

DOSSIER “Human development, drama and perezhivania:  
Vygotsky and the question of the psychology of the actor’s creation”<sup>1 2</sup>

## **Social theater of affections: on the power of theatrical arts to overcome oppressive school relations<sup>3 4 5 6</sup>**

### *Teatro social dos afetos: sobre a potência da arte cênica na superação de relações opressivas na escola*

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## Abstract

Considering, based on Vigotski's reflections on the actor's creative work, that character building can be a transformative experience in which the body and affections play a crucial role, we propose a scenic experience that transports such potentialities to social relations as a strategy for overcoming oppression at school. It is the Social Theater of Affections (TSA), the assumptions of which are based on Spinoza, Vigotski and Boal, especially on the concepts of intelligent emotion, catharsis, body, singular/universal dialectic and ethical-political suffering. As an example, we discuss a scenic intervention performed in municipal school aimed at confronting gender violence. The scenic actions place the actor as a dramatist and the audience as an actor, intertwining them in the feeling of the common and in the power to imagine and rehearse strategies to overcome oppressions crystallized in affections and social relations. Thus, in the creative act, individual suffering is transformed into collective action.

**Keywords:** theatre, catharsis, body, singular/universal dialectic, affections, school, sociohistorical psychology, ethical-political suffering

## Resumo

*Considerando, a partir das reflexões de Vigotski sobre o trabalho criativo do ator, que a construção da personagem pode ser uma vivência transformadora em que o corpo e os afetos têm papel preponderante, apresentamos uma proposta cênica que transporta tais potencialidades às relações sociais como estratégia de superação da opressão social na escola. Trata-se do Teatro Social dos Afetos (TSA), cujos pressupostos são baseados em Spinoza, Vigotski e Boal, com destaque aos conceitos de emoção inteligente, catarse, corpo, dialética singular/universal e sofrimento ético-político. Exemplificamos a partir de uma intervenção cênica em escolas municipais, visando ao enfrentamento à violência de gênero na escola. As ações cênicas colocam o ator também como dramaturgo e a plateia como ator, entrelaçando-os no sentimento do comum e na potência de imaginar e ensaiar estratégias de superação de opressões cristalizadas nos afetos e nas relações sociais. Assim, no ato criador o sofrimento individual se transforma em ação coletiva.*

**Palavras-chave:** teatro, catarse, corpo, dialética singular/universal, afetos, escola, psicologia sócio-histórica, sofrimento ético-político

## Introduction

This article presents the Social Theater of Affections (TSA) as a psychosocial intervention methodology developed during four years of activities in the public elementary school network – final years in the city of São Paulo, to motivate students to create student unions, reduce the violence and school dropouts, using the methodology of the Theater of the Oppressed (TO), under the coordination of Kelly C. Fernandes, one of the authors of this text.

TSA is a derivation of TO, a theatrical methodology systematized by Augusto Boal (1931-2009), which aims to transform every day realities marked by inequality and oppression through concrete social actions such as the democratization of artistic making, the protagonism of the spectator, the liberation of the oppressed, and the power of theater as a human language.

The activities began with forum theater, one of TO's techniques. It involves creating plays based on true stories of oppression about which the group wants to talk to a specific audience. The play's protagonist is the oppressed, and the antagonist is the oppressor. These plays are constructed collectively and mediated by the "joker,"<sup>7</sup> so named by Boal (2005), who, as well as being the master of ceremonies, can be the mediator of the group process.

Forum Theater – perhaps the most democratic form of TO and certainly the best known and practiced worldwide – uses or can use all the resources of all known theatrical forms, adding one essential characteristic: the spectators – whom we call spect-actors – are invited to enter the scene and, acting theatrically and not just using words, reveal their thoughts, desires, and strategies that can suggest, to the group to which they belong, a range of possible alternatives invented by themselves: theater should be a rehearsal for action in real life and not an end in itself' (Boal, 2005, p. 19).

This technique was used to encourage reflection on social inequalities, violence at school, and the importance of collective action to tackle this unjust social condition. The idea was also to train teachers as multipliers of the Theater of the Oppressed. However, during our activities with teachers and young people, we realized the need to introduce the Rainbow of Desire technique (Boal, 2002), deepen it, and create other elements to deal with the affections that insisted on demonstrating their positive centrality in the process of raising awareness of

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that we agree with this term used in TO, which, according to Santos (2016), is an artist-activist who is constantly learning. This concept will be better explored below.

oppressive social forces. Thus, we created new games and techniques such as affection and institutions, the “unlisteners,” and group agreements<sup>8</sup>.

We soon realized that, before the political action and supporting it, were the nodes of oppression and violence, which were, in fact, the subjects most chosen for the performances. The themes of the plays proposed by the young people revolved around the daily conflicts experienced at school and in the family and the suffering experienced. In these instances, they reported suicide attempts, self-mutilation, sexual abuse, harassment, homophobia, abandonment, rejection by their parents, and domestic violence involving drugs. Teachers complained about violence related to hierarchy in the school institution, such as problems with school staff, including sabotage of school projects, gender issues, and student violence. During the creation and presentations of the plays, it was possible to perceive circuits of oppression within the school environment, in which the socially oppressed became oppressors of their peers without fixed places. Often, a person who was an agent of oppression in one situation was oppressed in another. Also, the school became an accomplice to violence when it called the police to resolve a bullying issue<sup>9</sup> and because violence was systematically produced in the school environment, perpetuating itself. Looking at Kelly’s account:<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> These games and the methodology are still being investigated regarding dramaturgy and new games and techniques. The games and techniques are described in the ebook *Teatro Social dos Afetos nas Escolas* (Di Bertolli & Garcia, 2021) and part of them in the dissertation *Teatro Social dos Afetos* (Fernandes, 2019). We emphasize that applying the TSA requires practice. This research was only possible because the coordinator and the Coletivo Garoa group, which used TSA in schools, already had years of practice in the covered techniques. The article is too short to explain all the relationships between TSA and TO. Therefore, we invite readers interested in learning more about these issues to consult the bibliography found in the references, including the master’s thesis *Teatro do Oprimido: em busca de transformação social* (Fernandes, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> We will use the word bullying in this text, considering that it circulates among young people and in the school community to indicate school harassment between peers. However, considering that the word can mask tensions linked to oppressions such as racism, machismo, and homophobia, we highlight that its meaning in the text is close to the idea of “small power syndrome” by Saffioti (1989), which indicates the illusory feeling of power that reproduces violence between peers, contaminating all relationships at school and covering up structural violence.

