

Reclaiming Legitimacy through Performance: Postmemory, Blackness, and Belonging

KATHRYN BISHOP-SÁNCHEZ
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Abstract: This article discusses Grada Kilomba’s performance-installation *O barco/The Boat* (2021) as a denunciation of the legacies of colonialism, racism, and social injustices in contemporary society. In these times of perpetual crises, race crimes, discrimination, and the mediation of collective trauma, this study aims to understand how the performance of Blackness, centered around an ever-present past evoked by a slave ship hold in Grada Kilomba’s multidimensional art installation, constructs a forum to confront the silences inherent in the inequalities of power and privilege embedded in Portuguese history. I draw predominantly from the work of Diana Taylor, Marianne Hirsch, Christina Sharpe, and Peggy Phelan to examine how performance “in the wake” (Sharpe) is a powerful tool to address these perpetuated silences, feelings of loss and vulnerability, and the aftermath of colonial violence. I discuss the way in which performance can be a powerful tool to celebrate, verbalize, and embody racial difference and expose the normalization of racism while, at the same time, forging a new conceptualization of the Black Atlantic.

Keywords: Grada Kilomba, slave ship, performance, racism, postmemory, wake work

In 2012, divers working on the wreckage of what had been presumed to be the *Schuylenburg*, a Dutch merchant ship that sank in 1756 off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa, made a surprising discovery. Excavation of the ship exposed black

iron bars embedded in the seafloor. Iron ballasts were common currency of the slave trade, used primarily to counterbalance the variable weights of the ship's human cargo to keep the vessel stable as it sailed. The wreckage was thus subsequently reidentified as the Portuguese slave ship *São José*, which in April 1794 had sailed from Lisbon loaded with 1,500 iron blocks of ballasts, bound for East Africa, just off the northern shore to the Island of Mozambique. On December 3, 1794, it then set sail for Maranhão, Brazil, with over 400 enslaved Africans shackled in the ship's hold. After circling the treacherous Cape of Good Hope, the ship hit two reefs some 100 yards off land. Several hours later, it broke in pieces. The captain, crew and some 200 enslaved captives made it to shore while all others perished at sea.

Of all the various elements of the tragic story of the *São José* shipwreck, one of the most intriguing is a document researchers discovered in Mozambican government archives in 2013. Dated December 22, 1794, this document confirms the sale of a man taken from mainland Mozambique to the island and from there brought aboard the *São José*. The man is identified as nothing more than “Black Man” (Cooper). He was one of more than 400 nameless persons who were sold into bondage, forcibly removed from their country, and shackled in *São José*'s hold bound for Brazil.

Like the unnamed “Black Man” of the *São José*, millions of enslaved Africans were deprived of their identities and humanity during the colonial times and to this day continue to be mostly invisible in the retelling of these stories. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes in the preface to *Silencing the Past*, “the production of historical narratives involves the uneven contribution of competing groups and individuals who have unequal access to the means for such production” (xxiii). It is essential to expose the “power in the story,” to continue with Trouillot, for “history reveals itself only through the production of specific narratives” (25). As in the case of the *São José* “Black Man,” silences haunt all levels of slavery narratives; they erase identities and thwart the retrieval of these stories. While it is difficult—if not impossible—to reconstruct sources for these narratives or assemble facts that have been buried in the past (e.g., the true identity of the “Black Man”), twenty-first-century artists can play a significant role to make these silences speak retrospectively.¹ The creation of new perspectives is possible only

¹ Here I am also guided by Trouillot's conceptual tools that indicate how “silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources);

through the appropriation of power and privilege that is necessary to write an alternative narrative, to follow through with its creation and interpret it.

For some, as Patricia Williams laments, it might be considered “impertinent to keep raising the ghost of slavery’s triangle trade and waving it around; there is a pronounced preference in polite society for just letting bygones be bygones” (23). Given the legacy of racism and its ongoing effects in the modern world, Grada Kilomba’s *O barco/The Boat*,² as an installation-performance of a slave ship hold, brings to fore the urgent need to represent the historical past in the present context, to discuss this work through critical analysis.

To guide the present study’s inquiry within the context of modern-day perpetual crises, race crimes, discrimination, and the mediation of collective trauma, I use Marianne Hirsch’s powerful concept of *postmemory* to discuss Grada Kilomba’s multidimensional art installation as a vehicle through which the artist invites the spectator to confront silences created by inequalities of power embedded in Portuguese history. Following Hirsch, I view performance as an “imaginative investment, projection, and creation” with potential as “a platform of activist and interventionist cultural and political engagement, a form of repair and redress, inspired by feminism and other movements for social change” (5, 6).³ Against the backdrop of postmemory, we can analyze performance as a powerful tool to celebrate, verbalize, and embody racial difference, to expose the normalization of racism while forging a new conceptualization of the Black Atlantic.⁴

the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)” (26). Where I see an obvious distinction between the work of historians and artists is historical researchers’ impetus to significantly remake archives (cf. the dynamic group heralded and curated by Ana Lucia Araujo, *Slavery Archives*).

