado*, the image of the oppressed person (who is subjected to discrimination, exclusion, persecution, genocide, and whose rights are not recognized or violated) is an *emergent subject* (not a consequence, a result or effect) *within a certain social* (juridical, economic, symbolic) *context*.

As an Echo

Linear (progressive) time governs the post-Enlightenment ethical accounts because both the (collective) subject of History and the (individual) subject of Desire request, as an ontological given, an all-knowing interior thing, which *becomes* as it is actualized in time. To be sure, both rest on the predication of a position that is only available to that which exists in time, and in *immaterial* time alone. And both, the (collective) subject of History and (individual) Desire are supposedly accessible and available in the archives, documents, policies, decisions, and debates. Not surprisingly, then, to the discourses that describe social (gender, sexual, racial) subaltern subjects, self-transparency is presented as a problem.⁶

⁴ For the significance of voicing (in this case, in the form of confession) in the very assemblage of the discourses of sexuality see Michel Foucault (1990).

⁵ On the voice and its relation to self-consciousness, see generally Jacques Derrida (1997).

⁶ If there is one single attribute that belies how the subject, the ethical thing presupposed in the social (juridical, economic, and symbolic) context would be described as a racial (bodily-geographic) thing, it would be transparency. That the racial subjugation has been the model for the articulation of other forms of social subaltern subject, gender, sexual, etc. For the lack of transparency is precisely what is accentuated in statements on the impossibility of a transparent black subjectivity such as Du Bois’ (2007) Negro’s double-consciousness or Fanon’s comments on always seeing oneself through the eyes of the other. Perhaps a most important aspect of black feminist interventions has been a refusal to lament lack of transparency. Both Spillers’ (1987) “female flesh ungendered” and Hartman’s (1997) tracing of entertainment as post-Emancipation re-enactment of the scene of subjection, for instance, take the total violence that defines slavery as a the point of departure for a critical interrogation of modern symbolic, that is, onto-epistemological program that prefigure the juridic-economic conditions of emergence of blackness as a descriptor of the human difference, namely slavery.

For their representation requires the spelling out of their *material* (spatial) context, that is of the social (economic, juridical, and symbolic) architectures of power that produce them as such, that is, as the oppressed.

In Carlos Motta's work, in particular in the exhibition *Corpo Fechado*, I uncover a presentation of the oppressed (colonial-racial-gendered-sexual) subjectivity, as an *emergent* condition. Apposed to and against the subject's scene of transparency, the oppressed figures in Motta's artwork as an ethical figure that *reflects* its *material* context of emergence. Now such materiality can only be noticed because Motta does not depict subjectivity in abstract (absolute) space/time (where the subject enjoys its ability to return to itself) without mediation. Meaning, without interference of anything other than itself. Through a variety of formats, the oppressed figures as/in 'voicings' that resonate in a context composed of material referents of "past" (colonial) and "present" (political) juridic-economic structures: rivers, churches, or museums, from different spatiotemporal moments, such as, for instance, a colonial river (*Nefandus*), 18th century (*Corpo Fechado*), and the 21st century Netherlands (*The Crossing*).⁷

Neither an un-mediated expression (as form) nor un-mediated actualization (in time) of the "I" as a particular/individual (social) subject, the oppressed in Motta's work is still figured as subjectivity or self.⁸ However, the self emerges in a presentation of *voicing*, as echoes from material conditions, which renders it similar to a phonon (a sound quasiparticle) interacting with a solid, that is, it returns, folds back. In other words, the oppressed emerge as reflections of their material conditions of existence, which include possible and actual (previous, current, and further) deployments of total violence.

