

fucking with grammar

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abstract

Art practices occupy a space of liminality within academia, being valid, appropriate to illustrate questions and discourses in social sciences and humanities, and not sufficient in mainstream academia to assert what art foregrounds as ‘knowledge’. So, what happens when art has something to claim through non-academic methods of inquiry? Even more complicated, what happens when art allows putting forward theoretical hypothesis involving the immateriality of affect? Departing from a practice-led research focusing on the endurance of white, cisgender, and heteropatriarchic impositions, as well as the ways these impositions materialise themselves on the body, this paper explores the possibilities of *Fucking with grammar*, a writing method developed throughout the writing of my PhD research.

Linguistics has been stretched for centuries by QUILTBAG individuals — queer and questioning, unsure, intersex, lesbian, transgender and two-spirit, bisexual, asexual and aromantic, gay and genderqueer; swardspeak, lavender, and code-switching all entail ways of reshaping and creating language as response to socio-political necessities, camouflage, or simply to access a jargon that can be more faithful to practices and embodiments of the group creating it. However, there is a different kind of reclaiming emerging, when performance artist, actress, and activist Linn da Quebrada utters “I am a cisgender woman with one breast and a penis,” she is committing the kind of epistemic disobedience that undoes epistemology. Here, I focus on disobediences that bring western epistemologies to collapse. These challenges that contribute to what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls “the end of the world as we know it” (2014). To end what ‘we’ know requires a different ‘how’, it entails methodological deployments that help bringing into crisis academic hierarchies regarding [research] corroboration.

Questioning after Audre Lorde: how does one make tangible the immeasurable and unpredictable without being averted and undercut by the tools still sustaining the master’s house? The approach I propose here is *Fucking with grammar*. *Fucking with* is associated with messing with someone; fuck you or fuck me is negatively perceived; in sex, ‘fuck you’ or ‘fuck me’ is one-sided — the act of fucking should be fucking with, because even when saying ‘I want to fuck you’ it is still necessary more than one person for this ‘fucking’ to actually happen. Similarly, in English, the correct preposition following the verb ‘to dream’ is ‘of’ or ‘about’, which makes absolutely no sense: because when one is dreaming, one is embedded in a witness that ‘of’ or ‘about’ cannot account for.

This piece shares how I fuck with grammar within a practice-led PhD research: applying Portuguese and Turkish grammar structures to English, generating verbs or nouns out of adjectives and vice versa[s]. *Fucking with grammar* is a mode of surpassing some of language’s limitations when speaking of that which is immaterial; it is a semantic slap in the face calling for decolonisation of one’s immediacy of logic when assuming typos and linguistic ignorance within writings not following English normativities. It is a method that contributes to a broader challenge to formats sustaining hierarchies around what is considered ‘academic’ research.

keywords

practice-led research, fine art, language, cisheteronormativity, embodied experience

Fine art occupies a space of liminality within what is considered academic research: it is established as an *academy*, and its *ornamental* presence in academia is bait to an almost-promise of belonging. This has to do with the way arts-based methods of inquiry are not considered sufficient to ground research validation in mainstream academic research circles. So what happens when creative practices foreground knowledges that are not capturable within mainstream academic discourses? Even more complicated, what happens when creative practices allow for theoretical hypotheses involving the immateriality of affect to be put forward?

Fucking with grammar was developed through practice-led PhD research investigating the affective and embodied materializations of the long-term endurance of, and resistance to, cisheteronormative structures. At its core, my research is concerned with exposing the possible ways in which white, cisgender, heteronormative, and patriarchic frameworks (wchp) are nonconsciously processed, focusing specifically on the intangibilities of the embodied and lived experiences of oppressive gendered impositions, and how these are situated in relation to hierarchized knowledge systems.

Departing from my experience as a white, lesbian, and cisgender woman who has since childhood been misgendered as male or trans, I use my own body as a space where cisheteronormativity is captured and exposed. In order to speak of self-representation, it is necessary to articulate that which has no shape — affect, sensation, emotion. These are immaterial markers of identity that, despite having very concrete materializations on the body, are not materially tangible at a universal level. This has to do with questions of recognition, of identity, of voice, and of field of practice, and it is not dissociated from accessibility, to language, to education, to be accounted for.

