

ARTICLE

Using Art to Resist Epistemic Injustice

The Aesthetics of the Oppressed and Democratic Freedom

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Abstract: This article argues that the aesthetics of the oppressed—a series of artistic practices elaborated by Augusto Boal that comprises the theatre of the oppressed, the rainbow of desire technique, and legislative theatre—utilizes art in order to resist epistemic injustice and promote democratic freedom. By constraining people’s ability to know and explore the potentialities of their bodies and desires, epistemic injustice perpetuates oppression and blocks the advent of democratic freedom. Whereas the theatre of the oppressed tackles corporal oppression, the rainbow of desire technique resists psychological oppression by encouraging the oppressed to critically examine their desires and self-knowledge. Finally, legislative theatre furthers democratic freedom by allowing citizens to protest against any epistemic injustice that might result from the enactment of laws made by representatives.

Keywords: aesthetics of the oppressed, Augusto Boal, democratic freedom, epistemic injustice, legislative theatre, rainbow of desire, theatre of the oppressed

Since the publication of Miranda Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, scholars have devoted increasing attention to “epistemic injustice,” an expression used to denote any “wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower” (2007: 1). Yet, as Fricker herself acknowledges, epistemic injustice had been a topic of philosophical and political concern well before the publication of her book. As the work of Augusto Boal testifies, the phenomenon of epistemic injustice had been scrutinized by scholars before the concept of



“epistemic injustice” was coined. Neglected by most political philosophers and theorists who study epistemic injustice, Boal’s aesthetics of the oppressed shows that artistic practices can help overcome epistemic injustice and promote democratic freedom.

Before I proceed, a few conceptual clarifications are in order. By “epistemic injustice,” I refer to the harm inflicted on oppressed subjects that dwarfs their ability to know not only their surrounding reality, but also their bodies, desires, and themselves. Following Boal, I mean by “oppression” any act that thwarts the development of citizens’ aesthetic and cognitive capacities. The “aesthetics of the oppressed,” in turn, refers to the aesthetic techniques elaborated by Boal in order to resist epistemic injustice and promote democratic freedom. Finally, when I use the expression “democratic freedom,” I mean not a personal attribute that belongs to an isolated individual, but rather the furtherance of people’s political power.

In what follows, I explain how Boal connects resistance to epistemic injustice with democratic freedom in most of his theoretical books. First, I examine *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* and *Theatre of the Oppressed* and argue that both works characterize democratic freedom as a process of resistance against the epistemic injustice that constrains people’s ability to know themselves and their bodies. I claim that two of the main objectives of the theatre of the oppressed are (i) to expose how oppressive social relations police the use of citizens’ bodies and (ii) to exhort the oppressed to experiment with their bodies in novel ways.

Next, I turn to *The Rainbow of Desire* and submit that the rainbow of desire technique combats epistemic injustice by inciting the oppressed to analyze how their capacity to know their desires has been manipulated and deformed by social processes. The rainbow of desire technique promotes democratic freedom (i) by expelling the “cop” that is inside people’s head—a metaphor Boal created to refer to internalized oppressions that arrest the development of citizens’ cognition and affects—and (ii) by exploring the multifariousness of human desire that has been impoverished by oppressive social standards. To illustrate how the rainbow of desire technique advances democratic freedom and resists epistemic injustice, I refer to the testimony of two members of GHOTA (*Grupo Homossexual de Teatro do Oprimido*), a social movement composed mostly of poor gay men from Rio de Janeiro that uses the rainbow of desire technique to protest against homophobia and to mobilize people in favor of a more inclusive and egalitarian society.

Finally, I review *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics* and indicate how two practices proposed in this book—namely, the

Nuclei and the Chamber in the Square—promote democratic freedom by allowing citizens to produce knowledge and demands that ought to be taken into account by elected representatives. By granting equal deliberative power to citizens who would otherwise have unequal access to political deliberation, and by assuring that the voice of each citizen be weighed as a credible source of information that is entitled to contest the powers that be, the Nuclei and the Chamber in the Square advance the main goal of the aesthetics of the oppressed: to resist epistemic injustice and further democratic freedom.¹

The Aesthetics of the Oppressed and Theatre of the Oppressed

Although Boal had been theorizing about the aesthetics of the oppressed since the 1960s, only in his last book, *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, can the reader find a definition for the term: “The aesthetics of the oppressed is an artistic method that aims to restore the original and humanistic idea of democracy” (2009: 132).² Alluding to the Athenian *polis*, Boal contends that democracy comprises both *isonomia* (equal standing before the law) and *isegoria* (equal capacity to speak in public). The adoption of the “one man, one vote” formula is not enough to sustain a democratic society. Democracy also requires that all citizens equally participate in the public forum of opinions. Put differently, democracy demands participatory parity not only when it comes to electing representatives, but also when it comes to shaping the public opinion that influences and controls politicians’ behavior: “For me in a democracy everyone speaks. . . . everyone can say, ‘Stop, I want to have my say.’ That’s democratic, that’s freedom, and that’s what I fight for” (Boal qtd. in Morelos 1999: 38).