<sup>10</sup> Kelly C. Fernandes, project coordinator and co-author of this text.

“During the period of training teachers in TO techniques, I carried out weekly support visits.<sup>11</sup> On the day that the students presented a play about bullying, I sat with the audience, paying attention to the lines from the play and also to the parallel conversations that took place in the audience. A boy next to me was hitting and humiliating a smaller boy with Autism spectrum disorder. The brutality was so shocking that I had to intervene, asking him to stop hitting the little one, but it didn’t help. The unmeasured aggression was being carried out in action while the “fictional” scene about violence was presented. It is worth noting that, during the scene, the military police were in the management room, resolving “a bullying issue.” In fact, this was the reason for the director not to watch the play. So, outraged by the violence, it was impossible not to intervene in an incisive, unfortunately reactive, manner. It was known that some young people attempted suicide due to “bullying.” Furthermore, that day, a girl gave her statement to one of the TO team, narrating her desire to take her life because of the continuous and unbearable violence at school. So, I sharply said to the young man who never stopped tormenting the autistic boy: “Did you know that many people kill themselves because of bullying?” He replied emphatically: “Yes, so what? I will kill myself too when I’m 18, and I will kill everyone who hurt me.” I kept quiet and remembered the talk at school that he was a “problem” boy. I was intrigued and looked for him to talk right after the scene. It was touching because when I looked into the boy’s eyes, he was moved as if he hadn’t been looked at in a long time. His eyes watered, and he covered it up. The feeling was that, for a moment, he had stopped being a “ghost,” we started talking, and it was evident that he had a stutter that weakened him. His weakness demystified his bully attitude, contradicting the boy in torn pants and bad-looking. He told about his life without a mother, about abandonment and abuse. The narrative was permeated by suffering so that the “problem” boy, aggressive and who beat the smallest and weakest, showed himself to be a sensitive and suffering human being. Soon, I thought about the power of theater and the bonds in a group to welcome the boy. So, I asked him if he wanted to do theater, and he immediately replied, “Yes!”

Right at the entrance the next day, I found the same boy. He looked at me and started hitting another child in front of me, with his gaze turned toward me, making sure I saw his aggressive action. I kept thinking about the meaning of that attitude, which needed my watchful eye as a spectator. Was it a cry for help? A regret about the emotion expressed in the previous meeting? A demonstration that was totally stuck with the problem label?” (Kelly Fernandes’s account).

There was not a single question or an answer. Still, a single certainty: behind the violence was the boy’s terrible suffering, demonstrating that it is not an abstract entity with its own life

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<sup>11</sup> Support visits were carried out in schools during the TSA application process, so that it was possible to ensure that teachers were not alone in facing difficulties in reapplication of the methodology.

or inherent to the boy's personality or the school walls. It is fueled by sad affections, as Spinoza teaches us when analyzing the causes of servitude, which is equivalent to violence, affections of hate, fear, and humiliation, among others (Spinoza, 1677/2013).

Violence at school cannot be reduced to the relationship between an oppressive teacher and an oppressed student or a good student and a bad student. This concept tends to blame, pathologize, and/or criminalize young people, stigmatizing them as “problem” students and their families as “unstructured” and with “cultural lack.” In this way, the suffering of children and young people disguised the prejudice and stereotypes reproduced in the institution<sup>12</sup>. Violence at school is quite complex, involving the guardianship council, the police, medicine, and the Psychosocial Care Center (CAPS)<sup>13</sup>, but not in an interactive way, looking at the child/adolescent as a whole. Instead of articulating themselves, what happens is that these fields shift responsibility to each other so that violence continues to circulate in institutions, one forwarding it to the other, thus endorsing actions contrary to their objectives.

It became increasingly apparent during the theater activities that we were not dealing with violence or a violent boy but with an affective climate marked by sad passions, such as melancholy, fear, anger, hatred, and revenge, involving students, teachers, and administrative staff. An environment in which oppression was the model of relationship. The teacher, who suffers gender oppression in her home, is the oppressor in the classroom; children and adolescents who suffer from brutal inequality and injustice become tormentors of their peers, reproducing gender and racial oppression against disabled and weaker people. This reproduction of oppression among equals is one of the pillars of alienation: the breaking of the common, of the union of those who share structural oppression, which could strengthen the collective struggle against oppression.

We also found that teachers felt, even if confusedly, that these sad, polarizing, and violent affections were immune to reason: no advice, reflection, or punishment could persuade them to change, leading teachers to use violence and criminalize sad passions.

In this affective atmosphere that permeated relationships at school, which was not conducive to the objective of encouraging political participation or tackling school dropouts, it

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<sup>12</sup> Patto (2015), in her study on school failure, points out the history of a movement at school that, by proposing to work with affection and emotion, isolates subjects, making them “problem students,” subjects who need to be “normalized.”

<sup>13</sup> Entity linked to the SUS.

was necessary to work, firstly, on the oppressive nodes supported by the institution. However, going further, working on the sad affections that fed them at the same time that they were produced by them. This led us to delve deeper into the analysis of affections, looking for two thinkers who overcame the reason/emotion dichotomy: Vigotski, Russian psychologist and art critic, creator of the socio-historical theory of the psyche; and his favorite philosopher, Spinoza, a revolutionary who introduced affections as a place for ethics and a field for politics<sup>14</sup>.

## Emotion

According to Vigotski (1926/2010), no one acts, thinks, and feels without being emotional. Emotions constitute the motivation for our actions and are the result of our social condition. That boy who hit another, a younger boy with Autism spectrum disorder, was not afraid that he would die because he himself would die soon. The scene reveals an affective drama driven by hope(lessness), the essence of the tragic spirit, leading to resignation and/or violence. It is the feeling that life cannot offer any satisfaction; therefore, it does not deserve our loyalty or our effort, imprisoning us in the inexorability of the present that frightens us.

