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**“ALLOW ME TO SPEAK, NOT MY SCARS”:  
Anti-racist pedagogies and theater education in pandemic times**


“PERMITA QUE EU FALE, NÃO AS MINHAS CICATRIZES”:  
pedagogias antirracistas e ensino de teatro em tempos de pandemia

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**“Allow me to speak, not my scars”:**

**Anti-racist pedagogies and theater education in pandemic times**

**Abstract:** This article is an account of pedagogical practices developed for theater teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was qualitative study based on bibliographic and documentary data, which proposed the elaboration of a critical-reflective report that aimed to share the difficulties and challenges related to theater education in 2020.

**Keywords:** education; theater teaching; distance learning; pandemic; anti-racism.

**“Permita que eu fale, não as minhas cicatrizes”:**

**pedagogias antirracistas e ensino de teatro em tempos de pandemia**

**Resumo:** Este artigo é um relato de práticas pedagógicas desenvolvidas para o ensino de teatro durante a pandemia da doença Covid-19. Metodologicamente, realizou-se uma pesquisa de caráter qualitativo, baseada em dados bibliográficos e documentais, e propôs-se a elaboração de um relato crítico-reflexivo por meio do qual se compartilha as dificuldades e os desafios relacionados ao ensino de teatro no ano de 2020.

**Palavras-chaves:** educação; ensino de teatro; ensino remoto; pandemia; antirracismo.



## **1 Introduction**

This article is a critical-reflective account of the pedagogical practices developed for theater education during the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic, which causes COVID-19 disease; its origin was associated with contact between possibly contaminated wild animals and humans in Wuhan, China, in 2019. The field of investigation was the Dr. Pompeu Sarmiento Municipal School, located in Maceió, Alagoas. We sought to observe the difficulties and challenges related to teaching theater in a virtual environment, specifically in 2020, based on teaching experience with students enrolled in Elementary School.

As we know, on April 17, 2020, the Municipal Department of Education of Maceió (SEMED) instructed the entire Municipal Public Education Network, including all SEMED boards, coordinators and Teaching Units to adopt remote work, following ordinance 069/2020 Maceió/AL. The determination was part of preventive social isolation measures against the spread of coronavirus due to the announcement of the pandemic. The measure of social isolation during the health crisis complied with: the Declaration of a Public Health Emergency of International Concern issued by the World Health Organization (WHO) on January 30, 2020; Normative Instruction no. 19 of March 12, 2020 of the Secretary of Personnel Management and Performance; recommendations issued by the Brazilian Ministry of Health on March 13, 2020 and guidelines of Presidential Decree no. 10,282 of March 20, 2020 (SECRETARIA, 2020).

Ordinance 069/2020 Maceió/AL considered: items I and IX, of art. 3, Federal Law no. 9,394/1996, which establishes the Laws of Guidelines and Bases of National Education; Federal Law no. 13,979, of February 6, 2020, published in the Official Gazette of the Union (DOU), on February 7, 2020, which establishes measures to address the public emergence of international importance; Federal Decree no. 9,057, of May 25, 2017, which regulates art. 80 of Federal Law no. 8,864, of April 6, 2020, which establishes extension of measures to address public health emergencies of international importance resulting from coronavirus within the scope of Maceió, and provides for other measures; Provisional Measure no. 934/2020, which establishes exceptional rules on the academic year of basic and higher education resulting from the measures to address the public health emergency situation considering Law no. 13,979, of February 6, 2020; Ordinance no. 030, of January 23, 2020, which establishes organization of the 2020 School Year of the municipal education network of Maceió; Technical Note no. 03, of March 18, 2020, of the Education Defense Center of the Public Prosecutor's Office of the State of Alagoas (CAOP); the Note of Clarification, of March 18, 2020, of the National Council of Education; the Public Note - Use of Distance Education (EAD), of March 30, 2020, from the National Union of Municipal Education Directors; the Technical Note, of April 1, 2020, from the Union of Municipal Education Directors (UNDIME-AL) (SECRETARIA, 2020).