Why does Boal associate freedom with democracy? Briefly put, Boal associated these terms with one another because democracy for him is the only political regime that allows citizens to overcome epistemic injustice and thus to develop themselves autonomously. Following Paulo Freire (1996), Boal identifies freedom with the development of citizens’ aesthetic and cognitive capacities.³ Moreover, like Freire (1970), he also defines oppression as any act that thwarts the development of such capacities and inhibits the enjoyment of freedom. For both Freire and Boal, citizens could only develop their aesthetic and cognitive capacities by engaging with one another in the public sphere. Far from being a personal attribute that an isolated individual can possess on their own, freedom can take shape only when citizens from all walks of life can deliberate about their surrounding reality and act together as equals. Freedom for Boal is always *democratic freedom*.

A “real democracy” will never come about unless the oppressed “widen and deepen their capacity to know” (Boal 2009: 16). The capacity of the oppressed to know is restricted because, according to Boal, the oppressors tend to monopolize the production and circulation of knowledge so as to “conquer citizens’ brains, sterilize them, and program them to obedience . . . This unidirectional communication implants barbed fences in the heads of the oppressed, embalming their thinking and erecting forbidden zones to intelligence” (2009: 18). Unidirectional communication means here the *unresponsive imposition* of knowledge from the oppressors to the oppressed, which precludes the latter from challenging and contesting the former.

Though the expression *injustiça epistêmica* (“epistemic injustice”) was never used by Boal, one can identify the “barbed fences” that stymie the capacity of the oppressed to know themselves and their reality as an example of epistemic injustice. To be sure, my contention is that since its inception the aesthetics of the oppressed was created to resist epistemic injustice and, accordingly, to bring democratic freedom into being. Take, for instance, *Theatre of the Oppressed*. A collection of essays written between 1962 and 1973, *Theatre of the Oppressed* is where Boal presents the aesthetics of the oppressed for the first time. In the beginning of the book, he argues that the theatre of the oppressed (TO) aims at

multiplication. The synergy created by the TO increases its transformative power to the extent it expands and encompasses different oppressed groups: it is imperative to know not only one’s own oppressions, but also others’. *Solidarity* among similar beings is part and parcel of the TO. (Boal 2005: 16; passage omitted in the English translation)

The TO is a subfield of the aesthetics of the oppressed that deploys theatre as a device to multiply and enlarge citizens’ perspectives on political issues. Boal (2005: 177) claims that theatre initially fortified democracy, because it was a practice shared by all that was created by the people and for the people.⁴ But in ancient Greece, this communal ownership was subverted when a few citizens were chosen to perform on stage, while everybody else was compelled to remain quiet and still. Whereas before theatre afforded an occasion for citizens to interact with one another, henceforth theatre would keep the different members of the *demos* apart.

According to Boal, theatre became oppressive with this change because it turned the vast majority into a passive audience who was thereby excluded from the theatrical action. Its oppressiveness,

in addition, was observed in the division of the people: on one side, there were the few who held the prerogative to act; on the other side, there was the majority, who could do nothing but watch.

To boil a book-length argument down to a single sentence, the TO seeks to restore the original, democratic character of theatre by replacing the spectator by the figure of the *spect-actor*, a neologism Boal invented to denote the spectator who is also an actor and who, as such, has the power to intervene in the performance while watching it.⁵ For our purposes, it is important to highlight that the TO urges oppressed citizens from different social groups to enact in front of their peers the struggles they face every day and, moreover, to design—along with other similarly oppressed subjects—possible tactics for dealing with such struggles. This, in turn, allows the oppressed to realize that a significant part of the oppressions they suffer is due not to their personal faults, but rather to collective problems that cry for structural transformation.

Grasping the collective and interlocked nature of their oppressions reveals that the idea that each axis of oppression should be insulated from the rest is in itself an instrument of oppression, an ideological tool invented to divide and separate the oppressed so that they do not unite in resistance. Once they understand that, the different oppressed groups start to cultivate solidarity among themselves—which for Boal was a matter of identifying *with* rather than identifying *as*.⁶ Rather than being seen as a feeling that requires perfect identity, solidarity should be conceived of as a sentiment shared among those who, after debating with one another, perceive that they partake in similar problems and concerns.