² It is interesting that Grada uses the terms “o barco” and “the boat” for her performance-installation, whereas in Portuguese the more common term for the slaving vessel is “navio” and in English “ship.”

³ Hirsch uses the term “postmemory” to describe “the relationship that the ‘generation after’ bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they ‘remember’ only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up” (5). I am expanding this concept to several generations removed to revisit slavery in the twenty-first century through performance art.

⁴ Since the 1990s the ever-expanding field of performance studies continues to review and refine definitions of what we understand by “performance”: from the now-classic Marvin Carlson, *Performance: An Introduction* (1996), Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds., *Performance and Performativity* (1996), Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, eds., *Critical Theory and Performance* (1992), Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), to the more recent *Performance* by Diana Taylor (2016), which I use throughout this study, and Leticia

“Wake Work” along the Banks of the Tagus

Grada Kilomba’s *O barco* is an artistic performance-installation that can be characterized as speculative, denunciatory, and self-reflective. *O barco* began its trajectory in Lisbon, a locale dear to Grada as a choice for her work’s maiden voyage on the banks of the river Tagus. Since then, and at the time of writing, *O barco/The Boat* has been installed in Barcelona (in front of the Teatre Lliure on Plaça Margarida Xirgu, January 16 to 30, 2022). It opened the Kunsthalle Baden-Baden in Germany with performances on July 8 and 9, 2022, and was on display in the UK at the Somerset House overlooking the River Thames, September 29 to October 19, 2022, where Grada Kilomba was the featured artist of the 1-54 Contemporary African Art Fair 2022.⁵ Given their proximity to ports connected with the slave trade or, as in the case of Baden-Baden, to the Black Forest that supplied lumber for the slave ship industry, all these sites featuring Grada Kilomba’s work are symbolic as important reminders of European history. The large-scale installation consists of 140 wooden blocks arranged in a formation that through its shape and composition recalls the famous diagrams of the *Brookes* slave ship, one of the most recognizable images from the global abolitionist movement.⁶ *O barco* spans over 30 meters in length and 10 in width at its largest point (see Fig. 1).

Alvarado’s *Abject Performances. Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (2018), to mention but a few among the discipline’s field-defining works.

⁵ A new but related installation, *18 Verses*, was commissioned for the Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea in Torino, Italy, as part of the exhibit *Fractional Expressions* that was held from April 24 to September 25, 2022. It was also exhibited at the Pace flagship gallery in New York from May 12 to July 1, 2023. This recent work consists of a poetic, sculptural, and sound installation, with over a dozen carbonized blocks of wood with engraved poems in hand-painted, gold leaf, draped with 48 meters of black fabric.

⁶ The *Brookes* (or *Brook*, *Brooks*, *Bruz*) was a British slave ship that left Liverpool in 1781 and became infamous after prints of her were published from 1788 on showing hundreds of enslaved Africans destined for the Americas crammed in her hold.



Figure 1. Grada Kilomba’s *O barco/The Boat* (Oct. 2022) at the Somerset House courtyard in London. Image courtesy of the author.

O barco essentializes the Black experience of the slave ship and white colonialism. Following Aristotle’s view expressed in his *Poetics*, as Schechner points out, theater (applicable here to performance in general) “did not so much reflect living as essentialize it, present paradigms of it” (xi). With its imposing arrangement of wooden blocks representing the hold of a slaving ship and the musical choreography that accompanies the installation, *O barco* projects a collage of visual symbols and messages to redress history and contribute to a larger picture of colonial tales that have mostly overlooked the Black legacy and experience, or coopted, interpreted, and censored Black stories through white eyes. Grada’s work is essential to reverse the collective silence of Portugal’s racialized past, through a scenario that, to borrow from Diana Taylor, “make[s] visible . . . what is already there—the ghosts, the images, the stereotypes that haunt our present and resuscitate and reactivate old dramas” (141). *O barco* is a performance that blends several artistic dimensions, what Taylor designates as performance art, body art, live art, and action art, with a clear activist agenda that “summon[s] the tools of performance to fight for political and economic change” (1, 146). To this list we could add the qualifiers racial art, political art, and provocative art, among others. All these terms can be applied to Grada Kilomba’s *O barco*.

The message of *O barco* is clear: the *now* of its performance captures the ongoing racial disparities and violence that persist in our societies. It is a timely reminder that the oft-referenced “legacy of slavery” has concrete and real wide-ranging consequences. It is a testament that honors lost lives and is a call to action.

As such, Grada Kilomba's performance, as I detail below, aims to contribute to societal decolonization—that is, as Frantz Fanon proposed, to change the world order and, in this case, the lingering vestiges of Portugal's colonial past. According to Fanon, the hostility of decolonization is proportional to the violence exerted by the contested colonial regime. In the wake of lingering systemic colonialism, Grada denounces the embedded, often covert, racism in contemporary societies through a performance that centers on the enactment of the slave enterprise. With powerful chants, free movements, harmonious choreography, and dominance of Black bodies, her work portrays a triumphant statement that both decries the past and embodies a victorious stance over racial oppression.

