

## **THE QUILOMBO IS MY BODY: Transatlantic public history in the poetics of Beatriz Nascimento**

O QUILOMBO É MEU CORPO: a história pública transatlântica na poética de Beatriz Nascimento

QUILOMBO ES MI CUERPO: la historia pública transatlántica en la poética de Beatriz Nascimento

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Recebido em: 04/01/2024

Aceito em: 09/01/2024

Publicado em: 11/30/2024

### **ABSTRACT:**

The article aims to analyze fragments of Maria Beatriz Nascimento's poetics, considering her living practices of emancipatory knowledge forged inside and outside the academic space. Our hypothesis is that the black activist developed a decolonial public history engaged in multiple spaces, using different languages (poetic, cinematographic, historiographical narratives, journalistic texts, political speeches, oral interviews, conferences, etc.) while promoting a public debate about the history of slavery, referring to the historical continuums (past present) related to sensitive themes such as contemporary quilombo and traumatic memories of slavery in which the body is configured as a place of enunciation of atlanticities and afrodiasporic writings.

**KEYWORDS:** Black intellectuality; Decolonial public history; Present pasts; Atlanticities and afrodiasporic writings.

### **“How many paths have I lived”:**

#### **The trajectory of a quilombola and transatlantic intellectual**

The historian/poet/filmmaker Maria Beatriz Nascimento (1942-1995) produced, in different languages (historiographic articles, documentary film, poems, aphorisms, journalistic criticism, essays, cinematographic consultancies, etc.) what we currently consider a living public history (Almeida & Rovai, 2012; Almeida, Mauad, Santhiago, 2016; Almeida & Meneses, 2018), shared, sensitive to the emerging themes of their time, especially with regard to the anti-racist struggle and the emancipation of Afro-diasporic thought. For this article, we selected two combined poems (Transgression and Antirracism) by Alex Ratts and Bethania Gomes (2015) in the work “Todas [as] distâncias: poems, aphorisms and essays by Beatriz Nascimento” and the poetic narrative present in the film's script/ documentary about the contemporary black movement produced by Beatriz in partnership with Raquel Gerber (Orì, 1989).

Born in Aracaju (Sergipe), in 1942, daughter of Rubina Pereira do Nascimento and Francisco Xavier do Nascimento, a bricklayer and a “housewife”, Beatriz migrated with her parents and nine siblings to the city of Rio de Janeiro in the 1940s. 1950. The experience of displacement and the need to reconstitute oneself existentially in a territoriality marked by subtle and blatant violence, the affirmation of the body as a space for resistance, struggles and self-affirmation, constitute a front of forces in Beatriz Nascimento's reflections throughout her intellectual trajectory.<sup>1</sup>

Alex Ratts (2006, 2021) and Batista Vinhas (2016), scholars of the trajectory and work of the black activist and intellectual, demarcate the final years of the 1960s as crucial for the inclusion of Beatriz Nascimento in an active network of organic Afrodiasporic intellectuals inserted in the anti-racist struggle and in the construction of emancipatory political projects. The international movements Black is Beautiful, Black Power, the struggle for civil rights in the USA and the independence processes on the African continent are from this period, ideologically supported by diasporic movements of Negritude and Pan-Africanism. In Brazil, ideas from Malcolm X, Amílcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, Patrice Lumumba and Franz Fanon began to circulate in public debate meetings on the racial issue. Abdias Nascimento, Lélia Gonzalez, Sueli Carneiro, Helena Teodoro, Eduardo de Oliveira Oliveira, Guerreiro Ramos, Clóvis Moura, among other black thinkers, proposed significant confrontations with hegemonic historiography, by denouncing the injustices of Clio (Moura, 1990) or announcing other epistemic paths of their own, as Lélia Gonzalez (1988) did, when elaborating the thesis of *Amefricanity*.