Remote teaching thus became an integral part of public policies, working as, on the one hand, a significant alternative for educational processes in the context of the pandemic and, on the other, highlighting the difficulties faced by teachers and students to maintain school activities. Hence, what we found is that the exceptionality of the pandemic context was marked by gaps established between the normative requirements and the resources made available to school communities.

The lack of adequate support from the State in guaranteeing quality education resulted in exclusion, aggravating the social, racial and economic inequalities that mark the Brazilian education system, but also gave rise to a set of professional efforts aimed at ensuring the continuity of educational processes. Such efforts led us to the following question: what strategies can be developed for remote theater education that go back to the elaboration of anti-racist school practices and promote ethnic identification and acceptance of students' knowledge? Therefore, this article results from the effort to respond, based on dialogues with normative guidelines and the elaboration of pedagogical proposals, to this concern.

We propose, specifically, an account of the pedagogical practices developed for theater teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, we carried out a qualitative investigation, based on bibliographic, documentary and empirical data, elaborating a critical-reflective report through which we intend to share the difficulties, challenges and reverberations related to theater education in the year 2020.

## **2 On violence and inequality in the educational field**

Immediately, we emphasize that the normative guidelines and legal instruments were not accompanied by a minimum and necessary support regarding the equipping of teachers, knowledge of information and communication technologies for the development of teaching activities and access to the internet. Over the months, and faced with urgent professional demands, education professionals received numerous pedagogical training courses on remote teaching, hybrid teaching and use of information and communication technologies. However, contrary to the teaching reality that was then occupied by a workload with excess conferences, continuing education, courses, webinars, live streams and pedagogical meetings, the student body of schools in Maceió did not have any type of instrumentalization for the use of technological resources and supports.

In addition, it is worth emphasizing that all resources for the ongoing use of this new dimension of work were personal belongings of the teaching professionals. Ordinance 069/2020 indicated that public workers in under remote work should remain available for access via internet, telephone and other communication mechanisms, in their functional home, during



the workload indicated in the employment contract. Ergo, educators were subjected to services composed of numerous obligations, without being provided with the proper resources by the state of Alagoas; as well as students who, despite depending directly on their guardians or the State, did not receive any type of technological support to carry out their educational activities in remote teaching.

As a result, we observed, on the one hand, an overload of teaching work, as educators began to live with the demand for computerization of all services that involve pedagogical activity—such as preparation and sending of monthly reports and plans, through an electronic address, which often exceeded the weekly workload—and, on the other, we identified an abandonment of training processes of students and guardians for the teaching-learning processes developed in virtual environments.

Public representatives made promises that tablet computers and SIM cards with internet access would be delivered for the school community, in addition to making a commitment to the uninterrupted distribution of meals to students. Unfortunately, these projects did not come to fruition, which led to a resurgence of hunger in school communities and a profound worsening of issues linked to educational inequalities.

Therefore, if, at first, we tried to carry out theater classes synchronously and simultaneously, we soon realized that, due to multiple realities found among our students, it was not feasible to guarantee the continuity of this proposal. We understood that the students of the initial Elementary School grades at the Dr. Pompeu Sarmiento Municipal School, aged between 6 and 11 years old, in addition to suffering from social inequalities, were mostly dependent on their guardians for internet access and monitoring of activities.

We observed that a large part of the student body did not own laptops, desktop computers, tablet computers nor cell phones or internet access, using their fathers', mothers' or other family members' cell phones in the vast majority of cases. The use of these devices, however, was dependent on situations that made remote activities unfeasible synchronously. In some cases, the guardians and owners of telephone devices had to leave for work and took their cell phones with them, conditioning the students to perform their tasks only at night. In addition, we verified the existence of families that had only one cell phone with mobile data for the use of two to three students enrolled in the school, and cases in which access to the internet was non-existent.