Grada Kilomba's work sets the tone for and opens new directions for critical postcolonial performance within the Luso-African diaspora in particular and diasporic fields more generally. This is what Jon McKenzie predicted when he wrote that twentieth- and twenty-first-century performance “has taken on a particular political significance” and will be “an onto-historical formation of power” (8, 17). Grada's work is an example of what can be done through art, whether it's literature, performance, or visual culture, to mediate survival and “set history straight,” so to speak, in a society that has witnessed disasters that have reinforced racial divides and social racial bias.

A constant theme in Grada's work is the impetus to recuperate a legitimate place for the Black body through its performative and the ability to express the colonial experience from the point of view of the enslaved oppressed. We see this in some of her earlier creations such as the art video “While I Write” (2016) or the compilation of short psychoanalytical stories *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism* and their corresponding staged reading (2008/2019). As Inês Beleza Barreiros and Joacine Katar Moreira write, Grada Kilomba's “intersectional work responds to the contemporary urgency for decolonization in general, and knowledge and imagination in particular” placing her “praxis within a healing movement, a futurity” (58). As witnessed in Grada's texts, and as the conjunction of the two terms in the title *Plantation Memories* explicitly reference, daily racism is not a mere reenactment of a colonial past but a current, reoccurring, and constant reality: a traumatic reality that continues to haunt all aspects of society. Within these parameters, the Black subject personifies all the negative aspects that white society has repressed, such as aggressivity and sexuality, primitiveness, wildness; whereas whiteness stands for what is morally ideal,

decent, civilized, in full control, and without anxiety provoked by its historicity. Both “While I Write” and *Plantation Memories* dialogue with *O barco*.

Grada Kilomba inaugurated her large-scaled installation *O barco* in 2021 in Lisbon. It was installed on the Praça do Carvão, the square in front of the Museum of Art, Architecture, and Technology (MAAT), a new cultural space that focuses on these three disciplines and their intersections. As indicated on the museum’s website, the aim of MAAT is to present national and international exhibits by contemporary artists, architects, and intellectuals.⁷ *O barco*’s debut in a locale geographically, artistically, and intellectually appropriate to the work’s focus provides a physical support to the spirit and purpose of Grada’s installation, which resonates with the overarching message of her artistic repertoire—that is, to make visible the invisible and give voices to the underrepresented. Whereas the history of the Middle Passage has been predominantly told through historiographies—often with a focus on a quantitative approach asking questions such as how many enslaved left Africa, how many arrived, how many died at sea—Grada’s artwork aims to articulate a sensation rather than facts. In a recorded interview with Cristina Roldão, the artist states: “não se trabalha com o fato, mas trabalha-se com o significado, a subconsciência, e assim se cria a magia da performance, e entra-se no imaginário coletivo” (Kilomba and Roldão).

The installation-performance *O barco*, like most of Grada Kilomba’s aesthetic creations, expresses her commitment to further what Christina Sharpe has coined “wake work.” As Sharpe theorizes, the wake “can be understood as the track left on the water’s surface by a ship; the disturbance caused by a body swimming or moved, in water; it is the air currents behind a body in flight; a region of disturbed flow” (3). She argues “for one aspect of Black being in the wake as consciousness and [proposes] that to be in the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding” (13–14). Her main point is to ask “what, if anything, survives this insistent Black exclusion, this ontological negation, and how do literature, performance, and visual culture observe and mediate this un/survival” (14). From this perspective, we can interpret *O barco* as a forum that invites its spectators to likewise occupy “slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding,” all while mediating the “un/survival” of Black exclusion. Sharpe’s discussion of the ship hold that both inhabits us and by which we are inhabited (69) is particularly pertinent to Grada’s installation. It is a

⁷ See <https://www.maat.pt/en/museum-art-architecture-and-technology>.

site where violence is the first language of the keepers: “the language of thirst and hunger and sore and heat, the language of the gun and the gun butt, the foot and the fist, the knife and the throwing overboard” (70).

Rather than present the hold as an enclosed, dark, private space, Grada’s hold is one in plain sight, boldly challenging its historical implications out in the open. *O barco* represents, as Sharpe writes, the “hold in the contemporary,” the racial discrimination and injustices that continue in our societies, the past that continues into the present (71). Furthermore, the installation has been presented in public spaces, where observers and spectators can view the work and the performance outdoors and free of charge. As Grada recalls in a discussion about the installation in Lisbon, the placement of *O barco* in a public space was particularly important in a society where public spaces typically, and traditionally, have privileged masculine works that reiterate the tenets of the colonial system through their phallic constructions predominantly by male artists (Kilomba and Roldão). In Lisbon, a case in point is João Cutileiro’s monument to the 25th of April Revolution installed at the top of the Parque Eduardo VII since 1997 and commonly referred to as “o pirilau⁸ da cidade” [“the wiener of the city”]; or the large, rose-tinted stone Monument to the Discoveries, inaugurated in 1960 as part of the commemorations for the fifth centennial of the death of Infante Henry the Navigator, who is at the helm of the structure flanked by male discoverers, writers, cartographers, scientists, and dignitaries of the Renaissance period.

