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## ***Argentina, where are you from? Performative and pedagogical strategies to tackle racism***

Julia Broguet<sup>1, II</sup>

María Laura Corvalán<sup>I</sup>

Paula Drenkard<sup>I</sup>

Yanina Mennelli<sup>I</sup>

Manuela Rodríguez<sup>I, II</sup>

<sup>I</sup>Universidad Nacional de Rosario – UNR, Rosario/Santa Fe, Argentina

<sup>II</sup>Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas – CONICET, Rosario/Santa Fe, Argentina

**ABSTRACT – *Argentina, where are you from? Performative and pedagogical strategies to tackle racism*** – We present the development of a communicative and pedagogical device to address ethnic-racial discrimination in school environments. We work at High School No. 518 *Carlos Fuentealba*, in one of the neighborhoods with the largest *Qom* population in the city of Rosario (Argentina). The device, designed to guide academic and artistic research, uses performance as a *methodological tool* to investigate the African-Argentinean legacy and activate latent perceptions related to racism, a hidden and silenced issue in our country.

Keywords: **Racism. Performance. School. African-Argentinean Legacy.**

**RÉSUMÉ – *Argentine, d'où venez-vous? Stratégies performatives et pédagogiques pour interroger le racisme*** – Nous présentons le processus de construction d'un dispositif communicatif et pédagogique pour traiter la discrimination ethnique-raciale dans les milieux scolaires. Nous travaillons au Collège n° 518 *Carlos Fuentealba*, de la ville de Rosario (Argentine), situé dans l'un des quartiers avec population *Qom*. Le dispositif, conçu au croisement de recherches académiques et artistiques, utilise la performance comme *outil méthodologique* pour étudier le héritage afro argentine, à la recherche de activer perceptions et idées latents à propos du racisme, un conflit couvert et taire dans notre pays.

Mots-clés: **Racisme. Performance. École. Héritage Afro-argentine.**

**RESUMEN – *Argentina, ¿de dónde sos? Estrategias performáticas y pedagógicas para abordar el racismo*** – Exponemos el proceso de construcción de un dispositivo comunicativo y pedagógico para abordar la discriminación étnico-racial en ámbitos escolares. Trabajamos en la escuela secundaria N° 518 *Carlos Fuentealba*, ubicada en uno de los barrios con mayor población *Qom*, de la ciudad de Rosario (Argentina). El dispositivo, diseñado a partir del cruce entre investigaciones académicas y artísticas, utiliza la performance como *herramienta metodológica* para investigar el legado afroargentino y activar percepciones latentes relativas al racismo, en tanto problemática soterrada y silenciada en nuestro país.

Palabras-clave: **Racismo. Performance. Escuela. Legado Afroargentino.**



## Introduction

This work presents the practical experience of a pedagogical performance device applied to a specific educational environment: a secondary school from a peripheral neighborhood in Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina, within the framework of a university extension project at Universidad Nacional de Rosario. This device and its intervention forms within the school environment provide an evidence of the ways in which stage and performance materials contribute to create reflexivity about structural subject matters in the country, as racism, which is currently made invisible and naturalized, that is, *incorporated* or embodied in daily social relationships. This way, we can unveil the racism that interplays between the public and private spheres, with a variety of historical and sociocultural processes inherent to national contexts which must be taken into account in order to start dismantling them.

Through the collective creation of the performative action *¿Y vos, de dónde sos?* (*Where are you from anyway?*) – the outcome of a many-year-long research process – and the design of playful and participatory experiences in the form of workshops, the establishment of new connections between the aesthetical and the ethical/political aspects was presented as one of the main goals. The idea was to work with the historical process of racialization in Argentina and its social, cultural and political consequences: racism, discrimination, xenophobia, and, particularly, the process of invisibility, denial and oblivion to which the African-Argentinean legacy was subdued. At the same time, the process implied turning such experience into a thought-trigger itself, questioning the school's students and teachers with a performance and workshops which would put at stake senses, silences, gestures, music, as ways of de-constructing – by means of alternative paths to the conventional ones – the binary mechanisms (white-black) that take place in that *invisible* racism, dominant in the country. Furthermore, it posed the possibility of jointly creating other options that took into account the differences within a much more complex chromatic palette, as well as the possibility of a sociocultural transformation (that is, their mobility).

### Racism in *Argentine Style*

Several authors have analyzed the excluding nation model which characterized the period of the Argentine State conformation – from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century –, in which the intellectual and political elites sought to consolidate a eugenic, racist, sexist and highly homogenizing paradigm that excluded – by means of different proceedings – indigenous and African-descendant people (Terán, 1987; Segato, 2007; Briones, 2005; Solomianski, 2003; and others). This paradigm gave rise to a national post-independence project which implied the *whitening* of the population, as the route leading to *civilization: a melting pot of races* made up of, essentially, white-European segments. Policies of extermination, civilization and evangelization of indigenous groups, as well as the *disappearance* of African-descendant groups were part of its consolidation.

Nevertheless, even though many Argentines declare that “there are no native indians nor black people in the country”, and that, as a result, racism is not an issue about which we should reflect upon nor discuss, Frigerio (Frigerio, 2006, p. 1) analyzed how certain racial categories collaborated “[...] first, contributing to the continuous disappearance of black people in the Argentinean society, and, secondly, by reproducing the social differences”<sup>1</sup>. From that perspective, the operation of racial categorization forms in Argentina

[...] is [based] on the interplay between a hyper-restrictive modality (negritude) and a hyper-inclusive one (whiteness), which [ended up] consolidating the representation of national whiteness, supported not only by a master national narrative, but also by constant social micro-operations of negritude concealing in pursuit of whiteness (Guzmán; Geler; Lamborghini, 2017, p. 77).