Thus, from the first pedagogical meetings with the students' guardians, we made a commitment to apply teaching activities through a digital platform common to the vast majority of the local population: Whatsapp. The challenge of teaching theater without face-to-face contact persisted throughout the pedagogical process; however, we created possible strategies for contact and multimedia approximation. To reduce the difficulty of accessing the internet, we chose to offer the syllabus asynchronously. Group chats were created in WhatsApp, where recorded classes were posted and accessed by students, as well as answered at different times of the day. According to the



lists of attendance and admission times, approximately 35% of the student body responded almost instantly to the activities, 20% of the students delivered the activities at night, 15% fluctuated in participation and 30% had permanent absence in the network.

Despite these efforts, we realized that students from peripheral regions, the majority being Black, from single-parent families or with individuals who needed to work, unable to maintain home isolation, presented the greatest difficulties in the continuous use of the digital platform to access online classes, often finding themselves on the margins of the educational process compared to other students with more favorable family conditions.

These students lost the pleasure of studying and were violated in a destructive way by the lack of support from the State, suffering a colonial violence that has even hindered perceptions and reflections on inequalities in the teaching-learning processes and on the racist and classist functioning of educational institutions and social structures. What Veiga (2019) calls the "diaspora effect," the feeling of not being integrated into the modes of knowledge production, of not perceiving oneself as belonging to the environment in which one lives, and of not being included in social dynamics in a position equal to that of other community members. An effect caused by policies contrary to the Black or Indigenous, peripheral and poor populations.

Therefore, aiming to ensure continuity in the educational processes of these students, we asked ourselves what strategies could be developed for remote theater education that would foster anti-racist school practices and promote ethnic identification and acceptance of their knowledge. We started from the hypothesis that storytelling based on Afrodiasporic narratives could be established as a fundamentally significant methodological teaching resource by provoking associations between narrated and lived realities, bringing students closer to sensitive issues linked to the existence of Black bodies, social and ethnic-racial inequality. After all, according to Hartmann and Silva (2019), storytelling is a quite common practice in Brazilian schools, especially in Childhood Education and in the early years of Elementary School, whose performative action allows the emergence of new poetics in educational processes.

Therefore, we chose to use Afrodiasporic-based storytelling as a teaching-learning tool. We developed an Afro-referenced project with the classes, entitled "Dandarinha – Zumbizinho," launched in 2020, which aimed to stimulate identity recognition of students over the course of storytelling based on Afro-Alagoas oral tradition. In addition, we started video-telling of the tradition *Mané do Rosário*<sup>1</sup> and *Maracatu Nação A Corte de Alagoas*<sup>2</sup>, organizing learning devices

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1 According to Silva (2013), *Mané do Rosário* is an authentic cultural manifestation of Poxim (Coruripe, Alagoas/Brazil). The revelry, since its origin, has been traditionally celebrated in the streets of the village during the religious festivities commemorating the Catholic patron saint Saint Joseph. Closely related to the religious environment, the manifestation would have arisen spontaneously from the moment a man, known as Mané, fulfilled a vow. He would have left his residence and headed to the church dancing with rosaries hanging around his neck, which explains the name "Mané do Rosário." In addition, there are many other stories about the origin of the popular revelry.

2 In the monograph entitled "A reinvenção do Maracatu em Alagoas no século XXI," Lima (2011) explains through the testimony of Pai Elias, the spiritual responsible for the *Maracatu A Corte de Airá* and its king, as the birth of the



about corporeality and ethnicity where students played a leading role in the stories narrated and told through meetings with popular masters and organic thinkers.

### 3 Educational projects on the agenda: “Dandarinha – Zumbizinho”

The pedagogical activity entitled “Dandarinha – Zumbizinho” sought, during the pandemic, to stimulate the sense of belonging, territoriality and racial positioning of students. In addition, to reflect the values of Africanity that permeate ancestry, orality, corporeality, among other aspects, we dialogue with Trindade (2010), whose theoretical perspective establishes for the stage of Childhood Education processes of understanding representations of African ancestry in Brazil as Afro-Brazilian civilizational values. On an intersection, we experience such values in the teaching of Afro-Alagoas culture applied to theater in education. Regarding these Afro-Brazilian civilizing values, the educator states:

If we are in constant betterment, becoming, it is essential to preserve MEMORY and respect for those who came before, for those who survived. It is important to respect ANCESTRY, also present in the world of diverse territories (TERRITORIALITY). Sacred territories (RELIGIOSITY) because places of memory, ancestral memory, memories to be preserved as relics, common, collective memories, woven and shared by processes of COOPERATION and COMMUNITARIANISM, by ORALITIES, by the word, by diverse, singular and plural bodies (CORPOREITIES), by music (MUSICALITY) and, above all, why not, by the pleasure of living — RECREATION (Trindade, 2010, p.14).

