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# CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL THINKING FROM LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN

WRITINGS FROM THE MARGINS

*Edited by Aurea Mota, Laura Fóllica  
and Diana Roig-Sanz*



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## **Contemporary Global Thinking from Latin American Women**



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Writings from the Margins

Translated by María Cristina Hall

Edited by

Aurea Mota, Laura Fóllica and Diana Roig-Sanz

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# Contents

## Acknowledgements — V

Aurea Mota, Laura Fólica, and Diana Roig-Sanz

## Latin American Women Thinkers: Past and Present Considerations — 1

María Cristina Hall

## Translator's Note: A Rendering Situated in Movement — 19

Berenice Bento

## Sexual Difference and Abjection: What is the Gender of Enslaved Black Women? — 29

Alejandra Castillo

## Corporalitics and its Reticular Movement — 57

Mara Viveros-Vigoya

## Intersections, Peripheries, and Heterotopias in the Cartographies of Sexuality — 73

Silvana Rabinovich

## The Bedouin Paradox — 93

Cristina Burneo Salazar

## Heterolingual Movements vs. Vigilance: New Counter-Sedentary Narratives — 111

Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil

## A Manifesto on Linguistic Diversity: Five Essays — 127

Claudia Kozak

## Latin American Digital Literature: A Close-Distant-Material-Collaborative-Localized Reading — 141



**VIII** — Contents

Analía Gerbaudo

**Argentine Jetties — 157**

Ochy Curiel and Dennys Silva-Reis

**On Translation and Black Feminism. An Interview with Ochy Curiel — 173**

**About the Authors — 179**

Aurea Mota, Laura Fóllica, and Diana Roig-Sanz

# Latin American Women Thinkers: Past and Present Considerations

The literature published in international academic circuits – written mainly in English – wrongly gives the impression that Latin American<sup>1</sup> women writers have not sufficiently discussed contemporary social issues such as gender discrimination, racial injustice, displacements and refugee crises, income inequality, representations of the self, corporality, or language diversity and multilingualism, to name but a few of our most pressing global concerns. Latin American women are underrepresented and under-read in the English-speaking world, and Argentine scholar Nora Catelli's (2018: 179) claim that “little attention is given [. . .] to the translation of thought and theory that have accompanied literary creation in Latin American spaces” rings particularly true. Indeed, this claim could be easily extrapolated to other disciplinary fields beyond literary theory, as the exclusion of Latin American women thinkers in the history of international contemporary theory is a matter of fact. This book aims to bridge the gap by proposing a new research agenda that pushes for a more inclusive history of women's contemporary thought, one showcasing a diverse array of Latin American women writers and intellectuals who have made important contributions to understanding some of the main challenges of our time. As we shall see, their lines of inquiry pay careful attention to gender biases, global racial and linguistic injustice, and to the intersections between academia and social and intellectual activism. In this respect, contemporary social theory, feminist historiography, and literary studies have significantly contributed to acknowledging women and “southern” agency in key developments of the Modern era. However, the lack of English translations or international publications suggests that the work of women thinkers from the Global South has been obscured or even erased from international debates. This predicament only reinforces the western world's racialized and androcentric order. This problem is particularly hard-felt by non-European women writers who discuss relevant theoretical issues, do so in less-represented languages in the international academic world – such as Brazilian Portuguese, Indigenous languages, and the many var-

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<sup>1</sup> We want to clarify that we are using a broader definition of Latin America to include various areas of the continent, such as the Caribbean. We recognize that the Caribbean is typically considered a distinct part of the subcontinent due to its unique historical and linguistic characteristics. In this book, we explicitly address this issue by emphasizing the importance of incorporating authors from different regions.

iants of Latin American Spanish – and who deal with fundamental topics beyond feminist theory and gender inequality.

This book is a response to such a diagnosis. Our own experience as readers and researchers confirms that theoretical texts written by Latin American theorists have not garnered much attention in Europe and the English-speaking world, which, at the moment, leads academic publications and international research. This holds particularly true for our cohort of women, who embody multiple marginalizations, given 1) the language in which their intellectual work is written; 2) their gender; 3) their “race”<sup>2</sup>; 4) the fact that their intellectual productions are excluded or less-considered as primary sources in other languages and geographical contexts; and 5) the “peripheral” place Latin America still occupies when it comes to the recognition of theoretical contributions from these areas. The thinkers whose texts have been translated in this volume have assumed the challenge of writing from physical, linguistic, and metaphorical margins as they share their interpretations of the world.