“When the mind imagines its own lack of power, it is saddened by it and seeks signs of confidence in certain ideas through the power of those who express them” (Spinoza, 1677/2013, p. 227). Since the beginning of our interventions at the school, the resurgence, in the institution, of sad passions, driven by the desire to destroy other people’s joy, by envy and hatred, was visible. Little by little, we realized what we had already learned from Spinoza and Vigotski: socio-historical relationships are lived and sustained by networks of affectivities that weave the daily life of the school community, expressed in bodies and rituals. From the Spinozist perspective (Spinoza, 1677/1977), oppression is seen as a regime of sad people in which everyone is a servant of fear, even with different privileges. Those who exercise power need the fear of the oppressed to maintain themselves; at the same time, they fear losing control and need the sadness of those under them to live. Those who suffer domination, in turn, are afraid of the oppressor’s power and violence, often being forced to renounce their autonomy and

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<sup>14</sup> The objective is not to point out flaws in Boal’s work, as a great thinker is never reductionist, but to indicate the threads he launches so that others can advance his work, including emotion and catharsis. Boal reflects on emotion, especially when he highlights sensitive and symbolic thinking as dimensions of aesthetics. “Thinking is above all feeling,” he says, as always, teaching a psychology class. Also, inspired by Stanislavski, he talks about the value of emotion in the actor’s interpretation.

freedom. Once in the realm of alienating passions, these oppress their peers, creating markers of social differentiation, especially gender, as already narrated above.

To characterize these affections of those who suffer inequality and oppression, Sawaia (1999) uses the expression “ethical-political suffering,” aiming to highlight that the affections synthesize oppression and inequality in the subjective dimension. This concept allows us to work on oppression in a singular, particular, and universal dialectic, supporting the idea that it is social, historical, economic, and political, at the same time that it is sustained, experienced, and lived singularly, based on social relations and affections that they produce. Therefore, as Spinoza teaches us, to analyze and treat violence, one must not criticize and eliminate the affections that sustain it, but understand them to transform them (Spinoza, 1677/1977, p. 11).

Thus reflecting, the philosopher demonstrates to us his revolutionary thesis that ethical life is in the affections. It begins when the strongest passions of joy overcome the weaker ones, related to fear, hatred, revenge, and envy. Affections are not contingent; they are ontological. They reflect the increase or decrease in our power to act and think. When encounters do not match our power, reducing it, the mind imagines the body’s impotence, which is experienced as sadness. When the opposite happens, we feel joy. In other words, affection is the marker of the variation in my life power. There is an existential connection between joyful affections and autonomy, which, in turn, is linked to active resistance and the feeling of the common, therefore, to citizenship. The opposite occurs with sad affections linked to servitude, violence, and vengeful polarization (Spinoza, 1677/2013).

This conception of emotion guides TSA<sup>15</sup>: rational emotion or emotional reason<sup>16</sup>, which leads to its other central analytical category, catharsis, as an aesthetic reaction of art.

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<sup>15</sup> The TSA is designed to work with communities and groups, facilitating the experience of emotions never experienced before and searching for appropriate ideas about these affectations in a democratic environment, which tensions relationships toward empowering those subject to social transformation.

<sup>16</sup> It is essential to highlight the zone of resonance between TSA and TO regarding emotion, represented by Boal’s phrase: “emotion in itself, disordered and chaotic, is worthless. We cannot speak of emotion without reason or, conversely, of reason without emotion [...]” (Boal, 2006, p. 7).

## Vygotskian catharsis<sup>17</sup>

Considering that oppression is experienced as sad passions, especially hatred, humiliation, fear, and revenge that entangle individuals in violent relationships and that an emotion is not transformed by an idea but by the action of a more powerful and opposite emotion, the TSA bets on Vygotskian catharsis, characterizing itself as cathartic theater.

The catharsis of TSA is not Aristotelian; it does not aim at harmonizing, venting, or controlling emotions in the form of laughter or crying within the paradigm of adaptation, but the confrontation with contrary and more powerful ones, leading spectators and actors to experience emotions they have never experienced before, to change the constellation of negative affections that keep them in servitude<sup>18</sup>.

Analyzing violence at school from this perspective, it is understood that it would not be the brutality and isolation of some young people or their punishment that would change the relational scenario; on the contrary, with opposite emotions of generosity, recognition, and friendship among young people. “It is not through weapons [in the case of young people, violence, however, that tempers are pacified, but through love and generosity” (Spinoza, 1677/2013, p. 353).

It was necessary to imagine and offer other ways for the body to affect and be affected by other bodies, to imagine previously impossible things to think about, and to create new practices in everyday life that would leave the automated pattern and the realm of sad passions<sup>19</sup>. In this context, the TSA began serving as a space for experimenting with the differences and motivating collective action. Students considered violent began to be seen as beings of passion and imagination, neither good nor bad, who suffer oppression but oppress each other, illusorily thinking they have power under the forces of structural capitalist and colonialist inequality that

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<sup>17</sup> Vygotski was a defender of theater as a pedagogical and revolutionary instrument. He was an art critic and looked to psychology to understand the reception of the work of art, concluding that psychology needs art and not the other way around, reflections that he publishes in his first book, *The Psychology of Art* (1965/1999), in which he dialogues with Stanislavski, Tolstoy, and several other Russian avant-garde artists, and presents his assumptions about art and catharsis.

<sup>18</sup> Boal, in his writings, encouraged us to move forward concerning studies on catharsis in the TSA; in *The Rainbow of Desire*, he says: “The purpose of the Theater of the Oppressed is not to create rest, balance, but to create the imbalance that initiates action. Its goal is to dynamize. This dynamization and the action that comes from it (exercised by the expect-actor) destroy harmful blocks that prohibit the performance of this action. This means that it purifies the spectators and it produces a catharsis. Catharsis from harmful blockages. Welcome!” (Boal, 2002, p. 83)

<sup>19</sup> “Joy is dynamic, social, and critical; sadness tends to be immobile, solitary, and fatalistic” (Boal, 2009, p. 241)

crystallize stereotyped identities and affections at school. There were not the oppressed and the oppressor, the violent and the compliant, but beings seeking to persevere in existence, a desire that is never destroyed. Even when trained or desensitized, the body and mind do not lose the power of life.