It was during this time that the Soul Music movement internationalized and the dissemination of politicized messages such as “Say it loud- I'm Black and I'm Proud<sup>2</sup>” inspired community dances, such as the Black Rio movement. Therefore, we can note the insurgency of emancipatory epistemic movements in the Black Atlantic, closely linked to the practice of political struggle, breaking, in this sense, with the Westernizing paradigm, in which the process of knowledge is fundamentally defined as abstraction. Dualities such as body and reason, poetry and methodical language, writing and orality

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<sup>1</sup> Beatriz Nascimento gives an account of her childhood, when she entered a peripheral public school in Rio de Janeiro, still recently arrived from Aracaju. She talks about her friendship with Jurema, an extroverted black girl, nicknamed “*neguinha do morro*”. A friendship that arose from sharing experiences of facing stigmas: “But although I wasn't like Jurema, the punishments, the slights, the disrespect and the nickname itself affected me; And how many times! I remember that at that time my very short, natural hair was, like hers, the target of jokes in the neighborhood: “*sleeveless jacket, windbreaker, black woman with no hair is João*”. And we were followed by retinues of screaming boys, under the complacency and adhesion of parents and other adults (Nascimento, 1984, p. 03, in Nascimento, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Song composed and released by James Brown in 1968.

would not have rigid boundaries in Beatriz Nascimento's written and narrated productions. Like bell hooks (2021) and, later, Nilma Lino Gomes (2017), the author emphasized the existence of a network of circulating knowledge supported by black communities in diaspora, very close to the living knowledge announced by Hampatê-bá (2010), when dealing with West African storytellers and the meanings inscribed in the writings of Conceição Evaristo (1996), or oralituras, a concept worked on by Leda Martins (2003). This network of evolving knowledge (black press, Teatro Negro Experimental, terreiro communities, samba schools, emerging Afro-diasporic study centers, etc.) is in line with what we think of as public history<sup>3</sup> in movement, by breaking boundaries between systematized thought and living knowledge from oral tradition and that produced by social movements, by constructing their own narratives of the past. The intellectuals of the contemporary black movement elaborate a thought of denunciation and political demands, forged in the historical experiences of these activist subjects who sought to discuss the legacies of colonization and the need to break with the history made by white hands. At this juncture, coloniality, epistemicide (Grosfoguel, 2013), the intersectionality of gender and race (Collins, Bilge, 2020) were not current terms, however, such ideas were being germinated in public and academic debates, announcing epistemic fissures, or in other words by Beatriz Nascimento (2018), historical cracks also in the historiographic field, even inserted at sea “margins of the hegemonic symbolic field of that academic production.

In 1968, a year after starting the history course at UFRJ, a time of intense student mobilization and the Cem Mil march, it was a great awakening to the process of “black awareness”, as the same author announced in her speech:

At that moment I abandoned any bourgeois project as if I were leaving through an imaginary Exit from the line for the Hundred Thousand March. At that moment I became aware of my black color and how much I could start 'again'. I then started political activism (Nascimento, in Ratts, 2021, p. 7).

During the same period of graduation (1967-1971), she completed an internship in Research at the National Archives of Rio de Janeiro, under the guidance of

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<sup>3</sup> I think of public history as a movement produced by interactional networks of knowledge in diverse communities, especially with and by the subjects on the margins. In this sense, public history practiced in learning communities is far from being thought of only as dissemination or as an exclusive and linear transposition of academic knowledge by the public, imagined as a passive agent and consumer of knowledge in the form of products. However, we understand the public as an active agent and the exercise of public history from a decolonial perspective with collaborative and emancipatory interfaces, in which the forms of enunciation and languages used are multiple and complex.

professor José Honório Rodrigues, preparing her first studies on historical quilombos. In 1976, the black activist was already working as a researcher at the Center for Research and Documentation of Contemporary History at Fundação Getúlio Vargas (Vinhas, 2016, p. 32). Reading intellectuals such as Edison Carneiro (1966), Décio Freitas (1973) and Clovis Moura (1959) was sine qua non for understanding the historical quilombo as an “alternative social system”. However, the empirical work - carried out not only in the archives, but, above all, in quilombola communities, such as Carmo da Mata in Minas Gerais<sup>4</sup> - allowed her to perceive the historical continuum, the present pasts, that is, the living and reinvented traditions inscribed in the network of solidarities and re-significations of ancestral practices and knowledge. The idea of historical continuity breaks with the notion of a community isolated and frozen in time and space. In effect, quilombola communities could not be explained solely as a reaction to seigneurial power, as they meant much more than an act of escape. It was necessary to understand the quilombo as a physical and existential territory and how its “mystique runs through the memory of the black and national community, no longer as a declared war, but as an effort to fight for life” (Nascimento, in Ratts, 2021, p. 250). When dealing with the past/present in an approach of historical continuity, the intellectual states:

So my question was the following: the quilombo dates back to the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, suddenly, the historical cut leaves the quilombo as not existing – understanding the quilombo as a nucleus of black people – and we ask ourselves how such a strong story within four centuries, it may have suddenly disappeared from the map. And I came to the conclusion that this was a very big mistake, when I started doing research at the National Archives with José Honório Rodrigues, I started to see in the political cuts and in the police's correspondence with the Minister of Justice, thousands and thousands of quilombos that were located in geographic areas that, to this day in Rio de Janeiro, are areas of favelas or exfavelas. So, my question was the following: did the quilombo, as it is understood by historiography, that is, as a political movement of rebellion and insurrection, did it not also have another face that was transported, that had a continuity ending with Abolition? (Nascimento, 2018, p. 129).

In addition to the reminiscences of the past, the quilombo continually remade itself in its living and shared traditions. In this sense, the author broke with the idea of quilombo exclusively as a state of war. She addresses the “state of peace”, and the processes necessary for the flow of this historical continuum in which women began to occupy such a significant place in the actions of transmitting generational knowledge

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<sup>4</sup> The research in Carmo da Mata was carried out between 1976-1979 (Vinhas, 2016, p. 34).

regarding the modes of existence of this living tradition of the diaspora. For Beatriz Nascimento (1982, p. 30), it was up to the “black woman to sustain the escape”, and the act of escape was not seen as something spontaneous, unplanned or devoid of political meaning. In effect, quilombola communities could not be explained solely as a reaction to seigneurial power, as they meant much more than an act of escape. It was necessary to understand the quilombo as a physical and existential territory and how its “mystique runs through the memory of the black and national community, no longer as a declared war, but as an effort to fight for life” (Nascimento, in Ratts, 2021, p. 250).

In her poem “Transgression”, Beatriz Nascimento (1987) deals with the contemporary quilombo and denounces violence against the black population in a police action in the community of Rio de Janeiro. When dealing with necropolitics institutionalized by the State, the poet/historian speaks of a past that has not passed, of quilombo communities that housed the “same people”. For the author, the quilombo did not end with abolition, nor did the processes of historical coloniality, named by Nascimento, as a historical continuum. In her words:

### **Transgression**

(micropolitics class, Dona Martha)

[01.09.1987]

There was a war in Rio  
 For those who didn't know, a delusion  
 Hallucination product  
 There was an action against the hill  
 Armed and genocidal  
 Who ruled those hills  
 Of blood from below above  
 “Penal Code” action  
 Of social impotence  
 From henchmen and evildoers  
 Arrogant and arrogant  
 That threw everyone  
 In unanswerable terror  
 There were screams and cries  
 That the deaf city  
 Quickly forgot  
 And it was on Corcovado  
 In the quilombo where it already happened  
 At some time in history  
 That in memory faded  
 It was never told  
 Because it was the same people there  
 And the country urgently  
 Erased from mind  
 The truth that passed  
 But it's not past, it's present  
 Why repeat?  
 It is necessary that you muffle  
 The noise of sirens

That disturb the environment  
Dividing the men  
Between good and bad  
Between us and them  
Between the living and the dead  
(Nascimento & Ratts, 2005, p. 47)

The poem speaks of an “unanswerable pain” traveling through two temporalities that merge into a single “past/present”. For the lyricist, the “truth that has passed is not past, it is present”! At the same time, “memory faded and never told the story of those people, the same people who were in the quilombo at “some time in history”. The historical amnesia denounced by the poem in the metaphor of the “deaf city” refers to the silencing of the “genocidal armada”, the living memory of struggle, the traumatic experience of the Atlantic diaspora, the pasts that persist in the present in the expressions of historical injustices and abysmal inequalities. Therefore, Beatriz Nascimento's poetics is part of a politically engaged discourse in which the black subject is “consciously situated in writing”, making himself enunciator and enunciated, breaking, as Conceição Evaristo (1996, p. 39) postulated, with “a discourse about black people produced by the white elite”.

