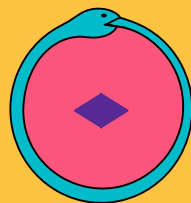
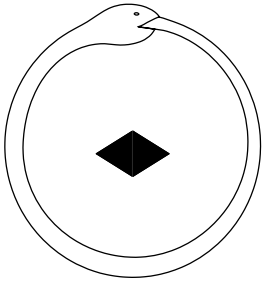


A SCHOOL TO COME
Thelma Vilas Boas



notebooks
SELVAGEM



A SCHOOL TO COME

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Talk presented by Thelma Vilas Boas

at the in-person Selvagem Cycle, on May 14th 2022,

O beijo do beija-flor [The kiss of the Hummingbird],

hosted at MAM Rio.

Well, my school kidnapped much of my orality, so maybe it's the school of many of you. But first of all, good morning.

I ask for the elders' blessings
And permission of those who came before.
I also ask for the blessing of the younger ones.
I speak for the children who entered Lanchonete¹ once,
many times, a few days,
those that have already gone,
those that are yet to come,
and whose names we don't even know.
African kings and queens
forcibly crossed the Atlantic Passage until here.
And it's because they gave me their hand
that I am here today.
Thank you so much,
thank you, children.

1. Lanchonete <> Lanchonete (L<>L) is a non-profit cultural association in Gamboa, Rio de Janeiro. Existing since 2016, its mission is to support the healthy development of the first childhood, adolescence and of the women occupying the region — which was historically subjected to the violence of racism and poverty. Source: website: <https://www.lanchonetelanchonete.com/nosso-rol>

In their names, I'd like to share with you what I know, which is little, but I ask permission to tell a few stories that helped us give life to a school permeated by racism. Because faced with the horror it is necessary to think about my whiteness and about colonization. I've got to say that it is a great honor to be sitting next to Ailton Krenak, Muniz Sodré and Luiz Rufino, Cristine, Dofono and all sisters and brothers. Your blessing, please. Thanks a lot to Anna Dantes for the invitation. And also to all companion species that are here, internalized in me, incarnated in me, because I am not alone here today.

And to speak in front of so many people gives me butterflies in the stomach so I made a script in order to not get lost in the words.

I speak to you from my experience with many other lives in a journey that takes place in *Little África*², since 2016, in the neighborhood of Gamboa, downtown Rio de Janeiro, baptized Lanchonete <> Lanchonete and which collectively develops a schooling program called Escola Por Vir [A School to Come]. A school which we want to come and that never stops coming. Even though within a collective journey, I recognize that I am speaking here from a white woman's place. And being white, regardless of my social class, I've obtained privileges granted by 500 years of active political processes of dehumanization of native and black peoples, which allowed my social and economic movement in society. The position of whiteness is one of advantage, because we live in a society structured by racism.

I also speak from the standpoint of an artist embarrassed with the physical and conceptual limits of contemporary arts and its weak positioning against the capital it accesses. It is not possible to break paradigms if we keep benefitting from them. When I arrived in Gamboa, I arrived as an artist, but open to learning what that place had to say, and it changed me completely, and my practice as well.

I speak in particular in defense of *Little África's* childhoods, strongly assaulted by the capital, including from the arts, that doesn't take on its "responsibility of creating new configurations of power, maintaining a cycle of a society that lives in denial, with a glorious and romantic

2. In portuguese: *Pequena África*. Name of a region of Rio de Janeiro City, the remaining community from the maroon villages Pedra do Sal and Santo Cristo.

discourse of the colonial past, with very strong and patriarchal accents, which takes the identities' subjectivities and reduces them to an existence of an object represented by the dominant"³.

There is no doubt that History is ideological; told this way and not that, so that we learn that "it has always been this way". But since I understood that I had been co-opted by a single story, the story that says "Show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become."⁴, I decided to ask myself: what is it that we haven't learnt for the world to be the way it is? And we haven't learned our story the way it really happened.