Within this general framework, this book offers nine texts produced by Latin American scholars and social and intellectual activists, originally published in (Brazilian) Portuguese and (Latin American) Spanish, which have been translated into English by the Mexican-American<sup>3</sup> scholar, poet, and translator María Cristina Hall – excepting the text written by Berenice Bento in (Brazilian) Portuguese, which was translated by one of the editors, Aurea Mota, who is a native Portuguese speaker.<sup>4</sup> Although all of the authors in this volume are of Latin American geographical origin (Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Mexico), their life experiences (with some being revered activists) and academic trajectories (as established or mid-career scholars) vary. Some work at universities in their countries of origin (Bento works at the Universidade Nacional de Brasília in Brazil; Burneo, at Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar in Ecuador; Castillo, at Universidad Metropolitana de Ciencias de la Educación in Chile; Gerbaudo, at Universidad Nacional del Litoral, and Kozak, at Universidad de Buenos Aires, both in Argentina; and Vivero, at Universidad Nacional de Colombia) while

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2 We are all aware of the fact that there is no such a thing as racial difference among human beings. When referring to the category of “race”, we use quotation marks to denote that we are alluding to the process of racialization that global modernity has brought about.

3 We would like to make it clear that for us “American” is a category that applies to everyone who lives in the continent we call America, not only specifically in the United States. We are open to accept the late-modern use of the term that denotes an association with this specific nation-state. We are also very much open to the fact that most of the authors of this volume are also Americans in the larger sense of the term.

4 To maintain consistency with the other texts, María Cristina Hall edited the translation in tandem with Mota.

others have established themselves in universities beyond their home countries (Rabinovich works at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; and Curiel, at Universidad Nacional de Colombia). The authors translated in this book have widely published their inspiring intellectual work in Spanish and/or Portuguese.

Among other considerations, what makes Latin American women theorists different is the way in which they situate their thinking in relation to the effects and consequences of the colonial past and the global and local dilemmas of the present. In this sense, the book considers the colonial past in terms of the effects of slavery, but also of the way that linguistic imperialism was imposed at the expense of other languages. The book provides novel insights for our understanding of gender, race, and language diversity, as in the case of the chapters by Berenice Bento, Ochy Curiel, Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, and Mara Vivero Vigoya. The idea of race, though problematic by itself, may be used to explain how racialization affects social and literary history, past and present, and raises relevant insights regarding, for example, the Afro-Brazilian or Afro-Caribbean experience, as well as that of Indigenous communities and their multiple languages. It also relates to the significance of the so-called ‘South’ for reshaping the dynamics of our world, especially in its connections with global movements such as *Me Too*, *Ni una menos*,<sup>5</sup> and Black Lives Matter.

In short, in the voices of these authors, this book addresses global systems of injustice and contributes to bridging the gap between different scholarly communities. In this respect, all of the authors’ contributions are framed in the fields of social sciences, philosophy, literary studies, translation and language, linguistic rights, gender issues, social and intellectual activism, politics, and the humanities in a broad sense. They offer strong theoretical texts grounded in different writing styles – from scientific papers, to shorter essays, to interviews – and we understand them all as very valuable sources of situated knowledges (Haraway 1988). Indeed, any form of knowledge is socially and historically located in a given community and reflects the conditions of the place where this knowledge is produced. Unlike the classical western way of understanding theory that assumes what the Colombian

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5 Translator’s Note: I would like to point out the untranslatability between “Me Too” and “Ni una menos” as movements. While the name of the first movement, which emerged in the United States, is written in the first person as a shared denunciation of violence, abuse, rape, and discrimination on the basis of sex, the name of the second movement (roughly translated as ‘Not one less’) refers to the third person. This is because “Ni una menos” points to the subtraction of women from the sphere of life: on top of all of the issues that are also raised by “Me Too”, “Ni una menos” is a denunciation of femicide. This entirely differentiated degree of violence points to the impossibility of a universal style of feminism and to the importance of heeding the articulations of women across disparate contexts.

philosopher Castro-Gómez (2005) has called the “epistemology of zero point”, referring to the lack of recognition of the empirical substratum feeding the analysis, the contributors of this book acknowledge and engage with their point of departure.

## Understanding the Latin American Intellectual Milieu: Past and Present

Political, social, and literary theory are deeply enmeshed in the Latin American intellectual milieu. We cannot ignore this entangled relationship. Thus, we must ask ourselves whether the formative specificities of the different countries that make up this very large region, as well as their various national histories and periodizations, would caution against a generalizing analysis. Indeed, as important thinkers from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have shown, since the beginning of the early modern period, specific sociohistorical rearrangements provided the basis for a new global system, forming the common substrate of what we call Latin American thought.