Of Unlimited

Eighty, seventy years ago, when Walter Benjamin was writing, the concepts of race and the nation supported statements and policies that justified state perpetrated (the Jewish Holocaust in Germany and colonial expropriation in Africa, the Middle East, Pacific Islands, and the Americas) and state permitted (the lynching of African Americans in the United States) total violence.⁹ Today's fascism, once again, calls for white supremacy and cis-heterosexual male self-protection against non-white, LGBTQI, and migrants in general and in opposition to global financial capital. Much like how historical materialism did back then, now, this moment, our moment, the critique of Discourse seems to fail the Oppressed and betrays its bourgeois commitment to remain within the limits of European philosophy. This means critique's seeming incapacity to address colonial and racial violence.¹⁰

Through the various and diverse fragments (words, gestures, images, etc.) that feature José Francisco Pereira as a colonial subject, Motta's image unsettles any assumed historical continuity and discursive coherency of the sexual and racial body. For the appositions in *Corpo Fechado* shatter the rigid forms produced by the analytics of raciality and the analytics of sexuality. Thereby offering a glimpse of what

⁷For descriptions of these works see <https://carlosmotta.com/projects/>. Last accessed on 20 December 2018.

⁸Thinking here of Kant's (1998, p.180) account of time, in regard to interiority, succession, and progression: "Time," he postulates, "is nothing other than the form of inner sense, i.e., of the intuition of our self and our inner state. (...) . And just because this inner intuition yields no shape we also attempt to remedy this lack through analogies, and represent the temporal sequence through a line progressing to infinity, in which the manifold constitutes a series that is of only one dimension (...).

⁹Both concepts informed the notion of white supremacy articulated in opposition to industrial capital – whether in defense of the white working class against the great industrialists (in the United States) or in defense of the German (Aryan) working people against Jewish and other Europeans.

¹⁰Through, in the case of Michel Foucault (1990), the analysis of the discourse of sexual (the analytics of sexuality) as a modality of productive power or productive violence; an incapacity that results from their inability to forgo interiority, that is, to release the person – the proper ethical and juridical figure – from the mark of (symbolic and juridical) authority, that is, the I, or the first-person singular.

might become possible to think through/with/ because of the body and its affections if the threads of the discourses that produce the sexual, the racial, the colonial, and the religious subjects were dissolved.

What they do is to deflect (diffract) and, in doing so, expose the fragments that constitute the presumed continuities that underlie descriptions of social institutions in progression. Notice, for instance, what happens to the thesis that the constitution and increasing expansion of the public into the private realm characterize the dynamics of the modern political configuration. This very distinction, which is taken for granted today, is undermined in an image of the modern colonial configuration where the Church, through the Inquisition, occupies the center of juridical architecture. In particular, this is an effect of an imaging that foregrounds the in/distinction between sodomy and slavery, through the fact that, in that social context, both authorized total violence, though from opposite ends. Let me elaborate: the particularity (fixity and interiority) of the (homo)sexual subjectivity (the self or identity produced by the analytics of sexuality) dissolves before the image of the body of the slave as the body of the sodomite. Put differently, when these are presented as indistinguishable sites of deployment of total violence these figures interrupt the coherency of the historical (temporal) and discursive (formal) lines that delimit the racial and sexual subjects of today. The image of the present appearing here is precisely that of fragments of what was once addressed and indistinguishable, in the figure of José Francisco Pereira.¹¹

In *Corpo Fechado* I find another instantiation of a confrontational method that I have identified in the work of other artists who explicitly address issues of social and global justice. Unlike the analytical method that prevails in most critical interrogations, it does not require the gathering of fragments, providing them with a form (logic or a grammar), that is, giving them the coherence of language, as discourse or text. Tracking fragments, the affections of the subject, as evidence of violence done, and of torture and extraction, as the constitution of our present material conditions, the critical gesture through confrontation becomes the sensing of the person (ethico-juridical figure) in the very documentation of the attempts at the erasure of subjects. This confrontational method – which registers violence – to refuse and recompose – informs questions raised by black feminist interventions, such as: “how to read the person in documents which cannot but return violence, her necessary inexistence?”¹² These are ethical questions requiring a point of departure that do not request sequentiality (time as progression) and its anchor linearity, interiority, and actuality. Instead, it requests an approach to materiality that relishes fractality and attends to the *deep implicancy* that characterizes existence.¹³

Possibilities

Perhaps there have been many moments like this, like now; other moments of danger where the threat of total violence closes off the cracks through which progress, the promise of linear time, is exposed. When it is evident that the course of History is nothing more than the recycling of violence through seemingly opposite social (ethic, juridical, symbolic) formations. Perhaps, alternatively, there has never been a moment like this, like now: no other moment when a relatively recent granted ethical and juridical gain – the right to exist, to the voicing of desires, the expression of identity – is met with unabashed threats and acts of total violence.