Thus, whiteness and negritude (as its extreme opposite end) mutually constitute (and exclude) themselves, as part of what Geler describes as a “binomial racial categorization system” that “makes *mestizo* impossible” (Geler, 2016, p. 78). So, there is an arch of intermediate experiences that are “absorbed” by whiteness<sup>2</sup>. In this way, two kinds of negritude arise in Argentina, among which there are multiple crossroads and mutual reinforcements: the afore mentioned *hyper-restrictive* or *racial* negritude<sup>3</sup>, and a *popular* negritude (associated to *another kind of black people* that are indeed included as fellow nationals, and among which the dimension of

social class acquires special strength, showing the melting pot processes that, in effect, took place on that territory)<sup>4</sup>. Those theoretical developments articulate with the diagnosis provided by the *Instituto Nacional contra la Discriminación, Xenofobia y el Racismo* (INADI, National Institute against Discrimination, Xenophobia and Racism) on its National Map of Discrimination (2013), where the color of the skin appears as one of the main discrimination factors nationwide, especially among a younger population (18-29 years old). According to the institute, that type of discrimination can be “identified with a type of structural racism” (INADI, 2013, p. 61)<sup>5</sup>.

### Where are you from anyway? Creating a performative action

The collective creation of the performative action *¿Y vos, de dónde sos?* (*Where are you from anyway?*) is the result of a research process with a more-than-ten-year record of academic and artistic studies related to a variety of African-American practices. On the one hand, in the creation of the group *Iró Bàradé* in Rosario, which focused on the research of the *orixás*<sup>6</sup> dances, the primary, ethical, and aesthetical supply for this work. On the other hand, the academic research we undertook within the context of our bachelor, master and doctorate degrees – currently grouped around the Area of Anthropology of the body (*Área de Antropología del cuerpo*)<sup>7</sup> – which addresses these practices, as well as the racial dimension from different points of view. In 2015, Julia Broguet, who was already working with the Anthropology School Museum (*Museo de la Escuela de Antropología*, Facultad de Humanidades y Artes – Universidad Nacional de Rosario) on the organization of conferences related to the theme of African and African-descendant presence in Santa Fe province<sup>8</sup>, convenes María Laura Corvalán and Manuela Rodríguez to create a performative action to take part in the university extension project *Muestras itinerantes y Performances. Nuevas herramientas de comunicación: voces, sonidos y colores del África santafesina* (*Travelling Exhibitions and Performances. New Communication Tools: The Voices, Sounds and Colors of Santa Fe's Africa*), introduced as a communication and dissemination strategy for the task carried on by the museum<sup>9</sup>. The invitation was made with the aim of shifting the starting point of the action regarding the previous dynamics,



which had included dancing and drums as core concepts. Now, they proposed the creation of a drama device that would address the African legacy from a perspective that would push to a crisis point the stereotype linked to it, its labeling as a dance and percussion folklore with its picturesque, *attractive* and exotic connotations; with the purpose of opening a debate about racism in Argentina as an element that would help understand those stereotyping mechanisms.

For a long time, we had written and reflected upon our own artistic practices, so, in this opportunity, we would try to take the opposite road: to stage our academic thoughts, and try to transform that experience into a thought-trigger itself. Although we already had had thoughtful experiences based on the performance *theories* with which we had addressed social phenomena linked to those African-American practices, for this work the goal was to investigate such legacy using performance as a *methodological tool*, to activate new perceptions and ideas related to that issue.

As already mentioned, one of the main goals pursued had to do with establishing new links between the aesthetical and ethical/political aspects; that is, working on that African legacy from its social, cultural and political consequences: visualizing racism, discrimination, xenophobia, as well as the process of invisibility, denial and oblivion to which such legacy had been exposed. To this end, we expressly tried to articulate aspects of social life that used to appear as split: the personal-national/private-public history. And, during the process, we observed that the *performance situation* was able to awake memories and associations that were rare to us up to that moment, and that evidenced the historicity of long racialization processes in our country. So, we put our minds to the task of arguing that journey through different expressive languages: gestures, objects manipulation, movements, dialogues, dances, songs, music, percussion. We used our personal memories as inquiry material, since we found that it was there where different marks of that shared history appeared, and these were summarized in the question taken as the *leitmotiv* of the proposed drama scene: where are you from anyway?, where are we from?

We chose the *orixás* universe as a common language and a way to esthetically address this theme. Our premise was to let that universe float around the stage space as an *absent presence*: it would appear in the clothing,

the objects, the singing and the sounds, and it would not reveal itself as a spectacular dance, but as a language to place the question and its possible answers. That way, we intended to show the ambiguous place of something that is present and absent at the same time, or something that is there despite our will to see it or listen to it, the same way we considered the African legacy was expressing itself in our country. In that sense, the performance-research method, as we call it<sup>10</sup>, was able to creatively introduce an issue that, due to several reasons, had been too hard to address in our academic researches, since the African legacy with which we worked used to always be associated to *someone else's* experience. However, the play of that legacy awoke concrete experiences inside us that revealed the impossibility to establish a black history in our country without cutting it off to a national shared history.

Therefore, different situations/problems have been staged:

- Significant absences in the construction of family lineages, visible and invisible ancestries, concealing of black and Amerindian lineages in family and national narratives.
- The continuation of the historical role of wet nurses, during colonial and early republic times, within the current household work (which frequently includes fostering care as well), as non-recognized forms of labor. Links between race, class and gender.
- Domestic inequality and power relationships.
- State operations to classify the bodies: national documentation records of the individuals.
- Stereotypes, fantasies and exotizing processes. Racialization of African-American bodies, especially the female ones, turned into sexual objects or animal-like figures.
- Labor racialization: class and race relationships according to labor areas, population's classification by race and occupation, current forms of slave labor.

The process of putting the work together consisted of improvisations based on some guidelines triggered by talks, readings of some texts, and debates regarding the subject matter<sup>11</sup>. Following the initial encounters, during which the images, gestures and movements that were the backbone

of the work emerged, we decided to call some other fellows to act as directors and outside observers, who could help us shape the ideas. This brought us the presence, primarily, of the anthropologist and actress Yanina Mennelli and the dancer and social worker Marcos Peralta. With them we agreed on a device that would work as a trigger of interlinked images, senses and emotions associated to the different issues we wanted to address.