Fucking with grammar engages with that which is uncapturable by the privileges of empiricism by seeking alternative ways of speaking. When working with the body in ways that confront wchp, philosophies that maintain at their core a white cisgender phenomenological approach to deconstructing identity and experience are insufficient. This has to do with questions of self-representation when it comes to understanding individually situated affective structures impacting experience, what Sylvia Wynter furthered from Frantz Fanon as the

sociogenic principle: the way subjective experience is not solely shaped through biological “factors”, but through social constructions as well (Wynter, 2013). Referring to white privilege in academia and academic discourse, Audre Lorde warned a long time ago that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 2007: 112). The consequences of white supremacy turning into “white fragility” (DiAngelo, 2018) in the maintenance of fixed definitions of academic production bear deeper consequences regarding what is considered knowledge, questions of belonging, and what is or what can be a research method.



How are you guys doing? digital collage, 2021.

In this contribution, I share *fucking with grammar*, a practice-led approach to transform English grammar in ways that challenge what is considered “proper” writing in relation to academic research. This proposal has to do with Portuguese being my first language, and with Turkish being a language I have spoken on a daily basis for a long period of my life. However, my purpose is not intended to hierarchize which

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language is better to convey what, or hide the way Portuguese and Turkish have their own histories of coloniality and supremacist imposition. My intention here is to foreground how creative practices and approaches applying semantic transformations can *exercise* English in ways that are more encompassing of what experience can be.

I will first explain how I began to *fuck with grammar*, and how this approach functions within my practice. I then engage with the work of Johanna Hedva and Linn da Quebrada, two artists whose practices articulate experience in ways that go beyond the thinking frameworks conditioned by western phenomenologies.

— **fucking with grammar**

Fucking with grammar is a thinking methodology and approach to writing derived from the way I articulate myself in English as someone whose first language is Portuguese, and as someone who has spoken Turkish regularly in a past period of my life. I argue that *fucking with grammar* can be used as a method to confront

some of the limitations when writing about the immateriality of affective afferences and efferences associated with the endurance of, and resistance to white-cishetero normativity.

Fucking with grammar first emerged as a way to respond to corrections made to my own writing when applying grammatical structures from Turkish and Portuguese to English. At first these transformations were made spontaneously: I instinctively *mis*-choose words and prepositions. Now they are deliberate, conscious, and informed decisions through which I am claiming the space to articulate the viscosity of affect in ways that come closer to what certain experiences entail.

*they were sucked into the void, but in different directions at random
yet, still sucked into that vacuumed emptiness
how can flesh be sucked into and apart, toward opposite directions?
the question is not a question but an image of being pulled apart
leaving a trail of wetness up in a curve,
as if a snail had passed by
but, this is another type of slime
it is a pleasant slime that as it is absorbed it contaminates that
through which it passes,
and then it spreads
it continues its contamination process weaving its way into the
fleshiness that wants to be pulled apart
now that it is contaminated, the flesh feels in its most raw existence
its parts enjoying being pulled by a slime that is no longer wet
the slime goes through the flesh, it passes through/under/within its
rawness reaching every bit and, as the slime made its way through
the whole, the flesh turns into slime itself
merged with poison, it enjoys its own effect while it lasts, and before
becoming another type of raw.*

another type of raw, poem excerpt, 2019

As a methodology, *fucking with grammar* tries to work with a gut feeling loose from tendentious impositions of how one is expected to write according to mainstream academic standards. This approach to writing led me to use *mis*-location as a method to narrate experiences of my own body when inquiring into the viscosity of specific injurious or violent confrontations. It is neither *un*-location nor *dis*-location. *Mis*-location is a wrongly situated narrative that is done intentionally.

The choice to fuck with grammar derives from the way fucking “with” is associated with messing with someone. Concurrently, fuck you or fuck me is negatively perceived [and thinking about sex, “fuck you” or “fuck me” can be individually one-sided]. The act of fucking, sexually speaking, should be fucking *with*, because even when saying “I want to fuck you”, there must still necessarily be more than one person for this “fucking” to actually happen.¹

Similarly, in Portuguese the preposition following the verb “to dream” is *with*, as opposed to the English “of” or “about”. To dream *with* always made more sense [to me], because when one is dreaming one is embedded in a *withness* that “of” or “about” cannot account for. The use of *with* became a mistake I often made when writing and speaking in English; it was a mistake that would often be corrected when someone would read my writing.

The influence of Turkish derives from the way the language is structured through formulas applicable to the stem of each word; these “formulas” can transform any stem into nouns, verbs, adjectives, or adverbs. Having this logic internalized affects how one deals with language, possibly leading to non-consciously shaping words through those internalized grammatical possibilities.

