

## Breaking Canons: Intersectional Feminism and Anti-Racism in the Work of Black Women Artists

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### Abstract:

In this essay, I will argue for the relevance of the visual production of several contemporary black women artists for the shattering of Eurocentric stereotypes and racist and patriarchal narratives, which, as legacies of the colonial and enslaving past, continue to wound the social and psychic lives of non-white people. While envisaging contemporary artistic practice as being in close dialogue with, or located within, other epistemic and cultural practices – such as the disciplinary fields of history and art history, and visual culture at large –, which have produced and reproduced racist discourses and racialized subjectivities for centuries, I will examine the ways in which black women artists break Eurocentric canons and counter racism, patriarchy, capitalism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism from within the specific field of contemporary art, in between theory and practice, and drawing on the invaluable lessons of intersectional feminism. Relevant examples will be works by Grada Kilomba (Portugal, 1968), Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala (Mozambique, 1987), and Keyezua (Angola, 1988). This essay will consider the ethico-political valences of such critiques through contemporary art, while not avoiding the problems that are inherent to the ways in which neo-liberal capitalism and white privilege remain structurally at the heart of numerous artistic institutions.

**Keywords:** intersectional feminism and anti-racism; black women artists; Grada Kilomba; Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala; Keyezua.

### Resumo:

Neste ensaio, argumentarei a favor da relevância da produção visual de várias artistas contemporâneas negras para o quebrar de estereótipos eurocêntricos e de narrativas racistas e

patriarcais, que, enquanto legados do passado colonial e escravizador, continuam a ferir as vidas sociais e psíquicas das pessoas não brancas. Considerando a prática artística contemporânea como estando em diálogo próximo com, ou situada no âmbito de, outras práticas epistêmicas e culturais – como os campos disciplinares da história e da história de arte, e a cultura visual em geral –, que têm produzido e reproduzido discursos racistas e racializado subjetividades desde há séculos, examinarei as formas através das quais artistas negras quebram cânones eurocêntricos e combatem o racismo, o patriarcado, o capitalismo, a homofobia, a transfobia e o capacitismo, a partir do campo específico da arte contemporânea, entre a teoria e a prática, e inspirando-se nas lições valiosas do feminismo interseccional. Exemplos relevantes serão os trabalhos de Grada Kilomba (Portugal, 1968), Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala (Moçambique, 1987) e Keyezua (Angola, 1988). Este ensaio considerará as valências ético-políticas de tais críticas através da arte contemporânea, sem evitar os problemas inerentes às formas pelas quais o capitalismo neoliberal e o privilégio branco permanecem estruturalmente no âmago de inúmeras instituições artísticas.

**Palavras-chave:** feminismo interseccional e anti-racismo; artistas negras; Grada Kilomba; Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala; Keyezua.

## 1.

In this essay, I will argue for the importance of attending to the visual production of several contemporary black women artists for their shattering of Eurocentric stereotypes and racist and patriarchal narratives. While envisaging contemporary artistic practice as being in close dialogue with, or located within, other epistemic and cultural practices – such as the disciplinary fields of history and art history, and visual culture at large –, which have been producing and reproducing racist discourses and racialized subjectivities for centuries, I will examine the ways in which black women artists break Eurocentric canons and counter racism, patriarchy, capitalism, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism from within the specific field of contemporary art, in between theory and practice, and drawing on the invaluable lessons of intersectional feminism. Relevant examples will be works by Grada Kilomba (Portugal, 1968), Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala (Mozambique, 1987), and Keyezua (Angola, 1988). This essay will consider the ethico-political valences of such critiques through contemporary art, while not avoiding the problems that are inherent to the ways in which neo-liberal capitalism and white privilege remain structurally at the heart of so many of the major artistic institutions. Critical thought and action around the notion of abolition (arising from the histories of black resistance rather than white abolitionism) continue to be necessary today, insofar as the wounds of structural, institutional, and everyday racism, as legacies of a long past of enslaving colonialism, remain open in the Global North and South (with contextual



specificities). Such wounds affect non-white people (black, indigenous, Romany, and other racialized communities) in various ways, and racialized women (both cis- and transgender) in particular, due to the intersections of race, class, and gender.

Grada Kilomba reminds us of such enduring legacies from an intersectional feminist perspective, notably in *Plantation Memories*, which took the form of both a publication (2008) and a video installation of staged readings (2015) (Figure 1.) (Kilomba, 2008; Grada Kilomba, 2015a; 2015b; Ferreira de Carvalho, 2017; Rapazote, 2018).<sup>1</sup> The title and subtitle of her book – *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism* – immediately make evident the continuity of the past of the plantation in the present of everyday racism (experienced on the street, at work, in relationships, etc.). The memories and episodes narrated, and elaborated upon by Kilomba, include those of the author herself (whose voice assumes the first person throughout) and of the two black women she interviewed (Kathleen, an African-American, and Alicia, an Afro-German, whose experiences are also recounted in the first person).<sup>2</sup> Thus, Kilomba highlights the ethico-political relevance of personal and subjective testimonies and psychic realities for the production of history and knowledge (against the myths of universality, objectivity, and neutrality) (2008: 24-36). She recalls the vital importance of ancestry to think about the present, namely the diasporic, and imagine the future; and draws attention to the fact that the entangled trauma caused by slavery, colonialism, and racism, as well as many forms of resistance, struggle, and healing have been transmitted through the body and the voice over generations. *Plantation Memories* deals with the processes through which, to this day, black people – in particular, black women – have not only suffered, but also resisted the physical, psychic, and symbolic violence of being made invisible and silenced, by becoming subjects of presence and visibility, speech and writing, history and knowledge. Kilomba's writing memorializes the "improperly buried" collective trauma of the enslaving and colonial past, which continues to erupt and hurt through unacknowledged racism (2008: 146). Memorializing the colonial wound and exposing racism become necessary, therefore, for the black subject's healing and decolonization, and the white subject's recognition and reparation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On black, intersectional, post-, and decolonial feminisms, see, among others, hooks, 2015; Davis, 1983; Hill Collins, 2009; Crenshaw, 1989; Spivak, 1988; 1999; Mama, 1995; Vergès, 2017; 2019.