Compared with the rest of the aesthetics of the oppressed, what is unique about the TO is its focus on the body:

[T]he first word of the theatrical vocabulary is the human body, the main source of sound and movement. Therefore, to control the means of theatrical production, man must, first of all, control his own body, know his own body, in order to be capable of making it more expressive. Then he will be able to practice theatrical forms in which . . . he frees himself from his condition of spectator and takes on that of actor, in which he ceases to be an object and becomes a subject . . . the objective is to make each person aware of his own body, of his bodily possibilities, and of deformations suffered because of the type of work he performs (Boal 2005: 188–190; English translation: 102–103).⁷

The TO brings to the fore the fact that our bodies are oppressed. Our gender roles, the work we perform, the type of transportation we

use, the cities where we live—all of these in one way or another can be conduits for oppression and constrain our corporal movements. The deformations of the body of the oppressed are “social” because they are provoked by social mechanisms (Boal 2005: 188). The first stage in the struggle for liberation carried out by the TO consists in exposing that several of our putatively spontaneous movements are actually coercive deformations that “the combination of roles that a person must perform imposes on her” (2005: 191). The first stage of the TO is thus mainly deconstructive, for its aim is to “‘undo’ the muscular structure of the participants. That is, to take them apart, to study and analyze them” so as “to raise them to the level of consciousness. So that each worker, each peasant understands, sees, and feels to what point his body is governed by his work” (2005: 191–192).

Though necessary, deconstruction is not a goal in itself; the deconstructive stage ought to be followed by a constructive one in which citizens are encouraged to use their bodies in novel ways, to construct new movements. For Boal, this second stage cannot do without the first one, for the first step to resist oppression and design more liberated ways of conducting our bodies is to become aware that oppression exists. Needless to say, if the oppressed believe their corporal deformations are merely idiosyncratic and natural results of their personal habits, they will never act in concert in order to struggle and protest against oppression. As a component of the aesthetics of the oppressed, the TO seeks to underline the fact that the current relations of power can be resisted and altered, thus instigating the oppressed to protest: “Everything is subject to criticism, to rectification. Everything can be transformed” (2005: 203).

The Rainbow of Desire

While *Theatre of the Oppressed* emphasizes that oppression constrains corporal knowledge, *The Rainbow of Desire: The Boal Method of Theatre and Therapy* grapples with a different kind of epistemic injustice, one that deforms the psyche of the oppressed and harms their capacity to know themselves and their desires. The fact that Boal wrote two different books to address the corporal and the psychic aspects of oppression does not mean, however, that he posited a dualism between mind and body. Though they can be distinguished for analytical purposes, in practice corporal and psychic oppression are entangled with one another. The way oppressive practices are sedimented in our bodies affects the way we feel about ourselves (Dalaqua 2020). If oppression is to be

resisted effectively, the strategies of resistance outlined in *The Rainbow of Desire* should work in tandem with the ones presented in *Theatre of the Oppressed*.

Originally published in 1990, *The Rainbow of Desire* introduces the figure of “the cop in the head,” a concept which is so central to the book’s arguments that Boal initially considered it as his title. In the introduction, Boal explains that the rainbow of desire was a technique he devised in the 1970s after fleeing from the military dictatorship in Brazil and becoming an exile in France. Having come from a Latin American military dictatorship where police violence was rampant, Boal was surprised when several French citizens told him that they were also oppressed: “I would always ask myself, ‘Ok, but where are the police?’ For I was used to working with concrete and visible oppressions” (1996b: 23). The surprise led him to realize that if the aesthetics of the oppressed was to help people overcome epistemic injustice and achieve freedom, one had to pay attention to the corporal as well as the psychological aspects of oppression.⁸ Boal’s experience in 1970s France made him perceive that oppressive power can take up subtle forms of manifestation, and that the police and other state apparatuses are only one avenue among several for its exercise. As Michel Foucault (1978) was writing more or less at the same time, power is not only repressive but also *productive*: it produces certain behaviors by making people internalize certain norms.⁹ Oppression is perpetuated by external and internal forces.

“I organized in Paris a workshop that lasted almost two years called *Le Flic dans la Tête* (the cop in the head). I proceeded on the following assumption: the cop is in the head. We need to discover how he entered there and devise mechanisms to expel him” (Boal 1996b: 23). The rainbow of desire is an aesthetic technique that investigates how the “kaleidoscopic” multifariousness of human desire has been crippled and impoverished by the myriad forms of oppression that were internalized by subaltern social groups (1996b: 115). These internalized oppressions that hinder the free development of citizens’ cognition and affects are what Boal calls “the cop in the head.”

The rainbow of desire “has gnoseological [*gnosiológicas*] properties, that is, properties that stimulate knowledge and discovery” (1996b: 34). It allows the oppressed to diagnose epistemic injustice by showing them that the epistemic framework that they use to structure their desires is, to a significant extent, a source of domination. Like their self-knowledge in general, their ability to know their desires has been damaged by powers that were once external, but that now are part of the very

psyche of the oppressed. Once they come to grips with the fact that they suffer epistemic injustice—a predicament that cries for resistance—the oppressed gain the *opportunity* to formulate their own desires autonomously and develop themselves freely.

I italicize *opportunity* because simply becoming aware of epistemic injustice is not enough for overcoming it. Take, for instance, the case of internalized homophobia, a prime example of how epistemic injustice can cramp self-development (Fricker 2007: 163–164). Although the topic of homophobia is not addressed in *The Rainbow of Desire*, it is not difficult to understand why Boal’s technique has been appropriated by some LGBTQ activists. The reason it takes so long for sexual minorities to fully explore their affective lives is because in most societies, if not all, everybody is trained from a very early age to adopt a heteronormative epistemic framework. Those who are not heterosexual are therefore disadvantaged, for they lack the hermeneutical resources to comprehend their desires.