In this line, we might consider the Cuban José Martí, with his seminal work *Nuestra América* (1891), the Peruvian José Carlos Mariátegui with his *7 ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* (1928), the Brazilian Gilberto Freyre with *Casa Grande & Senzala* (1933) [*The Masters and the Slaves* (1986)], and the Mexican José Vasconcelos with *La raza cósmica* (1925). In the study of the Latin American intellectual tradition, we may find a wide-ranging discussion that shows a path beyond regional and area studies, casting light on our global understanding of the world. Nisia Floresta’s *Humanitarian Booklet* (1853) is a clear example, as it shows how women intellectuals from the region have long contributed to the development of modern intellectual thought. Indeed, many Latin American thinkers have tackled issues in connection with both particular and universal themes, and the concept of scalarity between the local, the regional, and the global is embedded in the tradition of many Latin American authors, as we may glean in the multiple literary and essayistic texts that the women writers of this volume have proposed. In this sense, in the documented intellectual history of the subcontinent as of the establishment of early modern-colonial relations, regional self-understandings have been expressed relationally. Although our authors may be considered within this tradition, they address new issues, from our present time.

Beyond proposing non-individualized and regional understandings of Latin American thinking, while addressing the above-mentioned challenges of Latin American women’s peripheral allocation as intellectuals in terms of their gender, “race”, and writing language, another factor needs to be highlighted. Essayistic

writing marks the way Latin American thought has been traditionally produced. Indeed, the boundaries between genres in Latin American literature are somehow blurred and less clearly defined than in other traditions. But, as observed by the Spanish philosopher José Gaos, who was exiled in Mexico in 1938 and remained there until his death in 1969, since the nineteenth century, the essay as a genre has provided a way of analyzing Latin American social structures. Indeed, the essay is very much constitutive of national and regional identity. Of course, the essay is shared with many other intellectual traditions all around the world. However, in the case of Latin America, the essay became embedded in scientific arguments. For some, such an articulation would come at the expense of the objectivity considered necessary for the scientific or philosophical apprehension of certain historical developments. However, in the Latin American intellectual tradition, the importance of the essay is better gleaned in terms of a subjectivation that establishes a form of proximity between the *object* of thought and the *thinker*. It is not about assuming an impossible neutrality, but rather about making it clear that the frontiers between the two are very much artificial. Better to recognise it than to recreate the fallacy of the false objectivation of human observation. This first step thus overcomes “point zero” thinking previously mentioned, allowing for the development of a real, situated interpretation of any social phenomenon.

Beyond this brief historical overview of the Latin American intellectual milieu, we, as editors, would like to justify our authors selection and describe how these women writers deal with fundamental issues in connection to the past and present. As stated above, this book has gathered nine women thinkers, a choice that some readers may view as obscuring other voices that also deserve our attention. While this may be true, we would like to briefly address some of the important issues that the women in this book have raised in their various texts, leading us to choose to include them.

Over the last few years, Latin American contemporary thought has been marked by women thinkers relating feminism to decolonial epistemologies both in academia and in social movements, proposing new theories with which to revise – often too-white and elitist – hegemonic feminism. They have also proposed their thinking in relation to capitalism and neocolonialism. This theoretical revision has been spearheaded by women thinkers like Alejandra Castillo, Mara Viveros-Vigoya, and Berenice Bento, all in this volume, but also by other relevant contemporary women from across the whole continent and from different generations, with their ages ranging from their late thirties to their seventies. Some of these women include Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Marta Lamas, Eli Bartra, Marcela Lagarde, Fanny del Río, Mariana Berlanga Gayón, Karina Ochoa Muñoz, Carolina Araújo, Ivone Gebara, Danila Suárez Tomé, Rita Segato, Rosario Fernández Ossandón, Laura Quintana, and Leila Gómez. All of them have challenged old assump-

tions in a post-colonial but also post-Covid world, pushing forward theories that criticize the limitations of western epistemologies.

We have also chosen to highlight the fact that contemporary Latin American women thinkers have been very committed to promoting language diversity, Indigenous cosmologies, and readership in Indigenous languages, empowering Indigenous women in the public sphere. This is the case of Ochy Curiel, Cristina Burneo Salazar, and Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil, who are also featured in this volume. Yet we may also cite other Latin American women thinkers (scholars and translators in this case) who view language and translation as a political act, such as Patricia Willson, Andrea Pagni, María Constanza Guzmán, Gabriela Villalba, Gertrudis Payàs, and Nayelli Castro, work in different academies (in Belgium, Germany, Canada, Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, respectively), and have strived to think about the specificity of Latin American translation studies.