So here comes the first story. When I left aside the classic devices of art exhibition, I turned to what I knew to tell properly, with property, and where I felt whole: the kitchen. And all the memories of being beside the ladies of my life, cooking, embroidering, lighting the fire, while it was possible to be a child, even if under a table. Sometimes I think that it's as if I had crossed a wormhole and could verify a great nostalgia of the Big Bang, which sleeps in all of our atoms and in all of our molecules, the nostalgic memory of expansion and contraction, of pollination of that immense cosmic force wanting itself around warmth, which expands and then gathers and approaches. I think this is why we feel so attracted to the fire, and to the power of cooking, which breaks into pieces what is still a whole. Around the stoves lives our first school, with the table, the commensality, as a place of psychological relaxation, proper of chats, at the table of the cafés, bars, grandmas' houses, where you feel comfortable to elaborate and speak your mind, without fear, because no one is really giving true attention or value, and there won't be any kind of judgment. It's there, where the power of telling stories that you know so very well, happens. So calling it "Lanchonete" [Snack Bar] was to announce a place that doesn't summon any a priori knowledge except from existing, so well known to all people, a kitchen-school that respects the hungry body and feeds for emancipation and freedom.

3. Translated back to English. Reference in Portuguese: FANON, Frantz. *Escritos Políticos*. São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 2021.

4. Chimamanda Adichie: The danger of a single story. TED, 2009. available in: https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/no-comments . Last access: April 12, 2023.

Well, let's move to the story. Once, I brought carrots planted in a pot to Lanchonete. And after I asked several times, wanting to surprise them: "Imagine what's under these leaves". They guessed weird things, but never guessed that it was a carrot. Not even a potato or an onion. I stamped my foot on the ground and asked: "What do you think there is under this soil?!" And Pedrinho replied: "A cemetery." That 's it. In Gambia lie millions of bodies of children and young black people, trafficked by force from Africa, and who were thrown into a tremendous landfill, with no possibility to ritualize their passing. Therefore this is a transgenerational debt, because the trauma is passed down through generations. Recognizing the past and present mistakes made by colonization and participating in the reparation is done through political, social, religious, moral, anthropological, legal perspectives, but the revolution starts here [points to the heart], it starts inside me, inside of people. Toni Cade Bambara, an african-american activist says "we better save time to make our interiors revolutionary, our lives revolutionary, our relationships revolutionary". This is how a lot of schools could happen, and this is how the Lanchonete happened, from a decision, from action and through time it has been built with so many people, as an ecological, political and human irradiation, on ancestral territory, here in the city of Rio de Janeiro, here in Brasil. And it has been perceived as a web of many companion species, my beloved Ailton, who teaches me so much. Yes, many companion species, spiritual ones, local ones, and also from elsewhere. It has been perceived by the enchanted, all of them wishing to initiate a new holistic cycle of regeneration and against hegemony, in the world.

Today we're almost 40 allies/associates with over 50 children, their families and their community. So I tell the second story. The Lanchonete left a space that was a garage and went to the *Bar Dellas*, well known nowadays, which is a building occupied by homeless families: there are families upstairs and the bar is downstairs. At a certain point I decided we should take this tension on our purposes further. So we moved inside the Bar Dellas. In the evening, carrying things that Lanchonete had in a cart, because in fact there are children at the Lanchonete, embodied lives, but there were typewriters and some other things. I arrived at Bar Dellas and Samuel, 5 years old, came to tell me quickly that Edu wouldn't come to

Lanchonete anymore because now it is there, in that bar, now he has to go to another church. And I said: “But, Samuel, Lanchonete is not a church.” And he said “kind of, right?” Samuel was telling me that what we do, what we did — receiving, listening, hearing, an active hearing, perceiving problems and needs — is what a church does. But that is what the 40 year fundamentalist project has been doing, planting cells, with the difference that they have an agenda for power. We know about the evangelical caucus⁵. But what about us the artists? With our atelier, locked in personal projects, to attend biennials, galleries, museums, collectors etc. What were we doing with our ‘living school’ inside us? Considering that a lot of us here went to public schools and public universities. I’d also like to think about myself, about what I heard while at the university, orienting me toward career planning, but never told me to “give back to the public what the public gave you”. So we get out of university, build our studios, spread cells of possible schools of the entire world and lock the door. The fundamentalist project didn’t do that.

