

Maria Manuel Baptista & Larissa Latif
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3030-217 COIMBRA

Tel.: 239 084 370

e-mail: editor@ruigracio.com

site: www.ruigracio.com

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FOR A POST-COLONIAL QUEER THEORY: COLONIALITY OF GENDER AND HETERONORMATIVITY OCCUPYING THE BORDERS OF TRANSLATION¹

Fernanda Belizário²

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to briefly weave the dialogue of possibilities between the post-colonial studies and queer theory, an approach that is gaining ground in academia. Their fruitful spaces of translation have been offering to scholars and activists concepts beyond Eurocentric and hegemonic paradigms apropos of studies on gender, sexuality, hetero and homonormativity where the body emerges simultaneously as a locus of interpretation, violence and resistance.

KEYWORDS

post-colonialism; queer theory; critical border thinking; heteronormativity; sexual empire.

The purpose of this paper is to make some theoretical considerations from the meeting of postcolonial studies and queer theory, in order to bring out a comprehensive analysis of some social and historical conditions of deviant bodies production and their effects on the understanding of modern world-system.

The Modernity as a European epistemological project is characterized by Aníbal Quijano (apud Lugones, 2008:80) as *the fusion of colonialism and coloniality experiences with Capitalism needs, creating a specific universe of intersubjective relations of domination under a Euro-centered hegemony*. It is a form of knowledge, allegedly rational, which establishes coloniality in a cognitive dimension, focused especially on the separation between knowable objects (such as nature, uncivilized people) and knowing individuals (such as man, white, European, scientist). This separation has worked in several areas and established the modern western androcentric rationality as the exclusive form of knowledge, naturalizing power relations and identities in accordance with this racial, sexual, material and cognitive organization.

This coloniality of power, as Quijano presents, is therefore a hegemony strategy that had created new societal identities - blacks, mestizos, Asians - that constitute the other of white; and geocultural identities - America, Africa, Middle East - constituting the “other” of Europe, generating new intersubjectivities that reflect and ratify these power organizations over time, which have survived the colonialism itself.

In terms of gender and sexuality as an axis to analyze the coloniality of power, Maria Lugones weaves an interesting critique of the work of Aníbal Quijano, focusing her investigation on a *praxis understanding* against multiple oppressions suffered by women of color (such as race, gender, class and sexuality), understanding those as powerful brands of

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² PhD Candidate in PostColonialism and Global Cizentiship at Centre for Social Studies, University of Coimbra. E-mail: fe.belizario@gmail.com

bondage and domination that act on the bodies of individuals so that they can not be considered separately (Lugones, 2008: 78)

Understanding these features of the organization of gender in the modern/colonial gender system — the biological dimorphism, the patriarchal and heterosexual organizations of relations — is crucial to an understanding of the differential gender arrangements along “racial” lines.

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Along with proposing gender and race intersect to produce a specific type of domination - the subjection of women of color - the author also points out Quijano is normative and a reducer when naturalizes sexual dimorphism, assigning a biological meaning to sex and reducing gender to its expression.

Lugones goes further in her criticism by stating the concept of sexual dimorphism is an organizing axis of the gender system in a colonial perspective. By establishing heterosexual men and women as standard and other expressions of gender and sexuality as deviant, it endows individuals with unequal capacities to access the resources needed to fully exercise their citizenship, establishing a parallel with the idea of race in relation to the Eurocentric modern capitalist system. Thus, more than a coloniality of power, it is possible to recognize a coloniality of gender.

The coloniality of gender is also an organizing axis of society by creating opposing categories of man and woman, in which the latter is subjected to the first as a legacy of colonization itself (Lugones, 2008:88). Therefore, the author concludes not only the coloniality of power imposed sexual and gender dimorphism, but those categories are also its foundation.

Following the tradition of American women of color, feminists and their fruitful insistence on intersectionality as an essential epistemological feature to understand the oppression of women (not a man) black or *mestiza* (a non-white), it is required to establish a spectrum of analysis that incorporates categories such as race, class, nationality and other dimensions that constitute the individuals and how they are affected by a set of intelligibilities in order to understand the coloniality of gender. By intersecting gender with other elements, it turns out visible they are not merely associations but cumulative multiplications of elements fragmenting the individual and therefore producing diverse interpretations³ articulated from the idea of coloniality.

One example of how this subject fragmentation operates resides in the idea of border thinking. Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) in her work *Borderlands: La Frontera*, weaves an autobiographical testimony while theorizes on her *mestiza* woman experience as a Mexican descendant born in the United States, her voice sums up with others who continuously cross transnational and symbolical boundaries,

Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them* (...) The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eye, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead (Anzaldúa, 2012:25-6).

³ To an in-depth discussion about intersectionality see Brah & Phoenix (2004:75).

A critical *border thinking* puts into question the Eurocentric universalist interpretations that bend to normalize a certain gender, body and sexuality. Inclusively, it presumes the importance of the place of enunciation as producer of various representations and ways of being in the world. Says Walter Mignolo (2012), *I am where I think*.