The rainbow of desire can help sexual minorities know themselves. As a social activist who uses the aesthetics of the oppressed has explained, the rainbow of desire allows sexual minorities to fight against epistemic injustice by confronting the cops in their heads, whereupon they are granted the gift of “self-discovery” (Sarapecck 2015: 37). Yet, as Helen Sarapecck testifies, when it comes to internalized homophobia, resistance to epistemic injustice can be quite difficult. Even when they realize that their desires were manipulated by the heteronormative epistemic matrix that oppresses them, some homosexuals are not able to resist homophobia. To drive this point home, Sarapecck (2015) mentions a case she witnessed while working with GHOTA, a social movement composed mostly of poor gay men from Rio de Janeiro who use the rainbow of desire technique to resist homophobia.

In order to fight against the cop in the head, Boal’s technique first adumbrates the psychological mechanism by which oppression is internalized by the oppressed subject, which he calls “osmosis” (1996b: 54). As its name indicates, osmosis is a quasi-automatic psychological reaction of virtually everybody who lives in a society where oppression exists—that is, where social groups are treated unequally because some are hierarchized as somehow worthier than others. Osmosis happens “everywhere, in all cells of human life” (1996b: 54). Nevertheless, different types of oppression thrive in different settings, and what Boal’s technique does is to invite the oppressed to revisit their past in order to select the places where a certain type of osmosis took hold of them.

While she worked with GHOTA, Saraeck (a heterosexual cisgendered woman) observed that most gay men named the family, the church, and the workplace as fertile sites for the osmosis of homophobia. After tracing the historical genesis of the osmosis that implanted the homophobic cop in their head, the members of GHOTA then followed the second step of Boal's technique: they shared real-life experiences of such osmosis with others who were also its victims, and were encouraged to write a short script in which osmosis was blocked through resistance. Next, they were asked to perform the script in front of the group. The performance aimed to prepare them to confront their oppressors in real life—something which for Boal was crucial for the destruction of the cop in the head and, consequently, for the elimination of epistemic injustice: "The cops are in their heads, but the headquarters of these cops are in the external reality. It is necessary to locate [and resist] both the cops and their headquarters" (Boal and Epstein 1990: 35).

Saraeck recounts the story of Chuchu, a young man who had to dramatize a bad experience he had with homophobia at a job interview. Having been familiar with Boal's technique for some time, Chuchu knew he was a victim of epistemic injustice. He learned that the shame that he had felt when he encountered homophobia came from the cop in his head, and that the only way to expel that shame was to speak up against the embodiment of that cop, which in that particular scene corresponded to the man playing the employer. When he was dramatizing the scene in front of his peers, however, Chuchu could not resist:

[W]e were waiting for Chuchu's line that would signalize the reaction of his character [against the homophobic job interviewer]. Chuchu turned his face down and we thought, "now is the time, he is remembering the script." We were wrong. Chuchu was crying . . . we waited one or two more minutes until, without knowing whether I was right or not, I entered on stage and hugged Chuchu. The scene ended there. . . . In my ear, Chuchu whispered: "I just can't." (Saraeck 2015: 38)

By being refused the job he wanted once again, Chuchu was, just like the first time, overwhelmed with a mixture of sadness and shame. The fact that now, unlike then, he believed being gay was nothing to be ashamed of did not preclude him from feeling shame again, which explains why he could not pluck up the courage to resist the homophobic job interviewer. Chuchu experienced what Fricker calls "residual internalization," a phenomenon that occurs when "a member of a subordinated group continues as host to a sort of half-life for the oppressive ideology, even when her beliefs have genuinely moved on" (2007: 37).

Fricker maintains that residual internalization makes one's affective states lag behind one's epistemic beliefs. Her description of residual internalization can be applied to Chuchu's case because, though he no longer *believed* that homosexuality was shameful, Chuchu still *felt* shame when he was identified as a homosexual.

Residual internalization demonstrates that, though not impossible, resistance against epistemic injustice is not an easy process. Epistemic injustice is perpetuated through collective ways of imagining that demean some social groups while dignifying others; the depreciation of some and the overvaluation of others are two sides of the same coin. Collective ways of imagining social groups are deeply entrenched in our cognitive apparatus and frame our interactions with others quasi-automatically (Boal 1996b: 54; Fricker 2007: 38). That happens not because they are natural, but because they have been enforced over a long period of time. It took time for them to grow roots in us, and so it is no wonder that our uprooting them also takes time. No one is born, for instance, a homophobe. Like other forms of internalized oppression, homophobia is learned. And since it is learned, it can be unlearned.