The Atlantic thinker, in her article *Literature and Identity*, written for the II Profile of Black Literature-São Paulo International Exhibition, deconstructs the idea of the literary canon anchored in the archetype of the white man/colonizer and the images of black characters inscribed in hegemonic narratives in which non-white people are objectified and/or described as “slaves”, extremely submissive like “Bertoleza from *O Cortiço* by Aluísio Azevedo”. In his aphorisms and poems there is a confrontation between the fictitious black person (created by the colonizer's mirror) and the real black subject, immersed in his complexity of existence and historical and collective experiences. From this perspective, these marginal actors move from the condition of “object”, as they were referenced by the hegemonic narrative, to “subjects” of literary discourse, producing an insurgent self-narrative correlated with the collective social experiences of that context. This shift in the perception and construction of the narrative, in which the enunciating subject narrates his reflection based on his experience in correlation with social analysis, reaches its greatest maturity in the poetic narrative of the film *Ôrí*. Through the intense use of images of samba school performances, terreiro rituals, political meetings of blackness, the film documents black movements between 1977 and 1988, reflecting the transatlantic relationship between Brazil and Africa, with the quilombo as the central idea of a historical continuum and

presenting the personal story of Beatriz Nascimento as a guiding thread, as we will see in the following item.

### **I am Atlantic and from the people of Benin, where my mother comes from”:**

The Earth is circular, the Sun is a disc, where is the dialectic? At sea, mother Atlantic. How could they leave from here to an unknown world? Then I cried with love for the navigators, my parents. I cried because I hated them. I cried because I still felt sad about this story. But I fundamentally cried, faced with the poetry of the Tagus meeting the Atlantic, the poetry of the departure for conquest. They did it out of fear too and perhaps they cried, in front of all the beauties beyond the Atlantic Sea. Oh infinite peace, being able to make connecting links in a fragmented story. Africa and America and Europe and Africa again. Angola, Jagas and the people of Benin where my mother comes from. I am Atlantic! (Nascimento & Gerber, 1989).

The aforementioned poetic narrative by Beatriz Nascimento opens the documentary *Orì* (1989), a word that comes from the Yoruba *Candomblé* *ketu* which literally means head or spiritual intuition that drives paths. To the sound of Naná Vasconcellos' drums, the scenes move through transatlantic images of the sea and black cultures of the diaspora until reaching scenes about the debates of the contemporary black movement in Brazil and other parts of the Americas. The memory/body staged and personified in the body movements of the *terreiro* entities are inscribed in a performative way in an ancestral living memory. In the same way, the funk dances, Soul dances of the 1970s or other Afro-Atlantic community experiences refer to the black quilombo and reinvention of identities fragmented by colonialism and the legacies of slavery.

Beatriz Nascimento, in partnership with Raquel Gerber (1989), highlighted in her narrative the element of transatlanticity, by drawing attention to the circulating cultural practices emerging from the Afro-diasporic condition in community spaces of black sociability, present, in an active way, not only in the sharing of symbolic, material, cultural and affective exchanges of being among us, but, above all, in what Nascimento defined as the Afro-Atlantic body or “body-document”, this bearer of living memories, present pasts, recreated and re-signified values in the experience of transnationality in the Black Atlantic. For her, scientific/historiographical work was not opposed to her

experience of subjectivity. On the contrary, the ancestral knowledge announced by re-signified memories in the diaspora, crossed by corporeal subjectivity, are starting points for the construction of an anti-colonial epistemology pronounced in different essays: For a history of the black man (Revista de Cultura Vozes, 1974), Black women in the job market (Jornal Última Hora, 1976), Escravidão (Jornal do Brasil, 1977) and, above all, in the classic conference “Historiografia do Quilombo”, held at USP, in 1977, during the Quinzena do Negro, event organized by professor Eduardo de Oliveira Oliveira.