Thus, we invest in pedagogical actions mediated by Afro-Brazilian civilizational values aiming to fracture the hierarchical structures that try to legitimize ethnic oppressions and invisibilities historically incorporated into the educational space. Moreover, on theoretical and political levels, our pedagogical practices were based on the concept of Afrography, which situates the body and gesture as a place of memory, and on the notion of *oralitura*. These categories, based on Leda Maria Martins (2003), circumscribe the ideas of orality and corporeality as possibilities of performance.

These gestures, these inscriptions and performative palimpsests, written by the voice and the body, I have called *oralitura*, nuanced in the notion of the term the singular cultural inscription that, as a letter (*littera*) cleaves the enunciation of the subject and its collectivity, also underlining in the term its value of *litura*, erasure of language, significant alteration, constitutive of the otherness of the subjects, of cultures and their symbolic representations (Martins, 2003, p. 77).

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*Maracatu Nação A Corte de Airá* in 2009. This phenomenon took place with the permission of his orixá who, in addition to pointing the way, blessed him to carry out all the founding sacred procedures of the group. Later, the *Corte de Airá* would become the *Maracatu Nação A Corte de Alagoas*.





We can understand that while Afrography is related to a compound of forms of expression that inscribe Black memory and culture in acts of performance, a spelling of stories, narratives and ancestry from the body, the concept of *oralitura* combines bodily and oral [corpORAI] performances written by the voice and the body inscribed in people, social practices and community rituals. Both concepts transcend the notion of formalized Western writing and advocate the idea of performance as a place of fixation and sharing of knowledge.

In the pedagogical activity, we established a learning space whose logic was linked to aspects of this idea of performance. The proposal was to stimulate children's protagonism through musical, bodily, visual and theatrical exercises related to dynamics and aesthetics of African descent. Thus, we used workshops for the elaboration of percussive instruments associated with Black culture, with the collaboration of drummers from *Maracatu Baque Alagoano*; we carried out body expression exercises by videoconferencing, seeking to awaken relationships between body-space and raising recognition processes of Black practices in our corporalities and territorialities. We also generated workshops to make abayomi dolls<sup>3</sup> using recycled-shredded fabrics, and theatrical operations with puppets and shadows theater.

The children posted the processes related to the production of instruments (drum and ganzá); the elaboration of abayomi dolls; the making of puppets and storytelling based on their experiences or family traditions in Whatsapp group chats. Family members participated in these activities, making props and in the Afrocentric theatrical staging, arousing creativity and the construction of narratives of students on themes related to ethnic-racial identity and family traditions. In our understanding, the relationship established between the anti-racist, inclusive and participatory pedagogical proposals applied to theater brought our teaching practices closer to the philosophy of the Congolese Bunseki Fu-Kiau, who organizes ideas about African performances through a principle composed of the drumming-singing-dancing triad (Ligiéro, 2011). This triad reflects the inseparability of dimensions of the body in the ways of preserving memory, transmitting knowledge, valuing Black identities and religiosities.

[...] Singing-dancing-drumming is the basis of different celebrations, both in Afro-Brazilian rituals and also in non-religious festivities, as is the case of Carnival, in which samba schools, afoxés and street blocks set the cities on fire, bringing to the body of the reveler the synthesis of African performance that has become synonymous with Brazilian celebration (Ligiéro, 2011, p. 145).

#### **4 Reverbera(c)tion of practices**

We note, however, that despite the success of the activities that are part of our critical-reflective report, we faced difficulties regarding the limitation of electronic devices of those responsible for the

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<sup>3</sup> Abayomis are Afrodiasporic dolls made with pieces of fabric that date back to the artistic production elaborated by Maranhão-native and Black activist Lena Martins in the 1980s.





students, since the cellphones struggled with the volume of media and documents that transited in the daily life of the teaching-learning process.