<sup>2</sup> These are fictive names.

<sup>3</sup> According to Kilomba, the path towards the black subject's healing involves a sequence of ego defence mechanisms: negation, frustration, ambivalence, identification, and decolonization (2008: 153-154). White subjects' ego defence mechanisms are denial, guilt, shame, recognition, and reparation (Kilomba, 2008: 20-22). The latter gained visual presence as dictionary entries in the five-screen video work *The Dictionary* (2017) (Rapazote, 2018).

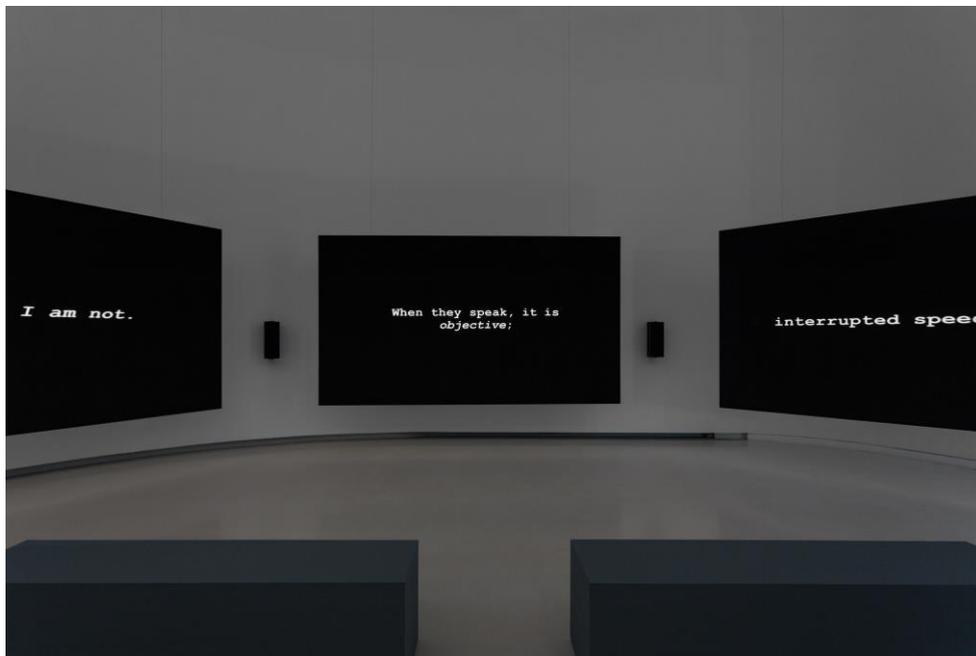


**Figure 1:** Grada Kilomba, *Plantation Memories*, 2015. Installation view, *Grada Kilomba, Secrets to Tell*, MAAT, Lisbon, 2017-2018. Photo: Bruno Lopes. © Grada Kilomba. Courtesy of the artist and MAAT, Lisbon.

Seven years after the book was first published, *Plantation Memories* came to life as a performance of staged readings for video, in which the body and voice of three black female and two black male performers enact Kilomba's, Alicia's, and Kathleen's memories, experiences, and reflections on everyday racism. "Without regret, pity, shame, or guilt", they "expose what has been kept quiet as a secret", i.e. the pervasive violence of racist and sexist stereotypes around the black female and male body and psyche (Grada Kilomba, 2015a). In two screens juxtaposing images of one, a few, and all of the speaking performers, who address the viewer and, at times, one another, one is invited to watch and listen: "When people like me, they say that I'm not black; when they dislike me, they say that it's not because I'm black"; "I hate when people touch my hair, ask me where I'm from"; "She committed suicide; I think she was very lonely"; "I had to be better than all the others, three times, four; black and smart"; "I'm not aggressive; angry, because this is aggressive"; "They're not interested in hearing that I'm from Berlin; rather, they want to hear a very exotic story" (Grada Kilomba, 2015a; 2015b). The inclusion of male actors alongside the female disrupts any essentialist conception of gender and sexuality, whereas the passage from printed to performatively spoken, audible, and visible narration heightens the embodied potency of *Plantation Memories'* words. From Kilomba's experiences, theorizations, and conversations (not only as an



interviewer, but also lecturer and convenor),<sup>4</sup> to her written and printed publication, to the spoken performance for video, *Plantation Memories*' trajectory highlights the importance of oral and performative histories and knowledges, while never doing away with writing and the necessary task of countering the coloniality deeply embedded in both language and its silencing. In fact, besides the transition towards performative video, Kilomba's book also takes a spatial and architectural shape in the installation *Printed Room* (2017), in which *Plantation Memories*' pages cover entirely the walls of gallery spaces. Such pages are previously sent to, read, and annotated by invited collaborators, notably from African and Afro-descendant communities, whose written comments enter into dialogue with Kilomba's writing – a conversation that, accompanied by Moses Leo's sound, must be physically entered by viewers in order to be read.



**Figure 2:** Grada Kilomba, *The Desire Project*, 2015-2016. Installation view, *Grada Kilomba, Secrets to Tell*, MAAT, Lisbon, 2017-2018. Photo: Bruno Lopes. © Grada Kilomba. Courtesy of the artist and MAAT, Lisbon.