In my writing I deploy *mis-* and other intentional transformations: these are italicized, so as to emphasize the words I am transforming. I use square brackets to comment on my own writing. The purpose of this disclaimer is to refrain from having to footnote every single transformation, and to safeguard myself from the unproductive tendencies that confuse my writing choices with linguistic ignorance [typos].

— dreaming *with*

In Johanna Hedva’s reading of “A Decade of Sleeping” (2020a), they share travels and encounters happening in sync with rest and stillness. Affirming what is written, Hedva tells us, the audience, that what we are listening to in their dreams *is* real; the information coming through their voice holds the essence of how things *are* during lengthy moments of “inactivity”; their voice is an embrace one can melt into, it is a *being circled* by another’s senses through spoken [read] narrative.

According to Hedva, in dreams, bodies can exist in multiple “as such” human and non-human possibilities. I argue that Hedva’s *dreams* are material intangibilities: a paradox of inaccessible reality connected [or perhaps connectable] to the way affective structures have very material consequences. They say that in sleep “I am then who I most am ever and I will not give that up for anything” (2020a, min. 7:58). To say “I am ~~then~~ [in dreams] who I most am ever” implies existing in the most faithful way to oneself;² existing in the conditions that are acknowledged the least, because existing in our dreams is not existing at all — it is not considered reality. Existing in dreams is not materially

communicable, one’s embodied experience in a dream is not transferable, what one experiences is not physically tangible [palpable] for another in the way that it is [very real] for the one who lived the dream. In this sense, dreams can be material intangibilities in ways not different from how an individual/personal embodied account of what it entails to be confronted with oppression might also be intangible for those who were not confronted.

There is an interesting overlap in the adjectives used to characterize what dreams are *not* with those used to describe what is materially intangible, especially when considering the commentary of those who do not undergo certain affective confrontations. The antonym of dream is reality, factual, certainty; these are aspects usually lacking when it comes to the *corroborability* of first-hand, singularly experienced, violent confrontations. I let myself play with this overlap of descriptions — it is a productive speculation into the paradoxality of an inaccessible reality no different from the way affective structures are materialized on the body. Using linguistic play, I contrast the veracity of dreams in Johanna Hedva’s piece with that which is materially [in]tangible, highlighting the dismissal of systems of accountability when measured in relation to who is allowed to be injured and who is not.



It’s been a long time since the last [in ongoing] revolutions and the faggots and their friends are still not free, 2021.³

In the foreword of the 2015 edition of *The Gilda Stories*, Jewelle Gomez describes the night when she wrote the first section of what would become her novel. Jewelle went to a phone booth to call a friend; as she was speaking with her friend, two men passing by “started telling [her] in lewd detail what sex acts they would like to perform on [her]” (Gomez, 2016: XI). Jewelle told her friend to hold

the line, and furiously screamed at the men; the men told her she was “crazy” and went away. Speaking of the viscosity of affect requires speaking of the different ways through which one is viciously inflicted. Yet, exposing the latter is not acknowledged due to dominating hierarchies implicit in the former — being unsympathetic (not submissive) towards the person harassing you will define you as incapable of feeling.

In *Disaffected: The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling* (2021), Xine Yao demonstrates how sympathy was constructed through colonial strategies to sustain white/western supremacy over non-white/western others. Yao weaves literary examples to point at how the lack of sympathy of a subordinate other towards their white/western master is equated to the inability to feel. Yao refers to the inability to recognize that which does not fall under western constructions of sentimentality, or what she names *unfeeling*. In simple terms: if one does not sympathize, the consequence is not receiving sympathy (Yao, 2021: 31). Yao formulates a relation between *unfeeling* and disaffection, centering *unfeeling* as self-protection, and emphasizing the ramifications this *unfeeling* has on the vilification of the subject it is characterizing due to its potential towards resisting normalizing impositions.

Being angry is devalued and reversed through institutionalized and normalized hierarchies. Disaffection is having one’s feelings unrecognized, but it is also the refusal to be affected by homogenized definitions of feeling, centering the potential of *unfeeling* as that which can break the balance intended by western governance. To rebel is to be disaffected, and to refuse sympathy towards white ignorance is to rebel. But, when one rebels, when one refuses and breaks the stability of specific systems of governance, one becomes the symbol of instability, an obstruction to balance, peacefulness, and quiet.