Here, we have the TSA ontology. It breaks with static and monolithic views of perverse social determinations on the oppressed, which understand that the poor do not have affective subtleties and that social determination is absolute, creating two types of people: those who have the right to joyful emotions and those who do not. Its conception of the human being as a being of desire and imagination demonstrates that determinations, however severe, cannot destroy the power of life that characterizes all beings and that the human being is not good or bad but a being of passion and imagination, whose psyche has to be analyzed as a drama, fluctuating and conflicting. TSA aims to recover the positivity of emotions to knowledge, understanding that they do not occupy a hierarchically inferior place to conscience or reason, a risk that the exercise of TO runs. However, Boal affirms the union between reason and emotion.

These assumptions guide TSA's forms of action and lead us to inspiration in the Rainbow of Desire. These are also the elements of TO restorative circles<sup>20</sup>. Below, we present some of the dimensions of the TSA's way of operating:

1. Guarantee of the joint distribution of emotional experiences in the actor-spectator relationship so that the spectator does not occupy a passive position, in contrast to Stanislavski, who emphasizes the former's ability to seduce or enchant the latter. For Vigotski, the actor's art provokes the spectator's interest in the surrounding social environment, not his artistic skills or psychotechnique. This is because the function of the role represented is to be a "generalized semantic image."
2. Common feeling and co-emotion: TSA, in line with what Vigotski (1965/1999) says, does not aim for the contagion of affection; it does not seek that the other actors in the group, or even the spectators, are moved by emotions identical to those of the character,

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<sup>20</sup> Boal's Rainbow of Desire techniques inspired us to craft the TSA. These are techniques considered introspective, games, and performances that use words and images to theatricalize introjected oppressions, which aim to show where they originated. They are always related to social life (Boal, 2005). Restorative circles also inspired us in their practices; they are a modality of Restorative Justice, which, in its circular practice, seeks to build a space of trust without judgment, in which, through a generating question, personal stories are told, which make it possible to repair relationships, holding the perpetrator of the violence and the community involved in the process responsible for fixing the damage caused by the violence. It is understood that all participants have unmet needs that need to be addressed. In this way, a space is built for consensus on how repair will occur.

but which promote new experiences. It would be deplorable if theater was reduced to contagion. “We cannot even admit the idea that its role is reduced to communicating feelings and that it does not imply any power over its feelings.” (Vigotski, 1965/1999, p. 310). This distinction is fundamental, considering that co-emotion can be highly alienating and overwhelming, as often happens when watching soap operas or series – in which, for the most part, one experiences the character’s emotion and moves away from real life and themselves, taking on a parallel fantasy life. A sad play aims not only to cause sadness in spectators but to transform sadness into something different, to promote estrangement, reflection, and the transformation of emotions and ideas.

“[if] I experience with Othello his pain, his jealousy, and torment, or Macbeth’s terror before the specter of Banquo, it is a co-emotion; If I fear for Desdemona, when she is still unaware of the danger she is in, it is the spectator’s own emotion, which needs to be distinguished from co-emotion” (Vigotski, 1965/1999, p. 262).

This is how TSA aims to affect the emotion of the spect-actor, which involves imagination and singularity, looking at them as a “witness,” and working on the feeling of the common. The witness, who is not being oppressed in the same way, can contribute to maintaining oppression when they remain silent and choose not to lose their privileges. Witness: understood, from the perspective of Paulo Freire and Desmond Tutu, as occupying a different place within the forces of oppression, has, in general, a power to act on the oppressive forces in another way and, specifically, following the experienced relational space. Being a witness does not remove them from the place of exclusion but places them differently within the forces of oppression in that space.

3. Body: One of the theater’s strengths in schools is the possibility of working with the powerful living body for action and the mind for reflection. In addition to the ideas, the body images created in the theatrical games developed at school and in consideration of the affectations they promoted, made it possible to observe the bodies, their gestures, their rituals, and the social codes embedded in them, as well as the suffering and small joys that configure the daily violence in schools. The body that suffers servitude can lose the sensitivity of being affected and affect how Spinoza (1967/2013) speaks, being

guided by social stereotypes. TSA seeks guidance from TO to expand the field of expressiveness of bodies and is inspired by *gestus* and Brecht for scenic compositions in which the body and its expressions reveal the social contradictions in each character so that each one can feel with the other, causing the young person to face unknown feelings.

4. Concerning the creation of the character, it is necessary to highlight diversity, collective work, improvisation, and the junction between author and actor: the rigidity of identity, of affectations, is contrary to the power of life, the bodies are power in action, the fixation on pain, suffering, is a constraint on the possibilities of the composition of a body, contrary to the necessary order of its nature (Spinoza, 1677/2013, p. 179). Hence, the resource of playing different characters and reversing roles at the TSA. The more diverse the encounters, the more varied the affectations, and the more capable the power of our bodies and minds is to act and think.

The actor can be activated physically to create a character's life. For example, another can chase the actor and fear running away from danger. Other currents look for fear in the actor's memories and access these emotions by lending these memories to the character without needing physical action to drive the emotion. The TSA considers the technique of experiencing the scene as a driver of emotion: even though work with memory is intensely activated in the activities, the aim is to create and experience encounters between the characters and the audience.

5. The TSA also works with the joker, classically considered the mediator and promoter of the debate, considering, as Boal said (Barbara Santos, Helen Sarapecck, Geo Britto, and other jokers) that they are never neutral and always have one side, the side of the oppressed. They never fail to question or even prevent modes of oppression from operating during the application of theater. For example, in a forum theater session where subtle oppressive forms may be reinforced, the joker must position themselves to promote catharsis. They work according to Paulo Freire's proposal for generating questions to encourage debate. In fact, they must be questions to which the joker does not know the answer to constitute a genuine dialogue, as it is not about reaffirming our opinions. But the "how" you ask matters as much as the "what" you ask because the joker works with emotions. Thus, they can help promote catharsis, the confrontation of

emotions and reflection on them, understanding that they constitute the subtext of consciousness.

In more than 20 years of daily practice and research into the performance of the Theater of the Oppressed, we see the fragility of the joker and the importance of enunciating these moments for a collective reflection, as proposed in the article. They are human beings and are susceptible to being affected by the speeches of the spect-actors, which can influence the debate, not always promoting dialogue in search of social transformation. The joker can be angry and will be: the question is how to use it strategically for transformation processes and not just to produce more violence, especially in the school context in which the text is inserted.

The groups create the pieces, which are often based on real stories, individual or collective, or on their experiences, which are collectively transformed into metaphors and fiction, in addition to being connected to actual data from the social context that involves the theme of the part. There is no prior dramaturgical text; it is built in the group's creative process, in the speeches of each character, as well as the physical actions and *gestus*<sup>21</sup> on stage.