<sup>4</sup> Kilomba curated and chaired the artist talk series *Kosmos*<sup>2</sup> at the Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin between 2015 and 2017. The title of her series was critically retrieved from the *Kosmos* lecture series (1827-1828), delivered by Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) at the Singakademie – where the Gorki was later founded (1952) – after his travels to the Americas (1799-1804). The lectures were later published in his five-volume *Kosmos: Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung* (*Cosmos: A Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*) (1845-1862). Kilomba's series sought to problematize such a legacy with decolonial conversations.

A similar decolonial thought and action is discernible in the video, sound, and textual installation *The Desire Project* (2015-2016) (Figure 2.), which is divided into the three acts *While I Walk*, *While I Speak*, and *While I Write*.<sup>5</sup> The three-channel video projection is visually made up of successive written words in white font on black screens, installed in a space which, filled with an immersive drumming sound (composed by Moses Leo), viewers are invited to enter. The three acts unfold simultaneously (each on its own screen), so that viewers may follow them at the same time. In each of these acts, Kilomba's first-person script (I/we) recounts the ways in which the historical coloniality of everyday racism constantly tries to re-objectify black subjectivity, in a continuous restaging of the colonial past; and how the desire for the presence, visibility, and agency contained in walking (into all sorts of spaces, including the dominant),<sup>6</sup> speaking, and writing becomes a decolonizing and healing strategy of resistance. In *While I Walk*, citing Frantz Fanon (2008 [1952; 1967]: 107), Kilomba writes:

“I cannot go to a film/ (...) I wait for me.”/ I wait for the savages,/ the barbarians,/ the servants,/ the prostitutes,/ the whores,/ and the courtesans,/ the criminals,/ murderers,/ and drug dealers./ I wait for *what I am not* (...) *I am not* discriminated against,/ because I am *different*./ I become *different*/ through discrimination (Kilomba, 2008: 18).

In *While I Speak*, one reads about the continuity of “an old colonial order”, “a violent *hierarchy*” that defines, in oppositional, binary terms, who can be a subject of valid speech and knowledge: “They have *facts*,/ we have *opinions*./ They have *knowledges*,/ we have *experiences*”. In both acts, plurals highlight critically the symbolic and psychic violence at work in the homogenizing fixity of racist stereotypes (Bhabha, 1994: 94-120). In *While I Write*, and despite language's entrenched coloniality (“I am embedded in a history of (...) forced idioms”), writing becomes a resistant tool for reclaiming agency for the black (female) subject: “While I write,/ I am not the ‘Other’,/ but the self,/ not the object,/ but the subject (...) I become me” (Grada Kilomba, 2015c).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Despite being *The Desire Project*'s third act, *While I Write* was the first to be made in 2015 (Grada Kilomba, 2015c). As a whole, *The Desire Project* was commissioned by the 32<sup>nd</sup> São Paulo Biennial in 2016 (Volz & Rebouças, 2016; Grada Kilomba, 2016; Ferreira de Carvalho, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Kilomba elaborates on the relevance, difficulties, and dangers of speaking at the centre (where one may finally enter but hardly stay), and a conception of the margin as a space not only of oppression, but also of resistance and possibility (which, however, must not be romanticized) (2008: 24-36). She acknowledges the vital importance of brotherhood and sisterhood (2008: 130-154), a sort of *aquilombamento* (indebted to the *quilombola* tradition of resistance in Brazil).

<sup>7</sup> *The Desire Project*'s script is very indebted to *Plantation Memories* (the book), and *While I Write*, in particular, to Jacob Sam-La Rose's poetry, which Kilomba quotes at the beginning of her book: “Why do I



The accompanying soundtrack evokes historically resistant auditory and performative black knowledges around drumming, found in African cultural, spiritual, and religious practices that survived epistemicide both on the continent and in the plantation economies of the Americas, notably those related to ancestor calling and worship. The initial sound is actually comprised of a multitude of (presumably white) indistinct loud voices (recorded in public spaces), which, at first ignoring the drums' gradual appearance, become silent in order to listen. Indeed, the question is never solely whether the (female) subaltern can speak, in line with Gayatri Spivak's famous interpellation, for she has always spoken and resisted in one way or another (as Spivak concedes, despite her earlier negative reply [1988; 1999]).<sup>8</sup> Rather, the question must be whether her speech is heard or silenced, traced or effaced.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the drumming sound retains a subtle electronic quality, recalling the kinship between older and newer forms of black aural culture, which, in its rich diversity, has become a potent counterculture of modernity (Gilroy, 1993).<sup>10</sup> Whereas in *Plantation Memories* the performing body is visible and spoken words are audible, in *The Desire Project* the performing body becomes audible and written words, visible. Like *Plantation Memories*, *The Desire Project* unveils the deep connection between racism and the history of slavery and colonialism: not only through its written words and performative sounds, but also by paying homage to a speaking and silenced ancestor in *The Mask* (Figure 3.). This is an altar that, placed at the entrance of the video projection, is dedicated to the figure of the enslaved Anastácia.