We began the design of the performance in a semicircular stage area, on the floor, at audience level, posing the question to them: *where are you from anyway?* By means of this procedure we aimed to turn those who were watching into active and thoughtful participants, not only in the interpretation, but also in the chance to fill in the meanings that the piece left unfilled. In the final scene, we tried to question the audience, in a more active way, to create a kind of *labor social map* based on the classification of different shells by their color: white, pink, spotted, brown and dark. This way, we opened up a question mark around the racism prevailing in our society, with the possibility to arise a debate about how to change that map, or what to do with this racialized social order; that is, to provide the possibility for people in the room to reflect themselves on what type of society they wanted, imagined, yearn for.



Image 1 – Shells map. Source: Personal archive.



During a second stage, we were joined by Marco Bortolotti, a percussionist and musician with whom we reworked the performance's sounds, incorporating drums and melodies. These elements dramatically modified the work, enriching it, granting a greater strength to certain passages, and reaching a more effective connection between the different scenes.



Image 2 – Presentation of the performance device at *Carlos Fuentealba* school. Source: Personal archive.

Along 2015 and 2016, the work was presented in several academic and non-academic events. Particularly significant were the presentations carried out in November 2016 in the context of INADI's summon, together with the African-Argentinean political and cultural organization *Casa de la Cultura Indoafroamericana* (Santa Fe), to join the organization of November 8<sup>th</sup> Conference for the *Día del Afroargentino y la Cultura Afro* (African-Argentinean and African Culture Day), to establish the debate about racism as a core concept. The presentation took place in front of a truly heterogeneous audience, which included women from popular classes, and local and province officers, in a district community center.

In 2017, we were awarded the grant *Arte y Transformación Social* (Arts and Social Transformation) from the *Fondo Nacional de las Artes*, with the group project *PISAR ATRÁS. Dispositivo escénico para problematizar la desigualdad racial en Argentina* (STEP BACK. Stage device to problematize

*racial inequality in Argentina*). We proposed bringing that device to four secondary and post-secondary schools to work with the students. Thanks to these previous experiences, during 2007 we also submitted a university extension project to the *Escuela de Comunicación Social* (Social Communications School) at Political Sciences and Foreign Affairs College (UNR), under the direction of Magister Paula Drenkard, professor and researcher of the social communications bachelor course, who had suggested us an intensification of the efforts and experiences developed with the performance device, through the university extension area of that college, from an educational and communicative perspective. Drenkard, in turn, had also developed ties between the academic and artistic fields, using performance as a research-action place – whose platform is the Research Seminary *Culturas Cuerpos e Identidades* (Cultures, Bodies and Identities) of UNR's Social Communications School –, and carried out educational theatre projects in different territories and environments (governmental and non-governmental).

Therefore, within the framework of a university extension project, we aimed to expand and enrich the work with greater interdisciplinary scope, involving a team of students and postgraduate members from different courses, and developing – in addition to the performance itself – participation workshops with secondary level teachers and students. We wanted to promote more participation and foster more reflexive outcomes, together with the secondary level students and teachers, interacting in the process. On the other hand, the discourse interplay between the different team members of that project allowed us to further deepen the complexity of the themes of racism and construction of identities, as well as to set goals, and communicative and pedagogical resources for the design of the device.

The project, entitled: *Y vos, ¿de dónde sos? Dispositivo comunicacional y pedagógico para el abordaje del racismo estructural en ámbitos escolares* (*Where are you from anyway? Communicative and pedagogical device to tackle structural racism in school environments*), sought to work with 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grades' students of Secondary School (EESO) No. 518 *Carlos Fuentealba*, located in one of the neighborhoods of Rosario city with *Qom* population. To this end, we formed a work team with students from different disciplines to carry out a more comprehensive record of the project and its



repercussions in the school. Under the direction of Drenkard, and the supervision of the actor and theater director Santiago Dejesús, some of the play's passages were reviewed, to adapt it to the new social context. Also, based on the new proposal, the device was expanded into a second round of workshops, including interactive dynamics and didactic tools.

Before we continue, we need to provide a brief characterization of the neighborhood that is home to the school, and to most of the *Qom* population coming from the Northeast region of the country. The *Qom* are an indigenous group that belongs to the *Guaycurú* language family, who traditionally inhabited the region of Gran Chaco, and that has carried on a migration process towards the big urban centers of Santa Fe and Buenos Aires provinces, with noticeable intensity to Rosario city since the 1960s. Currently, in Argentina, 69,452 people recognize themselves as *Qom*, or as their descendants, of which 47,591 are now in Chaco, Formosa and Santa Fe provinces, 14,466 in Buenos Aires City and Great Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area), and 7,395 in the rest of the country (Complementary survey, 2004-2005).

The number of *Qom* inhabitants in Rosario city has been a controversial subject, since in 2006 and 2007 several indigenous reference leaders recorded an estimate of more than 20,000 people belonging to that group<sup>12</sup>, but a census carried out in 2014 by the *Consejo de Políticas Indígenas* (Indigenous Policies Council) showed an approximate number of 6,000 people who appoint themselves as native people's descendants, with a majority from the *Qom*<sup>13</sup> culture. The current situation of indigenous peoples at a socioeconomic level is to be understood as a consequence of historical processes that begun with the Spaniards arrival, and that, since the national State conformation, has acquired particular dynamics (Radovich; Balazote, 1992). Policies of extermination with military campaigns, their incorporation as employed workers, and smallholding land farming, to name a few, led to the destruction of their economic-socio-cultural reproduction means (Bigot; Rodríguez; Vázquez, 1992). In the 1960s, the quest for *new horizons* led them to migration, first to urban peripheral areas in Chaco, and then to Buenos Aires, La Plata and Rosario, driven by Paraná river floods and regional economies crisis. Rosario, a city located in the southern region of Santa Fe province, with a total population

of 1,198,528 inhabitants, has received different migration waves. According to Garbulsky (1996, p. 4):

The migration process of *Qom* groups to this city goes back to the 1960s. The reason of these 1960s migrations was the fusion of two factors: regional economies crisis sharpening and the floods. These led to the settlement of the first nucleus (on the city's Western region), which occupied public lands.