— epistemic disobedience — epistemological destruction

The paradigm shift implemented through trans sexual politics, especially Black trans sexual politics, is the undoing of epistemologies so urgently required to dismantle the kind of constraining structures hindering social justice. When performance artist, actress, and activist Linn da Quebrada utters “I am a cisgender woman with one breast and a penis”, she is committing the kind of epistemic disobedience that undoes epistemology. She goes beyond the reclaiming of words like queer or faggot, because a *cisgender woman with a penis* contests what was “biologically” invented as a signifier of what gender/sex should embody (Priscilla and Goifman, 2018). Claiming to be a cisgender woman, Linn intentionally misuses the term cisgender. She stretches the capacity of an

already invented term derived from normative constructions, bringing into crisis sex/gender epistemes by making clear that the individual is the one deciding which categories they want to use.

Looking into the ways art-based inquiries can regenerate what our bodies sense, but cannot (yet) make sense of, Linn demonstrates what art can do when not submitting to non-negotiable and hierarchized epistemologies. Concurrently, she makes evident that “not being able to make sense of” derives from oppressive and normalizing structures that prevent one’s possibility to articulate one’s own body in faithful ways to one’s own identity.⁴ This is intangible mainly to the white-cis-hetero body, or to the body passing as such. Linn claims ownership to the right of terming her own body: she demonstrates through practice what living in one’s own terms looks like:

<i>Vou te confessar</i>	I’m gonna confess to you
<i>Que às vezes nem eu me aguento</i>	Sometimes even I can’t stand myself
<i>Pra ser tão viado assim</i>	To be so queer
<i>Precisa ter muito mais</i>	You need much more
<i>Muito talent</i>	Much talent

Undoing epistemology requires new terms decided by those who embody them, as Linn claims, “vai ter que enfiadecer”, “you’ll have to faggotize/queer yourself”. *Faggotize* did not exist as a verb, so Linn created it in order to say “you need to be a bit more fag”.⁵ These semantic transformations are not as easy to do in English as they are in Portuguese or in Turkish, where grammatical structures can be applied and easily identified as the transformation of a noun or adjective into a verb, or vice versa. This is not about creating a hierarchy in which language is more flexible, this is about being able to adapt certain terms when following an academic structure without having one’s written material perceived as having typos or linguistic ignorance.

Linn confronts the imposed binary inventions used to sustain cisnormativity. She is the scream to all forms of assault created by white-cis-hetero-patriarchy to maintain governance over all bodies:

<i>Ela tem cara de mulher</i>	She has the face of a woman
<i>Ela tem corpo de mulher</i>	She has the body of a woman
<i>Ela tem jeito</i>	She has he manners
<i>Tem bunda</i>	She has he ass
<i>Tem peito</i>	She has the breasts
<i>E o pau de mulher!</i>	And the cock of a woman!

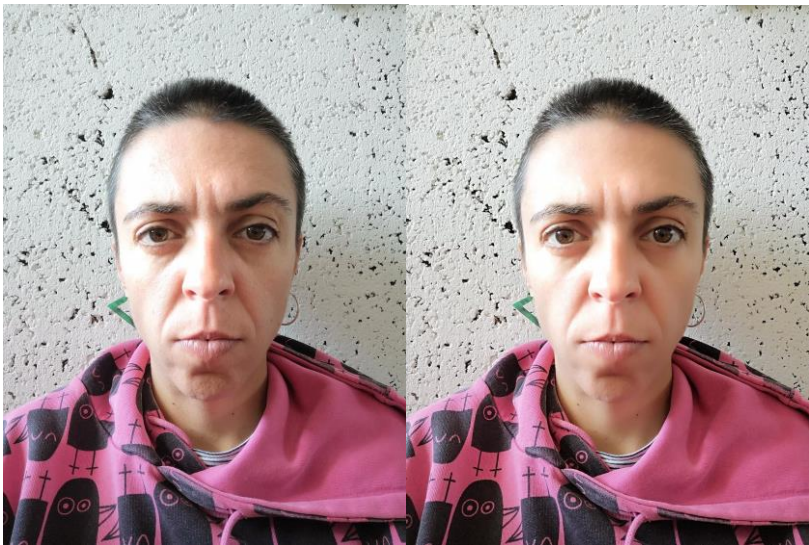
The unapologetic exposure of what is being denied and what is being embraced in Linn da Quebrada's work undoes (to me) oppressive epistemic structures by reinventing and reclaiming language in the terms she deems necessary. Linn formulates ways of undoing racialized and gendered epistemic structures by reinventing, reclaiming, and recreating the language necessary to articulate black and non-binary embodiments.