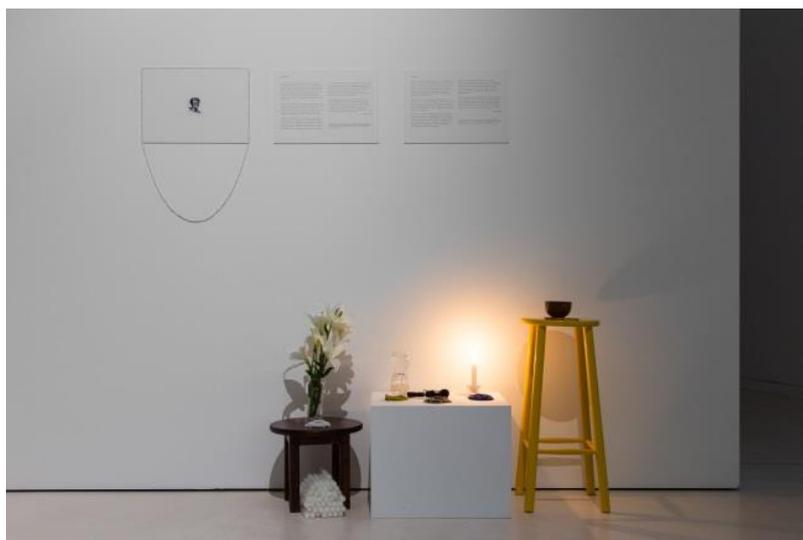
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write?/ 'Cause I have to./ 'Cause my voice,/ in all its dialects,/ has been silent too long" (2008: 10). For the complete acts, see Grada Kilomba, 2016; Ferreira de Carvalho, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Spivak stated: "I was so unnerved by this failure of communication that, in the first version of this text, I wrote, in the accents of passionate lament: the subaltern cannot speak! It was an inadvisable remark. (...) after all, I am able to read Bhubaneswari's case, and therefore she *has* spoken in some way" (1999: 308-309).

<sup>9</sup> Despite Spivak's later clarification, the question remained: "As I have been insisting, Bhubaneswari Bhaduri was not a 'true' subaltern. She was a woman of the middle class (...) What is at stake when we insist that the subaltern speaks?" (1999: 308-309). Kilomba takes Spivak's caution into account: "It is unnecessary to choose between the positions of whether one can speak or not. Spivak, however, warns postcolonial critics against romanticizing the resistant subjects" (2008: 25).

<sup>10</sup> On musical and performative, alongside written and spoken, Black Atlantic culture, see Gilroy, 1993; 2010. In the former, Gilroy elaborates on a (discursive) politics of fulfilment and a (performative) politics of transfiguration as the "sibling dimensions of black sensibility" (1993: 38).



**Figure 3:** Grada Kilomba, *The Mask*, 2017. Installation view, *Grada Kilomba, Secrets to Tell*, MAAT, Lisbon, 2017-2018. Photo: Bruno Lopes. © Grada Kilomba. Courtesy of the artist and MAAT, Lisbon.

It was Kilomba's grandmother who told her about Anastácia's story, urging her granddaughter never to forget it. An enslaved black woman in Brazil, Anastácia was forced to wear a mask over her mouth to silence her emancipatory words (and prevent white listening), having become a symbol of resistance to slavery, colonialism, and racism (in particular, for black women), and a venerated figure in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda religions.<sup>11</sup> Every Friday in the living room of Kilomba's grandmother, they both used to place a lit candle, a white flower, a glass of clean water, and a bowl of fresh, unsweetened coffee next to the image of Anastácia, following Candomblé's worship of the Orixás, in particular, Oxalá. This creolized and resistant

<sup>11</sup> There are different versions of Anastácia's biography, varying namely with regard to her place of birth (Angola, Nigeria or Bahia) and the reason for the mask punishment, which, despite variations, usually includes resistance to rape and other forms of resistance. Although her historical existence is doubtful, she became a revered figure in Afro-Brazilian religions and some catholic shrines, and a symbol for black feminism. Tin masks, iron collars, and other physical and psychic torture devices were commonly used in Brazil to silence, humiliate, and punish enslaved people. According to various accounts, the masks were intended to prevent them from eating food, such as sugar cane and cocoa beans, while working on the plantations, drinking alcohol, and committing suicide by dirt eating, etc. The image that became known as Anastácia's is the lithograph *Châtiment des Esclaves (Punishment of the Enslaved)* (1839) by the French Jacques Étienne Arago (1790-1854), which was first published in the first volume of his *Souvenirs d'un aveugle: Voyage autour du monde (Memories of a Blind: Journey around the World)* (1839-1840), and which derives from a drawing he made during his stays in Brazil (1817-1818; 1820), while travelling as a draftsman for a French so-called scientific expedition (Handler & Steiner, 2006; Handler & Heyes, 2009). For Kilomba's theoretical elaborations on silencing, speaking, and listening around Anastácia's mask, see Kilomba, 2008: 13-22.



black religious tradition is often practiced in ancestor-calling music and dance ceremonies – some of the auditory and performative black knowledges evoked by the drumming sounds of *The Desire Project*. In *The Mask*, Kilomba recreates in gallery and museum settings the Friday domestic altar of her grandmother's living room, making the same offering to Anastácia and inviting the viewers to partake in her homage by lighting their own candle. The altar includes a wall text next to Anastácia's image, recounting the artist's familial memory,<sup>12</sup> as well as the beads and smoking pipe of Candomblé.<sup>13</sup> The re-enactment of the female family ritual, based on this living ancestral knowledge, occurs in the immediate vicinity of the high-tech video projection, whereby material, digital, and spiritual forms of being and knowing become irrevocably enmeshed. Perpetuating the voices of Anastácia and her grandmother through her own (like Kala, who carries her grandmother's name, Zaituna, next to hers) in the structurally white spaces of museums and galleries, Kilomba thus calls for the necessary and urgent white labour of listening, acknowledging, and repairing.