The TSA prioritizes the collective creation of dramaturgy, which gives freedom to not get caught up in "how to say" a ready-made text so that it doesn't become mechanized and takes a long time for the actors to prepare. This does not mean there is no work to demechanize the lines because even if they are created by the actors, the tendency is to crystallize a way of speaking that is often unrelated to what the character feels or desires. TSA is always improvisation. When the group's creation is presented, the actors, in addition to representing the play, improvise with the audience, who share the spotlight.

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<sup>21</sup> As understood in this article, expanding the field of expressiveness as a *gestus* refers to the concept developed by Brecht (2005). It concerns a construction of gestures that denote the character's social situation, pointing out contradictions and ambiguities. In other words, it refers to a scenic composition that reveals the contradictions imposed by the social field. The actor's work of modulating their body, voice, and own social mask contributes to the fact that the accentuation of the word or the way of walking, for example, interferes with the character's logic. Brecht (2005) brings the concept of *gestus*, which is essential for thinking about the actor's body and social masks. Thus, the images in the theatrical scene or game should not be seen only as part of individuality but as social attitudes. Investigating them and analyzing how the body relates to others in certain circumstances is extremely important so that it is possible to understand the characters beyond their character. "*Gestus* is made up of a simple movement of one person in front of another, of a particular social or corporate way of behaving. (Pavis *apud* Piacentini, 2018, p. 35)". "The attitudes that the characters take toward each other and that constitute what we call gestural dominance. Body attitudes, intonations, and facial expressions are determined by a social *gestus*: the characters curse each other, greet each other, and exchange advice. (Brecht *apud* Piacentini, 2018, p. 35)".

To illustrate, we present a scene from the TSA: “The case of the shorts.” The following scene is one of the first activities of the TSA, which helped in its creation<sup>22</sup>. It took place in a classroom that was considered a “problem,” as it brought together many “problem students” or “difficult to deal with” students in the same space. It is essential to mention that this educational institution has a long history that supports these current stigmas. The group that participated had approximately 25 students, aged between 13 and 15 years old, including young people in wheelchairs, pregnant teenagers, autistic people, and boys on supervised release, who had already decided that the topic chosen by the students would be machismo. The room had a significant polarization of opinions on the matter; some girls were feminist activists with a lot of information about their fight for their rights; some boys were convinced that machismo was a “natural” position of privilege that should not be questioned<sup>23</sup>. Still, a part of the room preferred not to take a stance. It is essential to highlight that we had not been informed that the topic discussed would be machismo; In fact, not even the teacher knew. It was a surprise for the entire team to organize the young people waiting for our arrival at school.

The young people at this school were already familiar with the debate mediated by theater, as there was a group active for over a year that even held public presentations at the school. The previous year, a play about machismo had been presented for students in the final years of elementary school at that school, bringing together more than 200 young people in the courtyard to watch the play. The debate promoted by this play was fervent; it caused a lot of controversy among young people, but it did not cause changes in relationships, leading us to review the issue of affection in theater aimed at overcoming domination. The creation of the TSA began there.

The play “The Case of the Shorts,” presented in 2014, was created by the group that participated in the TO aimed at developing the school guild. It dealt with how girls, both on the street and at school, suffered harassment. It pointed rigidly to the problem of wearing short clothes associated with sexual abuse. After sharing real stories of oppression they experienced at school, this group of students chose machismo as an urgent topic to discuss. The students

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<sup>22</sup> Narration taken from Fernandes’ doctoral dissertation (2019).

<sup>23</sup> It is worth highlighting that we are not equalizing the group concerning the oppressions that circulate in the classroom. Machismo is not equivalent to the feminist struggle; feminism is a liberation struggle, and machismo represents conservatism. The point is that the two groups were on a battlefield where machismo needed combat. To do so, the boys needed to feel uncomfortable in their positions. This led them to play women with whom they had affective bonds.

narrated several stories of oppression that they lived due to their gender. For example, when the girls bent down to pick up something from the floor, the boys started to whistle and “make fun.” The girls reported embarrassing speeches that they heard on the street and said that the boys drew “obscenities” (penises) on the school chairs for them to sit on, making fun of them.

At the time, we saw many stigmas, such as women who hook up with men are “hookers,” and men who are with women are studs; women have to take care of household chores, and men do not; women who wear certain clothes may be discriminated against; between others. In turn, the boys in this group reported difficulty expressing themselves freely, as any type of manifestation other than sexist attitudes was understood as homosexuality, leading to violence. The boys also talked about their discomfort with the pejorative tone accompanying the word “faggot.” Even though the boys in the group were not homosexuals, they reported that they suffered from homophobia. Therefore, the issue of gender and sexuality was seen by them as something urgent to be debated within the school space, to even call into question bullying, which, according to young people, occurred, in large part, as a result of the discrimination that occurred, constitutes from this theme.

Thus, the creation of the play began, which narrated the experience of a student who faced “bullying” representing gender violence due to her clothes, until she reached the extreme of suffering sexual abuse. When the play premiered at the school where the young actors studied, the discussions held were controversial. The most fervent ones revolved around the costumes worn by the girls, which exempted the boys from blame. It was repeated, including the girls, that if a girl wore short clothing, such as shorts, she “was asking to be abused.” In fact, both the proposal for the scene and the comments were made by girls who agreed with the representation of sexual abuse of “girls who didn’t dress properly.” After the play, a group of girls waited for the actresses to fight; They wanted to beat up these girls who “were full of themselves.” The project team needed to accompany the group, mediating the conversation outside the school to prevent physical aggression. However, polarization continued to appear in the speeches and actions that the play triggered at school.

Theater made polarization explicit but did not resolve it. It is worth considering that we made a mistake in promoting violent clashes between young people and taking an angry position in the face of the public’s sexist opinions. Evidently, the angry attitude from the actors and crew only increased hatred in subjects with different views and did not reduce harassment at school.

In fact, it did not reduce violence, although, positively, it encouraged the desire to debate the subject further<sup>24</sup>.

Ultimately, the discussion, mediated by theater, shed light on machismo in this school, which was routine and almost naturalized, starting to cause strangeness. In fact, some teachers were mobilized, who created a space to discuss issues of gender and violence at school, developing extracurricular activities on the topic. However, after these experiences, the school coordination convinced the supervisor to remove the theater team.