We may also note that a significant number of Latin American works have focused on environmental justice and forms of Native thought regarding land restitution. Indeed, the idea of territory poses a hefty challenge to assumptions about the modern State and private property. Reflections along these lines will be found in the text by Silvana Rabinovich. In short, we do acknowledge that our selection implies the risk of hiding other voices, but we would like to clarify that one of our main criteria for the difficult choice of whom to include in this volume was that the work engage in regional and global dialogue, a cornerstone of the historical Latin American intellectual tradition. In this respect, these texts are the result of important exchanges, which are made visible in the works themselves. In this unique understanding of the individual versus the collective, these texts do not focus on the authors, forgetting the collective network in which their work has emerged, but understand thinking as non-individualized. That is to say, the texts by the authors who participate in this volume are articulated with other references. They are an entry point to a network or fabric that is being continually woven, not a closed universe.

To conclude, we cannot dispute the fact that a general and homogenizing analysis is not possible for such a large geographical and historical framework, across so many periodizations. It is also true that our choice of women thinkers leaves aside other fundamental Latin American women thinkers. Any criticisms along these lines are valid insofar as the various and multiple national histories; political, social, and cultural struggles; and intellectual processes that mark each of the realities that have constituted the region would prevent us from conferring any kind of analytical unity to Latin America as a whole. More than aiming for exhaustivity, we have sought to include proposals that deal with several quintessential ideas, including multilingualism, racial justice, and a resistance to the national-sedentary. The multiplicity of voices in this context is so vast that we

cannot proffer an all-encompassing selection and analysis. Indeed, following Mitre (2002) and Ianni (2005), we should note that, by taking Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean as the starting point for a regional and global examination, we are not invoking the image of a homogenized unit. The materiality of what we call the Latin American intellectual milieu comes precisely from this shared political, social, cultural, and linguistic history, in which the reconfiguration of diverse realities made possible the space-time reconnection that was essential for the creation of the modern world.

## Diversity Matters: The Role of Translation in the Literary and Intellectual Field

Though young women are picking up the pen in droves, it is a matter of fact that fewer women than men get published and translated and that the international literary canon is still very male, white, and western-oriented (Roig-Sanz forthcoming; Fóllica 2024). Indeed, we need to assume that the global recognition of women writers and the linguistic and cultural diversity of the literary field does not occur in the same way across genres and borders. Latin American women writers are certainly more recognized as novelists than for their essays, for example, and there are still many asymmetrical relations between world literatures outside the western world. Thus, even though the literary marketplace seems to be experiencing a feminization with a “second Latin American Boom” of internationalized women authors (we might consider their nominations for the Booker Prize or other awards worldwide, or their participation in conferences and scientific events), Latin American women remain underrepresented in terms of theory. Indeed, the distribution is remarkably gendered when one examines the international circulation of social and literary theory from this region. We have no systematic and large-scale analysis of the publication, translation, and reception of theory by women, and we lack a general understanding of the extent to which international institutions and intellectual debates promote them internationally.

For the Spanish and Lusophone-speaking cases, there is no doubt that the most circulated women writers are those who write literary texts in the most important publishing centers in Latin America (Buenos Aires, Mexico City, and São Paulo), even though there is an increasing effort, from both academia and the marketplace, to promote other names. Thus, a few literary authors such as the Argentine Mariana Enríquez, Samanta Schweblin, and Ariana Harwicz; the Brazilian Adriana Lisboa and Patrícia Melo; and the Mexican Fernanda Melchor



have been translated into many languages and have secured a space in the canon of international awards. In this respect, we may perceive a remarkable tendency to promote women's writing and Latin American women writers as a niche market that could eventually lead us, as mentioned above, to a second Latin American Boom – one that might reverse the invisibility of Latin American women writers by bringing new names and subject matters to the World Republic of Letters.

However, the same does not hold true for the more philosophical and theoretical works in the field of the humanities and the social sciences, and we need to address the multiple differences across the continent in terms of literary and cultural traditions, as well as language. Spanish takes different forms across the region, but we may also think of the wide range of Indigenous languages, as addressed by several texts gathered in this book. Thus, following sociological approaches to translation (Heilbron 1999; Sapiro 2008 and 2009; Wolf 2007), this book offers an important contribution by presenting, in English, multiple texts originally written in less-translated languages in international academia, in this case, Latin American Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese, while dealing with topics that have long been overshadowed. As to the under-translation of her cohorts, the Afro-Dominican feminist and activist Ochy Curiel states, “I don't think it's a matter of translation being guilty, but a matter of possibilities and access. Most Black, Afro, and Indigenous women on our continent don't have enough time or money to prioritize the translation of texts. Nor are there a lot of publishing houses interested in translating their work. I think that this is more of a structural matter that has to do with the coloniality of knowledge”. In this sense, we need to emphasize that translation is not inherently positive. It is not a prerequisite for a thinker to be recognized by her peers or to be acknowledged for significantly contributing to specific fields. Also, we daresay that most of the thinkers in this book never aimed for international recognition via translation into English. Moving beyond personal aims and choices, one reason we chose to offer these translations into English is to help establish a more natural path for exchange. This path allows works of transcendent relevance to become part of a bidirectional linguistic flow – with both translation from and translation to. Ideally, this would be part of a non-hierarchical structure for the global circulation of texts.