In Lisbon, the geographical placement of *O barco*, turned toward the river Tagus, dialogued with both the past and the present of this region of the city. From the late fifteenth century on, Portuguese caravels departed from here, followed by the slave ships heading to the Americas. Farther up the same river, in the direction of the Atlantic, monuments to the glory days of the discoveries stand proudly to memorialize this past. To this day the area remains steeped in Portugal’s problematic history, visualized by the above-mentioned Monument of the Discoveries flanking the Tagus in Belém across from the Monastery of the Jerónimos, the Praça do Império, and the Vasco de Gama Gardens, all imposing testaments to Portugal’s complex colonial past. Moreover, along this same riverbank, statements to modern-day neocapitalism now abound as luxurious ocean liners, cruise ships, and private yachts can be seen year-round. The area has been revitalized through the city’s initiative to expand its bike paths and recuperate

⁸ In continental Portuguese, “pirilau” is an infantilized term used for penis.

spaces that, until the 1990s with the opening of restaurants in former warehouses, were considered derelict, mostly abandoned, and eyesores of the city.⁹ Grada's temporary installation interrupted the male-dominated, colonial memory symbolically and geographically by its very presence along the same riverbank. As this area of Lisbon embraces new directions, it is also appropriate to rethink the region's past. The recently announced Memorial to Enslaved People, yet to be built along the same riverbank, in the Campo das Cebolas neighborhood—a place where slave ships docked—will no doubt serve as a vehicle for reflection on questions of slavery, colonialism, and racism. This project will consist of the creation *Plantação—Prosperidade e Pesadelo* by Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda, who is known for his decolonizing performance art such as his 2007 photographic interventions on the Monument of the Discoveries he titled *A descoberta*.

The Praxis of Performance: Revisiting the Hold

Grada Kilomba's work is a defiant performative act to decolonize. It makes a bold statement that dares to go against the status quo and centuries of perceived histories that have rarely been challenged. Beyond its performative segment, the artwork itself boldly represents a new perspective of a slave ship's hold. Fitting with Grada's mission to give voices to the untold stories of the underrepresented, each of the installation's 140 wooden blocks went through a process of burning and inscription, itself a prequel to the performance. On the charred blocks, Grada inscribed in gold letters poems that recall lost identities and histories of those enslaved. More than a poetic composition, the art of burning and writing comes together to create a performative act. As such, Grada reinscribed identity to a part of history that European empires silenced and erased: the millions of enslaved Africans who left their homelands for the Americas, many of whom did not survive the voyage, reduced to statistics shamelessly unverifiable and most probably incorrect.

⁹ This area of Lisbon, known today as "As docas," which extends along the Tagus river approximately from the Doca de Belém at its western point, to Doca de Santo Amaro, Doca de Alcântara, and the Santa Apolónia train station, was greatly recuperated following Portugal's entry into the European Community in 1986, with new restaurants opening along the "docas" (some refurbishing former warehouses), the hip artsy LX Factory complex, new markets such as Time Out Lisbon, museums (MAAT, the Museum of Electricity, the new Museu Nacional dos Coches, the art exhibit space Cordoaria Nacional), a bike path along the riverbank, the expansion of the metro system to the east of Cais do Sodré, and embellished parks and squares.

While history cannot be reversed, the preparation of the wooden blocks contributed to memorialize and call out slavery's systematic injustice. Each block bears a segment of Grada's original poem, with phrases in several European and African languages—namely, Kimbundo, Yoruba, Creole, Portuguese, English, and Arabic, which symbolically represented the international dimension of the slave trade. The words point to the mortality of life and the violence committed against the bodies of those enslaved. On one of the blocks, we read the inscription “uma vida um corpo,” which epitomizes the installation's overarching mission: each body is a life. In Grada Kilomba's words, *O barco* references “o genocídio, a brutalidade, e a desumanidade” of the slave trade that will forever plague the collective memory of European countries despite their resistance to publicly acknowledge their tragic past and the continuous presence of monuments to the “glories” of their discoveries (Kilomba and Roldão). There is a discourse that, again according to Grada, infantilizes the history of the discoveries, when the prominent narrative pretends that a continent with thousands of inhabitants could be discovered and uses the term “slaves,” which implies an identity rather than an externally imposed condition as the result of human agency (Kilomba and Roldão).

The physical placement of the blocks in an area that extends 32 meters in length was imposing by its size and the contrast created in the museum foreground by the dark burned wood against the white and gray pavements—typical Portuguese sidewalk stones. The darkness of the wood, caused by the burning process, reinforced the image of death. The burning can also be read as a symbol of renewal, of cleansing, an attempt to rewrite this chapter of history. This process began in Berlin, one of Grada's artistic bases.¹⁰ As Grada recounts, the blocks were placed in holes in the ground, then went through a series of very particular steps: fire followed by water and air before the gold ink inscription of the poems. This process was “um trabalho extremamente sensual, extremamente intenso e pessoal” (Kilomba and Roldão). This highly sensorial and tactile experience with the odors of the charred wood, the emanated heat, the inscribing of the letters that were then filled in with gold paint using syringes gave each block its own history and identity. The preparation of the blocks was in and of itself a performative act, a praxis to create essential props in the ship's hold, an important segment of the performance-installation. The preparation of each block became a ritual that can also be

¹⁰ Grada attended the Freie Universität Berlin in 2008 and continues to lecture at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

interpreted as a rising from the dead, a new chapter through which to understand the past and give visibility to lost identities buried by the slave genocide.