Witness the case of Flavio Sanctum, one of the oldest members of GHOTA. Sanctum's poignant account of how he overcame "self-repression" (2015a: 20) with the rainbow of desire technique shows that expelling the cop in the head is a process that does not happen in one day. Even after getting rid of the belief that homosexuality was shameful, Sanctum still felt ashamed of taking pictures with GHOTA members. He tells how he would hide his face under a big hat for fear of being recognized by family members in case the photo ended up being published somewhere (2015a: 23). Yet as his training with Boal's method increased, his feelings were by-and-by put in sync with his beliefs, and nowadays Sanctum is no longer ashamed of being identified as gay (see 2015a: 34).

Resisting epistemic injustice is not solely an intellectual enterprise, but it is also an affective one. That is why the aesthetics of the oppressed, besides encouraging the oppressed to discuss their problems collectively, asks them to produce *affective images* that portray the feelings that they had when they came face-to-face with their oppressors (Boal 1996b: 56). As each image is dramatized, it is imperative that the oppressed scrutinize it several times in such a way as to orchestrate subversive strategies to change their affects and feelings the next time they run up against their oppressors. Although feelings and affects are doubtless impossible to completely master, Boal's method seeks to give the oppressed some command over both of them: by playing artistically

with the affective images caused by their oppression in front of other similarly oppressed subjects, the individual learns to somewhat modify their affects as regards to their oppression. Shame can be morphed to indignation, and complicit silence can be replaced by noisy defiance. As they rehearse possible strategies of resistance in front of their peers, the oppressed “multiply the points of view through which each [oppressive] situation can be seen” (Boal 1996b: 58). The multiplication of perspectives allows them to resist oppression by constructing plans of action for their *collective* problems.

I emphasize *collective* to rebut the critique that the rainbow of desire led the aesthetics of the oppressed to divert attention from structural problems by reducing oppression to simply an individual psychological problem (see Dinneen 2013; Österlind 2008). The rainbow of desire technique is a “political therapy” (Boal 2019: 131) that refashions the cognitive and affective disposition of the self in order to promote social transformation. Boal makes it clear in *The Rainbow of Desire* that when “participants belong to the same social group . . . and are subject to the same oppressions . . . the individual account of one person will resonate immediately: the oppression of each is the oppression of all” (1996b: 58). The rainbow of desire technique strongly encourages the groups practicing it to be composed of individuals facing similar oppressions, because its purpose is to underscore the *collective* nature of individuals’ oppression.¹⁰ Familiarity with the oppression of others makes the individual participant at ease when they have to discuss their problems in the group and, moreover, facilitates the formulation of resistant tactics by the oppressed group, which can bring about structural changes.

Sanctum’s testimony exemplifies this feature of Boal’s method remarkably well. In his account, Sanctum (2015a) explains that the rainbow of desire technique was instrumental in helping GHOTA members take action against a homophobic restaurant from which several of its members were expelled simply for being gay. After some debates, GHOTA members decided to dramatize the oppressions that they faced in the restaurant in public “right at the door of the prejudiced restaurant” (2015a: 22). After the performance was over, bystanders were invited to suggest amendments to a petition that GHOTA members wanted to send to the Municipal Council of Rio de Janeiro.

The petition asked city councilors to enact a law creating a fine for restaurants that refused service to customers on the basis of their sexuality. It did not take long for representatives of the Municipal Council of Rio de Janeiro to enact a law based on GHOTA’s petition. The municipal law 2475/96, the first of its type in the country, would later serve as a

model for a similar national law. This example proves that the rainbow of desire technique can trigger structural transformations that mitigate oppression.¹¹

Legislative Theatre

The structural focus of the aesthetics of the oppressed would become more pronounced in one of Boal's last theoretical works, *Legislative Theatre: Using Performance to Make Politics*. As a component of the aesthetics of the oppressed, *Legislative Theatre* seeks to recover the original meaning of democracy as a regime that is characterized by both *isonomia* and *isegoria*. Paying particular attention to the issue of political representation, one of the main goals of the book is to indicate how representation and democracy can be reconciled. Published in 1996, *Legislative Theatre* is a work that furthers the so-called "representative turn" in contemporary democratic theory, an intellectual movement that "set about reclaiming representation in the name of democracy" (Vieira 2017: 5).¹² Whereas the tendency among democratic theorists in the 1970s and 1980s was to cast aspersions on "representative democracy" for being a travesty of real democracy, in the 1990s several scholars began to defend the claim that, under certain circumstances, representation *can* be democratic.

After stating that "direct democracy . . . is impossible" in large and highly populated countries such as ours, Boal (1996c: 48) clarifies that representation is democratic when the laws enacted in the representative assembly emerge out of the interaction between representatives and constituents. In other words, democratic representation requires that both representatives and the represented act. Political action in a representative democracy cannot be reduced merely to the exercise of the franchise, for it also entails having the power of causally contributing to the content of the laws voted inside the representative assembly.