Finally, we would like to stress the extent to which this book has committed to the translation process, paying specific attention to the many varieties of “peripheral” languages, the gender perspective (please see the translator's note in this regard), and our dialogue with the authors. In other words, the book considers translation as a cultural practice of exchange and as a tool of resistance that contributes to the survival of works while promoting their visibility. Translation also helps disseminate our women thinkers beyond their national and regional borders, and it allows us to bring them together in a single volume so that we

can amplify the dialogue between their distinct perspectives. It is now up to the reader to weave this exchange.

## An Overview of the Book's Structure

Berenice Bento (Campina Grande, Brazil, 1966) opens the volume with the chapter “Sexual Difference and Abjection: What is the Gender of Enslaved Black Women?” in which she shows how the racialization of bodies can preclude a universalizing gender analysis. She does so by critically discussing Joan Scott’s “Gender a useful category of analysis”, (1986) pointing out the importance and limitations of gender categories when considering enslaved bodies. Bento critiques the centrality of sexual difference as the basis upon which the female and male have been defined. In this sense, she shows that the word “Black”, when added to female (and also male) bodies, completely changes the equation. To be Black would thus cancel the possibility of being recognized as gendered, making the gender struggle one of the key points that many Black movements continue to address. She concludes that taking gender as the primary category for the analysis of power relations does not sufficiently problematize the conditions that precede the positions of power that men and women occupy in racialized social relations. Drawing on her own historical sociological research, she develops the concept of “necrobiopower” as a key analytical category with which to examine the differential distribution of gender recognition. As stressed in her chapter, the foundation of States in the modern period was very much connected to the direct or indirect acceptance of slavery – and not only where slavery was explicitly adopted, as Europe profited from slavery as well. Bento shows that one cannot consider gender today without taking into account the historical effects of slavery and the persistent role that State institutions have played in determining which lives are “dispensable” and which are worthy of preservation. She thus advocates for race to be taken seriously in gender studies, moving beyond what she calls “intersectionality by addition”.

In the second chapter of this book, “Corpopolitics and its Reticular Movement”, Alejandra Castillo (Santiago de Chile, Chile, 1974), proffers an in-depth analysis of the control of bodies on the part of States. She proposes the category “corpopolitics” to highlight the movements through which the politics of inclusion and exclusion were determined in modern States via the construction of an ocularcentric regime through which corpolities are narrated. As she shows, the politics establishes coordinates “that have been used to describe the space of what is held in common on the other side of the idea of the luminous – reason – while also producing images of a passionate body”. In dialogue with Julieta Kirkwood, along with Deleuze and

Guattari, her reticular conception of feminist politics has become central to understanding feminist social movements. Castillo explores the metaphor of the network in relation to feminist corpopolitics, paying particular attention to Kirkwood's "knot" (*nudo*) to denote ties formed at the political level and determining everyday, gendered societal practices. As Castillo posits, a feminist corpopolitics is one in which there is "no light, no shadow, no center, no margin [. . .] a feminist corpopolitics seeks to alter the visibilities, hierarchies, and classifications of the domination coordinates of the current political-visual order". Castillo grounds her argument by critically articulating a feminist corpopolitics in the performances that marked the great feminist revolt of Chile in 2019, which originated with student demands against sexual harassment at the university. The performances of this moment are cast as key examples of how a new critical, reticular, and feminist corpopolitics is underway.

Mara Viveros-Vigoya (Cali, Colombia, 1956) is the author of the third chapter of this volume: "Intersections, Peripheries, and Heterotopias in the Cartographies of Sexuality". Along the same line as the previous contributions, the author shows how gender is defined in intersectional feminist theories in order to criticize and develop the idea further through the analysis of contemporary political experiences. Viveros-Vigoya identifies some of the main axes of the intersectionality debate in order to show its scope and limitations, which are largely related to its dissemination. She shows how the intersections of race and gender, and class and gender, are experienced, and she demonstrates the consubstantiality of these relationships for the societal groups involved. The conservative rhetorical strategy arising in many parts of the globe in which gender struggles are cast as an imposition of "gender ideology" that goes against "traditional" ways of life is traced in France, Ecuador, Brazil, and Colombia. Viveros-Vigoya emphasizes the contributions of Black feminism, feminists of color, and Latin American feminism as decolonizing epistemic practices. This analytical assessment serves to highlight the theoretical and critical scope of a localized, contextualized, intersectional approach. Viveros's chapter offers a clear example of how theoretical criticism needs to be grounded in situated practices across different societal contexts in order to offer a fully global analysis of a given phenomenon.