Yet the burning of the wood blocks adds another sensorial dimension to the installation: the burning created a lingering smell that revealed “quase uma pele, uma cicatriz, uma ferida,” according to the artist (Kilomba and Roldão). These marks are part of a collective suffering, one shared across continents and eras, but ever present in the ongoing and unresolved memory of the death toll caused by the inhumanity of slavery. *O barco* as an installation goes beyond the physical arrangement of the blocks with their inscriptions that represent the mortality of humankind: it portrays the human tragedy that was the slave trade through choreography, chants, music, percussion, a chorus, and the above-mentioned Portuguese context that can never be considered innocent. As Diana Taylor sums up, “in performance, context is all” (149). Over the past few years, Grada Kilomba has become known for her multidisciplinary work. Typically, as in the case of *O barco*, there is a poetic, written or spoken component, accompanied by music, movement, and symbolic images. In this, *O barco* is emblematic of Grada’s signature work as a transdisciplinary artist.

Focusing on the slave ship, Grada’s installation foregrounds the liminal space of slavery at sea. While the artwork as a whole challenges the erasure of Black bodies within the history of slavery and centralizes the Black experience within this context, the imposing presence of the slave ship captures the transitional moment of enslavement where death, disease, suffering, revolts, and terror were all present. As studies such as Sowande’ Mustakeem’s *Slavery at Sea* discuss, “The ocean was not just where the story of slavery transpired as black bodies were ferried beyond costal ways and into unknown lands, . . . it also became a central conduit for how bondage unfolded and consequentially devastated lives” (5). The importance of the ocean passage, as Mustakeem explains, was itself a “transformative space of history. The Atlantic Ocean was more than just a space; it became an agent that imposed significant impact on people, further bridging the relationship of man and the sea. . . . The Atlantic slave trade serves as the most iconic marker of struggle, oppression, unity, strength, and perseverance in the African Diaspora” (5, 6).

The cargo ship as a central site of slavery in the installation echoes seminal texts that constitute a longstanding focal point of Portuguese diasporic cultural memory. One such text is the nineteenth-century abolitionist poem by Castro

Alves, “Navio negreiro” (1870), an extract of which was beautifully set to music by Caetano Veloso and Maria Bethânia in their 1998 rendition featured on the album *Livros*, the basis for the homonymous Guinness Book of Records performance with over 12,000 presentations worldwide by the actor and director Vado. Another example is the first part of Ana Maria Gonçalves’s voluminous novel, *Um defeito de cor* (2006), whose violent explicit narrative goes far beyond the symbolic nature of the Middle Passage.

Grada’s work adds to this tradition but from a new angle combining an imposing visual installation with performance that represent the violent process of the slaving voyages and bring to a public space the interior, private, seaborne space that was occupied by enslaved people. *O barco* explicitly references the slavery ship hold where captives were submitted to all manner of psychological and physical violence, debasement, hunger, lack of sanitation, darkness and cold, in a climate of terror, faced with the unknown and stripped of all freedoms. Yet Grada’s performance humanizes the slave ship experience, the past suffering, and its ugly scars, through the lyrics of the chants pronounced. As Édouard Glissant writes under the section “The Open Boat” where he discusses the inhumanity of the slave trade as “a debasement more eternal than apocalypse”: “the belly of this boat dissolves you, precipitates you into a nonworld from which you cry out. This boat is a womb, a womb abyss . . . Although you are alone in this suffering, you share in the unknown with others whom you have yet to know” (6). The hold is the death of a former life and the beginning of a new one, but it is a birthing into suffering: “This boat is your womb, a matrix, and yet it expels you. This boat: pregnant with as many dead as living under the sentence of death” (6). The unknown is coupled with a deep sense of never belonging to a home, “never being on the right side of the Atlantic” as Stefano Harney and Fred Moten write. “To have been shipped is to have been moved by others, with others. It is to feel at home with the homeless, at ease with the fugitive, at peace with the pursued, at rest with the ones who consent not to be one” (97).

In their collaborative work, Harney and Moten introduce the term “hapticality” to describe what they define as “the touch of the undercommons, the interiority of sentiment” (98).¹¹ It is the life sphere of feeling, “the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you.” In relation

¹¹ The etymological root of “haptic” in Greek is *haptein*, meaning to take hold of an object, fasten onto, or touch it.

to the slave ship, the final essay of *The Undercommons*, titled “Fantasy in the Hold,” is an attempt to convey the sentiment of the hold that percolates through all levels of modern society: “Thrown together touching each other we were denied all sentiment, denied all the things that were supposed to produce sentiment, family, nation, language, religion, place, home. Though forced to touch and be touched, to sense and be sensed in that space of no space, though refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other” (98). This feeling of unrest is transmuted in our current times. The hold, as discussed by Christina Sharpe, may no longer exist as during the slave trade; it has been reincarnated in contemporary societies as prisons and other structures and institutions that repeat its logics throughout the global Black Diaspora (75). In these conditions, the Black body is marked as less-than-human, the embodiment of terror, instigator of violence, the birthing of disruption, to be condemned by state authorities.

