

Transitionings and Returnings

Experiments with the Poetics of Transatlantic Water

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Abstract The author takes her *escrevivência* as a Brazilian black trans woman and experiments with the poetics of Atlantic water to let the text itself be a transitioning space of poetics-autoethnography-cosmology-water-energy-memory tissue. Water is the riverine thread that runs through the sections of this text, be it as rain, as tears, as sea, as metaphor, as body, as energy. The author suggests that, for black trans people in the African diaspora, trans travel narratives evoke the metaphor of transitioning in the similar ways that M. Jacqui Alexander works with the metaphor of the crossing, which not only recalls the embodied memory of the disembodied in the “tidal current of the Middle Passage” but also “evokes/invokes crossroads, the space of convergence and endless possibility.”

Keywords Brazilian black trans women, black feminism, transfeminism, African diaspora, black queer studies

***Escrevivência* and the Right to Write**

As the sky drizzles thin tears over our shoulders, I climb those stairs with the usual habit of not making eye contact, but discreetly searching for familiar faces in the crowd. I am stopped by hand waves of dear colleagues who kindly tighten themselves to leave me space to sit on the dry part of the concrete stair. Being touched by cold rainy tears would add too much to the affect of that mourning night. By sitting on the top row of the stairs, I look down with the usual habit of searching for resemblance. I greet three black friends on the next row down who turn back to acknowledge my presence with warm smiles. Resemblance comes with the few black necks I see here and there. I am handed a booklet with a long list of names I assumed would be remembered that night. As I flip the pages, my vision is blurred by tears, as I notice that most of the names belong to Brazilian trans women. One page, two pages. Blurriness. My wet palm can't differentiate between tears from the sky and my own. Memories of fear. Sadness. Rage. I can't read anymore. My mourning is interrupted by the miked voice of a

white woman saying, “We will remember the names of people in the US.” It must be the time constraint. It must be the cold rain. Skipping two pages out of the almost five reminded me that I somehow don’t belong here. The two pages filled with the names of murdered Brazilian trans women remind me that that nation doesn’t want me there alive, either.¹ I can’t differentiate my sisters’ pain from my own sorrow. Suddenly I clench my teeth as I berate myself. Does your privilege allow you to merge your pain with theirs? What legitimacy would you have to speak on those present in the skipped pages? What a privilege it is to mourn over printed names when people struggle over the bodies of their loved ones! It’s mainly their pain! Why me, right? A black Brazilian able-bodied (mis)documented (passable?) trans woman who transitioned in her thirties at the beginning of a PhD program at a US institution! Would I have lived this long had I transitioned earlier living in the *invasões*² of a mostly black poor area in northern Brazil? Would I have benefited from affirmative action sponsorship had I not been perceived as just a black man? Why me?!

After that rainy night of the Transgender Day of Remembrance 2014, ritualized on the stairs of Austin City Hall Plaza, “Why me?” haunted me strongly, like sounds of tides resonating in a seashell, questioning *shhhorre . . . ? shhhurre . . . ? sssurre . . . ?* Sure? Are you sure? In those moments, I have to remind myself that patriarchy has engendered an imaginary that we are suspect, be it for being too close or being too distant to our communities to tell the stories we want. Powerful black women writers, both cis and trans, have reminded me that despite the haunting “Why me?” we have the right to write, the right to be “unsubordinated,” as the Brazilian black feminist writer Conceição Evaristo (2007) points out. I needed to acknowledge that right in order to write this text, to allow my vulnerabilities and privileges to give me a precarious sense of entitlement to make the choices of language, vehicle of circulation, and academic alignment for this text. I have the right to write. I have the right to live. I have the right to transition geographies. I have the right to learn. I have the right to hope. Here, I take my *escrevivência*³ as a Brazilian black trans woman and experiment with the poetics of Atlantic water to let the text itself be a transitioning space of poetics-autoethnography-cosmology-water-energy-memory tissue. *Escrevivência* is the woven tissue of unsubordinated writing of our living, writing as our living, writing-living. Water is the riverine thread that runs through the sections of this text, be it as rain, as tears, as sea, as metaphor, as body, or as energy.⁴