After a year, we returned to the school for a support visit to the teacher, who was applying theatrical techniques and games with her students. When we arrived at the entrance door, the coordinator looked at us unreceptively; in fact, she pretended she didn't see us. She didn't leave her room, with the door half open; she remained silent in front of our desired invisibility.

Immediately, the teacher training the TSA technique came down the hall. She was smiling. Then, in the school corridor, a teacher appears with his forehead bleeding. He complained about the "marginals" who threw a chalkboard eraser at his head, saying that "because of some marginals, no one in the classroom studies." He also stated, with hatred and victimization: "They attacked me."

The teacher looked at us with some embarrassment, saying: "This is the room we're going to." We looked at each other and took a deep breath, knowing that the moment was delicate. We thought the class would discuss this fact, as it had just occurred. However, when we entered the classroom, we noticed the restlessness of the young people. There was a dishcloth that flew at the girls, who bravely threw it back at the boys. This cloth represented the social role of women restricted to the kitchen. It was evident that the young people recognized us and already knew that we were "theater" teachers and that this title gave us a specific power of action in the classroom. So I waited for the moment the dishcloth fell into a boy's hand and greeted him with a satirical tone: "Very well, dishtowel with a boy! You must like washing dishes,

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<sup>24</sup> In this case, the joker asked questions to the spect-actors. However, with great anger, she asked an angry question in her space of power on stage in the face of the public's comments. The joker's anger, which occurred in front of 200 young people with very different opinions on the sexual abuse case, was a mistake. She takes a stand with her personal anger, resulting from all the abuse she herself suffered, and, by taking a stand in this way, inflates the spirits of young people, including girls who thought that those who wore shorts were asking to be abused. In this way, it prevented a dialogue from being possible, and the fight for the abuse to end at school was not won with this joker's positioning. Since the joker's commitment is to social transformation, they must be responsible for the consequences of a theatrical intervention they coordinate.

right?” Laughter at the back of the room. He also laughed with some embarrassment. Two other boys were struggling to hide something under their desks. I asked: “What’s there?” And they: “It’s nothing.” I insisted, and they came out with many printed sheets intended to be sexist posters. The sayings were repeated: Everybody is a bitch, and go wash the dishes. I asked: “Are you sexist?” They responded in chorus, very loudly, a resounding “Yes!!!!”.

It was time to start transforming the room into a scenic space, promoting a dialogue different from the ones we had already had with them. Unlike hatred and anger, we could make them experience new feelings and characters, as well as experience passions contrary to those crystallized in stereotypes and seek good ideas.

We invited the boys: “Since you are sexists and are so sure of this opinion, come here (pointing to the front of the room, where the teacher’s table and the blackboard are) and tell us why you are sexists.” Almost everyone went to the front of the classroom, but they went with pamphlets in their hands. It was clear that, outside of class, they prepared to discuss and spent energy, time, and research so that they could express their stereotypes when we visited the school.

Hatred seemed to motivate the boys’ actions and speech; in fact, this affection circulated at school, uniting groups and being supported by colleagues’ laughter and omissions. We assessed that this sad affection caused a feeling of belonging, becoming an identity, whether of “males,” “good people,” or of some idea that justified excessive violence against a specific idea and group of people.

Spinoza, once again, offered us elements for analyzing affections in violence. According to him, hatred can never be good, and envy, mockery, contempt, anger, and revenge are related to this affection, intensifying its association with violence (Spinoza, 1677/2013). Furthermore, he introduces the power of imagination into the configuration of this polarized relationship:

If a subject imagines that someone or something he hates is affected by sadness, that subject will rejoice in the suffering of others, he will even strive to cause pain, [...] and one or another of these affections will be greater or lesser as its opposite is, respectively, greater or lesser in the hated thing. (Spinoza, 1677/2013, p. 191).

It was necessary, then, to create a network of characters who were united by feelings other than hatred and felt the fluctuation of their affections. An affection contrary to hate, which

appeared with great power, was the joy young people felt when helping each other and seeing each other happy, creating a sense of collectiveness. When subjects tell their life stories to be represented, this narration must generate compassion and not laughter or contempt. To do so, breaking the polarization and the affections that sustain it is necessary. Only in this way can the group be affected by the reported suffering, feel sad, understand, and act to reverse the situation. In this way, a power for collective action is created in the groups.

If we imagine that someone similar to us is affected by some affection, this imagination will express an affection of our body similar to that affection.[...] But if we hate something similar to ourselves, we will be affected, in this case, not by an affection similar to yours, but by your opposite (Spinoza, 1677/2013, p. 195).

Returning to the classroom, Elisa<sup>25</sup>, the protagonist of the previous year's play, who was shouting at the boys, stopped to see what this "intervention" would be. We bet on the potential of theater to unlock the capacity of bodies to be affected, even if stifled by stereotypes and sad passions, and to bring to the surface diverse and even contradictory emotions so that they could be reflected in a critical way in the group, especially stereotypes who reaffirmed violence in the classroom.

The boy who had thrown the chalkboard eraser at the teacher said, looking happy: "Finally, someone will discuss this. We have been asking since the beginning of the year, and no teacher wants to discuss this with us." When he finished his sentence, the entire class supported him. The room was still in uproar, but they wanted to debate the topic.

We knew it was unnecessary to demand everyone stay quiet and sit in their "seats." However, this type of dialogue required patience because, at various times, they did not listen to each other. It was necessary to break up fights and deal with the possibilities of dialogue with people talking simultaneously. In fact, with all this, engagement and debate began to happen.

The boys positioned themselves at the front of the room, in the scenic space at which the group looked; one by one, they were invited to argue about their sexist position. The first boy was a boy who had autism. In his speech, he repeated, with conviction, what he had already heard on the subject. They were memorized words and phrases probably heard at school, on

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<sup>25</sup> Fictitious name.

television, or in the family, such as “women have to stay at home to cook and wash dishes” and other stereotypes that mark machismo in society.

The second to speak was a young man who was on supervised release. He had a sign that he held up proudly, on which it was written: “Everyone is a bitch.” So, I asked: “Everyone is a bitch? Are you sure?” And he said firmly, “Absolutely.” I replied calmly: “Ah, so, I’m a whore, your mother is a whore; all women are whores, is that it?” He quickly changed his mind and said: “No! Only the girls at the dance party,” suggesting they had to deprive themselves of their desires. The speeches were permeated by moralism and stereotypes, such as that “a ‘uptight’ girl cannot listen to funk.”

