

Towards an Abyssal Praxis in 5 Moves

Miro Spinelli

*O que é a carne? O que é esse Isso
Que recobre o osso
Este novelo liso e convulso
Esta desordem de prazer e atrito
Este caos de dor sobre o pastoso.
A carne. Não sei este Isso.
O que é o osso? Este viço luzente
Desejoso de envoltório e terra.
Luzídio rosto.
Ossos. Carne. Dois Issos sem nome.*

—Hilda Hilst (2004)

(What is flesh? What is this It / That wraps around the bone / This smooth and convulsive skein / This disorder of pleasure and friction / This chaos of pain over the pasty. / Flesh. I don't know this It. / What is bone? This luxuriant vitality / Longing for wrapping and soil. / Luminous face. / Bone. Flesh. Two nameless Its.)¹

1.

América:
a dialogue between
soil and flesh
or the moment in which
by realizing itself
as a penetrated
invaded territory
the body discovers
its flesh

1. All translations unless otherwise indicated are my own.

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América:
secular
memory/trauma
open veins
unstanchable
bleeding

América:
blood in the sea is bait
blood on earth, spell

América:
infuriated tremors
from the center
of the earth
are coming
to charge
every drop of blood
that was gushed
every ounce of ore
extracted²

2.

I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. (Spillers 1987:67)

Even before Hortense Spillers’s theorization of the distinction between body and flesh, the way that flesh has been distinguished from the body generally has to do with a greater proximity, or with a limitation to materiality. We usually think of the body, as in the case of the human body, as having an outline, a contour. The body has boundaries. Flesh, on the other hand, evokes a color—red, or bright pink. Flesh comes with blood and with texture. And it is usually cut, ripped apart, probably because in order to see flesh you have to lose the outline of the body, you must cut the skin to access that which is the filling of the functioning system we call “body.” In that sense, flesh is closer to being an object, while the body, because of its outlined integrity and presupposed subjectivity, is closer to a subject. With that in mind, one of the most intriguing things about the passage above at first reading is the way it is written: “body” is described as captive and “flesh” as liberated subject-position. But if flesh is closer to being an object, how would it be liberated? Wouldn’t the body, the one with subjectivity, be the liberated one? Maybe the question is, why did we come to think of things that outline and constrain (the body/individual subjecthood) as something to wish for?

These questions are connected to many others that have been asked by scholars engaged with minoritarian perspectives and anticolonial struggles. A few examples are Louis Althusser’s interpellation scene on the street, in which one becomes a subject by turning to respond to the police officer’s hailing ([1971] 2001:118); Frantz Fanon’s conclusion in the metro, when after being called a “Negro” he finds himself to be “an object in the midst of other objects” ([1952]

2. I began developing the ideas for this essay in a very compressed form in dialog with Francisco Mallmann’s book *América* (2020) upon his invitation for me to write a text for the book’s cover flap. While not directly cited, the book, as well as my friendship and constant exchange with Francisco play an important role here. These initial poems and the image of the abyss appeared first on that text.

2008:82); Fred Moten's formulations on how the object resists becoming a subject (2003); and Ailton Krenak's elaboration on indigenous subjectivity based on a collective subject (in Souza e Silva 2018). These and many other authors have been putting pressure on the persistence of coloniality by way of modern dialectics by recognizing and opening space to radical imagination and practices that, instead of leaning towards subjecthood or focusing on decolonization by way of identity or institutional politics, are able to perceive and create relations between entities that are not limited to that dual, violent hierarchy between subject and object that provided the cultural and scientific bases for the invention of the New World. By losing the subject as a goal, we may start to access flesh as the liberated position proposed by Spillers, and beyond that, to liberate ourselves from the burden of desiring individual subjecthood together with its necessity of making objects of other entities, be they human or not, organic or inorganic.

Spillers has the experience of black women in mind while reflecting how their bodies are produced by their experience of racial and gender otherness. That is important because it reminds us of how what we came to think as "body" in the Western world is dependent on the violent asymmetries of its colonial history. She goes on:

In order for me to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time, over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness. (1987:65)

With that we could break down the interplay between body and flesh in a few processes: (1) the body becoming flesh by the effects of violence; (2) the flesh becoming body again by being invested with added "layers of attenuated meaning" produced by the interpellations; (3) the body returning to flesh by the stripping of those layers in order to access an "inventiveness"; and (4) the product of that inventiveness then configuring a new body.

The problem is that the sequence of processes I presented before is not linear. There's no way we can transform our flesh into bodies invented by ourselves because this would ultimately mean subjectivation, and at this point we already know that some of us never get to become subjects; there's always something that brings us back to objecthood. From (4) we go straight back to (1); our bodies are forever re-stolen.

3.

América:
land is
to soil as
body is
to flesh

I propose this poetic and theoretical equivalency as a way of addressing two points that I believe to be central to colonial metaphysics (the onto-epistemological system in which modernity is based, namely the separation between Man and Nature, human and nonhuman, subject and object, and so on) and, consequently, to the elaboration of anticolonial practices that seek alternative ways of thinking and (un)making worlds. The first one is the interplay between materiality and conceptuality or, to pose it as a question: How are material things imbued with value and meaning or possessed by symbolic and political forces? In the same way that flesh is "that zero degree of social conceptualization" that comes before the body, soil plays the same role in its relation to land. Before land there is soil, and between them, a history of markings, delimitation, and brutality.

