INTERVIEW

BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

GRACE PASSÔ + **CHRISTOPHER HARRIS**

In Grace Passô's films, bodies are avowedly raced and gendered. Further, these bodies—most frequently her own—are variously possessed, doubled; faces are subject to visual distortions and contorted expressions that signal at once agony and ecstasy, and are even subject to impertinent blasts of flatulence. An award-winning actor of stage and screen, a playwright, as well as a theater director and a filmmaker, Passô possesses an embodied knowledge that comes to us through the looking glass of her cinema. Like the body-snatching voice that holds forth in **Dazed Flesh**, her 2019 collaboration with Ricardo Alves Jr., Passô's films are "hungry for matter." In that film, she enacts what she terms a "strategy of estrangement" that takes the impossible as its point of departure. Through this strategy, she refuses the givens of bland, flattening universals and the bourgeois complacencies of liberal humanism, in favor of a Blackness that is altogether stranger than anything such bromides can offer. Her films, rife with internal contradictions, offer a vision of Blackness that becomes opaque.

In conversation, Passô is clear about the necessity to center herself as a Black woman in Brazil within her artistic practice. Upon taking possession of this woman, the abstract, eternal, and timeless voice of **Dazed Flesh** gradually becomes undone by the mystery of her gendered Black embodiment. Initially bemused, the voice becomes increasingly erratic, alternately impatient, exhausted, enraptured, and intoxicated by the "mere flesh" of its host. At turns feeling the heaviness of embodiment, and then suddenly lighter than air, the voice reaches its breaking point once it accepts the reality of historical time that is intrinsic to this particular embodied form, a realization from which it seeks to flee in horror, back to the eternal verities of abstraction.

I had the honor of talking with Passô via Zoom in the aftermath of the 2021 Flaherty Seminar, during which I first encountered her work. We talked (with the expert assistance of translator

Raquel de Souza) about the evolution of her artistic practice, her approach to filmmaking, and her plans for an upcoming feature film.

Christopher Harris: I want to begin by asking how you arrived at being an artist.

Grace Passô: Well, it is impossible to speak about my relationship with art without speaking about my family. Because I am Brazilian, I'm a Black woman from a working-class family, and I have access to art circuits in Brazil, although I do not belong to the elite. The history of my family is linked to the means that I found to enter these art circuits in Brazil.

I have six sisters and brothers and our family has a history very common in Brazil: an impoverished family migrating from the interior [of the country] to a big city. And everyone in my family always had an artistic sensibility. I don't know why my brother plays the guitar or reads literature or goes to artistic events, but that has always been the case. I am the youngest and I am the only person in my family who had the possibility of trying to live as a professional artist; those doors were open to me. My brothers, for example—since very early on—they had to work in order to sustain the family. I was the only person who had the possibility of trying to work professionally with art. My sisters had a very important link with literature. So my childhood was always informed by literature. I read a lot and I learned a great deal about literature.

When I was 13 years old, I started to study stage acting. That's when I started to become interested in directing and in writing for the theater. I had to write and direct so that I could get closer to my characters, and so that I could create a theater in which my community could see itself.

I remember in the beginning of my theater courses that I had difficulty seeing myself in certain characters. I couldn't even fit into the costumes at the theater. None of them were my size and they wouldn't fit my height. I also started to realize how it bothered me that certain traditions of the theater were so distant—authors that I respected and that I loved profoundly, but who simply didn't fit me in my body. I wanted to have the symbolic universe of my life in these scenes. And the first play that I wrote, a play I am going to use for my first feature film, is about a family and takes place inside a home. I've always been invested in surreal situations. It's a family that lives with a hippopotamus for many years, and they don't realize

which included images that were a part of my childhood and youth. The yard was a space that was very important where I lived: the fruit in this yard, the relationship between time and nature. Above all there is this space of a Black middle-class/working-class background—which means profound exhaustion in which it is impossible to mourn, to lament. There is no time and possibility for that, so affection happens as a means of survival. All of the stories take place in this low-income, working-class family background space which I wrote so that I could see myself.