In order to safeguard the democratic character of representation, Boal sews a new thread in the fabric of the aesthetics of the oppressed: the legislative theatre, which he defines as a set of practices that turns "citizens into legislators through the intermediation of the city councilor" (1996c: 34).¹³ Notice that Boal does not dispense with the figure of the representative. This is consonant with the ultimate goal of *Legislative Theatre*, which is to probe what makes representation democratic (and not to simply jettison representation as a hoax invented to maintain the *demos* at a considerable distance from political power).

This is not the place to embark on a granular analysis of the theory of representation presented in *Legislative Theatre*. For our purposes, what matters is to show how two practices of legislative theatre—namely, the Nuclei and the Chamber in the Square—resist epistemic injustice and promote democratic freedom. Boal defines the Nuclei as public spaces where constituents gather on “a frequent and systematic” (1996c: 66) basis in order to form and express “their opinions, desires, and needs,” which are then communicated to one or more representatives. By offering a space where different perspectives can be articulated and negotiated in public, the Nuclei create “an agonistic public sphere in which people who are situated in different class and other social positions, and who experience issues very differently, engage each other directly” (Pratt and Johnston 2007: 107).¹⁴ By giving vent to the many conflicts that permeate social life, the Nuclei, just like the aesthetics of the oppressed in general, use art in order to promote an agonistic intervention in the public realm.

The Chamber in the Square is also a place where constituents espousing different political perspectives can publicly confront one another. The difference is that whereas the reasons that justify the meeting of the Nuclei are legion—Boal (1996c: 78) even concedes that a given Nucleus can meet simply to encourage constituents to socialize—the Chamber in the Square is held with a very specific purpose in mind: to propose a solution to a problem of public relevance by drafting a “summary” (*súmula*). The summary emerges out of the epistemic friction of citizens’ different political perspectives and is elaborated under the supervision of a legal adviser, appointed by the representative assembly, who is responsible to point out to the people any contradiction with existing laws or incoherencies that their summary may contain. Each clause of the summary has to be voted on by all citizens who are participating in the Chamber in the Square. Once finished, the summary is sent to an elected representative, who then has to transform it into a bill that elected representatives will vote on.

Thirteen of the bills that Boal managed to transform into municipal laws during his term originated from the Chamber in the Square consultations, which can happen in any public space with easy access, such as public squares, sports fields, parks, and churches. The Chamber in the Square democratizes representation by turning constituents into coauthors of the laws enacted by their representatives. As Boal explained, the objective of the Chamber in the Square is “to consult people whose opinions might be useful in preparing a law, and whose

knowledge could enlighten us [sc. the representatives]” (qtd. in Schechner and Chatterjee 1998: 87).

As an agonistic thinker, Boal knew that society teemed with conflictive political views, and thus demanded that the Chamber in the Square followed egalitarian deliberative procedures that protected citizens’ participatory parity. Before drafting the summary, citizens attending the Chamber in the Square ought to be given equal time of speech, so that each can have equal power of influence (Boal 1996c: 120). In addition, each citizen should receive only one vote when voting for the final form of the summary. This way, the Chamber in the Square allows citizens from oppressed groups to express their beliefs and knowledge regarding public issues on par with more privileged individuals. By assuring that citizens’ *isegoria* is respected, the Chamber in the Square lets the extant social conflicts and oppressions be drawn out in all their nuances and exposes them to public criticism.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the aesthetics of the oppressed utilizes art in order to resist epistemic injustice and promote democratic freedom. Other scholars have also claimed that social movements struggling against oppression seek to bring about cognitive and affective shifts in mainstream society (Eyerman 2006). What is unique about Boal’s aesthetics of the oppressed, however, is that it proposes a series of techniques that has helped social movements, in different parts of the world, change the hegemonic epistemic and affective frameworks of their societies (see Howe et al. 2019).

Oppression is a complex phenomenon that traverses corporal, psychic, and legislative dimensions. The interlocking character of these dimensions requires that all of them be resisted in tandem, and that is why social movements struggling against oppression should use the three components of the aesthetics of the oppressed. To tackle corporal oppression, Boal designs the theatre of the oppressed, an aesthetic technique that exposes how social relations can police and limit the use of citizens’ bodies and that, in addition, exhorts the oppressed to experiment with their bodies in novel ways. To tackle the oppression that is transmitted through deformed desires, Boal creates the rainbow of desire, an aesthetic technique that resists psychological oppression by inciting the oppressed to analyze how their knowledge of themselves and their desires has been manipulated by social processes. The

rainbow of desire technique promotes freedom by expelling “the cop in the head”—a metaphor Boal uses to refer to internalized oppressions that hinder the development of citizens’ cognition and affects—and by exploring the multifariousness of human desire that has been impoverished by oppressive social standards.