The Trans Orientation of Language

In their introductory texts, Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore (2008) and Stryker and Currah (2014) tell us that although the use of the term *transgender* may signal delimitation, phenomena/subjectivities, the readers should be

comfortable to pick up any kind of trans- that best suits us. In a previous work also expanding the concept of “trans,” these authors reference the work by Sara Ahmed (2006) on orientation to invite us to think in a different spatiality for trans-, that is, instead of a horizontal perception. In this sense, the trans- that best suits me is the one from transatlantic, a *travessia*, the crossing, in M. Jacqui Alexander’s terms (2005). For Alexander, “crossing” is a metaphor that rests in the Middle Passage but is not “chattel or moveable property to be selectively owned by Africa’s descendants alone” (2005: 18). She states that the crossing is derived from her multifaceted engagement “with(in)” different genealogies of women-of-color feminisms and her relation with the sacred, with ancestral energies, which give the crossing the meaning of “breaking through” “inherited divides” that permeate the “multiple operations of power, gendered and sexualized power that is simultaneously raced and classed” but not limited to the “borders of the nation-state” (4).

The trans- as crossing becomes a space of simultaneities, whose orientation is other than just horizontal. The transatlantic is in that space of simultaneity in which the body is also water and energy, the water is also energy and body, and the energy is also body and water. Transing, in this sense, is finding that space of transition with(in) body-water-energy. Water is the embodiment of trans orientation. The illusion of horizontality contrasts with the shape-shifting, leaking, bleeding, in-corporating, *em corpo*; water is membrane, burial, means, memory, and a connection. Transitioning is our movement along that space of possibilities that produces embodied knowledge. It is moving across and along the waters, the imposed limits of gender, the secular and the sacred, the expectations of our death, the imaginary that we are not lovable. My orientation is also translinguistic, a confluence of Portuguese and English in which *trans-* happens to coincide as a cognate term, not interchangeable, in both languages and brings me the acoustic/embodied memory of crossing. I use *transitioning* instead of *transition* because I want to convey the continuum motion of resisting systematic oppression through embodied knowledge.

Transitioning along Black Diasporic Brazil

In the summer of 2014, a few months after I started publicly vocalizing “I’m transitioning,” I returned to Brazil after a year and a half in the United States. As I sat at a table outside a bar in the Rio neighborhood of Lapa with a group of trans-activist friends, most of whom are black, I was approached by what I read as a black cis male police officer asking for my purse. Because of the World Cup, Lapa was heavily crowded with people from outside the country, including a considerable number of harassing white males. Realizing that we were the only group targeted within the entire crowd, I was so paralyzed by the mixture of anger, fear, and the sadness of the predictability of the situation that I couldn’t react and just

stayed where I was, with frenetic smiles of amazement framing my “I can’t believe this, I can’t believe this!” as he grabbed my purse and shuffled the things inside it. Some of my friends stood up and started yelling at the police officer, “She’s just arrived, she’s not from here, that’s shameful what you’re doing!” As the officer didn’t care and skipped from my purse to the purse of the dark-skinned black trans woman at my side, people at the table started shouting, “Polícia racista! Polícia racista!” (Racist police! Racist police!). Not able to find or plant anything considered illegal in our purses, he and two other white police officers left. A few minutes later, they targeted a black man wearing a backpack who was selling shots, which is not illegal in Rio. A black woman who appeared to be his mother reached for her son while people in our group yelled at the black man to watch his bag closely while the officer screened it so that they were not able to plant anything in it. As we witnessed the profiling of this person, our group started shouting, “De noite, de dia, contra o racismo, o machismo e a transphobia!” (At day, at night, against racism, machismo, and transphobia!).