CH: I'm curious to know what more you would like to say about the feature you are working on.

GP: It is the history of a family. And I very much would like to film it in my house where I grew up, which is about to be sold. It is the history of a working-class Black Brazilian family; they feel there's a big problem inside this house, but they cannot solve it or understand what this problem is. And then at a certain point, the youngest child realizes that there is a hippopotamus that lives on the terrace of this home and nobody has ever noticed it. But when that happens, everybody in the family is then able to understand that they felt this problem for a long time, but they didn't know what it was. They decide to call the father to tell him that this hippopotamus is there. The child reveals that the hippopotamus has swallowed the father many years ago and nobody realized it.

This small fable is about the impossibility of mourning. My father died very young. He was 40 years old. And my family didn't have the chance to mourn because they had to work a lot. And mourning is an important issue when we talk about Black families in Brazil, because there's a daily life, a rhythm towards survival that prevents these families from mourning.

The film then measures this problem from a political perspective. This family realizes that they didn't feel the paternal presence because they did not have time. They're people who work driving for Uber and doing temporary gigs. They work all the time and they don't realize it. So the entry into the film is based on realistic circumstances, although this surreal story is there. There's a whole direction that creates a pact with the public from this realism of a Brazilian family in a certain Brazilian periphery. There's an Uber driver in the family, who works almost twenty hours a day. His car is like his unconscious mind, and he sleeps in the car. There's a bit of confusion between what is reality and when he is dreaming. The film presents itself in a realistic way, and slowly this realism becomes impossible.

CH: How do you think about the relationship between your ongoing theater work and your more recent work as a filmmaker? Is it an evolution, or do you feel like it's an expansion, or is it all part of one practice?

GP: Yes, no doubt it is an expansion. I started to think about film in 2016, from the moment when I first worked as an actress in cinema. I had several critical perspectives about the film [I was acting in], and I was left with a desire to write a film about the director. It was from this experience that I started to develop, to get involved in projects for cinema. I think about theater as a way to think about film. A work like **Dazed Flesh** has a theatrical nature, but at the same time, I was not interested in translating or transforming this play into a realistic movement with codes that were already conventional for film. I was interested in this in-between confusion. It has a texture that is more theatrical.

For me, cinema has to do with expansion. And since I come from theater, and I think along theatrical lines, I'm very interested in finding ways of overcoming realism. I may create strategies to deal with real lives in a more expanded way—not only based on that realism—so I create surreal situations. Perhaps these situations are able to address the stories that I want to create. And then we also know that there is this Black life in Brazilian society and in the world that is already surreal—it is already placed in our society as a surreal space.

CH: It seems that the main character of Dazed Flesh—the voice—occasionally abandons language, lapsing into sound rather than sense, becoming rhythmic expressions. It's quite musical and beautiful in those moments in which you seem to me to be improvising. What's the role, if any, of improvisation in this piece?

GP: Well, the text is 100 percent memorized. I do not improvise, except in one moment when I ask the public to give me one word, and the public says "lobster" and I repeat the word. I asked them not to tell me what word they were going to choose; in the film it is the only place where I improvise. Everything else is fixed text.

At the same time, my research has to do with finding the difference between text and speech. I tried to break with this formal,

stagnant way of speaking. My research is a way of dealing with the word in improvisation, although the text is memorized and I don't know if that's perceptible, if it's a bit of secret creation.

But I have dissected and separated the text from formal speech—it's my way of understanding and dealing with the word as improvisation, although the text is memorized. I have divided the text, as though it was music, in order to speak. I have dissected the different speeds, different durations, low pitch and high, high volume and low. But I haven't dissected it, marking it in the text methodically. It is something very natural. And since I wrote it, I have this score that is a musical improvisation. But I don't want people to realize this, so I try to find ways of omitting or hiding these separations in vocal qualities. And since the character is a voice, I knew that I needed to assign movement to this voice because my body is very stagnant. In order to provide movement, I had to modulate [the voice] to have it become slow, very slow and very rapid, and then speak until I lost my breath, speaking very low then very high. I designed these characteristics so that it seems like the voice is in movement.