Performing Blackness against the Scopophilic Gaze

Similar to Sharpe’s critical analysis of the hold and the images that extend far beyond that of the slave ship, we can also read *O barco* as denouncing racial injustices, discrimination, police violence, the “holds” of contemporary life in the Portuguese twenty-first century. How telling it is that Grada Kilomba, an internationally recognized artist whose work aims to further the discussion around racism and the toll of slavery in modern societies, was herself the victim of serious irregularities as a candidate to represent in the Portuguese Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2022.¹²

In the performance staged around the installation of *O barco*, the centrality of Black bodies moving freely around the blocks purposely draws attention to the commodification of Black enslaved bodies associated with slave ships, in an act of reversal, an un-doing, and a reclaiming of bodily agency. Through slavery, the enslaved Africans lost control of their own bodies. Trapped within a disorienting world, suicide was one of the outlets to reclaim power over their lives, even by

¹² For an open letter denouncing the “inconsistencies and serious irregularities” of one of the jury members of the Direção Geral das Artes, see “Open Letter. Grada Kilomba and the Venice Biennale 2022,” *C&*, Dec. 21, 2021, <https://contemporaryand.com/magazines/open-letter-grada-kilomba-and-the-venice-biennale-2022/>. Accessed July 16, 2022.

putting an end to it.¹³ Grada Kilomba's performance invites the spectator to reimagine this space that recalls and denounces historical bondage and brings the viewer to contemplate the beautiful, free movement of Black bodies and voices.

The darkness of the wood, the black skin of the performers, their black cloaks and clothes, and black props form a uniform and harmonious visual effect. There is no denying the prominent message of this color palette: Blackness is purposely chosen to boldly confront the colonial past, in unison, and without fear. Black becomes the color of resistance and beauty, a color to move and disturb, to provoke and comfort. Working in the wake but not absorbed by it, Blackness here denounces the past injustices and confronts its colonial legacy still ingrained in contemporary societies. Four percussionists (two men and two women) with their portable drums mark the rhythm of the music. At the forefront of the blocks, the percussionists' music beckons the dancers and other performers who advance through the installation, with slow, solemn, calculated gestures, extending their arms and waving their wing-like props (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Dancers wave their props during the performance of *O barco/The Boat* (Oct. 2022), Somerset House courtyard, London. Image courtesy of the author.

The soloists lead the music with several particularly powerful phrases, repeated by the strong voices of the chorus. The visual and musical arrangements form a collage of symbols that hark back to the inhumanity of slavery and the need to

¹³ For a discussion of suicide and self-sabotage by enslaved women and men, see Mustakeem, ch. 5, "Battered Bodies, Enfeebled Minds," pp. 106–30.

confront the past in the present day. To the accompaniment of the chanting and the percussionists' music, the performers make their way through the wooden blocks: "um esquecimento, uma dor, uma revolução, uma revolução, uma igualdade, uma igualdade, um afeto, humanidade" ["forgetting, pain, revolution, revolution, equality, equality, affection, humanity"] is one of these segments (Kilomba and Roldão). Another sung section points more directly to slavery's inhumanity, with reference to the history of the slave trade, lost lives, and bodies: "uma carga, uma história, uma história, uma peça, uma peça, uma vida, um corpo, um corpo, uma pessoa, um ser . . ." ["a cargo, a story, a story, a piece, a piece, a life, a body, a body, a person, a being . . ."].¹⁴

All the performers and most of the support staff for *O barco*, like Grada Kilomba herself, are Afro-descendants, predominantly from the periphery of Lisbon, representing various generations from a diversity of Portuguese-speaking countries. Grada was adamant on having Black protagonists from the outskirts of Lisbon, to give body and voice to those living at the margins of Portugal's capital city, both geographically and socially. We can also read this choice as a desire for authenticity, the pursuit of which, as E. Patrick Johnson indicates, "is inevitably an emotional and moral one. Many times, these arbiters of authentic blackness have the economic and/or social clout to secure particular attributes of blackness—for example, dreadlocks, vernacular speech, living in a particular part of town, etc.—as the components of the template from which blackness originates" (2). For the creation of this experimental work, Grada proposed and designed the choreography that then took on a life of its own through the embodiment of the dancers and the presence of Black bodies in movement, each dancer bringing to the performance their biographies and the legacy of colonialism. The performers transfer knowledge and evoke images that far surpass the immediacy of the performance, extending a message that exceeds any geopolitical border or historical timeframe. *O barco* can be considered a racial performance in which the presence of Blackness is literally and figuratively center stage, embodying resistance in the face of white colonization inherently present in the depiction of the slave ship. It is a political statement, one that sees Black identities as a necessary means to enable marginalized people to counter their historical

¹⁴ In the October 13 and 14, 2022, performances at the Somerset House, the chants were sung in English.

oppression and hopefully make space for further inclusion of Black bodies in contemporary society.