Critical border thinking is consonant with Homi Bhabha's idea of Third Space, as a propose to apprehend individuals who transcend fixed identity positions to *in-between places that provide the ground for the development of subjectivity strategies - individual or collective - that initiate new signs of identity and innovative collaboration and contestation posts* (Bhabha 1998:21) .

These in-between places of difference are the juxtaposition of several variants that produce otherness (such as gender, class, race) generating overlaps and displacements expressed in a performative language of negotiation, sometimes recurring to the difference, other times to assimilation. For the author (1998:78), *it is needed to realize the complex trading condition set in the ability to rewrite the tradition from hybridisms that are characteristic of the lives of those who are minorities*. This interstitial border perspective highlights the negotiating experience between the fixity of identities, the skills to negotiate within the tradition and the subalternising processes that subject the individuals who occupy these spaces.

Critical border thinking and the third space theory suggest an identitary instability in negotiation with hegemonic and counterhegemonic values, to Avtar Brah (2006: 331) it is necessary to grasp how discourses and practices inscribe social relations, subjectivities and individual positionalities and from which criteria these definitions are operated, their nature, their borders, the boundaries that forge and fix the other.

In this regard, *queer⁴ theory* states we must be suspicious of individuals identity stability and their sexed bodies to unveil how social classification practices produce identity fictions as negotiating processes between the subjectivation of normality - professed by the disciplines that organize sexuality - and the political ability to seek for fractures in this system.

For a Queer Postcolonial Theory

Oppositely to the naturalization of the relation between gender *versus* genitalia, feminist, gay, lesbians studies and queer theory rely on gender conception as an instrument inscribed in the culture to legitimize sex differences and provide stability to the heterosexual order which builds the oppositions men/women and their derivations.

Although socially constructed as natural, gender is a set of acts, gestures, signs, standards continuously and performatively updated in order to strengthen the construction of culturally viable bodies (heterosexuals), in the words of Judith Butler (2008:59) *Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being*.

The contemporary social order is also sexual and heteronormative, a term coined by Michael Warner in 1991, defined by *a set of prescriptions underlying social processes of reg-*

⁴ According to Ana Cristina Santos, *queer theory is a political and theoretical project that seeks to build the destabilization, subversion and emancipation of space to the phenomena related to sexuality and gender, no longer understood in linear and regular manner, but rather unstable, fluid, as real, as imagined, and always politicized*. (Santos AC, 2006:102).

ulation and control even for those who are not sexually interested in the opposite sex (Miskolci, 2009:156). Similarly, Paul B. Preciado elaborates the idea of *sexpolitics* to reflect on how sex is a device of normalization technologies of sexual identities. Heterosexuality is more than a sexual identity, it is a political system designed to produce straight bodies, *sexuality always implies a precise territorialization of the mouth, vagina, anus (...) Sexual Capitalism and Sex of the Capitalism (Preciado , 2011 : 12).*

If gender and sexuality are social constructions to regulate and control bodies, categorized between normal and abnormal, founding a *phallic economy* (Scott 1991: 778), the political project to dismantle this structure should be one that de-territorialize sexuality, using the devices that produce normal bodies to produce other sexual subjectivities. It demands a new understanding of the sexuality fluidity and the need to state strategic identities - not essentialised ones - as political action places.

This is the proposal of queer theory, a destabilizing political project, according to Jagose (apud Santos, AC, 2006:7), *that describes attitudes or analytical models that illustrate the inconsistencies of allegedly stable relationships between biological sex, gender and sexual desire.*

Ana Cristina Santos (2006:8) presents five key ideas in order to understand queer theory: the recognition that identities are always multiple, composed of an infinite amount of components; any identity is arbitrary, unstable and exclusionary; we should not give up the idea of identity, but recognize it as an open, fluid and questionable category; theory or policy focused on homosexuality reinforces the binary hetero/homo that urges to be challenged in favor of the emergence of multiple sexual identities; queer proposes to theorize about sexualization of bodies, desires, actions, social relations, institutions across various fields of knowledge.

Therefore, if gender was created as a strategy to normalize bodies following straight biopolitics – homosexuals, transsexuals, transvestites, intersexed people – the abnormal, the queers as political subjects appropriate this concept to establish its social transformation project

sexpolitics becomes not only a place of power, but also the space of a creation in which succeed and juxtapose feminist, homosexual, transgender, intersex, chicanas, postcolonial movements. Sexual minorities become multitudes. The sexual monster whose name is multitude becomes *queer* (Preciado, 2011:14).

Although Queer Theory is associated with the study of desire and sexuality, contributions from Paul B. Preciado and Judith Butler for instance have forwarded their discussions to a critique of globalization, the Euro/North American models of hetero-sexual identity and integrationist movements that struggle for gender identity, seeking to position it as a theory that resists white, hetero-gay and colonial Americanization of the world.

For these groups, it is important to understand most of the phenomena seen as deviations are differences produced throughout inferiorization processes, in creation of otherness, justifying an unequal access to material resources of existence, to retrieve the terms of Quijano. Queer project is also a critical project heir of the feminist tradition and anticolonial that *aims to analyze and deconstruct historical and cultural processes that have led to the invention of white heterosexual body as the dominant fiction in the West* (Preciado, 2011:15).