That is why it’s important to say that Lanchonete gives back to the world what it received. It is public, free, open, where kids arrive and leave when it is possible for them, where they find a large roof that ensures their rights and talks about it with them: about constitutional rights. This is also being a living school in the city! There is lunch, water, a shower, affection, respect, quality toys, living together, and many things that a childhood tired by not dwelling, by suffering daily in the flesh what it is to be made invisible by the white world project. There, the child appears: it is, feels, exists, and we talk about its rights and create public demands.

So, I’ll go back to Lanchonete tomorrow and tell Samuel that we know we are not alone. I just take a look around, meet people, you, and we know we’re building intelligences and gathering social technology that must be tapped into by public policies.

The forms and appearances of Lanchonete get into conversation beings that differ in perspective and in ontologic domains. This contributes to the community, neighbors, institutional health and education

5. Group of brazilian congressmen that are or defend the same schedules as evangelicals.

networks of the territory, validates the pluriversity of ways of being and appearing in the world, promoting changes so that black children may occupy spaces of decision and power soon, neutralizing the maneuvers of the capital of exclusion of non-white people.

We are a pluriverse of possibilities within ourselves. This way the Escola Por Vir participates in the affirmation of non-hegemonic worlds at the same time as it modifies its way of being and opens itself to a new form of school. Our question, all the time, is: what school does the world need? But when we say “school”, it’s the school that lives inside me, inside you, inside each one of us. But what school is this? I came here to this meeting to find the school that was not there, rather, my school just reproduced all the colonial concepts and logic. Because there we learn and teach not to be racist, and this education has to begin at an early age, so that this internalization can guide our behavior and it can indeed be a school for everyone, but for everyone alive.

Now that we are all adults, we are the ones who take care of the *erês*, and we don’t acknowledge this responsibility. As Ailton said, if we are in a ship, we are in charge of this ship, we’re the pilots. What do we say to these *erês*⁶?

The Lanchonete didn’t emerge vertically, it is contextual, it is not the odd one out, and it is built with the community and it is not an ephemeral body either. It accepts itself as unstable, because it perceives and absorbs the world, filters its most precious forms to be modified by them and to prolong its being there, in Gamboa, in *Little Africa*, on the ocean of instability which is life in an impoverished territory. It dribbles the lack of financial resources with insistence, persistence and it recognizes the immense symbolic capital it is. It sees its world falling down and slipping, but then it insinuates itself again. Every day.

It is as if we changed the tire with the car moving, but in spiralled and ascending movements of subjectivities, healing ourselves, potentializing, affecting the social fabric, and this way, spinning and circling, improving the subjectivities, improving the fabric, and so on. But all of this has to be in the lifetime of a child, a child who has a name, whom we know, whom you know, whom you know to exist. So it is not early

6. The *erês* are the kids in Umbanda and Candomblé — the two main Afro-American religions in Brazil: manifestations of childlike entities.

or late, it is time. It is time for each one of us to recognize ourselves as living school.

The Escola Por Vir has sprouted in unison with the kids of *Little Africa*. They were leaving school and saw me there by the door, sitting with a blackboard, saying “Come, sit down, let’s talk about the world.” And they would ask me what that place was, with an auntie sitting around, waiting, with nothing to do. But it was only about being available to others. And then, they were the ones who decided that it would be the school for the children there. Then their mothers, sisters, aunts and grandmas came. Now the time has come to open the space for the men of the community, because the Lanchonete opens itself to everything in the world that surrounds the life of the Gamboa children.

Meeting someone or something also happens in the inside, and these encounters create an action-movement where choices are possible, denied paths are treaded and the colonial consciousness develops. And there is no way it won’t develop. The Lanchonete affects different social groups and summons the whiteness to debate, even if we’re still learning, but we can’t conceive this school without it.

So here comes the third story. One day, Raiane asked me “Thelma, are you rich?” and I, looking and imagining which were the codes in my body that announced this to her, asked: “Why do you say that, Raiane?”, and she said: “Because you’re healthy, because you never get sick.”

In a concrete way, the Escola Por Vir trusts in the plasticity of art to organize in unison with the community, in the african dimension of its existence, circumstances so that the world literacy, the attention to mental health, the recognition of local leaders, the commensality, have impact on raciality, class, gender, sex, lgbtqia+ orientation, religious prejudice etc, and also on experiences in the artistic field.