Reading these works makes clear the confrontation with the hegemonic paradigms of the ways of writing black history in Brazil. The author draws attention to the lack of sensitivity in writing based on elitist parameters of whiteness, causing the historical objectification posed by the slavery system to reflect, in a certain way, in the dealing with the sources (produced mostly by men of power) and in the interpretative approach, guided by the narcissistic pact of silencing the harmful effects of the slave past in Brazilian society by insistently denying racial violence, through the dissemination of racial democracy (Bento, 2022). This epistemic inflection point can be perceived when Beatriz Nascimento questions the role of black people not only in the historiographic narrative, but in their places of belonging in the process of creating this writing and in the spaces of history taught in classrooms. In the following excerpt, the documentary reproduces Beatriz's participation in the Quinzena do Negro at USP (1977), when the author gave the conference “Historiography of Quilombo”. The film's scenes reveal the tensions between the white academic elite and their misunderstanding of the demands of black social movements in that context. According to the narrative of Beatriz Nascimento (1989):

I think this cycle of lectures that Eduardo tried to do here in São Paulo is extremely important, because we really need to do a series of reformulations, of criticisms, regarding all the studies that have been carried out, some studies that have been carried out regarding the black. In my special case, I am basically interested in history, because I have a degree in history and it was through history that I came to know about my role as a black person within a society like Brazil, which has always sought to alienate us. [...] we are never part of the History of Brazil, of the things that happen in Brazil, of the most important things. We were always contributors to a culture, we always contributed to cooking, dancing, football, etc. and such. So, but that didn't make it impossible for me to see, between the lines of the History of Brazil, a massive, often independent, and strong participation of black people within Brazil. Due to my own reality, as a black woman from the 20th century, and living with black people from the 20th century, my story was somewhat cut, with a cut that I didn't know where it could be. This I felt very early on, still in primary school,

and it was on school, didactic texts, about Quilombo de Palmares, where I most felt this division, that despite us participating in the history of Brazil, we were not counted within the history of Brazil [...] And when I arrived at university, the thing that shocked me most was the eternal study, when referring to black people, about slaves, as if throughout the history of Brazil we had only existed within the nation as slave labor, as labor of farm work, for mining (Nascimento, 2018, p. 127).

Approaching the concept elaborated by Paul Gilroy (2002) about the Black Atlantic, Beatriz Nascimento enunciates a living memory present in black corporeality, expressed in denied body language, in the Black is Beautiful aesthetic, in gestures, in the modes of communication of existing in community spaces.

Memory is the contents (sic) of a continent, its life, its history, its past. As if the body were a document. It is no surprise that dance for black people is a moment of liberation. The black man cannot be free until he forgets his captivity [...]. The language of trance is the language of memory. All of this does not rescue the pain of a historical body. Slavery is something that is present in the body, in our blood, in our veins. [...] You need the image to recover your identity. You have to become visible. Because one person's face is a reflection of the other. One person's body is a reflection of the other. And each one is a reflection of all bodies" (Nascimento & Orí, 1989).

Beatriz Nascimento's poetic and historiographical work allows reflections on the body as a bearer of historicities and memories (body-document), in addition to being inscribed (Evaristo, 1996) as an experience of knowledge of Atlanticity and black subjectivation from a consciousness anti-colonialist race. Verbs in the first person singular (poetic inscription) refer to a subjectivity in movement, in struggle, in search of self-positivity, without neglecting, therefore, the process of pain, fragmentation and violence experienced in colonization and coloniality Brazilian, anchored in the "myth of racial democracy". The lyrical self of his aphorisms is empowered, faces contradictions, psychic crises of existence and imposes itself as a thinking being full of corporeality, in living language, of the body/mind that dances, becomes ecstatic and is fulfilled in the recognition of its self-image in collective experience. "You need the image to recover your identity. You have to become visible, because one's face is the reflection of another, one's body is the reflection of another, and in each one the reflection of all bodies" (Nascimento & Gerber, 1989). In the poem described below, it is possible to perceive the lyricist's refusal to lose his tenderness, that is, to give up the anti-racist fight:

### **Antiracism**

No one will make me lose my tenderness  
 As if the four beetles  
 Generation of the generation  
 Gestation of freedom  
 Heron flight, safe  
 No one will make me lose my sweetness  
 Palm sap, coconut plasma  
 Pendulum in extension  
 In extensive sea – open  
 Scaled mackerel on sand bed  
 No one will make me racist  
 putrified dry stem  
 No veins, no hot blood  
 Without rhythm, without body, does it last?  
 You will never make me exist  
 Cancer so torn  
 (Nascimento, 1990)