Slavery as an institution relegated Black enslaved to second-class citizenry. Denouncing this subjugation, *O barco* aims to be generative toward articulating a critique of this human genocide and racial discrimination to create a site for social reflection in view of transformation. The sophistication of the performance, the use of lyrics (in Portuguese and other languages) in the chants and on the blocks, places this enactment out of the reach of a colonial, racist gaze, often construed as “spectacles of primitivism.” As Johnson discusses in dialogue with Patricia Williams, “performance becomes a vehicle through which the Other is seen and not seen There are ways in which blackness exceeds the performative” (8). Johnson continues by arguing that Blackness resides beyond the “colonizer’s scopophilic gaze,” in that it is “also the inexpressible yet undeniable racial experience of black people—the ways in which the ‘living of blackness’ becomes a material way of knowing. In this respect, blackness supercedes or explodes performance in that the modes of representation endemic to performance—the visual and spectacular—are no longer viable registers of racial identification” (8). However, and most pertinent for an installation-performance such as *O barco*, while “blackness offers a way to rethink performance theory by forcing it to ground itself in praxis, especially within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society,” this implies that “performance must also provide a space for meaningful resistance of oppressive systems” (Johnson 9). Grada’s performance blends these distinct axes of representation by anchoring her work in authentic Blackness and charting a direct challenge of a white, patriarchal, colonial society, both past and present.

The presence of Black bodies in movement was an essential part of the performance as imagined by Grada, and not only Black bodies, but a prominence of female Black bodies to rectify the lopsided tendency of history that has privileged white male bodies and symbolically and concretely challenge the lack of representation of Black female subjectivity in Portuguese polity. As Grada states, “são exatamente estas identidades e estes corpos [de mulheres negras] que têm sido sistematicamente invisibilizados das plataformas e dos palcos [...] e que têm de ter visibilidade, e têm essa magia de construir, escrever o futuro” (Kilomba and Roldão). This resonates with Jean-Paul Rocchi’s understanding that the issue with performing Blackness “is not to assert the right body or identity, but to create

a space and time where the black body can appear, disappear, and mutate, echoing the performance's own destiny, oscillating between the real and the phantasmatic" (2). In the case of Grada's performance and installation *O barco*, we can perceive it as a response, perhaps even a psychic need, as Phelan writes, "to rehearse for loss, and especially for death" corresponding to performance as a vehicle for "art as memorial" (*Mourning Sex* 3). The slave ship hold inevitably evokes images of death and loss, both staples of Western theater with its prominence of the incorporeal. In this, we can ask ourselves, along with Phelan, what does performance have to teach us about "the possibilities and perils of summoning the incorporeal" (2)?

The centrality of women in Grada's performance expresses a bold feminist statement as well as a significant decolonial project. Commenting on Tania Modleski's view that "feminist critical writing is simultaneously performative and utopian," Phelan argues that "feminist critical writing is an enactment of belief in a better future; the act of writing brings that future closer" (*Unmarked* 150).¹⁵ Similar to this political, urgent, and activist genre of critical writing, feminist performance-writing and embodiment aims to usher forth a brighter, more equalitarian future. As Grada has clearly stated, the centrality of women in her project is the impetus to bring these female bodies into visibility as subjects of the performance through movement, voice, and music. Or, in Phelan's words, "performance uses the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body" (*Unmarked* 150). Rocchi adds to this concept the fact that the performing body can be viewed as "a pharmakon, that is, a poison and a cure, whose duality applies particularly to marginalized cultural identities" for whom what is at stake "is to channel the variations of their subjectivities through petrified and reductive cultural representations" (12). From this point of view, Grada's *mise-en-scène* of Black female bodies, moving freely around the hold of the reconstructed slave ship, can be read as a counterperformance, escaping stereotyping, silencing, and objectification.

Reversing the "Politics of Erasure"

The audience not only is invited to witness the performance of the dancers, musicians, and singers in Grada's work, but also is able to walk between the

¹⁵ Here Modleski is commenting on Derrida's reading of Austin (in Phelan, *Unmarked* 150).

blocks, read the poem, and physically become part of the experience as co-creators of this revision of history. With the blocks placed at ground level, reading the inscriptions may require the viewer to lean over or crouch down. Performance, as Dwight Conquergood discusses, is “associated with feelings, emotions, and the body,” and the interactive nature of *O barco* enables the audience to experience the exhibit more intensely, as a visceral experience (499).¹⁶ This arrangement purposely creates the possibility of physical discomfort as the public interacts with the space, which should also provoke emotional discomfort as the viewer recalls the associated history as the slave ship re-creation makes its imprint on a new collective imaginary. This interaction, as Taylor has discussed, “precludes a certain kind of distancing and places spectators within its frame, implicating ‘us’ in its ethics and politics” (141). Furthermore, the spectator interaction with and in proximity to the engravings on the wooden blocks breaks down the physical distance and disrupts the traditional voyeurism that has often been present through what Williams referenced as the “one-way gaze of the soberly disengaged” (38). The work can be seen as an invitation to a new journey, one that draws from a raw genocidal past and directly interprets the reality of its inhumanity, and gives presence to the enslaved it erased, through this very open and public forum. The spatial setting of *O barco* is not enclosed, which leaves the installation widely available for anyone interested in seeing it up close. Likewise, during the performances enacted in this space, passersby would stop and listen and watch, some briefly, others lingering longer, some not at all. In this, the installation became a truly ephemeral happening that could be experienced through different levels of involved spectatorship, reflecting how society today experiences this historical past in varying ways. Often, as seen on one of the recordings of the Lisbon performance, those passing through the area, riding on the bike path, or walking by may have been unaware of the event taking place a few meters away. For them, the performance was merely an interruption in their daily activities. Yet the invitation to interact with the installation was there. The space was open on all sides and to all, welcoming the public without any distinction of persons. This reflects the overarching message of the performance, to create a democratic performative space, free of hierarchies.