In close relationship with *The Mask*, Kilomba has also exhibited the installation *Table of Goods* (2017), another altar of sorts, made up of raw materials associated with the history of slavery and colonialism – cocoa powder, chocolate, coffee beans, ground coffee, and sugar –, which punctuate a circular mound of vegetal soil, the perimeter of which is, in turn, delineated by wax candles. The installation evokes a memorial, in the form of a burial ground and ceremony, in homage to the enslaved ancestors who perished in the transatlantic crossings and plantation economies, not only of the Americas, but also, for example, in Angola and São Tomé and Príncipe (countries to the diaspora of which the artist belongs).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, despite the legal reforms with which, before the independences (1973-1975),<sup>15</sup> Portugal attempted to silence the growing internal and external pressure and struggle against its colonial empire (which included protests and revolts, the crushing of which ultimately led to the liberation wars in Angola,

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<sup>12</sup> For *The Mask's* wall text, see Ferreira de Carvalho, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Although Candomblé has been a part of Kilomba's life since her childhood, she has spoken about the relevance of her visits to the Candomblé shops of São Paulo's peripheries for the making of *The Mask*, and of the significance of showing *The Desire Project* in Brazil (Grada Kilomba, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> The homage in the form of the proper burial relates to the fact that enslaved ancestors were deprived from it, while evoking the protracted temporality of the collective trauma of slavery and colonialism, restaged in racism: "our history haunts us because it has been improperly buried" (Kilomba, 2008: 146). The use of soil also evokes the dirt eating by means of which enslaved people often committed suicide (Kilomba, 2008; Ferreira de Carvalho, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Mozambique's, Cape Verde's, São Tomé and Príncipe's and Angola's independence occurred in 1975, while Guinea-Bissau's was unilaterally declared by the PAIGC in 1973.

Guinea-Bissau, and Mozambique between 1961 and 1974),<sup>16</sup> forced labour nonetheless remained a common practice until independence in various contexts.<sup>17</sup> São Tomé and Príncipe, in particular, has a complex history of various and successive forms of enslaved labour, named differently after the formal abolition of slavery in the archipelago in 1875, which was largely due to São Tomeans' constant resistance. Henceforth, Portugal resorted to the importation of labour from Cape Verde, Angola, and Mozambique to São Tomé and Príncipe's cocoa and coffee farms or *roças*.<sup>18</sup> Many of these plantations were nationalized after independence and, subsequently, progressively abandoned, but some of them were re-appropriated and their ruined spaces occupied in various ways by former workers and their descendants.<sup>19</sup> As a whole, *Table of Goods* makes explicit the lie of the civilizing mission and of the Enlightenment conception of citizenship by revealing the colonial-capitalist matrix as the real driving force of European modernity.

## 2.

The economic motivation of the colonial and enslaving enterprise is also underlined by Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala (in homage to her grandmother Zaituna) in the black-and-white, silent, and performative video *Measuring Blackness and A Guide to Many Other Industries* (2016) (Figure 4.). Traditionally considered a symbol of white female purity in the West and, via colonialism, beyond it, the white wedding dress becomes a

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<sup>16</sup> Some of these massacres were: Batepá (São Tomé, 1953); Baixa do Cassange (Angola, 1961); Mueda (Mozambique, 1960); Pdjiguiti (Guinea-Bissau, 1959); Wiriamu (Mozambique, 1972), etc. (see, among others, Nascimento Rodrigues, 2018; Cabrita Mateus & Mateus, 2011; Dhada, 2016). The liberation war began in Angola in 1961, in Guinea-Bissau in 1963, and in Mozambique in 1964. It was fought by the MPLA and the FNLA in Angola (subsequently, also by UNITA); by the PAIGC in Guinea Bissau; and by FRELIMO in Mozambique. In São Tomé and Príncipe, the MLSTP was founded in exile in Gabon in 1960.

<sup>17</sup> On forced labour until 1962, see Monteiro, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> After the formal abolition of 1875, enslaved people were replaced by *serviçais*, subsequently called *contratados*. São Tomeans' historical resistance (escapes, hinterland *quilombos*, revolts, etc.) to both slavery and the subsequent forced labour culminated, firstly, in the destruction of many sugar plantations in the sixteenth century and the concomitant decline of sugar production, which was transferred to Brazil and later replaced by cocoa and coffee, and, secondly, in the importation of forced labour (*serviçais* and *contratados*) from Cape Verde, Angola, and Mozambique upon the formal abolition. The surviving former forced labourers, who stayed in the archipelago after independence in 1975, and their descendants comprise contemporary São Tomean society, with the inherited colonial hierarchy that keeps them at the bottom having far from disappeared in the post-colonial period. On this colonial hierarchy and its legacies, see Seibert, 2015. On São Tomean *quilombolas* and their descendants, the Angolares, the 1591 slave revolt led by Amador, and their lusotropicalist denial by the geographer Francisco Tenreiro, see Seibert, 2012. On the continuities between slavery and forced labour, see Bandeira Jerónimo & Monteiro, 2019; Castro Henriques, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> For an architectural history of the *roças*, see Pape & Rebelo de Andrade, 2013.



kind of standard measurement based on which other white materials are weighed upon a set of scales.<sup>20</sup> These are some of the materials associated with the history of the European colonial conquest in Africa (in particular, Mozambique), the enslavement and trafficking of African people across the Indian and Atlantic oceans, slavery and forced labour (which, in the Portuguese empire, including Mozambique, and despite changes in the law, lasted practically until independence in 1975, as stated earlier).<sup>21</sup> This is why the work's title points towards an actual *measurement of blackness* by means of the weighing of white materials. This weighing also hints critically at the ways in which, from enslaving so-called Renaissance and Enlightenment, to colonial and capitalist industrialisation, to post- and neo-colonial global capitalism, whiteness has become a widespread and deep-rooted trope, even as a colour, for what is generally deemed better, superior or more valuable. Hence, next to the wedding dress, and depending on its weight, the artist (here performing as her character *That [BLCK] Dress*)<sup>22</sup> places on the scales some of the African (more specifically, Mozambican) raw materials commercialised by Europeans (in particular, the Portuguese): ivory (which, 'too scarce to be filmed', the artist warns us in words written on a sheet of paper stuck on the wall

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<sup>20</sup> From her own personal history of marriage, separation, and divorce, Kala first examined the use of the white wedding dress in Mozambique in the photographic series *Entre-de-Lado* (2012-2017). Together with *Measuring Blackness* and other elements, an image of this series reappears in the installation *Imagine If Truth Was a Woman... And Why Not?* (2016), to be discussed below. In these works, the wedding dress is Kala's own. *Entre-de-Lado* began as a historical and critical reflection on the introduction of western wedding traditions and dresses into Mozambican cultural practices during the colonial era. In particular, she analysed the impact of the circulation of photographs of the famous wedding of Queen Victoria of England to Prince Albert in 1840 (which was re-enacted for the camera in 1854). Kala presented *Entre-de-Lado (As Queen Victoria)* (2017) in the collective exhibition *Being Her(e)* at the Galeria do Banco Económico, in Luanda, in 2017-2018 (see Balona de Oliveira, 2018; 2019b; 2020b).

