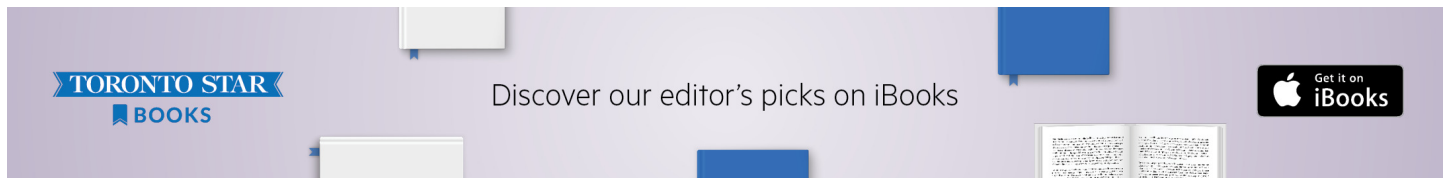


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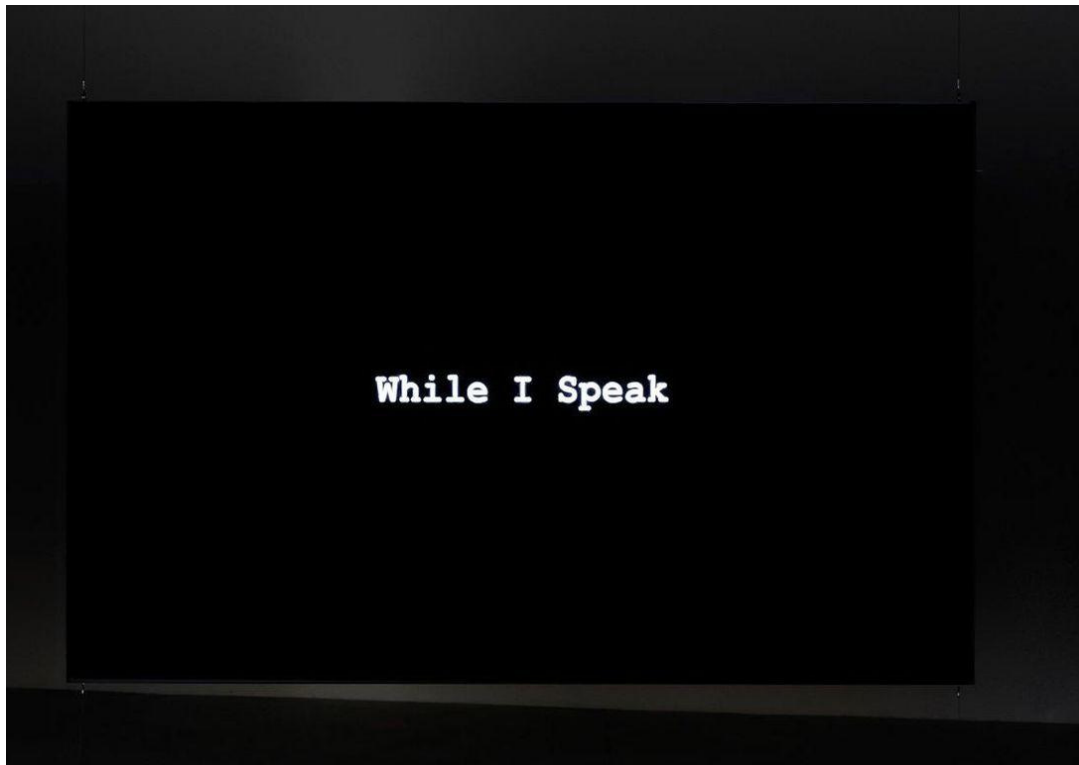
Videos elevate anger in Grada Kilomba's Power Plant show

By **MURRAY WHYTE** Visual Arts Critic

Mon., July 30, 2018

Grada Kilomba is an artist who likes to lay it bare, make things plain. *Secrets to Tell*, her show at the Power Plant, by way of the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology in Lisbon, does plenty of that.

One work — a reading of her 2008 book *Plantation Memories*, a catalogue of offhand, workaday racism suffered by Black women of the African diaspora — is presented, starkly, as a video piece of various people dressed in black reading aloud dispassionately (“This violence of racism is such that it cannot be assigned meaning,” one reads.) Another, a poem, reads, plainspokenly, as a litany of complaint: “I had to be better than all the others/ Three times/ Four/ Black and smart/ Angry.”



A part of Grada Kilomba's *The Desire Project* at the Power Plant. (TONI HAFKENSCHIED / COURTESY THE POWER PLANT)

A nearby installation piece, *The Mask*, obliterates any mystery it might hold with an accompanying text: Composed of a small table and stool with a candle, two bowls white lilies and beads, Kilomba accompanies it with the story of Escrava Anastacia, a venerated Brazilian saint often depicted with her head ensnared in a harness and a muzzle-like iron gag to keep her from speaking, her punishment for daring to speak of emancipation while still enslaved.

Kilomba, in other words, won't risk her point being missed. Escrava Anastacia stands as a potent emblem of what the artist has embraced: The power to speak freely and the danger it represents ("There is an apprehensive fear that if the colonial subject speaks, the colonizer will have to listen," she writes in the exhibition booklet). More power to her. These are hard conversations that need to be had. After centuries of being beaten down, the urge to hit back is all too easy to understand.

At the same time, [across the hall from Ellen Gallagher's mysterious, poetic exhibition *Nu-Nile*](#), whose concerns align so closely with Kilomba's, *Secrets to Tell* often feels like medicine without the spoonful of sugar. Kilomba owes that sweetener to no one, but it makes the show feel more like a shout down than an invitation to engage. Fair enough, but I found it hard to get inside.

Not so, though, *The Desire Project*, a spare, beautiful video piece unfurling on three huge, adjacent screens. Each begins, simultaneously, with a title slate: *While I walk, While I*

confusion that frustration brings (“In this world I am seen as a body that cannot produce knowledge,” reads a passage from *While I Write*).

It felt intimate, immediate, sympathetic: Kilomba opening a door to her private self, where softer sensations like self-doubt and pain leaven the anger outside. That’s not to say there’s no anger here – in *While I Speak*, words register like an indictment: “We are not dealing here with a simple game of w-o-r-d-s, but rather with a violent *hierarchy*.”

Together, the three pieces form a tableau of thought and experience, exposing vulnerability within the artist’s hardened shell (In *While I Walk*, you can see why the tough exterior’s there: “Someone points at me and says something ... something about being different. I ask myself: Different from whom?”).

All of Kilomba’s work seems to circle back to Escrava Anastacia – silenced, roughly, for daring to give voice to a fragile hope, for freedom, to which Kilomba can’t stop also giving voice. *The Desire Project* intensifies that simple urge, layering it with complexity that elevates it beyond the registration of a complaint. It’s urgent but nuanced, a sharp mind no longer railing, but hard at work unravelling a confusion that should never have had to be. It’s a simultaneous fog of ideas that translates frustration (walk) to indignation (speak) and, finally, clarity (write), and sharpens it all to a point: “So why do I write? I have to. I am embedded in a history of imposed silence. While I write, I am not the ‘other’ but the self. I become me.” In this piece more than any other.

Grada Kilomba, *Secrets to Tell*, continues at the Power Plant until Sept. 3. For more information please see www.thepowerplant.org.

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