Silvana Rabinovich (Rosario, Argentina, 1965), who has long lived and worked in Mexico, is the author of the next chapter, "The Bedouin Paradox", which establishes a strong dialogue with the first chapters of the volume in the sense that it also challenges fixed categories and seeks to consider them in terms of movement. Rabinovich beautifully addresses the political power of nomadism through the paradoxical figure of the Bedouin. Through the analysis of two nomadic groups, from Western Sahara and the Naqab in Palestine, both of which have been persistently persecuted by the colonial States of Morocco and Israel, respectively, Rabinovich

explores the key paradox around the idea of property and territorial fixation in the modern State. By citing Torahic texts from the book of Leviticus, Rabinovich draws from the Biblical edict that no one possesses anything because people are only on the earth for a transitory moment. Thus, nomadism as described by Ibn Khaldun in the fourteenth century would stand as a Biblically sanctioned mode of life because it recognises the impossibility of possessing anything through individual means. From a heteronomous ethics in which what prevails is the perspective of the *other*, Rabinovich probes the meanings of the word “inhabit”, showing that nomadism poses a radical critique of land appropriation. Nomadism allows us to glimpse the promise of other ways of inhabiting, beyond possession and accumulation. Last but not least, although this chapter has not been updated to reflect the present, Rabinovich’s extensive, continuous field work in areas of Palestine and Israel serves to locate today’s attempt to exterminate Palestinians in Gaza within unequal power relations and a larger framework of belonging.

Cristina Burneo Salazar (Quito, Ecuador, 1977) wrote this book’s fifth chapter, “Heterolingual Movements vs. Vigilance: New Counter-Sedentary Narratives”. In it, she explores sedentarism and monolingualism as modes of administrative control and borderization in the context of global border governance. In opposition to this exertion of control, Burneo Salazar proposes a “fugitive corpus” of counter-sedentary literary texts from the Ecuadorian diaspora that take migration, transnationality, bilingualism, and other transits and displacements as modes of writing. Focusing on the work of Ecuadorian writers in the United States who migrated or were migrated from the 1998–2000 period, such as Fabián Quito, Sonia Guiñansaca, Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, and Mauro Javier Cárdenas, Burneo Salazar finds that these texts spill past the notion of identity. The texts do not ascribe to a strict correspondence between nation, mother tongue, and belonging. In her analysis, Burneo Salazar brings to the table a fascinating theoretical crossover of authors who argue for the need to consider languages as fugitive given their non-national usage, as suggested by M. Suchet. Thus, Burneo Salazar crosses her readings of E. Glissant on the “imaginaries of languages” with R. Grutman’s “heterolingualism”. She also refers to N. Sakai and S. Mezzadra’s “borderization” in order to propose the analytical gesture of “heterolingual listening”. This heterolingual listening in Burneo Salazar’s fugitive corpus heeds a language that is diasporized through code switching, appropriations, mixings, and translations. This listening opposes the monolingual regime with which identity is often understood. Thus, referring to Cornejo Villavicencio, the author points out that “national literatures cannot understand the fact that one of the most relevant stories of Ecuadorian migration to the United States has been written in English by a queer author who identifies as a New Yorker”.

Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil (Ayutla Mixe, Mexico, 1981) is the author of chapter six, “A Manifesto on Linguistic Diversity: Five Essays”. In five short texts – “To Be or

Not to Be: Bilingualisms”, “In Speaking”, “There is No Such Thing as Indigenous Literature”, “Hahahatl. Should We Be Laughing?”, “Borders, Why Borders?”, and “Is There Linguistic Activism in Mexico?” – Aguilar Gil delves into common themes in Indigenous languages as they clash with the monolingual State perspective. One key aspect of this selection of essays is that it expands the possibilities of heterolingual approaches. She questions national borders, the imposition of official languages, and the homogenizing understanding of Indigenous literatures, all of which are violently imposed social and political constructions. She subverts what has been accepted as common sense and finds a way of life and a path for resistance in the diversity of bilingualism. In addition, Aguilar Gil explores the consequences of the artificial divisions imposed by national-territorialism. The essayistic character of these texts demonstrates what we have explained before about the importance of this genre of writing for the Latin American tradition of thought. With great clarity and commitment, Yásnaya Aguilar Gil shows that to write revealing a more subjective perspective does not detract from the analytical quality of the essay.