<sup>21</sup> On various kinds of forced labour (including contracted) in Mozambique, see O'Laughlin, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Kala's performative persona *That [BLCK] Dress* appears in several works besides *Measuring Blackness*, such as *Telling Time: From Compound to City* (2014) and *Will See You in December... Tomorrow (WSYDT)* (2015). On the latter, see Balona de Oliveira, 2017; 2020b. The former is a performative and conversational piece (with video) that took place twice a day (4am and 1pm) at the Jeppe train station, in Johannesburg. Kala reflected on the apartheid and post-apartheid commuting of black labourers to the city centre. In the early morning, in the absence of any announcement at the station – an apartheid legacy –, she announced the train times. In the afternoon, following a strategy similar to the one she would later use in the Maputo-based performance of *WSYDT*, she offered tea to commuters in exchange for their stories and memories of Johannesburg, whereby they also told of time, past and present. A camera recorded and screened their entering and exiting the conversation.

behind her, is substituted with paper), salt, bone (made from candle wax), coconut, cotton, and plaster powder (used in construction).<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 4:** Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala, *Measuring Blackness and A Guide to Many Other Industries*, 2016. Video still. © Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala. Courtesy of the artist.

Through visual and material presentation and performance, Kala deconstructs the notion of the European civilizing mission.<sup>24</sup> She unveils the intimate relationship, made visually, materially, and performatively explicit, between such purportedly benign civilizational ideals (notably female) and the violence of commodification (*measurement*) and genocide of black lives, and of the cultural epistemicide that accompanied them – a violence that, for black women living under slavery in plantation economies, acquired specific features, especially (although not exclusively) sexual ones, with enduring legacies (hooks, 2015; Davis, 1983). The work's title presents this genocidal *measuring* of *blackness* as a *guide to many other industries*, whereby it underscores the necropolitical racialization (with its particular forms of [un]gendering black women outside of respectable white womanhood) at work in the capitalist and colonial exploitation of black bodies and labour by European modernity and industrial revolution (both before and after the abolitions) – a racialization that, under neo-colonial guises, continues to thrive in the present (Mbembe, 2003; 2001; 2013; 2016; Ferguson, 2006). Kala's critical analysis of whiteness is intensified chromatically by the fact that the entire space in which the performance unfolds is painted white, including the wall on which a map and other visual and textual elements are stuck, the table, the scales on which the

<sup>23</sup> Kala worked purposefully with Mozambican materials: the salt and the wax came from Matola, near Maputo; the cotton, from Nampula, in northern Mozambique; the plaster powder, from a cement site near the Maputo airport.

<sup>24</sup> On the Portuguese so-called civilizing mission between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, see, for instance, Bandeira Jerónimo, 2009.



artist determines the quantity of the raw materials based on the weight of the wedding dress, and the gloves with which she handles them, as if she had decided not to touch them with her bare hands, protecting herself. She thus highlights the blackness of her own body and dress, whilst at the same time signalling, by means of this very emphasis on black as a colour, that race is not only a social construct, but also a powerful one, with very real consequences for racialized subjects, and that racialization occurs both along and beyond purely colourist lines. Indeed, colourism as a preference for lighter skin tones is yet another instance of *measuring blackness* against the so-called standard of a white backdrop.

In Kala's deconstruction of whiteness, the black skin neither internalises, nor allows itself to be made invisible by the white masks, including female ones (Fanon, 2008; Mama, 1995). In line with intersectional feminism, Kala examines how white supremacy, white feminism, and patriarchal anti-racism have denied the specificity of black women's experiences and the multiple forms of discrimination they face (for example, attempts to escape stereotypes of over-sexualisation have often culminated in conceptions of female respectability far stricter for black women) (hooks, 2015; Davis, 1983). In contrast to the whiteness of the wedding dress (and the similarly alienating white blackness of the widow, while also differing from sartorial expectations of Africanness and African femininity associated with the use of the *capulana*),<sup>25</sup> *That [BLCK] Dress* reasserts blackness as an embodied, historically conscious, non-normatively gendered, and performative space of resistance to intersected racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia, and capitalism.

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<sup>25</sup> Beyond the western female character of the bride dressed in white, in the Lisbon-based part of *Sea (E)scapes* (2015-2018) Kala also looked at a related figure, a sort of "post" to the white bride: the old widow dressed in black, evoking namely the impoverished women left behind by the men who departed to the so-called discoveries and the colonial war (the wars of liberation in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau [1961-1974]). The artist sees this elderly woman, associated with oppressive stereotypes of female resignation and permanent mourning, as still prevalent in Portuguese society, notably the poor, rural, and religious. This figure, too, was propagated by the processes of colonization. To this white and patriarchal female sartorial blackness, Kala counter-poses the figure of *That [BLCK] Dress*, the character which she herself performs, and with which the black dress becomes a symbol of resistance to racist, patriarchal, and capitalist whiteness (on *Sea (E)scapes*, see Balona de Oliveira, 2019a; 2020a; on *That [BLCK] Dress*, see Balona de Oliveira 2019b; 2020b). Kala examines the *capulana* in *WSYDT* (see Balona de Oliveira, 2017; 2020b).