This scene is an example of my *escrevivência* as an archive of transitioning. It focuses on a context in which mega events mobilize high surveillance of black bodies through racial profiling and, in this case, intersect with transphobia, but it finds resistance by the voicing of black trans people naming those systems. I situate this experience as an instance of what Matt Richardson and Enoch Page call “sexually racist and gendered practices of oppression” shared by millions of blacks in the African diaspora, which defines “Black trans subjectivity as a racialized embodied experience of gender variance that ranges beyond the state’s preferred binary gender code” (2010: 57). I suggest that, for black trans people in the African diaspora, trans travel narratives evoke the metaphor of transitioning in the similar ways that Alexander (2005: 8) works with the metaphor of the crossing, which not only recalls the embodied memory of the disembodied in the “tidal current of the Middle Passage” but also “evokes/invokes crossroads, the space of convergence and endless possibility” (8). The idea of “return home” here, rather than what Aren Aizura (2012: 140) points out as an “import of Euro-American geographical narrative about the shaping of the (colonized) world into a center,” is closer to the discussions of home as a site of displacement but also connection, which is raised by authors such as Janet Mock in her memoir *Redefining Realness* (2014), Saidiya Hartman in *Lose Your Mother* (2007), Joseph Beam in his essay “Brother to Brother” (1986), and Sharon Holland in her foreword to *Black Queer Studies*, “Home’ Is a Four-Letter Word” (2005).

But when my friends say “she’s not from here,” although used as an attempt to restrain the officer’s screening by pointing out the state politics of having the police protect foreigners in mega events, it also marked my outsider status, the privilege of mobility, my passing (?) as a cis black woman, and the

possibility of performing foreignness by speaking English with a certain prestigious phonetics, indicative of an academic education; and all these factors' implications and the precarious legitimacy of my discourse of "us, black trans people." On the other hand, if I had passed as a black cis woman from the United States, would the implications be different? Other cis black women from the United States who are Brazilianist scholars, such as Erica Williams (2013), have talked about their experiences of racism and misogyny, for example, being mistaken for a sexually available Brazilian black woman. There's no privilege—or if there is one, it's very precarious—that confers safety in "passing" as a cis black woman across the diaspora, from the accounts I know so far.

As a black trans woman, when I say I'm transitioning or I've transitioned, I want to do something with it. When I'm exhausted and choose not to give further explanations to the daily question "What do you mean, trans?!" and I just answer back, "I've transitioned, I've transitioned," I imply the usual assumed meaning of "transition from male to female through bodily modification" despite the fact I think it is a continuous process of self-discovery. I realize this is the meaning assumed, when the addressee responds with a flinch, "Oh, okay." In this piece, I've chosen to unpack the meanings of this "I'm transitioning" as a Brazilian black trans woman, but such experience comes in a range of related and different forms to other trans people, as my trans men and gender-queer friends have shared with me. Although I've used "I've transitioned" instead of "I'm transitioning," these are not in opposition. "I've transitioned" may consist of a chosen point of departure within the continuum of "I'm transitioning." That refers, for instance (within the different examples of nonconforming experiences), to choose at a certain point to share in public an aesthetics of femininity, mutually constructed on our own terms and outside the perceptions of others, that does not match an old photo ID. That does not necessarily mark a point of start or end, or even an abrupt and sudden change, but it states a point of departure of a series of effects based on that decision; one of those effects is suffering transphobic violence.

As a black trans woman in Brazil, I transition along a discourse of racial democracy that multiply negates the experiences of black trans people, including the negation of the effects of race on a black trans body and the negation of one's gender due to racialized constructions of gender. Transitioning along the discourse of racial democracy refers to an embodied knowledge constructed by the visceral effect of moving within and reacting to those spaces in which we are negated. In my case, those instances are materialized by cordial racist transphobia: "Oh, but you are *morena* [brown], not black"⁵ and "You don't look like you're trans." It is materialized in the pathologizing scrutiny of my body and story through my forced confession in order to convince the state to change my

documents, in the visceral effect of anxiety around the possibility of being a victim of a random hate crime, and even in my hyperconsciousness in leaving and entering the United States and Brazil, given the technologies of surveillance that target black bodies and the shaming procedures of screening trans bodies.