In the seventh chapter, “Latin American Digital Literature: A Close-Distant-Material-Collaborative-Localized Reading”, Claudia Kozak (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1960) deals with digital literature as a critical, diverse, and collaborative expression transiting through Latin America and its diasporas. This is done not by pinning an essentialist identity on Latin Americans but by considering mobile, differentiating features that are nevertheless linked to spaces of expression in tension with a literature that is simultaneously international. To some common ways of reading digital literature, such as close reading, distant reading, and hyperreading, Kozak adds notions such as material reading, collaborative reading, and localized reading. Thus, she emphasizes: a) digital literature’s politics of materiality; b) collaborative and multi-layered reading processes that allow for synergy between different aspects of the text, with this collaborative and multi-layered reading able to go beyond the hegemonic trend of “user” readings; and c) tensions between geopolitical locations and de-locations in the context of globalization. In the last part of the text, she considers works that can be included in a “migrant corpus of Latin American digital literature”.

Anaía Gerbaudo (San Vicente, Argentina, 1971) has authored the eighth chapter, “Argentine Jetties”. She analyzes the social conditions of the internationalization of certain contributions by Argentine literary critics and theorists. Starting with some “jetties” (a term she borrows from Derrida to refer to academic contributions) proposed by Argentine literary scholars, such as “fantastic literature” by Ana María Barrenechea, “post-occidentalism” by Walter Mignolo, “post-autonomy” by Josefina Ludmer, or the “autobiographical space” by Nora Catelli, Gerbaudo analyzes these jetties’ possibilities of circulation beyond their national or regional borders. A jetty, in this sense, is taken as an encompassing category that allows for the

analysis of linguistic relationships in terms of circulation, circuits, and taxonomies in relation to the political, academic, and publishing fields. As Gerbaudo sustains, “the jetty concept requires that we become aware of our scant ideological control over our taxonomies and labels”. Discussing both methodological nationalism and the epistemologies of the South, she points to the academic trajectories of certain Argentine authors, considering the myriad of factors that affect their consecration as theorists: migration (voluntary or forced), travel, translation, and academic networking in the transnational space.

The Afro-Dominican Ochy Curiel (Santiago, Dominican Republic, 1963) closes the book with chapter nine, “On Translation and Black Feminism”. The chapter is a 2019 interview with Ochy Curiel by Dennys Silva-Reis. In this dialogue, Curiel comments on the unequal circulation of feminist thought, citing her experience translating authors such as Colette Guillaumin, Paola Tabet, and Nicole-Claude Mathieu. She denounces the difficulties that Black Latin American feminist and decolonial thought has faced in its path toward internationalization – to borrow a term from the previous chapter. Without essentializing these terms and spaces, she highlights the potential of transnational coalitions, activism in translation, and creative collaboration. Though not a strictly academic text, this interview allows us to close the book by adding more questions than answers, encouraging us to conduct a socio-analysis of our own positions as the editors of this volume.

## Paths and Possible Connections

The texts that have been gathered in this book deal with a myriad of relevant and shared issues that we would like to highlight in this final section. Thus, we shall conclude with some of the interconnected themes that are of great importance when conducting a global and diverse analysis of our present time.

The first central point is that all the authors take a critical position on gender as a category. The construction, access, and instrumentalization of this category, as well as its intersection with other categories such as race and class, is analyzed in depth by Bento and Viveros-Vigoya. Gender issues are present in most of the analyses in this volume. While the aforementioned authors deal with gender thematically and conceptually, others do so textually. In the original texts, Burneo Salazar and Kozak, for example, used inclusive language, with open gender marks like the “x” or “e” in nouns (which raises a problem of translation, which María Cristina Hall deals with in her Translator’s Note).

Castillo’s political-philosophical approach connects to Bento’s historical and sociological chapter, as both show how every single political practice is conditioned

by a politics of visibility and invisibility in which bodies are categorized and hierarchized. For them, the racialization of class and gender relations connects with the denunciation of the logics of power that have been historically implemented by nation-states. Concepts such as corpopolitics (by Castillo), necrobiopower (by Bento), and national-sedentarism (by Burneo and Rabinovich) allow us to understand the need to break out of the sex-gender and linguistic binarisms that lead us to identify a nation with a language and with a certain masculinity. In line with the argument against national-sedentarism developed by Rabinovich and Burneo Salazar, Aguilar Gil explores the consequences of the arbitrary divisions imposed by national-territorialism in her essay “Borders, Why Borders?”. In fact, all of the authors in the volume are in favor of a plural, diverse, and heterolingual Americas.