A common source for queer and post-colonial theories are the subaltern studies since both propose researches on the historical experience of subaltern groups from a non-canonical reference in the search for visibility - not assimilation -, recognition of difference, the ability to speak truth to power or to *increase the myriad of stories permitted to tell the nation*, as said Homi Bhaba (1998:198). According to Paul B. Preciado (apud Miskolci, 2009:160)

Postcolonial and queer theories answers, in a sense, the impossibility of the subaltern individual articulate its own position within the analysis of the history of classical Marxism. The locus of political subjectivity construction seems to have been displaced from traditional categories the class, labor and sexual division to other transversal constellations as could be the body, sexuality, race, but also nationality, style or even the language.

Regarding the constitution of subjects who can speak, it is crucial to mention the seminal work of Gayatri Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak* (1988). The idea of subaltern recovered by the author comes from Gramsci, which defines it as a category in the sidelines (borders) of power. For Spivak, Gramsci overemphasize the autonomy of the subaltern subject, describing it as essentialist and reduced to an undifferentiated monolithic set of individuals who, to the author, are heterogeneous in their own inferiority, recurring fluidly and contextually to identities and identifications in a form of strategic essentialism. Within this diversity of subjects and conditions, the subaltern is defined by one whose voice cannot be heard, they make up

the bottom layers of society constituted by specific modes of exclusion from markets, political-legal representation, and the possibility of full membership in dominant social strata (Spivak, 2010:14).

No subaltern representation act is legitimate if it is not imbricated in this process of agency and representation. Otherwise, it is the reproduction of power relations and oppression that silence the subaltern and not give them the space to speak that make the subaltern an object of knowledge behind an attempt to make it subject.

In the same direction, Sandy Stone (2006) in her essay *The Empire Strikes Back: the post-transsexual manifesto*, originally published in 1987, argues transsexuals have been used as arguments and examples of non-naturalized relationships between genitalia and gender identity in medical discourses, in feminist theories and in the foundations of homosexuality theories (see also Prosser, 2006: 257), however, as in the colonial discourse, there is a denial of their voice and their subjectivity, *the people who have no voice in this theorizing are the transsexuals Themselves*. (Stone, 2006: 230).

Stone proposes the idea of intertextuality to reflect the experience of a transsexual who can speak. This would imply a relationship between the discourses that build plausible stories – coming from devices that seek to normalize the transsexual deviant body - and the personal experiences bring out the transsexual subjectivity, which is much larger than the conflict body/gender enshrined in the academic and medical literature, *considering that most transsexuals choose reassignment in their third or fourth decade, this means erasing a considerable portion of their personal experience* (Stone, 2006:231).

Corroborating Stone, Chandra Mohanty (2005) develops the idea subaltern can speak - and it does - in fractures between several hegemonic discourses, producing new meanings.

Identities are processes, are performative and created at the intersections of power relations. Both postcolonial theory and queer theory understand borders as meeting places for discourses, practices and various contingencies, escaping the universalities where translation is the counterproposal of invisibility. Preciado (2011) tells us queer theory only exists as a translation, as a form of agency of the political subject. Similarly, António Sousa Ribeiro (2005) states *a post-colonial perspective of translation allows us to open spaces of knowledge and action that have been too long closed in exclusive dichotomies*. Again, we recall to the critical border thinking. The boundaries not as external domination, but as friction zones (Preciado, 2011:18), hybrid spaces of transversal identity production.

Queer theory and post-colonial studies, each one in its own way, create and recreate themselves from tension with dominant knowledge to build other intelligibilities from identities that were on the side lines, or at borders or below abyssal lines. As the non-European is the result of the race concept with which the West organized the world in human and sub-human categories, queer is the result of dimorphism that organize the world in normal and deviant bodies and subjectivities.

It is urgent to rethink the modern world-system as a crisscross of gender-race- capitalism, a detached force field from binary logic which is the milestone of modern Western ontology, founded in dualisms that always presupposes a hierarchy: man/woman, society/nature, heterosexual/homosexual.

These dialectical oppositions do not make clear the interstices of various oppressions made invisible in the binaries. This is why María Lugones speaks of a gender coloniality that is only visible when race and gender intersects, it is about this place that Joan Scott speaks of when she establishes the idea of phallic economy in contrast to studies that emphasize the behavior of sexual minorities, without contextualizing them within a normalizing production scheme that affects all bodies.

In these terms, perhaps the most radical meeting of queer with the postcolonial is the body: the body as a limit, the body that causes affections and is affected by identity, subjection, oppressions, differences, borders and translations.

The post colonial body is a central element of analysis in the extent it is metonymy and expression of social inscription of the difference, which represents a starting point for questioning the Eurocentric, logocentric and heterocentric condition, their invisibility engines and subordination of other world grammars.

At the same time, the queer body is the condition of meaning. As a limit, is the body that is racialized, who is male or female or neither, is the body that has sex, loves and negotiates its physical boundaries within the boundaries of their identity. The body is the place of identity, oppression and resistance.

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