The third and last component of the aesthetics of the oppressed is legislative theatre, which comprises, *inter alia*, two practices: the Nuclei and the Chamber in the Square. The Nuclei are public spaces where constituents gather in order to debate and collectively create “their opinions, desires, and needs,” which are then communicated to their representatives (Boal 1996c: 66). With a more narrow focus, the Chamber in the Square is a public meeting between regular citizens (and a legal adviser appointed by the representative assembly) that aim to find a solution to a specific problem of public relevance. The Chamber in the Square democratizes representation by allowing citizens to draft a “summary,” that is, a sketch that contains general guidelines that representatives must follow when legislating a given topic. By allowing citizens to protest against any oppression that might result from the enactment of laws made by representatives, the Chamber in the Square and the Nuclei further democratic freedom. By granting equal deliberative power to citizens who would otherwise have unequal access to political deliberation, and by assuring that the voice of each citizen be weighed as a valid source of information, the Chamber in the Square in particular helps combat epistemic injustice.

Marias do Brasil epitomizes remarkably well how the aesthetics of the oppressed can help social movements resist the corporal, psychic, and legislative dimensions of oppression. Composed of poor women who work as housemaids, Marias do Brasil has been using the aesthetics of the oppressed for more than 20 years in order to reconfigure the way mainstream Brazilian society sees and treats domestic servants. In *Theatre as a Martial*, Boal cites the testimony of a member of Marias do Brasil who transformed the way she sees herself, as well as how others see her, through the use of the aesthetics of the oppressed:

A good housemaid should be invisible. . . . We learn to be invisible. We know we are invisible. . . . During our performance, the family I work for was watching me, seeing my body and listening to my voice. They were attentive and quiet as they watched me and listened to me. I’ve been working for them for more than ten years, and I think this was the first time they really saw me, the first time they saw me as I am, the first time they heard me say something other than “Yes,

sir” or “Yes, ma’am.” . . . I cried after [the performance] . . . because I looked in the mirror and saw a woman. This was the first time I saw a woman in the mirror. Before, in the mirror, I saw a housemaid. (qtd. in Boal 2003: 12–13)

With the help of the aesthetics of the oppressed, the women who participate in *Marias do Brasil* managed to challenge the images and roles that mainstream society had allocated for them. From submissive and invisible subjects, they became protagonists who can assemble in the public sphere and protest for better working conditions. With the use of legislative theatre, *Marias do Brasil* pressured elected representatives into approving the law 11.324/2006, which gave housemaids all over the country labor rights that until then they did not have (see Felix 2018: 161–162; Vannucci 2019: 135). Before this law was enacted, we can say that housemaids in Brazil suffered legislative oppression, inasmuch as the earlier laws that regulated their work did not grant them the same rights that other workers had.

With the help of the theatre of the oppressed, the women from *Marias do Brasil* discussed sexual harassment and proposed measures to deal with this type of corporal oppression that many of them face at work. By practicing some of the techniques of the rainbow of desire, participants of *Marias do Brasil* learned to resist psychic oppression and recast their self-image in a more positive light. The aesthetics of the oppressed helped housemaids from *Marias do Brasil* overcome epistemic injustice by allowing them to develop deliberative and cognitive skills, which in turn gave them strength to mobilize in the public sphere and demand that their bodies be recognized as worthy as those of others. Since the vast majority of the women who participate in *Marias do Brasil* are of African and/or indigenous origin, their mobilization also constituted a struggle for racial equality.

The cognitive shift regarding the public perception of housemaids in Brazil led Rede Globo, the largest commercial TV network in Latin America, to create a soap opera in which the protagonists were all housemaids. For the first time in the history of this network, housemaids were seen as people who had their own stories to tell and whose lives did not revolve solely around their jobs. *Cheias de Charme* aired in 2012 and was one of the first soap operas from Rede Globo with a Black female protagonist. The women from *Marias do Brasil* were invited to give opinions of the soap opera, which was a commercial success.¹⁵

Their greater visibility in the public sphere and the creation of a law that increased their rights, of course, were not enough to allow

housemaids to overcome oppression entirely. Housemaids still face racism, economic exploitation, and sexual harassment in Brazil, and that is why Marias do Brasil has never ceased to exist. This is consonant with a major thesis of the aesthetics of the oppressed, which is that conflict and oppression are inherent in political communities. The struggle against oppression is a battle that never ends, and that is why Boal claimed that democratic societies should incite the different groups comprised in the *demos* to protest. Most legislative arrangements and balances of power tend to privilege some citizens while excluding others. Protest is a way for citizens who are facing some kind of exclusion to demand greater equality.