As set forth by Edgardo Garbulsky, Elena Achilli, and Silvana Sánchez (2000, p. 4), the following must be taken into account:

[...] among the migrants, several people arrived who were experienced in the constitution of indigenous land claim and rights movements. So, they establish the *Toba* People Community Center, which becomes bonded, during the early 1970s, with the Asociación Indígena de la República Argentina (Argentine Republic Indigenous Association). However, the presence of this first nucleus, with labor and inter-neighborhood relations, was an unnoticed element for most of Rosario city's inhabitants.

According to the authors, that imaginary changes since the early 1980s, when migrations make a quantum leap. And in 1981, the local government, assigned by the dictatorship, arrests indigenous migrants settled in railway lands and forces them back to Chaco. This action is attempted again by the City Council President in 1984, now in democracy, and, in 1986, racist expressions strongly manifest themselves in the voice of neighbors and institutions of the area of Empalme Graneros, where *Qoms* were mostly settled. As a consequence of such tensions, in 1987, the local authority (Municipalidad de Rosario) assigns the Housing Public Service the task to elaborate a relocation project, allegedly, with the aim of building a new neighborhood for the community (Garbulsky; Achilli; Sánchez, 2000, p. 5).

The neighborhood were the EESO No. 518 *Carlos Fuentealba* is located is the product of this relocation, and is called *Barrio Toba* (Toba Neighborhood)<sup>14</sup> or *Barrio Toba de Rouillón* (Rouillón's Toba Neighborhood) (to differentiate it from the first settlement at Empalme Graneros). It covers a total area of 22 hectares in which 254 *Toba* household groups, 46 *Mocoví* household groups, and 20 *Creole* (*criollos*) household groups live (Vázquez, 2000). Ruperta Pérez, *Qom* reference leader in this neighborhood, describes that:

In the early 1990s, families from the area of Juan José Paso and Travesía were transferred here, as well as some families who lived in Villa Banana, and other places. This was part of a plan that included housing self-building, but in 10 years, it expanded tremendously, and there was a massive arrival of people in the mid-1990s. Other families from different ethnic groups joined, including *Mocovíes*, *Wichís*, *Coyas*, and *Creoles*, who occupied the adjacent lands<sup>15</sup>.

According to Valdata, such neighborhood was created by the local authority, particularly, by the Housing Public Service, in 1992, as a response to the expansion of irregular settlements. The anthropologist also points out that:

[...] even though this neighborhood was the product of the community members' management efforts facing the public servants, the struggle continues. Currently, they are struggling to obtain the houses' title deeds, which were promised at handover, after ten years of possession<sup>16</sup>.

The conflicts and tensions aroused by *Qom* settlements expansion at Empalme Graneros neighborhood revealed themselves with great hostility in educational spheres. As claimed by Garbulsky, Achilli, and Sánchez:

In 1990, the province authority introduced a bilingual school project in our city, as a result of the conflicts aroused by the presence of *Toba* kids in Empalme Graneros common schools. The parents of non-indigenous kids of those schools put pressure so that *Toba* kids were expelled from school, for fear that they would pass some 'diseases' on to their children.

Those kids had to get through their education at the back of a church... In addition to its scarcity, the place was far from the *Toba* settlement at Empalme Graneros, and from the new neighborhood [result of the aforementioned relocation]... In 1992, the church expelled the school from its territory, and since then, school organization was split in two, according to *Tobas'* spatial distribution in two settlements, very far from each other (Garbulsky; Achilli; Sánchez, 2000, p. 8).

Later, the school operated in a political party headquarters, a very deteriorated building away from both neighborhoods (15 blocks from Rouillón's *Toba* Neighborhood). Finally, in 1994, the Education Aid Fund built a place for the school operation, which had to deal with various difficulties stemming from its spatial fragmentation history, and from the lack of staff retention, due to so many conflicts related to the lack of

recognition and wage payment to the principals, teachers and janitors, and to interracial conflicts.

That is, the neighborhood presents an ethnic complexity that is reflected in the school, since, as reported by some teachers of the institution, there is constant discrimination among the students, due to their different sociocultural belongings. This is mostly observed in the early grades, where there is a strong segregation and lack of integration between *Tobas* and *Creoles*. With time – and groups reduction due to students dropping out –, this situation improves.

### **Goals and Theoretical/Methodological Basis of the Extension Project**

The goal we established for the extension project was to delve into the communicative and pedagogical dimensions of the performance device, expanding the work and elaborating participation workshops, in order to foster a critical attitude about ethnic-racial inequalities in secondary schools in the city of Rosario. The specific goals included:

- Arising awareness in different actors and educational institutions around an issue historically made invisible and scarcely discussed in our Argentinean context.
- Providing theoretical tools produced in the academic environment, which would collaborate in the denaturation of the daily situations involved in many of the ethnic-racial discrimination and inequity cases in our country, which are silenced and socially legitimated.
- Creating an interchange and reflection environment in an aesthetical and poetic way, which would widen possible interpretations and significant learning with respect to the subject matter.
- Tackling, as well, the relations with other kinds of discrimination due to gender, social class, ethnicity, work activity, traditions, consumption habits, place of birth, etc.
- And, lastly, producing photographic and audiovisual material that would allow sharing the experience with the various institutions involved.

Regarding the background of the issue being addressed, we relied on INADI's Map of Discrimination, which we mentioned at the beginning of this article, in which school appears as the setting where the young public

mostly experiences the discriminatory practices. Also, based on previous academic researches, carried on by the teaching staff (Broguet, 2013; 2014a; 2014b; 2014c; 2015; Rodríguez, 2007; 2008; 2009; 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2015a; 2015b; Broguet; Picech; Rodríguez, 2012; 2013; 2014; Corvalán, 2013), it was recognized that structural racism and ethnic-racial discrimination included two aspects as related elements: the incidence of race as a category that reinforces the (re)production of social inequity forms and the process of invisibility of the ethnic-racial presence in the hegemonic national narrative. Therefore, we proposed that, due to multiple reasons (historical, political, cultural), those had been seldomly read keys of our daily reality.