**Figure 5:** Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala, *Imagine if Truth was a Woman... And Why Not?*, 2016. Installation view, 12<sup>th</sup> Dakar Biennial, Dakar, 2016. © Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 6:** Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala, *Entre-de-Lado (A Conversation I)*, 2013. From the series *Entre-de-Lado*, 2012-2017. Print on canvas, variable dimensions, variable dimensions. © Eurídice Kala aka Zaituna Kala. Courtesy of the artist.

In the context of its presentation at the 12<sup>th</sup> Dakar Biennial in 2016 (Njami, 2016), *Measuring Blackness* was accompanied by other elements, with which it became a part of the larger installation *Imagine if Truth was a Woman... And Why Not?* (2016) (Figure 5.): text pieces with the written names of the six white materials; *Entre-de-Lado (A Conversation I)* (2013) (Figure 6.), a photographic image extracted from the larger series *Entre-de-Lado* (2012-2017), in which Kala had previously begun her very personal deconstruction of whiteness with her own wedding dress; and a video component, where she examined the patriarchal ways in which women's participation in the African liberation movements and post-independence revolutionary governments has often been silenced. Despite the equalitarian rhetoric and the strong participation of women in all sorts of capacities, including military (alongside the undeniable exclusion from leadership and the attribution of caretaking roles in education and health), the anti-colonial and revolutionary history of building both the nation and the so-called "new man" has often been told, written, drawn, painted, woven, sculpted, performed, sung, photographed, and



filmed “in the masculine”, which has helped canonise anti-colonial male leaders and overlook the role played by women (with very few exceptions, such as Josina Machel in Mozambique; Deolinda Rodrigues, Irene Cohen, Engrácia dos Santos, Teresa Afonso, and Lucrecia Paim in Angola;<sup>26</sup> Titina Silá, Amélia Araújo, and Lilica Boal in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde; and Alda Espírito Santo in São Tomé and Príncipe). In the text-based and silent video diptych *Names and Other Names* (2016), Kala placed a screen, on which a list with the names of the main leaders of the continent's anti-colonial movements and post-independence governments unfolded, *alongside (ao lado de)* another screen, where another series of names was made visible, but here with each name appearing at a time. These were the names of the women involved in those struggles, many of them partners of those men, such as Josina Machel, Janet Mondlane (a white North American), Ginette Eboué, and Pauline Opango, among others. Through this exercise in memory and in opening up the anti-colonial and pan-African archive (both Lusophone and beyond), these women were invited to *enter – de lado*, alongside, next to, on the same footing as the men – *the conversation*.<sup>27</sup>

### 3.

Black women artists have significantly countered racist and patriarchal silencing and stereotypical representation not only in history, including anti-colonial, pan-African, and revolutionary history, but also, importantly, in art history and visual culture. Similarly to the ways in which Kala has examined how certain cultural, material, and sartorial practices (such as the use of the white wedding dress) are inscribed in larger histories marked by capitalist, racist, and patriarchal violence, Keyezua has paid attention to the ways in which racist stereotypes of female beauty have circulated in visual representation: from the Eurocentric conventions of Western art history to those of mass media and popular culture, from advertisement to fashion, from television to film, from the internet to social media.

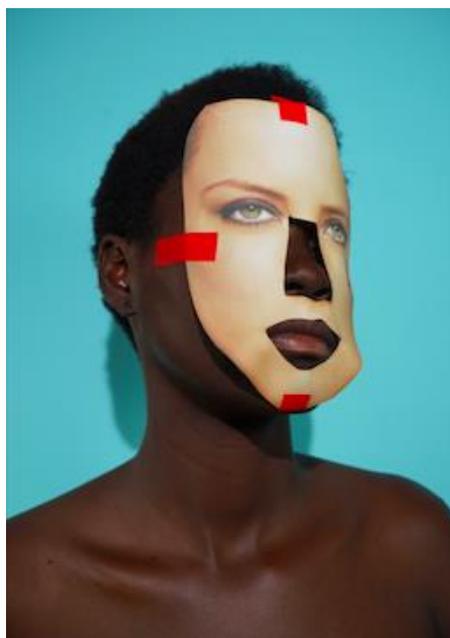
This is most discernible in the photographic series *Afroeucentric Face On* (2016) (Figure 7.), in which the artist reflects critically on and disrupts so-called white standards of female beauty that, alongside the appropriation and commodification of black culture by a white mainstream, remain insidiously pervasive. Having found out about a facial mapping technology developed by a London-based plastic surgeon, according to which famous white women, such as the actress Amber Heard and the reality-TV star Kim

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<sup>26</sup> On the role of women in the liberation struggle and the civil war in Angola, see Paredes, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> For an in-depth analysis of *Imagine if Truth was a Woman... And Why Not?*, see Balona de Oliveira, 2019b; 2020b.

Kardashian, were considered the most beautiful, the artist came up with a photographic and performative strategy to counter such a narrative by mimicking and mocking the plastic surgery face cutting.<sup>28</sup> While, at first, the masks of these white female celebrities completely cover black female faces, in Keyezua's series the black skin progressively emerges through the cutting of the white masks (Fanon, 2008; Mama, 1995). The removed pieces are precisely those that pseudo-medical science has apparently deemed essential for female facial perfection: fine lips and noses, thus eclipsed to make way for black beauty. Like Kala, Keyezua reinforces whiteness visually only to disrupt it more powerfully.



**Figure 7:** Keyezua, *Afroeucentric Face On (Amber 4)*, 2016. From the series *Afroeucentric Face On*, 2016. Giclée print on fine art paper, variable dimensions. © Keyezua. Courtesy of the artist and Movart, Luanda.