¹¹A similar emergent is found in *Shipwreck*, another beautiful film, which is an adaptation of the Brazilian anthropologist Luiz Mott text, titled “Misadventures of a Sodomite Exiled in 17th Century Bahia”: In the first person, Luiz Delgado, says” The Inquisition Tribunal, its avid spies, my neighbors, have insisted in defining what I am, as if a person were only one thing and not an unlimited compendium of possibilities.” (<https://carlosmotta.com/project/nafragios-shipwreck-film-2013/>. Last accessed, on 21 December 2018).

¹²See Harman (2008)

¹³For a presentation of the thesis of Deep Implicancy see Denise Ferreira da Silva and Arjuna Neuman’s film titled *4Waters-Deep Implicancy* (2018)

Heard from this moment, the present, the *voicings* in *Corpo Fechado* do not do the work of power of the subject as a thing of Desire, whether emerged in History or Discourse. Between us and them are the economic and juridical architectures of merchant, industrial, and financial capital. And in particular the colonial mechanisms of expropriation and political mechanisms of exploitation both interrupt and belie the dis/continuities that constitute the oppressed at any given moment; the very dis/junctions through which the past flares up in/to the present.

In *Corpo Fechado*, as in other works by Carlos Motta, the indistinguishability between what has happened, what happens, and what is to (or could) happen is made available in the voicings he creates which, lacking the presumption of interior identification with the audience, become not through language (modelled after structural analysis) but through image (modelled after figural readings). Central to this image are objects such as the *bolsa de mandinga* and other referents (the whip) of refusal to comply with the Church's regulations of Sexuality and Slavery's tools of expropriation.¹⁴

Jose Francisco Pereira's body and voicings figure the deep implicancy between the sodomite and the fugitive and the protective amulet and of the colonial material conditions, within which their refusal of norms could only be met with total violence. In this image, what has been already apprehended as a historic and anthropologic object, *the bolsas de mandinga* are released. In short, through the *bolsas de mandinga*, as a tool of the Devil, *Corpo Fechado* confronts historical and anthropological depictions of the oppressed, in particular, it recuperates the political significance of the *bolsas de mandinga*. By recalling its use as juridical evidence in the Court of Inquisition, it retrieves the *bolsa de mandinga* from its construction in anthropological discourse as specimen of a mode of thinking that lags behind in the progression that lead to modernity and its proper ethico-juridical subjects.

For what the past holds for the present *as the gift of progress* is not waiting to be discovered or invented. It is already available, refigured (reflected, diffracted, refracted) in/as the present. The past is not an archive, a repository. What has happened and existed remains as an echo, distorted reverberations, which can be captured when one attends to the present itself not as what is about to become past, as that which will take to the future; but as that which has become, of what has passed and will remain in/as what is to come. For they speak in the present, through interruptions that expose how subjectivity is nothing other than an amalgam of positions (first, second, and third person singular as well as plural) of address. That is done through voicings that reverberate the figure of the (colonial, racial, sexual) oppressed, emerging in social (juridic, economic, and symbolic) architectures of then as well as that of the oppressed (colonial, racial, sexual) that emerge in the present.

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¹⁴There is a road I cannot take here, which is about how the *bolsas de mandinga* recall the Haitian Revolution, which preceded and still to this day escape the critical tools of historical materialism. For accounts of the use of *bolsas de mandinga* in slave revolts in early 19th century Brazil as well as the inspiring role of the Haitian Revolution, see Reis (1993) and Ferretti (1988).

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Dr. Denise Ferreira da Silva's academic writings and artistic practice address the ethical questions of the global present and target the metaphysical and ontoepistemological dimensions of modern thought. Currently, she is a Professor and Director of The Social Justice Institute (the Institute for Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Social Justice) at the University of British Columbia.

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