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Notes

1. In Fricker's (2007) vocabulary, not having your testimony and voice considered as a credible source of information constitutes a specific type of epistemic injustice, namely, testimonial injustice.
2. Unless otherwise noticed, when I use the expression "aesthetics of the oppressed," I refer not only to the book *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed*, but also to Boal's theory of aesthetics and oppression in general. Although I use the title of the translations, my page references are to the original editions of Boal's oeuvre. I prefer to offer my own translation because some of the English translations of Boal's texts are based on translated versions of his work. That is the case, for instance, with *Theatre of the Oppressed*, which is a translation of the Spanish translation of the book (originally written in Portuguese; see Boal 2008). Also, in some of the translations, several pages are omitted and the original division of chapters is altered. That is the case, respectively, of the English translations of *The Aesthetics of the Oppressed* and *Legislative Theatre*. When citing long passages from Boal's work, I indicate in parentheses the corresponding pages in the English translation.
3. By cognitive capacities, I mean our abilities to know and understand something. Our aesthetic capacities, in turn, refer to our abilities to feel and imagine something. On Freire's influence over Boal, see Mutnick (2006), Paterson (2011) and Vittoria (2019). In his essay on Freire, Boal (1996a: 103) reinforces his understanding of liberty as *isegoria* by associating oppression—that is, the absence of freedom and of self-development—with the disappearance of citizens' equal power to speak in public. Like Freire, Boal knew that oppressions are multitudinous and intersectional, and that hence one can be oppressed in one social context while being an oppressor in a different context.
4. In this paragraph, I simply reconstruct Boal's narrative of the history of theatre and refrain from assessing its historical accuracy. For a criticism of Boal's narrative, see Frances Babbage (2004). She contends that Boal's "depiction of an originary, communal, carnivalesque theatre might strike some as romantic and insufficiently grounded in evidence" (2004: 38).
5. Boal's approach in this regard can be opposed to Jeffrey E. Green's. Both scholars proceed from the same diagnosis: in contemporary representative governments, the represented is treated like an audience of spectators whose main function is to watch the representatives' performance. The difference is that, while Boal seeks to revert this predicament by introducing the figure of the *spect-actor*, Green dissuades political philosophers from trying to change the current structure of our political experience: "Why not, instead [of accepting the reduction of citizens to spectators in contemporary representative governments], seek to find ways to transform spectators into actors? One reason . . . is that . . . political philosophy of a democratic stamp has a special obligation to develop political principles in a manner that respects the everyday structure of political experience" (2010: 6). In the wake of Boal, one could rejoin that the obligation of a political philosophy

- of a democratic stamp is not to resign to the given and develop theoretical principles that keep the current structure of power intact. Rather, the obligation of a political philosophy of a democratic stamp is to elaborate a theory that can make the current configuration of political power more democratic.
6. As Boal said in an interview, the aesthetics of the oppressed seeks to “create a net of solidarity. Not my family, my race, my sex for itself, but my family, my race, my sex with the other ones. And this, I think, is necessary if we are to produce change” (qtd. in Schechner and Chatterjee 1998: 76).
 7. Boal’s use of the word “man” in this passage to refer to human beings in general was common in the Portuguese language when he wrote *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Such use does not mean, however, that he was unaware of the fact that one’s gender affects the way one experiences oppression. For a discussion of how the aesthetics of the oppressed can be used to resist gender violence, see Santos (2019) and the final section of this article.
 8. My understanding of the differences between psychological and corporal oppression subscribes to Cudd’s (2006) understanding.
 9. On the similarities between Foucault and the aesthetics of the oppressed, see Leal (2015).
 10. As Boal had already remarked in *Theatre of the Oppressed*, “it is always necessary to understand the generic character of the particular case [of oppression] presented” (2005: 229). The act of unveiling the general, collective forces that lie behind each individual manifestation of oppression corresponds to what Boal names *ascesis*.
 11. Boal’s theory reinforces a point raised by Elizabeth Anderson (2012): overcoming epistemic injustice requires structural changes. Nevertheless, unlike Anderson (2012), Boal does not neglect to mention that, before integrating themselves into mainstream society, oppressed groups might need to temporarily segregate themselves from the rest of society in order to create alternative knowledge and resistant strategies that will help them confront their oppressors in larger social settings. For a similar criticism of Anderson (2012), see Medina (2013: 7-8). On the importance of maintaining “protected enclaves” where oppressed groups can temporarily segregate themselves from mainstream society and “explore their ideas in an environment of mutual encouragement,” see Mansbridge (1996: 57).
 12. My association of Boal with the representative turn pits my analysis against the interpretations of Kershaw (2001) and Picher (2007), two scholars who aver that Boal was against representation and in favor of direct democracy. Boal was only against *oligarchical* representation, not representation *tout court* (see Dalaqua 2019).
 13. Boal’s definition might give the impression that the Chamber in the Square works only in the municipal level. The Chamber in the Square, however, can be used on the national level as well (Soeiro 2019).
 14. On the relationship between democracy and art as an agonistic intervention in the public sphere, see Mouffe (2013: ch. 5). Boal (2009: 71–72) claims that this association between politics and conflict traces back to Machiavelli. On Machiavelli’s influence over Boal’s theory, see Milling and Ley (2000: ch. 6).

15. Many of the participants of “Marias do Brasil,” however, were unhappy with the way in which Rede Globo depoliticized their struggle by overly emphasizing the love stories of the soap opera’s protagonists, thus effacing the depiction of economic exploitation that many Brazilian housemaids suffer (see Sanctum 2015b).

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