Also, we took the category *performance* as a way of action-communication made of words and acts which, apart from representing or symbolizing certain ideas, feelings and values, are basically considered as “performative acts” (Austin, 1988; Derrida, 1995; Butler, 1999; 2002; Turner, 1992; Taylor, 2001; Schechner, 2000). This means that such acts have effects that materialize in the subjects in a way in which the thoughtful aspect is closely related to the emotional, the perceptive and the sensory aspects. From that point on, we tried to generate a reflection deeply rooted in the racial reality experienced in schools, in a more specific sphere, and in the country in general. On the other hand, and with the intention to have a more complex device, in a way that it would involve not only the research and thoughtful goal, but also the communicative and pedagogical one, we took resources from the educational theatre or education itself, through art and participatory intervention strategies, intrinsic to social transformation and development projects.

Educational theatre<sup>17</sup> is an underdeveloped theme conceptually; however, it could be defined – briefly – as a teaching methodology that uses different techniques stemming from performing arts – mainly regarding the dramatic game and sensory-perceptive and interactive dynamics – to develop learning processes. The signs/signifiers passed are received in a more direct and immediate way than with traditional learning and communication methodologies, and are the product of a joint creation. Thanks to the participants’ identification mechanisms – in the context of such devices, games and dynamics –, not only with the *stories*, but also with

the active/participatory exercises, cognitive processes are related and integrated to emotional and sensitive processes. This helps *apprehending*, and not just learning, knowing, and making it persist in time, assuring significant results (footprints in the body/mind) regarding learning. The participants of these processes are also actors: spect-actors; and thus they can interact with what is narrated (what is put on *stage*), being themselves the protagonists of the stories dramatized. This is why spectators integrate various perspectives or *positions*, which differ from the usual ones, to their own vital experience. Therefore, dramatizations become action and reflection places (through appropriation) in which different options and paths join together to experience daily and extraordinary life situations (Drenkard; Dejesús, 2016).

Thus, the methodological proposal consisted in a communicative and pedagogical device formed by a performance-intervention and participatory dynamics in the format of a workshop (forum theatre, interactive communication, and cognitive, perceptive and movement experiences). As stated before, the racial issue is deeply interwoven with emotional situations which are difficult to be tackled exclusively with words. That is the reason why those methodological strategies were chosen, as they allow other ways of reading, both verbal and non-verbal, which open questions without closing meanings or laying out closed answers.

The methodology of the work included three stages:

1) Exploration visits to the institution in order to:

- assess the specific issues related to racial discrimination;
- establish common criteria for the development of the device;
- approach bibliographic material that worked as an introduction to the topic in the classrooms.

2) Presentation of the performance-intervention with the goal of questioning the spectators, both in a corporeal and emotional sense, in a critical review of the notions of origin, family and descent. The work concludes with an opening to debate through different questions that invite to a reflection on the categories of discrimination and exclusion based on ethnic-racial origin, and which are naturalized in the national context.



3) Development of the workshops, in which we work, first, with rhythmical practices that assist integration and recognition within the group (taking advantage of the work that one of the team members was already doing in the school, in drum workshops for students). In a second stage, we would address daily situations referred to by the participants themselves to – from there – present some key theoretical categories such as racism, ethnic groups and race. Finally, playful and expressive tools would be provided to allow the possibility of collaboratively imagining and developing alternatives for the transformation of those realities.

During the whole process, the team of students undertook participatory observation, field records, and photographic and audiovisual records. This material was later used to socialize and disseminate the results of the project.



Image 3 – Presentation of the performance device at *Carlos Fuentealba* school. Source: Personal archive.



Images 4 and 5 – Workshop with 5<sup>th</sup> grade kids. Source: Personal archive.

### Implementation of the Aesthetic/Expressive Work in the School

The work with the students was carried out in two stages: the first one took place after the performance and in that we sought to open up the game of the map. As previously stated, in the final scene of the performance, three skirts are spread out on the floor and on top of them there are shells being placed according to their color and, in relation to this, they are given a job, occupation or social role. In this way, a kind of social map is formed and organized according to the social sectors and their job opportunities, showing the correspondence between the darker shells and the most precarious and informal jobs. The trigger questions were: Do we agree that it is like this?; How can this be changed?; If this was a map, is it



possible to think that there are other maps that are perhaps not so visible, with people that might gather in relation to other things? Which examples could we think of?; How could we organize other maps with other names (classifications) and other ways of gathering?; Are there other maps in which we live? Which could these be?

The idea was to take one of those examples and, in case they did not emerge, to propose them. We took as options for classification: from different activities, grouping the shells (people) according to whether they liked sports, physical activities, crafts, trade, cooking...; or different music/dances, to group those who liked folklore, reggaeton, cumbia, rap... In a second instance, we asked students to group according to classifications with which they identified the most. The task was to take a shell from the ones placed on the skirts, the one they liked the most, and to name themselves showing the shell and to put it back in that new map according to the chosen category. The proposal also consisted in promoting arguments and negotiation around spatiality in the skirts: which spaces to occupy, why, which one was better or worse, most valued; presenting issues linked to power, hierarchy, gender relations (as well as, or beyond, race/color and class). Finally, we proposed linking exercises among the different subgroups which would imply movement and expressivity: how they would greet the other group, which movement or gesture would they choose that would represent their group, how would they convince the other group to move to their own, etc.; promoting spaces for interaction as well as hostility, in a playful manner. The closure of the first stage of the workshop consisted in the making of a circle that dissolved the subgroups and that would call, through a percussion rhythm, to share a similar movement.