— practice-led research

Fucking with grammar is part of a pursuit for finding ways of writing (even if minor) that come closer to articulating how affect manifests itself on the body. At the same time, by *fucking with grammar*, I highlight a space for disobediences that can help to destabilize western epistemologies, to create challenges that contribute to what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls “the End of the World as we know it” (2014: 84). To end what “we” know requires a different “how”; it entails methodological deployments that help bring into crisis academic hierarchies regarding (research) *corroborability*. It is through this “how” that art and other creative forms of inquiry articulate something different. The material intangibilities derived from violent confrontations with white, cisgendered, heterosexual, and patriarchic normativity are not comprehensible through western phenomenologies privileging wchp experience. Rather, practices where the body is self-defined, reclaimed, and exercised as a medium and method beyond the discursive can articulate how sensation is manifested in relation to experience.

Through my practice, I explore language's constraints and possibilities, where language is tied to photographic investigations in the unfolding of a process that articulates the nonconscious semiosis of affects, meaning the way the repetition of certain patterns can affect embodied experience.⁶ For example: one does not “come out” as heterosexual — it is not a thing, and therefore it is a normalized behavioral pattern. My photographic investigations look into the impact these patterns have on the body. I do this by highlighting how, semiotically, my portraits react to the semantic constructions tied to the way I am addressed.

I began to map ways that would allow me to come closer to the viscosity of affect that is part of embodied/lived experiences. I tried to do this without being averted and undercut, without being minimized and condescendingly perceived within research circles dominated by supremacist epistemic structures. Working



Knowledge with beauty filter zero,
2021

Knowledge with beauty filter 10,
2021

on that which is immaterial comes with challenges (pushes towards) regarding mainstreamed philosophies, and consequently with detachment and alienation from concrete branches of (what is accounted for as) knowledge. I wanted to propose alternative *wordings* and transformed grammatical structures, without having to dedicate my entire research to linguistics. Rather than engaging with linguistics specifically, or continuously searching for the “appropriate” work done under a linguistics umbrella, I find it more fruitful to draw on work in which there is the potential for non-supremacist relationalities, work that demonstrates repetitious exclusionary patterns in tandem with what happens when these patterns are not in place.

The photographic works shared here are companions of *fucking with grammar*. Some of these works are titled in ways that indicate my encounters with cisheteronormativity, such as *How are you guys doing?* and *The faggots and their friends*. I hold hands with passages from science and speculative fiction books, such as Samuel Delany’s:

I know, knowledge: another process, finally no different, in its over-all form, from the one called stupidity. Information is not taken into the human organism so much as it is created from the strong association of external and internal perceptions. These associations are called knowledge, insight, belief, understanding, belligerence, pig-headedness, stupidity. (Only social use determines which associations are knowledge and which are not.) (1984: 32)

Without going against already existing strategies dismantling a “proper English” ideology, as well as challenges to English as a universal language, *fucking with grammar* is a small contribution, a proposition to create new [and old] transformations that contribute to destabilizing western normativities associated with writing. *Fucking with grammar* is an addition to, a request to share, to bring in, and make available, strategies that can contribute to linguistic transformations so urgently required for English to actually mirror the plurality and multiplicity of those using and being addressed with/in/by this language.

notes

- 1 This comment is certainly not encompassing all that fucking can be: someone can fuck by themselves, and there are modes of consensually using “fuck you” and “fuck me”. Please keep in mind that “fucking with” is an addition, and expansion of meaning, and not a substitution.
- 2 Strikethrough mine.
- 3 Titled after a quote from Mitchell Larry (1977: 9). Strikethrough mine.
- 4 *Wording* the question after Karen Barad’s “[c]an we (re)generate what our bodies sense but cannot yet touch?” (Barad, 2015: 411).
- 5 To *faggotize* could also signify “to queer”. Although viado or bixa — faggot — can be used among close friends when talking to each other, it is also a derogative term used specifically to curse “male” gays.
- 6 The nonconscious semiosis of affect results from weaving Terrence Deacon’s understanding of *form* — the production and reproduction of patterns — via Eduardo Kohn (2013) into N. Katherine Hayles’ nonconscious cognition (2017).

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