Performative investigations for the camera, this time in video, which address the politics of black hair, notably female, are visible in Keyezua's *Beautiful People Know* (2017) (Figure 8.). Like Kilomba in *Plantation Memories* (2015) - "I hate when people touch my hair, ask me where I'm from"; "How do I wash my hair? With water and shampoo!" (Grada Kilomba, 2015b; Kilomba, 2008: 72-79) - and Kala in *Unlike the Other Santas* (2013), where the artist critiques the racism of the Dutch blackface tradition of the *Zwarte Piet* (Black Pete) with her own hair cutting and warrior face painting, appropriating and

<sup>28</sup> On the critical potency of mimicry and mockery, see Bhabha, 1994: 121-131.



disrupting blackface.<sup>29</sup> In her video *Keyezua* examines the violence of stereotypes around black hair and asserts black beauty. She films a black young woman combing and braiding her hair slowly, in a long ritual of hair care that includes sewing book pages of “wisdom and awareness” into her hair (*Keyezua Atelier*, 2017). The hair braiding and page sewing become somewhat ambivalent gestures, both hiding and protecting the natural hair. In fact, braiding and sewing can simultaneously evoke hurt and care, pain and repair. The book pages are sewn only to be crumpled into hair buns and then re-flattened, uncovering and re-covering the braided hair with wise words of awareness. The artist thus addresses the psychic wound arising from the alienating desire for an always frustrated social acceptance by white standards, and the healing opened up by the political awakening contained in words and gestures, both individual and communal. Which wise words are these?



**Figure 8:** Keyezua, *Beautiful People Know*, 2017. Video still. © Keyezua. Courtesy of the artist and Movart, Luanda.

Although the pages are not readable, the soundtrack provides the viewer with audible words. The hair care ritual is reinforced by an audio that Keyezua retrieved from a 1970s TV hair commercial by Afro Sheen (*Retro Black Media*, 2010). The audio accompanies the performer’s slow gestures repeatedly at given intervals, almost as a constant reminder interrupting the otherwise silent images. Its message is comprised of powerful ideas around black natural hair, pride, and unity, conveyed by a male voice that, in turn, is echoed by a male and female choir:<sup>30</sup>

“Beautiful people know true beauty is natural/ wear their naturals proudly/  
as a symbol of pride in blackness/ as a symbol of responsibility to black

<sup>29</sup> Here there is a critical appropriation and reversal of the colonial mimicry and mockery at work in the blackface (Bhabha, 1994: 121-131).

<sup>30</sup> Other Afro Sheen ads had female protagonists.

people/ a responsibility to promote love and unity among black brothers and sisters/ and help establish a new order of freedom and dignity for our people/ and that's the natural truth" (Keyezua Atelier, 2017).

The message reveals how black natural hair has been an ethico-political terrain, among others, for healing and resistance, dis-alienation and anti-racism; and how black hair, whether natural or braided, has become a potent political symbol for black identity. Being performed by a woman, the video highlights the specific condition of black women, while the Afro Sheen audio underscores the importance of black unity, brotherhood, and sisterhood. As a whole, Keyezua's performative video relies on slow gestures and reiterated words that require the viewer to stop and patiently listen.

In *Stone Orgasms* (2015-2016), Keyezua delves into the long tradition of collage, cutting and juxtaposing digitally old archival portraits of women (from several locations) with images of Western classical statues, notably of the self-covering *Venus Pudica*, anatomical depictions of organs and body parts, and images of rocks.<sup>31</sup> The aim is to suggest the extreme shattering of the female body at work in female genital mutilation, and to challenge the patriarchal conceptions of female sexuality that allow for such a practice. By including imagery from Western art history, the artist resists the Eurocentric binarism inherent to Western stereotypes of cultural superiority regarding women, while at the same time interrupting any possibility of directing an ethnographic gaze at the non-Western women.

Finally, in works such as *Fortia* (2017) (Figure 9.), and from her own painful experience of losing her disabled father at a young age, Keyezua addresses issues of physical disability by portraying a majestic black woman wearing ritual masks, which, designed by the artist, were handmade with recycled materials in collaboration with a group of disabled artisans. Physical and psychic disability affects many in Angola (a country that lived through centuries of colonialism and many decades of war, with the liberation struggle in 1961-1974 and the civil war in 1975-2002): men and women who all too often have been forgotten and neglected by those in power and marginalized by society. In both process and form, Keyezua opposes dignity to common perceptions of pity. The juxtaposition of the varyingly shaped masks (designed with African motifs) and the regal red gown or skirt on the black female body posing in several landscapes (some arid, others watery) also touches on the intricacies of the artist's own identity between Africa and Europe, Angola and Holland, where she lived; and, more generally, on colonial and post-colonial histories. While deeply personal and ritualistic, something the viewer

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<sup>31</sup> Although archival portraits predominate, *Stone Orgasms (Lola 5)* (2015) was produced from Keyezua's own portrait.



progressively learns by looking carefully at the images and by reading the accompanying text, the series remains poetically open to broader readings on black female and male beauty and strength, and to non-normative conceptions of gender and sexuality.



**Figure 9:** Keyezua, *Fortia* (11), 2017. From the series *Fortia*, 2017. Giclée print on diasec mount, 118.9 x 84.5 cm. © Keyezua. Courtesy of the artist and Movart, Luanda.

Importantly, Kilomba's, Kala's, and Keyezua's works have circulated widely in the global North and South. Insofar as contemporary art remains an elitist arena, institutionally driven by neo-liberal practices and white privilege, their works (alongside those of their female and male black peers) contribute decisively to breaking the enduring force of racist and patriarchal canons in history, art history, visual culture, and the society at large. However, although entering the institution in order to undermine its canonizing power is most urgent and necessary, while its modes of production remain unchallenged, such a move is only a step of a much wider, systemic struggle.

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