In order to open the second stage of the workshop, we proposed a group song, the same that we used to start the performance, called *avamunha*, which is a song of opening in the *Yoruba* language, coming from the *candomblé* ceremonies. As this second stage was proposed for another day, we sought to collect the repercussions of the play and materialize that through the selection of some of the moments of the work, resumed in the most representative objects (popcorn, doll, birth certificate, pipe, handkerchief, shells, skirts) put into action by Julia, María Laura and

Manuela through a gesture made of movements, sounds and/or words. In this way, we made a tour, shorten in 8 sequences, of the whole performance, which the kids first observed and later were invited to mimic. In this way, we looked for a corporeal way to recall the work, which would enable other perceptions, sensations, emotions and memories. The work consisted, first, in everyone mimicking the moments together and later, we invited the students to choose the gesture that they most liked to repeat it. Next, we proposed an introspective moment in which they could close their eyes and take some minutes to think about some situation in their lives that the work had reminded them of. That moment was guided by questions with the goal of promoting the expansion of the description: where that situation took place, when, who were they with, how was the space, which colors/smells/sensations they remembered, how did they feel, which feelings appeared (joy/sadness/anger/laughter/cry/hatred/love), etc. And, finally, which word or words could they give to that situation; a word which we later asked them to write on the chalkboard. In order to conclude the workshop, we asked them to group themselves in relation to the gestures of the work they had chosen, with three groups being formed (in connection with the gestures proposed by Julia, Manuela and María Laura). Each group had to develop a performance with all the elements we had worked with, and then show it to the others.



Image 6 – Activity with words. Source: Personal archive.



In order to speed up the work with the students, as we feared they would have certain resistance, we agreed that the same team members participated actively throughout the workshop. That was very helpful, as we found more resistance than we had imagined. At first, it was a real challenge to break the classroom space: to move the seats and clear the space was an uncomfortable situation, a little violent and invasive for many team members. The kids, as they had not been informed about what and how we were going to work, seemed a little confused and suspicious at first. The second barrier we had to overcome was that of feeling shy, manifested principally as laughter or as introspection channeled through the screens of telephones. As a strategy, we sought to integrate laughter to the work, to play with shyness and discomfort, to make jokes ourselves or to take those that they made, looking for empathy with the most uninhibited students who, through irony or perspicacity, made comments about the work and allowed to release the tension.

The other big challenge was to invite them to move around and to actively participate in the proposals. Some of them did not leave their seats or stayed on the side looking. Others, little by little, or in some opportunities, came closer and were receptive of our tasks and some were active for most of the time. According to their age, between 16 and 20 years old, we found that the embarrassment caused by being exposed to the stare of others prevented, in many cases, to carry out the work. But, essentially, we understood that also something related to the code of the scenic arts was alien and provocative for them, it demanded a certain way of being and behaving which they were not used to, and that made them uncomfortable. Even though, with effort and a lot of support from the whole team, we managed to get many of them integrated to the exercises and doing movements, gestures, words and getting some involvement with the proposal, it is also true that we had to improvise new strategies, to modify the time of tasks, to make them more group-relevant and with a lower level of exposure, in order to reach some places that we considered essential. We found that only with a more active involvement from our side, and even sometimes resorting to insistence, we managed to get the students to leave the seats, to come closer and get involved. Little by little, we managed to break those barriers.



## Conclusions

The project developed without major obstacles, we entered the school space with surprising willingness from its principal and the participating teachers. At first, those were encounters of recognition with an institution that truly is a community organization; thanks to that, we were able to reshape and plan the work to be carried out. Also, together with the project's team of students and teachers, we were able to re-design, re-think and organize the communicative and pedagogical device that we had suggested to tackle the ethnic-racial inequality. We consider that the internal communication of the work team as well as the connection with principals, teachers and students of the school worked in an active and dynamic way. Those connections are reflected in the photographs and the video developed, in which we could capture everyone's joint work, as well as the echoes left by the work with the situations created by the performance and the dynamics of the experience-based workshop.

In that sense, we understand that the goal of the project is not limited exclusively to the work with the students, but it aimed to intervene in the rationale of the institution, especially in its fragmented order and its discipline in terms of subjects, teachers, time slots and areas of work (that logic lacks the time and space for its articulation and mainstreaming). Likewise, in this school in particular, the school trajectories of the students tend to be non-continuous due to issues of migration, work and family reasons; intermittence in attendance caused an uneven situation in the attendance of the work as a whole inside the groups: some attended the performance, others did only the workshop. However, we identified that the exceptional nature of the experience in that context had an impact in the students, who started to circulate in the school corridors comments and stories about what had happened in the classroom a few days before. This shows that the echoes and consequences of the work – even though they were reduced in regards of following its effectiveness on the students in the long term – are in the movement that happened in the institution itself, in its daily operation. As the principal expressed: “anything that you bring that is outside the norms, helps”.





On the other hand, we understand that the device collaborated with the denaturation of racial discrimination, as it managed to translate in images, movement and some words an issue that, in Argentina, is really difficult to address and to name. Especially, the work done around the signifier *negro*, which was captured in talks about what are the implications of a practice, a religion or a person being named as *negro/a* (black) (and its links to something dark, bad, negative). This triggered reflections and questioning in the students around the type of jobs that *the black (shells)* can have, around *black* magic as something dangerous, the *black* family members who are hidden, who are not named. These allowed them to question an idea that is well extended in common sense. And in the case of teachers, some of the feedback from the teacher that worked to connect us with the students was actually related to the fact that the work had made her think about a topic that is little discussed, a national history that is not easy to work on in the classroom and that needs greater conceptual and pedagogical tools in order to be formulated; tools she said not to have close at hand. It is worth noting that the bibliographical material donated to the school includes guidelines for specific activities to introduce those themes in the classroom through languages that are not merely expositive.

With this project, we had the aim of questioning the students through the senses, silences, gestures, music, and this was a challenge as we did not know whether it would work or what would the response be. Although at the beginning the students were not clear about what it was about, what was *that thing* so different to what they were used to see in the classroom, we think that the room managed to become a *multi-sensory* place, full of rhythms, images, voices and unusual movements. That was also demonstrated in the feedback given by some of the students to the journalist Vanina Cánepa on how they lived the experience<sup>18</sup>. Little by little, they managed to integrate to the work to, finally, present with words, but also with gestures and movements, their views on the topic, taking as starting point their own daily life. There also appeared prejudices, fears, and rejection. We were able to present, in a playful manner, other social classifications, different to the ones we are used to, other ways of grouping and linking to build and deconstruct possible identities. The game with the symbolic elements allowed revising how those social grids are being



organized, which look immovable at first and, in that way, formulate the question of their transformation.