And for this dialogue to happen in the afro-centered and pan-Africanist perspective, transiting through the values, the habits, beliefs, and through the way of being in the Black-African world, there is the ancestral issue as an aesthetic resource. Once, there at the Lanchonete, we distributed 20 cans of foam spray to the kids, who used the opportunity of a passing tram: they ran and rushed forward with their arms stretched, so it crossed the square with little foam stripes and left. Many

adults came to me asking me to take care of the children, because that was a risk. It was very hard for the white people to understand that it is the maroon village Pedra do Sal there, those children run free, they are at home. The city, the maroon village, Little África is their home. And I answered: “Please, you too take care of them, these are our children, they are everyone’s children.” And after many times that the tram passed, and everybody announcing that a little leg would be cut, a little arm would be lost, and me knowing how very sagacious those children are there, I came close and said: “Kids, we had better stop.” Even because the police, when they pass there, violently reprehend the black children. And one of them said to me: “It’s okay, Thelma, if the police pass I’ll tell them it’s art.”

The story is beautiful, but Cauã didn’t perceive it this way. He was with us for years to realize that his black, depreciated body could also be the body of an artist. But still a black body. And having the ancestral issue as an aesthetic resource, once that ancestrality is the basis for experience of the rescue of tradition of black-African cultures, in the practical life of Lanchonete we trust in the memory of our older masters, who are closer to becoming ancestors and to comprehending the facts of the visible and invisible world, in the person of Master Graúna, who teaches *capoeira*⁷, Master Antônio, who teaches us the history of the territory, and who secure the survival of other discourses and other truths.

To strengthen our ways of being and appearing, we choose the weapons of Saint George against inequality and social injustice, and the weapons of George are autonomy, emancipation, physical, mental and spiritual health, literacy, income generation, access to quality education and to universities, and mainly the right to decide on ourselves and on our right to live.

To think about schools with you, here, and from where you and I exist in Brazil, is to understand that anti-colonialism cannot be reduced to a declaration, it must be an anti-colonialism of fight and not a branch of our consciousness. Because, as Robin Diangelo says: “My adult

7. Capoeira is a cultural activity originating from enslaved Africans brought to Brazil. It puts music, movement and ancestrality in relation, and can be practiced as a martial art or a game.

consciousness is anti-racist, but my structure is profoundly racist and denying this only serves to protect that structure”⁸.

It’s not possible to be truly human if we don’t feel deep down inside the unspeakable drama of a child without its right to life because it is not white, permitting the narcissistic pact⁹ of white privilege to continue to triumph.

Thank You.

8. Reference in Portuguese: DIANGELO, Robyn. *Branquitude: Racismo e Antirracismo*. In: *Cadernos Ibirapitanga: O branco na luta antirracista: limites e possibilidades*, 2020.

9. Reference in Portuguese: BENTO, Cida. *O pacto da branquitude*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2022.

Photographer with a master in Pedagogy in Visual Arts at Escola de Belas Artes in Rio de Janeiro, Thelma post-graduated in Documentary Cinema at FGV. Since she moved to Rio de Janeiro in 2012, she has been participating in independent places such as Residência Artística CAPACETE RJ with LA BOCA_2015 project, and the SARACVRA (RJ) space with the Lanchonete <> Lanchonete_2017. She was invited by the UFF Arts School to teach for 6 months, where she proposed a discipline named *Práticas Artísticas para Além do Dispositivo Clássico* [Artistic Practices Beyond the Classic Device]. In 2019 she participated in the artistic residence Casa do Povo: an institution of the common with the work DESLOCAR É PRECISO activating the communication between Casa do Povo, Ocupação 9 de Julho and adjacent squats to L<>L. Thelma plus 6 children from *Little África* traveled by bus to SP, lodged at Ocupação 9 de Julho and lived the experience of the artistic residence together. She contributes as an invited artist in the course DESILHA na CIDADE at the Post Graduate Program in Visual Arts at EBA - Rio de Janeiro. Currently she is president of the Cultural Association Lanchonete <> Lanchonete, manager of the programs developed there, acting in the field of art and coordinating with all the Lanchonete family the pedagogic and artistic practices of ESCOLA POR VIR.

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