Contradictorily, the boys thought funk was good and considered that they could and should listen to this type of music. They also stated indignantly that feminist women wanted to revolutionize with their “breasts exposed” in demonstrations. In unison, they stated that this was absurd. After all, for them, women have big breasts and are not like men who can go shirtless; Keeping the “breasts exposed” was synonymous with “not commanding respect.”

For a while, we encouraged girls and boys to take a stand on girls’ and boys’ right to desire. There were many controversies, but the group was all involved and attentive. Until, after almost an hour, one of the boys said: “It’s not that we’re sexist, we’re just against some feminist things.” The shouting, punches, and jokes, which were present at the beginning of the meeting, calmed down.

It was essential to experience empathy in the group. Many boys did not consider their daily aggression toward the girls harmful and did not realize the servile joy they felt in attacking them. One of the boys carrying the “everyone is a bitch” sign tore it down.

After a short stop, the group began dramatizing a story experienced by someone in that class related to gender aggression. Three girls told a story that had happened to them and the boys in the classroom at a club they attended. They said that when the boys saw them at the club, they did not respect them and said “nasty” things. Soon, some boys said: “It was with us. We said that.”

So, we asked three girls and three boys who participated in the story to improvise the scene to analyze it together. They did so, and the boys spoke for the first time while the girls remained silent at the scene. We suggested that in the second improvisation, they make a chorus

in response to all the boys' speeches in a loud and clear tone. Instead of remaining silent, they should say silence in response to each abusive statement.

**Boy 1:** Hottie!

**All girls (chorus):** Silence.

**Boy 2:** Oh, if I hook up with you!

**All girls (chorus):** Silence.

**Boy 3:** Imagine you and me at my place!

**All girls (chorus):** Silence.

Then, we asked them to reverse roles, which was well accepted by the group, as the boys could carry out that request, as it was a dramatization. In this way, the girls played the boys' characters, and the boys played the girls' characters.

**Girl playing boy 1:** HOTTIE, if I hook up with you!

**Boy playing girl 1:** Come.... I'll break your entire bed! (sensually)

**Girl playing boy 2:** Oh, if I hook up with you!

**Boy playing girl 2:** Come, and I'll make you a... (grotesquely)

**Girl playing boy 3:** I'll beat you up, girl!

**Boy playing girl 3:** Come, stud!!! (sensually)

The boys seemed to believe that they were pleasing the girls by positioning themselves aggressively and sexually toward them. However, the body doesn't lie on stage: the voice, the movements, and all the small gestures tell things about the characters and their social rituals, demonstrating that the boys "objectified" the girls, given the responses and aggressions they gave, so that for them, their speeches were natural and did not represent any violence.

Therefore, we believe it is essential to consider that the boys who caused suffering to the girls were not even aware of it since they practically did not exist for them as subjects in the relationship, with equal rights.

Once again, we asked the group to improvise the scene. This time, the boys, still reversing gender roles, created responses as characters of women they loved, respected, and knew very well. Thus, they chose to represent the mother, sister, and cousin. It is understood that the spontaneous dramatization, with the protection of being “characters” in action, allowed young people to place themselves in the scenic game, willing themselves to experience other places in relationships already established and stratified in the form of specific social masks, experienced in the daily life of that collective.

**Girl playing boy 1:** Hottie, if I hook up with you !!!!

**Boy – mother:** Respect me, boy!!! (indignantly)

**Girl playing boy 2:** If I hook up with you ...

**Boy – sister:** If my brother catches you, he knocks you out!!! (angrily)

**Girl playing boy 3:** I’ll beat you up, girl!!!

**Boy – cousin:** I’ll call my cousin, and you’ll see! (boldly)

As expected, the affections involved in boys’ responses when playing roles of another gender were modified entirely. The changes were even more effective when they got engaged with characters that represented people who aroused affection in them, such as love, joy, and care. This way, it was possible to verify that contradictory affections clashed in the boys’ experiences, who committed aggressive acts, motivating other speeches and actions.

The contempt that is “[...] the imagination of something that touches the mind so little, when faced with the presence of that thing, it is led to imagine more what the thing does not have than what it does have” (Spinoza, 1677/2013, p. 241).

In other words, the characters represented at the beginning aroused the actors’ contempt and hatred of what the girls in the room meant to them. When these characters were

exchanged for someone the actors loved, the shock of emotions caused a short circuit, generating strangeness and indignation. The boys were motivated to act differently, mobilized by empathy with the girls in the class, by bringing them closer to female subjects they loved.

Finally, we asked them to do one last improvisation, in which the role reversal would continue: once again, the boys would play the role of the girls, and the girls would play the boys, but now the scene would take place in the classroom.

**Girl playing boy 1:** Bend down to pick up the eraser, will you...

**Boy playing girl 1:** I'll tell the teacher!

**Girl playing boy 2:** If I hook up with you, girl!

**Boy playing girl 2:** If you don't stop, I'll call the principal!

**Girl playing boy 3:** Go wash the dishes, girl!!!

**Boy playing girl 3:** You go!!!

The boys gave “tips” on how the girls could react. However, what mattered was not these “tips” but the fact that the boys could move from their positions of power and privilege to play other characters. It is worth remembering that the parts of power in small groups need to be questioned, as they are relevant to social transformations, both in the scope of micro and macro politics.<sup>26</sup>

To end the session, the group was asked to divide into two: one of girls and the other of boys. It was proposed that each group create a song to talk about what they learned,

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<sup>26</sup> When playing the opposite role, girls and boys could experience images, ideas, stereotypes, caricatures about the opposite sex, and socially constructed images that can be experienced bodily and reflected upon. In the book *Arvo-íris do Desejo*, you can even find the game “*Imagem da telá*” (Boal, 2002, p. 200), which can contribute to understanding our intervention. It is worth highlighting that, in a second moment, the strategy of differentiating the generic discourse of women from those who had an affective bond with boys made it possible to expose the stereotype that stigmatizes more autonomous girls, deconstructing the image typical of machismo, that the empowered woman it is hypersexualized and available to men, following feminist theories. As feminist Helena Buarque de Hollanda says: “If men can occupy a place in feminism, they are deconstructing themselves.” The intervention, in this sense, opened space for this deconstruction.

considering what each group wanted to share with the other group about gender issues. Both groups created pieces and happily showed them to each other.

