

TALKING QUEER

Archive, Activism, Creative Disruptions

Hosted by Caio Simões de Araújo

EPISODE 8 - THE ARCHIVE IS THE FUTURE: a conversation with Pamina Sebastião

In this conversation I have the pleasure of speaking with Pamina Sebastião. Pamina is a multidisciplinary visual artist, who uses their writings and their body to create a debate around coloniality in the context of Luanda, Angola. Today we talk about their work in the context of LGBTIQ activism in Angola, including the creation of the AIA, the *Arquivo de Identidade Angolano* (Angolan Identity Archive), and more recently their experimentation with the language of visual art through their project *Só Belo Mesmo*.

Pamina, welcome to the Podcast.

Thank you.

Let's start by talking about the Archive, about the AIA. How was the process of creating the Archive, how did it happen? I know it was a collective project, but I'd like to hear your narrative...

About the archive... when we started engaging the historical register, we had an extremely political motivation, in the sense of bringing up the question: what is our political position in relation to LGBTIQ struggles in Angola? This was something that I missed when I was working in the activist sector here in Luanda. I really missed spaces for questioning. We were already talking about gender, but only basic things, like: "gender is this". But there wasn't much questioning of "why things were like this". So we decided to create a website. It was such a nice creative process. We translated one or two things from the *Queer African Reader*, we uploaded some things by Zanele Muholi, there was also a manifesto, and then there was a series of testimonial videos. And then I met Líria de Castro, who is now the director of the archive. That was when things started to take on the proportion that they have today. We found a space and were able to identify concrete areas of intervention, mostly around the creation of content. But specific content on gender and sexuality. So, the archive emerged in a register of trying to explain three temporalities. The part relating to the books, to the translations we did, had to do with deconstructing the myth that homosexuality is not African.

It had to do with the historical recovery of the past in order to change a narrative about the present, a LGBT-phobic narrative, a narrative based on a certain notion of African identity that excludes us. And at the same time the archive was also about preserving the present, the issues facing LGBTIQ people today. We produced content in different formats, but always navigating the past and the present. I'm not sure if we were really navigating into the future, or the possibility of the future, but maybe the archive's very existence was precisely that, navigating into the future. The archive is the future. When I say future I am talking about the next generation, of another type of activism, which hopefully can reconcile all the experiences we archived and recorded, and can continue to produce a narrative that preserves us. The archive was a place of navigating the past and the present, with an ideal for the future. But it was more than that: it was about us being able to say that we exist.

It's indeed a very powerful project. But I'm still curious to know a little more about why an archive, and why not another form of organization? What was there in that idea of an archive that sparked your interest, where did it come from?

I can't remember when it happened, but I remember watching a documentary about a Lesbian Archive, which I later had the opportunity to visit in Brooklyn, in New York. I remember being very impressed. At that time, it bothered me that the community work we did was almost invisible. So, the idea of the archive comes from the thought: but hold on, the knowledge that we are creating by living as LGBTIQ people, by living together, by forming a community, it is also very important, and it needs to be registered. If you ask me, I think that by having this attitude we were challenging the coloniality of knowledge. We wanted what we said in our daily lives to also be considered knowledge. And this battle continues. And the archive has this potential, of registering how we met, how our community-building was done. All of this speaks of knowledge production. So, when I saw the Lesbian Archive in Brooklyn, I was inspired. Because I was able to see, to learn from the experience of those lesbian women. And I was able to learn because someone had valued their knowledge, their experience, and had registered it. That's when I realized the potential of the archive. That's why we decided to create an archive, because we had a multiplicity of registers: how we love, how we create a community, various registers of our existence. And the most important thing is that by living we create knowledge. That is the power of the archive.

Pamina, after several years, you decided to depart LGBTIQ activism. You created your project *Só Belo Mesmo*, which involves various forms of artistic intervention, including writing, photography, and performance. How did this process of migrating from activism to the visual arts happen?