With the discovery of the New World and its vast exploitable land, that process which has been termed the "reduction of Man to Labor and of Nature to Land" has its large-scale beginning. From this moment on Western Man saw himself as the "lord and possessor of Nature." (Wynter 1971:99)

Following this quote by Sylvia Wynter, the second point has to do with scale. Adding to the understanding that the modern colonial worldview was widely spread since the invention of América, as she suggests here, I am mostly interested in thinking about scale and its relation to volume and to space. There's an increase in volume from flesh to body, as there is from soil to land, and most importantly there's an interplay of volumes, a transposition of violent techniques that are used in the transformation of flesh into body and of soil into land. To put it another way, if we are to understand coloniality, the success of its domination project across the centuries, and its astonishing persistence to this day, we have to consider the transposition of techniques from the European understanding of body and flesh to soil and land. Ultimately, what that implies is the necessity of implementing their model of body as a precondition to the expansion of their power over the peoples who already inhabited the land they called the New World. So we have this transit between the small scale/materiality, and (a desire for) the universal.

Approximating flesh and soil can help us think about how the problem of coloniality is not how human subjects are treated as objects, but rather how all kinds of entities are made into objects in order to attend to the demand of the hegemonic subjects that become themselves through the objectification of all kinds of matter.

Now, the question that remains is: How can those of us who are constantly objectified by way of violent interpellations interact with the world without being either an object or a subject? What and where are we if we lose that dichotomy? What happens if we start thinking about our (in)existence as exactly that which is beyond? What if we stop thinking of those "its" without names as objects and start looking at them as peers, monsters of flesh and soil liberated in solidarity with every thing that exists without and against borders. That would allow us to answer the second question in this paragraph like this: We are everywhere, and what we are is (always and already) in the making.

4.

*Seu sangue é terra
que ninguém pisa, ninguém conhece
na trama que emaranha da teia
é... chapadão deserto
do peito tudinbo aberto
onde só ele se apruma
onde os cavalos suam sal e espuma
saberá...saberá*

—Cátia de França (1979)

(Its blood is soil / that nobody steps on, nobody knows / in the entangled weft of the web / ehh... desert great plateau / with a wide open chest / where only it stands upright / where the horses sweat salt and foam / you will know...you will know.)

Aligned with Cátia de França's understanding that in "the desert great plateau with a wide open chest [...] you will know...you will know" and with Gloria Anzaldúa's invitation for us to look the Shadow Beast in the eyes (1987), I propose an anticolonial praxis of going to the edge of the abyss, feeling the soil crumbling beneath our feet, and allowing ourselves to be traversed by something other than fear—something we may call vertigo for its paradoxical tension between rooting and falling. Vertigo, the spiral sensation of being suddenly transported to another regime of time, is a disruption that allows us to anticipate the fall without moving; only by the change of the field depth provoked by a disturbing realization that when you insist on looking deep into the dark eye of the nothingness, what you may find instead of fear is actually an almost uncontrollable desire to fall. For what I call the abyss is nothing more (and nothing less) than the paradox that constitutes our lives: our bodies were stolen at the same time they were

invented. And América (the no longer so novel world, the land on which we stand) was invented at the same time it was stolen.

(And if something was stolen from us, it doesn't necessarily mean we have to want it back.)

5.

How do we get to the abyss? How do we find ways around constant planning in the topography of thought, jump the fence of the cognitive plantations,³ fly over the mining of the mountains, the extraction of radical creativity? How to get to that vertiginous point where fear is no longer an option and the unknown is fuel?

Because it aims at the paradoxical unknown, an abyssal praxis works for the collapse of the opposition between theory and practice (and many other oppositions we've been talking about here), and it necessarily goes both ways: theory can also act, and the more integrated the writing of theory is with an aesthetic practice from within the text, the more abyssal it will be. Concomitantly, practice is already a mode of thinking, and its transformational forces can be potentialized by theory, which doesn't mean that practice requires theorization, but rather that theory happens in many forms, practice being one of them.

Abyssal praxis is one possible way of answering the question asked by Diana Taylor: "What can we do when apparently nothing can be done, and doing nothing is not an option?" (2020:95). For its paradoxical nature, her question is an abyss in itself, and it is an antidote to stagnation. We may not be able to end or reverse the effects of coloniality with one single act, but if we find ways to stay on the edge of the abyss long enough, we may sharpen our listening ability enough to hear the soil and our collective flesh, both echoing reflexively and teaching us the way.

As a last gesture, following Taylor's answer to her own question, with an "act of *acuer-pamiento*, learning of a situation by living it in the flesh" (2020:2) and influenced by the performance artist and scholar Eleonora Fabião, I want to propose a few actions, or better yet, a few "performative programs," which are defined by Fabião as "the motor of experimentation": "the program is the enunciation of a performance: a set of previously stipulated, clearly articulated, and conceptually polished actions" (2013:4). The following list was elaborated as a way to further practice, theorize, think, experiment, and expand the proximity of flesh and soil as well as what I am proposing here as abyssal praxis. The reader is invited to try these programs out, and of course, to create their own.

- Plant your feet in the soil.
- Bury a Western philosophy book and make a funeral for it.
- Season the soil with your favorite spices.
- Sleep outside with the dogs.
- Write theory with your feet, poetry with your guts. Reverse and restart.
- Bring the yard to the bedroom.
- Pierce your finger with a needle and taste the blood. Give the rest to the plants.
- Ask someone to embrace you very tight while you write for 10 minutes without stopping.
- Invite some friends to rub mud on each other. Stay silent until it dries on your skin. Then shower or bathe (in a river if possible) and talk.
- Read your favorite anticolonial text to your favorite piece of furniture.

3. "Cognitive plantation" is a reference to Jota Mombaça's essay "A Plantação Cognitiva" (2020).

- Take a walk around the block and collect things to make a spell. Make the spell.
- Start your next paper with a dream you had.
- Write an epitaph for your colonial fantasies.
- For an entire day, communicate only by way of questions.
- On a rainy day, go outside and walk for an hour without an umbrella. Go back home and pour a gallon of warm rosemary tea over your head.

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