Being racist, in the poetics of Beatriz Nascimento, means associating oneself with a dead body, deformed by a “cancer so torn apart” that it allows the triggering of a non-existence or a dehumanized/dehumanizing way of being in the world. In this sense, the idea that colonialism/racism, violence against black people and also deforms the humanity of white people, is present in Beatriz Nascimento's poetry. “Putrified dry stem” that the body is eaten away, losing its “veins”, “hot blood” and “rhythm”, thus becoming a lifeless body, without a vital essence (Nascimento, 1990). Just like Franz Fanon (2008), colonialism, through racism, produces a division of the world between being and non-being, in which subjects marginalized by colonial violence inhabit the abysmal zone of non-being, through the destructive gaze of the colonizer. In this way, the affirmation of the aesthetics of the body and the experience of corporeality/memory delineate collective belonging and paths of cracks and fissures of rupture of the exclusionary colonial logic. The proposal to work on the poetics of Beatriz Nascimento in teaching history or in literature classes provides the opportunity for the collaborative construction of other narratives capable of confronting the hegemonic narrative and generating community actions of knowledge, in which the student can see themselves in the experience of these stories and collectively develop the attribution of significant meanings in a network, as in the learning communities designed by bell hooks (2021).

### **Final considerations**

Beatriz Nascimento's work is multidimensional and complex. By inscribing herself in a self-narrative correlated to the historical and collective experiences of the Afro-Atlantic context, the poet/historian demarcates other epistemic places that generate

fissures in the hegemonic colonial narrative. Territoriality, the body/memory, the experience of transatlanticity recreate black identities in the Atlantic world, incorporating the issues of past/presents and historical injustices, as political guidelines for politically positioned writing/action. Beatriz Nascimento made public history, even without naming her practice with this concept. She dealt with living pasts, sensitive memories, the institutional violence of racism and denounced a writing about the slave past that was intended to be neutral, written by the universal subject. Ori's filmic narrative expresses a high level of maturity in his historiographical reflection that is not exclusively within the academic parameters of writing/research. The poetics of Beatriz Nascimento, paraphrasing Conceição Evaristo (1996), was not made to lull children in the big house, it therefore reveals a language of enunciation of knowledge that breaks with the Cartesian, methodical language structure, anchored in a supposedly universal subject /neutral. It is an incarnated narrative, full of subjectivities, belongings, actions and ways of being in the collective world, a writing, permeated by oralitures from which the steps of those who speak come from afar.

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**RESUMO:**

O artigo tem por objetivo analisar fragmentos da poética de Maria Beatriz Nascimento, considerando suas práticas vivas de saberes emancipatórios forjados dentro e fora do espaço acadêmico. Nossa hipótese é que a ativista negra desenvolveu uma história pública decolonial engajada em múltiplos espaços, utilizando-se de diferentes linguagens (narrativas poéticas, cinematográficas, historiográficas, textos jornalísticos, discursos políticos, entrevistas orais, conferências, etc.) ao promover um debate público sobre a história da escravidão, reportando-se aos *continuuns* históricos (passados presentes) relacionados aos temas sensíveis como quilombo contemporâneo e memórias traumáticas da escravidão em que o corpo se configura como lugar de enunciação dos das atlanticidades e escrevivências afrodiáspóricas.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Intelectualidade negra; História pública decolonial; Passados presentes; Atlânticas e escrevivências afrodiáspóricas.

**RESUMEN:**

El artículo tiene como objetivo analizar fragmentos de la poética de María Beatriz Nascimento, considerando sus prácticas vivas de saberes emancipadores forjados dentro y fuera del espacio académico. Nuestra hipótesis es que el activista negro desarrolló una historia pública descolonial comprometida en múltiples espacios, utilizando diferentes lenguajes (poéticos, cinematográficos, narrativas historiográficas, textos periodísticos, discursos políticos, entrevistas orales, conferencias, etc.) a la hora de promover un debate público sobre la historia de la esclavitud, refiriéndose a *continuuns* históricos (pasado presente) relacionados con temas sensibles como el quilombo contemporáneo y las memorias traumáticas de la esclavitud en las que el cuerpo se configura como lugar de enunciación de atlanticidades y escritos afrodiáspóricos.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Intelectualidad negra; Historia pública descolonial; Pasados presentes; Atlánticas y escritos afrodiáspóricos.