Afterwards, the students worked with the teacher and provided some written feedback about what they thought of the work. There were some doubts about what were our *real* goals with what we were doing. For this reason, we re-planned a new meeting with them at the end of the year, to share those doubts and to tell them more clearly what the goals of the work and our intentions were. That final instance, in which we also showed the photographs, the video produced, some material from INADI and some bibliography on the topic, was very productive, as they saw themselves working and participating. We could, then, talk about the fears associated to what is *negro/black* (such as *black magic*) and around the negative associations assigned to that word and which hide the profound social stigma and racism that influences the ethnic diversity that composes our national society. In that sense, with one of the groups in particular, that topic was a reason for rejection and of a strong resistance to participate, as there was a fear of the foreign language of the song, the music of the drums and the popcorn, as they were associated with *the danger* of voodoo and *umbanda* (linked, in our national context, to *the African-religious*). In that way, we could talk about past and present history, and to share with them the development work of the performance, its origins and motivation.

Regarding the goals of the work, the most participatory moment and which allowed to fully enter the topic of race and discrimination was the final part of the performance and the setting of the map. There, the students proposed classifications, ways of modifying that racial map, they dared to take a place in that order, criticized the established order and, later, participated in the game of setting other groups, creating types of group salutations, sharing them with others.

One of the methodological conclusions we reached comes from the fact of recognizing that participating in a performative event (which, despite calling for action, is mostly contemplative) produces a sensibility that allows and expands exchanges and, in some way, opens the way for the boys and girls to have the courage to move or to participate in the proposals. This opening is reduced when, without prior intervention, appears a request for participation that involves movement and breaks with the hegemony of





words. For this reason, the beginning of the workshop was tenser and required a lot of willingness from the team, which – being large – managed to divide the responsibility of supporting and balancing inconveniences. We recognize the importance of proposing a moment for participation in a performative type of intervention as a way of creating a break in the school's routine. We sought to modify the classroom's dynamics, with its intimist, quotidian and monotonous spatiality and temporality – which influences the bodies towards repetition without surprises, bodies somehow asleep that anticipate the daily occurrence –; and we met strong resistances. Even with the willingness of teachers and principals, that typical inertia of schooling tends to not be easily open to changes. Because of this, we confirmed that the performative work managed to produce some discomfort which drove students to re-place themselves in space, time and with the others who were present. In any case, we understand that this work has just started and that it should be further elaborated in other educational spaces, with other socio-cultural issues, in order to see up to where and how it is possible to intervene in a micro-political manner in the framework of the institutional logic of the schools.

We recorded rich moments and situations in which some kids entered other expressive codes (boys rocking dolls, singing and dancing circles between boys and girls, moments in which everyone could close their eyes and allow themselves introspection, corporal contacts, construction of concrete movements, words that summarized the experience, etc.). This is why we believe that the work was fruitful, it managed to communicate a difficult issue in an environment in which ethnic-racial discrimination is not specifically tackled. And that is important, as it is a school situated in a neighborhood with a high number of *Qom* population, so ethnic-racial discrimination is strongly present, as we have previously pointed. The work with expressivity managed to mobilize students, who were able to actively intervene in the proposal's dynamics, overcoming the barriers of shyness, fear and prejudice.

Thus, we conclude the evaluation of the process undertaken with the recognition of the effectiveness of the resource of performance as a pedagogical and communication device, implemented in an inter-discursive manner in a space such as a school which, being an institutional space of



modernity, was and is destined to control/discipline the bodies and to make them docile to the pedagogy centered in rationalism, with predominance of literary skills (leaving out critical and reflexive creation). Although we maintain that it is necessary to adjust these pedagogical proposals, as they cannot be otherwise adjusted to different realities and problems that we are trying to examine, we value art and corporal movement as resources that promote reflexivity and transformation. In this case in particular, opening a questioning and creative space related to the issue of structural, latent and denied racism in Argentina; as we maintain that it is only through mobilizing sensitivities and impressions deeply rooted how we can denaturate what is established and develop strategies for socio-cultural transformation.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The author specifies that he is talking about Buenos Aires city, but he adds that such situation worked as a synthesis of the whole nation. Therefore, we will adopt his analysis to reflect upon the local reality.
- <sup>2</sup> The author highlights how, based on that national ideology, “[...] African-Argentineans would have disappeared, in part, due to the melting pot phenomenon, that is, would have become white by dilution/absorption” (Geler, 2016, p. 76).
- <sup>3</sup> Which bears strong stereotyped racist connotations, based on a system of visual categorization according to which the people considered *black* are, exclusively, those who answer for the prototypical figure of the *black race* (blackish skin, kinky hair, wide nose, and thick lips).
- <sup>4</sup> With no exclusive dependence on visual race marks, this category of negritude reinforces with them. As warned by Frigerio, the darker – or not so much – skin color schemes of the historic “cabecita negra” (black head), and of today’s “negro villero” (slum black) “comes from the ancestral melting pot, not only of indigenous people, but also of the large black population that existed in several provinces during the XVIII century” (2006, p. 4). Therefore, those monikers, usually assigned to “low-income mestizo sectors” (Frigerio; Lamborghini, 2010, p. 140), would represent the synthesis of a fellow national negritude that refers to a “manner” associated to the popular world (Geler, 2016, p. 75).