Thus, despite the numerous attempts to explain that there are ways to keep images and videos saved in virtual space or that it is possible to limit the visibility of media resources without downloading all items shared, some parents demanded that we no longer request activities in video format. In addition to the lack of storage space, some of the parents or guardians argued about the lack of time to help their children in more elaborate tasks, requesting that we only share activities that could be developed through writing in notebooks.

In view of the above, we understood that the attempts to combat educational inequalities through strategies that promote inclusion and participation make up a panorama of studies, propositions, exchanges and incessant dialogues with the school community. The teaching of theater in the school environment during the pandemic period was associated with numerous difficulties, linked to socioeconomic and racial inequality, the absence or precariousness of technical resources for the development of remote teaching activities, the inability of those responsible to act as co-participants in the pedagogical process, the lack of investment in equipment and technical preparation of students and guardians for the implementation and development of remote teaching practices, among others.

Moreover, the pedagogical practices developed for theater education had their relevance constantly challenged, which provoked us to establish even deeper and more meaningful dialogues with fathers, mothers, guardians and students. In general, the perspective of teaching arts as something superfluous made those responsible feel authorized to intervene in educational processes, dictating what needed to be done, unlike what occurred in other curricular components.

This challenge was not something negative, especially because it pointed to the possibilities of perceiving the teaching of theater as an art of encounter, solidarity and cooperation, whose school practices are not restricted only to children and young people. We realize how necessary it is to reflect on the impacts of theatrical practices across the school and family community because the dynamics of anti-racist, inclusive and participatory learning through theater education can bring families closer to schools by the appreciation of local cultures and existential narratives.

Furthermore, the teaching of theater in the school context, through Afro-diasporic poetics, was linked to the celebration of counter-hegemonic pedagogical practices and, therefore, the teaching actions represented a fundamental learning for the promotion of new understandings, aesthetics, perspectives and cosmoperceptions that have historically been disarticulated, devalued and persecuted in Brazil.



## 5 Final considerations

The anti-racist practices applied to theater education expanded spatio-temporal notions, frictioned interactions between reality and fiction, linked social agents and created a particular poetics: a poetics related to ethnically minoritized trajectories, realities and subjectivities. Therefore, we believe that the teaching of theater developed through anti-racist pedagogical practices is an act of transgression (hooks, 2017) capable of generating resistance to the environmental, economic, viral, ethnic-racial, educational, in short, colonial-capitalist crisis to which we are related.

The pandemic caused by the coronavirus has expanded and amplified our critical possibilities regarding the structural crisis instituted in our country and in the world, leading us not only to reflect on what would be the possibilities of effective participation of the theater education field in this environment of global crisis, but also to create critical approaches to themes related to the urgency of strengthening Afro-Alagoas identities and cultures.

In this context, we identified that the theater education field is in crisis. We live in a crisis within the crisis, within the crisis, within the crisis (Oliveira *et al.*, 2020; Oliveira, 2022). And, therefore, we realize the importance of pedagogical practices related to theater teaching to turn to assumptions that are related to the experiences of combating oppression and to the dynamics of inclusion and social transformation. The viral crisis has quite rightly pointed out to us that the challenges for pedagogical processes with theater are related to the ways in which we establish solidary partnerships, engaged political practices, and collaborative operations that reduce the systemic inequalities produced by colonial conditioning and the logic of extractive-predatory production that disregard the importance of global sustainability.

The post-pandemic scenario has started to demand the presence of education professionals who, when operating with theatrical pedagogies, are aware that, although the coronavirus crisis is passing, the crisis structured by the depletion of natural resources, by growing economic inequality, by the absence of accountability of the powers that foment the genocide of Black and Indigenous populations in Brazil, will continue. The systemic crisis, therefore, will last. And we recognize that valuing Black narratives, stories and theatricalities is one of the paths linked to the possibility of filling theater education with life. A very significant way for the people of this country to be able to speak louder than their scars.



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