Listen, it was a healing process. One of my first issues with activism had to do with the NGO-ization of the collectives, of the activist groups. Over time, the effects of this process of NGO-ization started to really bother me. And, honestly, I started not liking the person I was becoming in activism. So, I removed myself. I deleted my Facebook, my Instagram, I left the collectives I was part of. *Só Belo Mesmo* appeared as a project at this time. I've been writing for a long time, but I never realized the potential of writing myself fully. One day, I wrote a text in a single breath. And that's how the project came about, with the question: *e se fosse só belo mesmo?* (what if it was just beautiful?). The text seemed to be about beauty, but it had nuances about issues of gender, of race, of class. And for the first time in a text I wrote all of myself. After I left the collectives, I started writing more. It wasn't yet a project, it wasn't anything I thought would become what it is today. And these writings started my healing

process. The Brazilian writer Conceição Evaristo has a very cool term, *escrevivência*, meaning one writing one's own life experiences. I love this term. And for the first time, I wrote my own life. At the time, I already had my nude photos, which I had taken for another project related to issues of care, of well-being, of our pursuit of the ideal body, which is also linked to issues of class. So, I decided to build a website, because for the first time I was proud of my photos, of my writing. And today there are a lot of things in there. There is a second series which is called *Estando* (Being).

And what is *Estando* about?

It came from my thinking: how does a body like mine inhabit? How can I just "be"? It's a question that might seem silly, but it's very deep. Because we weren't taught to just "be" with ourselves, doing nothing. From childhood, there has always been a pressure to "do". If you are a girl, you have to be doing something, right? Which relates to the construction of our gender roles. And I started to question: how does this deprive us of reaching our potential elsewhere? If I hadn't decided to question or limit this urge to "do", I don't think I would be in this creative moment in my life.

What really interests me about your project is that you directly face the colonial legacies in Angolan society. I am especially interested in your use of the term "gender racism". I wanted to hear more about it.

Honestly, I started navigating this concept with bell hooks and Grada Kilomba. Speaking about the tangle of race and gender is an intersectional exercise, right? And it allows us to talk about the bodies of black women, the vulnerability of these bodies. I really like this topic because in the case of Angola, of Luanda, this vulnerability is striking. I've been trying to navigate this with the idea of coloniality of gender. We have to be able to say: "there was a historical time of colonization, but coloniality is not over". Because we are a black-majority country, some people may think that it doesn't make sense to speak about racism. But when we speak about racism in Angola, we are speaking exactly about colonial ideas that still exist. And I think that with this concept of "gender racism" we are able to bring the experiences of black women to the center of debate.

The idea of coloniality is productive because it allows us to see and question the living legacies of colonialism. But it can also be a bit frustrating. By that I mean that it may be difficult to imagine alternatives to it. How do you navigate this question?

I think the frustration starts when we begin to see how various forms of coloniality intertwine with one another to feed the entire machinery. I am not sure how we can think of alternatives, but I have two questions. First, we exist in a state of constant survival. And I wonder: how do we overcome this, and start living? When I say living, I mean living fully. I mean being well mentally, emotionally, and economically. The second question is: how can we bypass the machinery of coloniality so that this living, this well-being, can actually happen? These questions will continue to exist, and I think they are obviously part of the process of decolonization. For me, they demand that we take a break to rethink, to analyze deeply, what living truly means for us. And I think *Só Belo Mesmo* is an exercise in wanting to know how one lives. So, I don't have an answer.

I guess no one does. Pamina, in closing, what would you say to a new generation of queer activists or artists who are grappling with similar questions? Today, when you look back at your trajectory, what would you say?

I think it's a very difficult path, but I think that walking this path through the arts gives us the tools to think inclusively, to consider other forms of society. And I say the arts because it's a medium that has saved me. I think other people are using other tools, but they are still walking the walk. To answer your question, I don't have any advice. I just think people need to walk the walk. Along the way, you will find what individually can help you to continue on. And the arts have helped me profoundly. I think people go on different paths, and that, too, is beautiful. As long as we walk, we will eventually get there, and we will set up a possible society in which we can finally live.

Beautiful. Pamina, thank you so much for the chat, I loved it.

Thank you for the invitation.