- <sup>5</sup> Some recent research studies have inquired into the skin color incidence on the labor market and the criminal sector (Heredia; Olariaga, 2015; de Grande; Salvia, 2013).
- <sup>6</sup> Main deities of the African-Brazilian religious pantheon.
- <sup>7</sup> Available at: <<https://areadelcuerpo.wixsite.com/areadelcuerporosario>>.
- <sup>8</sup> There are three activities that precede this work to promote the subject field articulated with the museum: the exhibits *El color invisible. Presencia africana en Santa Fe. Periodo colonial* (*The invisible color. African presence in Santa Fe. Colonial period*) (2010), *África sonando en América* (*Africa's sounds in America*) (2011), and the workshop *Ritmos afro que viajan* (*African rhythms that travel around*) (2012).
- <sup>9</sup> On this exhibit they would present some archaeological pieces of ritual/daily use, associated to the presence of African population, collected in the surroundings of the once first settlement of Santa Fe city, today, *Parque Arqueológico Santa Fe "La Vieja"* (Old Santa Fe Archaeological Park), located in current Cayastá city (Santa Fe province).
- <sup>10</sup> In the context of the body and performance Anthropology Team (Equipo de Antropología del cuerpo y la performance, Universidad de Buenos Aires), run by Dr. Silvia Citro, we have been discussing the contributions of new interdisciplinary methodologies of performance-research to the anthropologic research practices and their outreach modes. We enquire into their epistemological and political repercussions in the field of studies about corporeality-subjectiveness. In this regard, see Citro et al., 2016; 2017.
- <sup>11</sup> Initially, this search was mostly focused on readings and images linked to the history of the archaeological site mentioned in note number 8, and then we open up towards other approaches.
- <sup>12</sup> ¿Veinte mil Tobas en Rosario?, *El Ciudadano y la región* newspaper, April 4, 2006. Cifras a la espera de un censo. At: *La Capital* newspaper. April 1, 2007, Rosario.
- <sup>13</sup> LA CAPITAL, December 8, 2014. Available at: <<https://www.lacapital.com.ar/la-ciudad/en-rosario-6-mil-personas-se-reconocen-como-integrantes-pueblos-origenarios-n458399.html>>. Accessed: 20 February 2018.
- <sup>14</sup> *Toba* stems from the *Guaraní* language and it means "big forehead". It is presumed that this term was adopted by the *Avá* Guaraní people to



pejoratively refer to the *Guaicurú* peoples who inhabited the Central and South regions of Gran Chaco. It is believed that this is due to an old tradition of shaving the front-end of the hair, giving the impression of having a great forehead.

- <sup>15</sup> Testimony obtained from the media piece “¿Veinte mil tobas en Rosario?” At: *El ciudadano y la región* newspaper. April 4, 2006, Rosario.
- <sup>16</sup> Testimony obtained from the media piece “Saberes que es necesario transmitir y sostener”. At: *La Capital* newspaper, April 1, 2007.
- <sup>17</sup> *Educational theatre* and education through art are fields with little development in conceptual terms. Nevertheless, by means of the creation and articulation of tools borrowed from the performing arts, like forum theatre and peer-to-peer education, applied to educational environments, or with pedagogical and communicative purposes, Drenkard developed some arguments and theoretical/conceptual approaches. Especially, see: Drenkard and Dejesús, 2016.
- <sup>18</sup> Brisa Nieves, one of the students who participated in the experience, wants the visit to be repeated: "I liked it a lot because it is very nice to share these things with the schoolmates. I loved the part of the doll because I saw the image from when my mum got my brother to sleep and sang songs for him." "It was very nice to close my eyes and go back in time, I had many memories from when I was a child and I used to go to the countryside, to General Lagos, to visit my grandparents. The play we did at the end was very good as we all got together to do something, we all contributed a little, we could share," says Rocío Barreto, another student. For Cristian Flores, who is 21, "it is good to participate in these things as the classroom is boring, we always do the same." For him, one of the passages of the performance made him think in the hypocrisy and double morale and he says that, when he closed his eyes, "the first thing that came up was when I was little, and I was hit by my friend's dad, that hurt me." Stories gathered in the article "La experiencia de abrir el debate a partir de los sentidos" (The experience of opening the debate from the senses), published in the Education Supplement of the newspaper *La Capital* from 8 July 2017. Available at: <<https://www.lacapital.com.ar/educacion/la-experiencia-abrir-el-debate-partir-los-sentidos-n1429832.html>>. Accessed: 20 February 2018.



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Julia Broguet is an Anthropology graduate/Facultad de Humanidades y Artes/Universidad Nacional de Rosario (UNR). PhD candidate in Anthropology/Universidad Nacional de Buenos Aires (UNBA) and scholarship holder from the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET), with the project *Raza, región y nación en los candombes del Litoral argentino*. Trained in African-American performances.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8246-1203>

E-mail: [lajuliche@hotmail.com](mailto:lajuliche@hotmail.com)

María Laura Corvalán holds a master's in dance and Specialist in Contemporary Dance Studies from PPGDança/Universidade Federal da Bahia, Brazil. BA in Social Communication. Doctoral student in Social Communication at Universidad Nacional de Rosario. Head of Practical Assignments in the Department of Culture and Subjectivity of the Degree of Social Communication at the same institution.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5200-2302>

E-mail: [danzanegralali@yahoo.com.ar](mailto:danzanegralali@yahoo.com.ar)

Paula Drenkard holds a master's in Communication and Education/Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona. Psychologist/Universidad Nacional de Rosario. BA in



Social Communication/Facultad de Ciencia Política de la UNR. Lecturer and Researcher/Facultad de Ciencia Política de la UNR/Centre of Research in Mediatizations. Consultant in Education and Education through Arts. Director of educational theatre and performance-theatre, actress and dancer.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3313-9645>

E-mail: paulazul@yahoo.com

Yanina Mennelli is an Anthropology graduate/Facultad de Humanidades y Artes/Universidad Nacional de Rosario (UNR). Founding member and coordinator of the area of Anthropology of the Body/UNR. Lecturer of Anthropology at UNR year 2007 to date. Lecturer of Postgraduate Studies *Latin-American Corporal Territories* of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies at UNR. Actress and theatre producer.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7560-1244>

E-mail: yaninamennelli@hotmail.com

Manuela Rodriguez holds a PhD in Anthropology/UBA. BA in Anthropology/UNR. Researcher of CONICET. Lecturer at the School of Anthropology/UNR. Specialist in Anthropology of the Body and Performance Studies – emphasis on performative processes of racialization in African-American practices del Rio de La Plata y Argentinean Seashore. Member and co-founder of the African-Brazilian dance group *Iró Baradé*.

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0761-0763>

E-mail: manuela.guez@gmail.com

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