¹⁶ Conquergood is discussing shamanistic performances in relation to the colonialist constructions of Otherness that emphasize savagery and racism; however, the sensorial nature of performance (in opposition to “scientific reason and rational thought” [499]) is useful beyond that context.

Artworks such as *O barco* are instrumental to bring forth a new awareness of past and present erasures of Black bodies, which Grada refers to as the “política do apagamento” or “politics of erasure” (Kilomba and Roldão). This is not a historical problem limited to and contained within the parameters of a distant slave trade but rather an ongoing, recurring, and ingrained concept of modern societies where contemporary racism is a daily occurrence. As such, works such as Grada’s *O barco* become pressing reminders of how far Western society must still go to remedy its discriminatory racial practices. In Portugal, events such as the racially motivated homicide of the 39-year-old actor Bruno Candé in July 2020 or that of the 21-year-old Cape Verdean student Giovanni Rodrigues in December 2019 are egregious examples of ongoing racism in a society already steeped in a tragic past with which it refuses to reckon.

The international appeal of Grada’s work clearly extends beyond the specific locales where *O barco* has been installed and performed, and is in synchrony with other performative works worldwide that in their own way are likewise participating in this ongoing reckoning with slavery and decolonization through artistic engagement. An emblematic example of this is the interactive augmented reality (AG) sculpture series “Slavery Trails” (2022) by the artist Marcus Brown, whose bright fluorescent pink virtual sculptures represent ghosts of the past that tell the story of slave markets in New Orleans. In Portugal, Grada Kilomba’s work resonates with Welket Bungué’s films of the periphery, most notably *Treino periférico* (2020) and *Calling Cabral* (2022). Grada Kilomba’s works likewise dialogue with Ayrson Heráclito Novato’s 2015 “Sacudimento” series performed on both sides of the Atlantic, at Casa da Torre in Mata de São João, Bahia, and the House of Slaves, on the Island of Gorée (Senegal), as a performative cleansing ritual of two edifices connected to the slave trade. These are just a few examples of the artists whose work spans the Black Atlantic.

What these artworks have in common is the impetus to bring attention to slavery and racial violence in societies that for the most part have preferred to veer away from the discomfort of a past that continues to haunt the present. With a lack of historical markers—in Lisbon there are notoriously few indications of the country’s slave past—these performances and artworks tell a story that needs to be clearly visible to educate, remember, and address a part of history that imperatively should be out in the open, upheld and acknowledged publicly. We must ask ourselves, with Trouillot, “how do we recognize the end of a bottomless silence?”

(30). What is at stake is the representation of the future through a rereading of the past and alternative narratives. We should examine, following Johnson's lead, "[w]hat are the cultural, social, and political consequences of [the embodiment of blackness] in a racist society" such as Portugal (2). As we do so, we are aware that "we are positioned in the knowledge that we are living in the afterlives of slavery, sitting in the room with history, in a lived and undeclared state of emergency" (Sharpe 100). We may be running against the current, upstream, without sufficient structural and institutional support, while all around us the ship hold morphs and takes on different postures and violence multiplies.

The performance-installation *O barco* conjures up the memory of colonialism and the slave trade, all while presenting a critique through which to interrogate this human tragedy. The presence of the Black dancers, percussionists, and powerful voices, at the center of the work, postulate a more inclusive and equalitarian future. The bodies in movement and the accompanying chants and music propose a revision of the past in a present moment, but without erasing the violence of the slave enterprise that will forever haunt the memory of European colonial powers such as Portugal.

O barco can be considered a resistive, subversive, and celebratory performance. It is through such artwork and performances that we can reposition ourselves, tell new stories from new perspectives to create alternative narratives that refuse to be hostages to a silenced past. We can ask ourselves, along with Diana Taylor, "performances may take place, but do they entirely disappear, or do their effects endure?" (10). The entire performance of *O barco* lasts less than an hour, but in Lisbon or at its other destinations worldwide, the blocks remained before and after the performances per se to ephemerally invoke the presence of the performers for the duration of the installation. Grada Kilomba's work is a stark evocation of racism, colonialism, and genocide that resurfaces in contemporary society, past and present, reminding us where we are in relation to where we were, and ultimately seeking change for the future.

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