My oral response, “I’ve transitioned,” or my body reaction (I raise my eyebrows) is a response to the inquiring gaze of the addressees who look at me with a multistable perception (the vase or the face?) and who assume their work is to construct my beforeness/nowness through the cues of my body features and color and my geographical (dis)placement. Such beforeness/nowness comes into discourse through the stuttering on pronouns and racial classifications. In my case, it comes after the stuttering “mmm . . . b . . . black/b . . . Brazilian, of color . . . Latina . . . h . . . she” I transition along those racializing formations as I interrogate racial classification in institutional surveys: “Excuse me, isn’t there an ‘other’ in this form?” I transition in languages in an accent and tone that elicit answers like “Oh, but you don’t sound like you’re Brazilian” or “Oh, but you don’t sound like you’re black.” For me, those identifications refer to transitioning along space but not citizenship, transitioning along racializing gaze but not a certain language socialization. Transitioning (*transicionando*, *transitando*) in the sense I have discussed refers to spatial mobility, crossing theories, embodied knowledge, and intersecting community engagement. Transitioning is a state of acknowledgment in which I am labeled as just “*morena*” (brown), “person of color,” “Latina,” or “just a woman”; this flattening of transitioning along the racializing gaze denies slavery, racism, transphobia, and my self-identification as a black trans woman. Sometimes those acknowledgments come embedded in sexualizing intonation, as in “Mmmm . . . Brazilian, huh?” That “mmm” and its prosodic variations encapsulate the sexualization of black trans women’s bodies and make it very difficult to experience/acknowledge desirability in a nonobjectifying manner. Acknowledgment may also come as the patronizing statement “Black trans people are humans too.” My frowning answer, yes, to both kinds of acknowledgment always reminds me of the quality of these transitionings. What heals me in the move is being in movement, crossing, transitioning along self-collective-familial-intimate-erotic love—love that make us stand together and shout and echo our voices.

Transatlantic Transitionings, Returnings, and the Work of Love

Jafari Allen states that black queer “work is both a labor of love and the evidence of it, perforce” (2012: 217). He also engages with the work of Chela Sandoval (2000: 146), for whom “love is a hermeneutics of social change” “in which love can access and guide our theoretical and political *movidas*—revolutionary maneuvers toward decolonized being.” Like the work Allen (2012: 218) introduced in the

issue of *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* entitled “Black/Queer/Diaspora,” my work is also “passion filled” (not easy, uncomplicated, or necessarily romantic), but also full of tensions and irresolution. I’m interested in what the work of love (hooks 2000) among black women, cis and trans, can do, that is, love embodied in flesh in ancestral energies with potential to heal, to fight death, and to organize, and as praxis of caring for each other against intersecting oppression. Love and passion here are not intended to have the effect of sentimentality, since, as Barbara Christian has stated, “sentimentality replaces the passion for living” (Christian 1986 quoted in Bobo 1988: 47). The black queer/trans work of love is instead the work that fills our passion for living and assures our survival but doesn’t forget the dead. It is in this spirit that I end this section with transitioning love, as it transforms itself into a new language to also transition with us.

***Minha Filha!* Memories of a Black Brazilian Trans Daughter**

My mother’s joy and loud laugh have warmed my memories. Our arguments have haunted me, too. It was June 2014 in Rio de Janeiro. A year and a half had passed since I left our island of São Luis in Brazil to pursue my graduate studies in Austin, Texas. This time, I had transitioned through the aerial waves over the Atlantic from Austin to Rio, where my auntie and I awaited my mother. I left in a body whose changes into my womanhood during a few preceding months my mother hadn’t seen. Will she see *me*? My gaze shifts from the bus window on the way to the airport and goes to the patterns on my yellow dress. It’s Senegalese, the street vendor said at the time. I follow the route of black lines crossing each other into lozenges filled with a bright orange over the gold yellow fabric. The wax cloth rubbing against the changing feeling of my skin under the effect of hormones during those few months made me think about my resilience along my transitioning. A legacy of resilience from my ancestors who transitioned through the water, into the water, from the water—a legacy rippled through generations and poured by this powerful black woman that my auntie and I were about to see again. I entertained the idea that this fabric had its own route crossing the Atlantic to get to Rio de Janeiro; it would cross over the ocean again with me upon my return to Austin. This fabric could have its birth with exploitation as well. Its crossing would intersect with mine, ours. This time, the dress would not dance with the breeze from the watery skirt surrounding São Luis Island. My hometown? It doesn’t feel like home yet. Nowhere feels like home now. The encounter of my auntie, my mom, and me was a celebration of our search for ourselves and for each other, in our love for each other. Black women daring to love each other. Mom, Mamãe, would see her baby sister after all these years; she would also see her daughter. At the airport, I spotted that short curvy black woman covering her smile. There she is, auntie! Auntie Matilde, Tia Matilde, ran and hugged my