[In the original play,] this part in which people scream a word and I repeat it, it usually lasts five minutes. It's a long time. And we started in 2016. It's very interesting because of all the political moments since 2016. Brazil has been dealing with a very high political fever. And when I started the first performance of this play, people used to scream Dilma [Rousseff]'s name, because she was the president who suffered a coup d'état. And then we went through the process of imprisonment of [Luiz Inácio] Lula [da Silva], the former Brazilian president, and people were screaming about several political topics. And then there's the current conservative president, Bolsonaro, who is a madman—

Dazed Flesh is a grand trip for each person who watches it—people are screaming very subjective things. But when people scream, I am able to realize a bit of the nature of the public of that day.

You also asked about silence. In the book on which the play is based, the silent parts are blank pages. Obviously, if this voice is a character, it is impossible to have people listening, if they don't hear the silence. Silence is the moment in which it seems like the vacant flesh becomes vacant for the voice. It's like this voice is testing this body. It is as though it is absent and then it populates itself and then it [re]populates, to understand if it really exists.

When I ask the public, "Did you miss me?"—there is a method referred to there. It's a double method for metaphor. It's one of the possible metaphors with which you can read **Dazed Flesh**. And one of the possible metaphors that has to do with this voice is discourse.

We live via a process of identity building in Brazil. This is more recent for Black people in Brazil vis-à-vis the United States; this process of racial identity construction is very different here. There is a whole pedagogy of our Black activists to try to understand the identity of this country.

For a long time, the country has been invested in the notion that we were, we are so mixed. So very mixed that we don't have a race because we don't need to have a race, because we are more than that. We are beyond that. That was the strategy to deal with racism in Brazil—that Brazil is so divine, so human and generous and divine that we don't need race. We are so mixed that there's no Black or white. That was the white colonizer strategy. And that has generated a lot of confusion in our subjectivities. The idea of building a discourse as a person of Black identity is often sold by the media in Brazil as something simple. It's as if it were simple for you to identify yourself with Blackness. But I think that building an identity discourse is very complex.

And therefore the voice is a complex voice—it is a somewhat wrong voice and that's why it comes and goes. We are building an existential discourse, as though we are creating a name for that body in that society. And we know that all of us human beings are singular, and that our names are political necessities, and necessities have several orders. But voice has to do with the notion of discourse and the attempt to create a discourse about oneself in society.

CH: You said that one of your motivations for writing came from the fact that the existing body of plays in Brazil did not fit your body. Dazed Flesh does not repair or redress your dissatisfaction, but it enacts the gulf between the voice and the body and therefore heightens the contradictions. What is the relationship between that early dissatisfaction and Dazed Flesh?

GP: I confess that I didn't do that consciously, but it makes

perfect sense. I have an obsession with creating situations that cause estrangement to the body. And hence the situation of a body that is in disharmony with speech; it is a strategy for the estrangement of a body, of an existence.

There is another text that I wrote a long time ago, about a family underneath a house that collapsed. The bodies are in very strange positions because they were buried under the rubble. This is an obsession of mine—creating situations that remove the body from a natural gaze, the common gaze.

There's something that I also seek. I look for ways of speaking about certain subject matters, like, for example, the fact that I'm Black—other ways of speaking that complicate issues of having this body and living in this body. I don't know why I think that the first idea I had in terms of the situation of **Dazed Flesh** has to do with that. It has to do with creating a situation where there's a very big difference between action, gesture, and movement, and the speech of discourse. Enhancing that difference was my point of departure, curating any strategic situation, in which the story of **Dazed Flesh** is presented through a voice, and then there's the body and the voice inside the body. It was a strategy of dismantling.