The girls sang, stating, “A woman does not need to command respect; that respect is already hers by right.” The boys sang happily and tore up the papers with the writings they had brought at the beginning of the intervention. Obviously, there was no magic. In the boys’ lyrics, machismo has not entirely disappeared. Change is an ongoing process, continually fueled by good or bad encounters. Once triggered, it is not a one-way street toward deconstructing social stigmas but an uninterrupted process in the singular/particular/universal dialectic.

A month after this meeting, we contacted Elisa to investigate the impact the drama had or had not left on the subjects in that classroom. After the theater, she reported that the boys stopped “messing with the girls like before” and acted more respectfully. The power was directed toward the fight against stigmas and violence and in favor of bonds of friendship and respect between subjects at school.

Regarding singular affectations, it is also worth noting that the process of character construction can be considered transformative. Elisa became a leading activist against gender oppression. A young man, when playing a sexist and homophobic character, realized that he was acting in the same patterns as his character. Another example is a teacher who, when playing an oppressive character, realized that she acted that way in the classroom. A confrontation of emotions that drove change in his pedagogical action, remembering, as Vigotski states, that: “Art is rather an organization of our behavior targeting the future that leads us to aspire above our life.” (Vigotski, 1965/1999, p. 320).

## Final considerations

In the end, it is worth returning to the propositions that guide this text, which, in our assessment, had the relevance demonstrated by the experiences promoted by the TSA.

The first is that violence at school is not caused by the “problem boy” or the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor. Violence is not an entity; it does not have a life of its own and cannot be reified. It is an affective configuration, which, in turn, is not reduced to school but manifests itself there, marked by sad passions, such as melancholy, fear, anger, hatred, and revenge, involving students, teachers, and administrative staff.

The second, in this affective atmosphere, which permeates institutional relationships and their members, dealing with violence requires moving from deep sadness to the power of life, confronting the passions of hate and fear, which mark the relational atmosphere of the school and the configuration of individualities, with other more powerful and contrary affections, in this case, friendship and the feeling of commonality.

Thirdly, affections are not psychic phenomena but ethical-political ones, as Spinoza (1677/2013) and Vigotsky (1982/1990) teach us. They have a determining importance in political dynamics; they divide men politically, create polarization, maintain the illusion of freedom in servitude, sustain inequalities, and unite people around everyday ideas and feelings, the defense of democracy and interests common to the majority.

In Spinoza's dynamic universe, the variations inherent to things are constitutive of their essence, as they are the concretization of the *potentia agendi* of God/Nature (Ferreira, 2014). These variations are experienced as affections or passions, remembering that the affection called passion is a confused idea by which the mind asserts a force to exist in its body (Spinoza, 1677/2013). A passion is not fought by reason but by another, stronger passion that must be opposed to mitigate its effect. Theater offers such an opportunity by adopting, as Vigotski (1965/1999) wrote, the language of affection, which is not separated from the imagination<sup>27</sup>.

The fourth proposition argues that the TSA, built from this framework, offers a cathartic affective experience concerning violence at school. In it, the creation of characters and scenic actions places the actor also as a playwright and the audience as a witness, intertwining them in common feelings and in power to seek appropriate ideas about their violent and/or servile affections, as well as rehearsing strategies of overcoming oppression crystallized in affections and social relationships. Thus, in the creative act, individual suffering is transformed into collective action, favored by collaborative creation and imagination. Imagination expands the experience of the human being, as Spinoza wrote: "The soul, while it can, strives to imagine that which increases or stimulates the body's power to act" (Spinoza, 1677/2013, p. 179).

The role reversal technique was the one that stood out in this direction. It was fundamental to overcoming the crystallization of sad affections. However, it should be noted that this only happened when stereotypes justifying violence were associated with people loved

<sup>27</sup> On imagination in Vigotski's work, see Sawaia, Magiolino, and Silva (2020).

by those who exercised violence. This technique should not always be used. For example, role reversal does not contribute to the objectives of this methodology when trying to give a “moral lesson on how to act” or when someone simply represents a character very distant from themselves and recommends how the other should act. The inversion must involve affection to trigger the affective memory and provoke the cathartic shock. In the case narrated here, the inversion made it possible to sensitize bodies and minds to the suffering of those who were targets of widespread stereotypes. Friendship became the antigen of hatred for girls who wore “shorts” and liked to attend funk dances, and the girl who was bullied became an activist.

However, that doesn't mean they lived happily ever after and inequality disappeared. Although the TSA was an essential moment in the development of these young people, they continue to be affected by the ethical-political suffering of inequality. However, they could collectively exercise the ability to think about the causes of their affections and the power of friendship against hatred. The TSA worked to increase this power of freedom, the ability to select good dates, and to overcome the small power syndrome (Saffioti, 1989) and polarization. In fact, this does not mean holding each person responsible or blaming them for violence, nor victimizing them. In the cathartic exercise, in the confrontation of emotions in search of adequate ideas about the causes of their affections and suffering, young people begin to feel that school can be a space of joy and good encounters between colleagues and teachers, the joy of knowledge, friendship, feeling of the common, that it is possible to change and contentment within oneself. Thus, they want to stay in it and look for it instead of moving away.

We often forget that those who suffer oppression have bodies like ours and suffer from the same desires and pains; we act as if this body was completely desensitized by social determinations, a human body. It is impossible to dissociate social oppression from the subject who suffers and sustains or rebels against it, which necessarily goes through experience.

The plot of sad affections at school supported perverse models of integration, which polarized to include a process in which the gender marker stood out as an affection that destabilized the feeling of the common.

It became apparent during the TSA that the emancipating school is that of good encounter, whose guide is the potentialization of collective action, a non-identity collective, articulated by marks of gender or race, but by the feeling of the common and the desire for happiness. The insurgency changed its focus, previously opposed to teachers and peers, to

educational policies and combating inequality. Students begin to feel that it is the role of the school and the State to ensure good encounters and the need for freedom and expansion of individuals and the collective, but that, to do so, constant vigilance is necessary, made possible only by the union of *conatus* of students who suffer exclusion.

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