mom tight and long as they exchanged words of love and longing. I was right behind my auntie, and I also let water flow from my eyes and wet my yellow dress. After a few moments, my aunt releases her sister and looks at me and back to mom and says, “Here is your daughter.” Mamãe looks at me in a way that I haven’t seen before. It takes only a few seconds before we hug, me leaning over my mom. My mom hugs *me*. The water feels right. I let myself into my mother’s arms, and I recall that feeling. I feel that she is not concerned about what a hug could do to me at this point. My mom hugged *me*. Dora, her daughter. I am not used to feeling such happiness. When we release each other, mom looks at me from head to toe, and the water in my body seems to want to escape through my palm when I see her motion to speak: “You are too skinny, you haven’t fed yourself properly as usual.” I smile as water cools my neck, saying, “Let me pull your suitcase for you, Mom.” My aunt grabs my mom’s hand, and they start talking. I go a little forward, pulling the small suitcase she brought, as I hear her saying how adventurous she felt flying on a plane for the first time, how well treated she was by the crew who helped her at every step, so that she didn’t need to say she forgot her glasses to avoid saying she couldn’t read. From time to time, my mom would pause while my aunt took over the conversation, and I could see from the corner of my eye that she was looking at me from head to toe again, with that expression I couldn’t read. I had become very knowledgeable in reading gazes at this point. Walking in the sidewalks of Copacabana during the World Cup forced me to react to multiple gazes, especially those by intoxicated white male foreigners. As I walk on the skirts of Yemaja-Rio-Waters, I say to her, We meet you under vigilant eyes, we are pushed away by the walls of buildings, but we fight to be close, Mother, *Axé, minha mãe!* Eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes. Frowning eyes, staring eyes, smiley eyes, angry eyes, hungry eyes, indifferent eyes, eyesss, eyes see, eyes-sea, see, sea, see-sea-eye, eye . . . water heating . . . I . . . water boil. I, I’m, am, am, mmm, me, me, *me!* What are you looking at?! I breathe deeply. Water cools my neck. As I let these memories flow and I mechanically walk as I pull my mom’s suitcase, I hear it. Dora! Dora! I turn back, making sure I was not still in my head. Mamãe asks me with uncertainty and the same gaze, “It’s Dora, isn’t it?” “Yes, Mom,” I answer, taming the tears. “Come back here, your aunt says we should go this way,” Mom says. I pull the suitcase in another direction. Water rises and layers and turns my sight into watercolor. She said it! She said it! After a week, that gaze was not there. I was not used to having my mom’s gaze of (un)familiarity, of an (un)familiar love. She was learning to love her daughter. I was learning to deal with her timing to love me. We are learning to give language to each other’s (un)familiarity. As I remember, water rises, folds, and shores up at the edges of my eyes. Water cools my neck. The water feels right. The water feels right. *Axé, minha mãe Yemaja!*

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Notes

1. The English version of *trans woman* I use here encompasses a range of self-identified terms in Brazil such as *travesti*, *mulher trans*, and *transexual*, which at times overlap, connect, or oppose one another, depending on the meanings and contexts one builds during our process of self-making.
2. I refer to the nonofficial occupation of state land in the capital of Maranhão, São Luís, mostly by poor black migrants from the countryside, who have resisted leaving despite the government's attempt to demolish our houses. A similar process characterized the formation of favelas in Rio de Janeiro.
3. Evaristo (2007) defines *escrevivência* as a process of writing lived experiences of and by black women who dare to tell stories with a pedagogy of graphic work. She uses the term *graphic work* to refer to different forms of writing, from drawn on the ground to words on paper. She argues that because black women's stories are erased, daring to tell our stories is a form of insubordination.
4. The perspective of Atlantic water as a powerful metaphor and framework for black queerness comes from my dialogue with Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic" (2008).
5. In Brazil, the ideology of racial democracy consists of the belief that the "nation" is inherently mixed, that race (implied as blackness) is not part of the cultural imaginary. However, as the black movement in the country has argued and as scholars have pointed out, clinging to the discourse of mixture is a strategy of negating blackness and not being accountable for its structural oppressive effects in the country. A more detailed discussion on negation of blackness in Brazil can be found in Vargas 2004.

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