In this book, the reader will find an English shaped by Latin American Spanish and the Portuguese of Brazil. The book also addresses literatures written in different varieties of Latin American Spanish, such as Palenquero (a Creole variety from Colombia), but also in different Indigenous languages, such as Ayuuik or Kichwa. In a gesture that positions itself against national-sedentarism, for example, Burneo traces the narrative modes of authors of transnational texts, such as Sonia Guiñansaca, who works with a mix of English, Spanish, and Kichwa. Aguilar Gil, meanwhile, explores this heterolingualism as constitutive of the Americas. She denounces the nation-state’s linguistic hierarchies, for example, in terms of encouraged and discriminated sets of bilingualism, or in the homogenizing construction of “Indigenous literatures” that actually encompass very different literatures, languages, and representations of the world. From a heterolingual perspective of the continent, the authors of the volume encourage a non-essentialist reflection on Latin America, proposing “mobile differentialities” (as Kozak suggests). Thus, the situated thinking of these authors does not imply that we should reduce their contributions to their case studies or places of origin. For example, the potential of the figure of the Bedouin in Rabinovich’s text, Viveros’s analyses of “gender ideology” in Colombia, Ecuador, and Brazil, Burneo’s proposed “fugitive corpus” of writings by the Ecuadorian diaspora in the United States, and Gerbaudo’s “Argentine jetties”, goes beyond the strictly geographical scope, inviting us to consider these contributions’ applicability across other spaces, coordinates, and scales. In this sense, when we talk about “writings from the margins”, we expect the reader to be aware of the fact that this category does not refer to a concrete, physical border or to any construction that can be easily identifiable by an ocularcentric regime, to borrow Castillo’s use of the term. The texts in this book show that one can find living proposals, against sedentarism and the violence of borders, with displacements, movements (Rabinovich, Burneo Salazar, Aguilar Gil, Gerbaudo, and Kozak), and a questioning of the structures that condition us as human subjects (Bento, Castillo, Curiel, and Viveros-Vigoya).

Thus, concepts such as “migration” are loaded with different meanings. Above all, they are not stable. The authors of this volume have analyzed migrated authors (as in the chapter by Burneo Salazar), migrant artists (in Kozak’s text), and also texts that migrate or hybridize languages (as in Burneo Salazar and Aguilar Gil). We have cases of translation (Gerbaudo, for the analysis of the international circulation of Argentine literary theory) and cases that still require translation (as Curiel points out regarding Latin American feminist thought), and finally, we may appreciate a focus on a migration of formats when it comes to the digital literature analyzed by Kozak. These displacements of authors, texts, formats, and, ultimately, meanings shows “the tensions between geopolitical localizations and delocalizations in the context of globalization” (as Kozak points out in this volume). In Kozak’s text, for example, we may appreciate an analysis of the Transborder Immigrant Tool, a poem-instruction that brings all these forms of migration into play, offering assistance to migrants in their border crossing along the desert between Mexico and the United States.

All the authors also share a critical approach to the conception of the archive as a fixed and stagnant entity. Instead, they propose that we think about the ways in which the archive has been historically constructed, bringing to light the cultural arbitrariness that operates when selecting authors and texts deemed worthy of preservation. Burneo Salazar explains the “fugitive” character of a “counter-sedentary” corpus of transnational writings that would resist a fixed identity; Kozak also points to a “migrant corpus of digital literature” that makes it possible to denounce the politics of invisibilization as a way of understanding the digital nowadays. Indeed, she analyzes the supposed “dematerialization” that hegemonizes (techno-capitalist) discourse on digital archives.

In short, the knots of the arguments brought together in this book challenge and reverse the asymmetrical flow of hegemonic translation<sup>6</sup> by rendering these texts into a central language. We are aware of the largely unidirectional flows of translations of Latin American thought, especially that produced by women in the fields and disciplines that interest us – from political philosophy to sociology, and from translation studies to literary criticism. For that reason, we are thrilled to share this volume, which brings together a selection of authors translated into English. Our aim is not to reinforce disciplinary monolingualism but to make these authors more well-known in international debates. We seek to disseminate, on a global scale, the multiplicity of writings, accents, and voices of this cohort of brilliant authors who develop their theoretical and socially committed proposals as they kindly invite us to join in on a collaborative reading of our present.

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<sup>6</sup> As per Heilbron (1999).



Despite the great diversity between the different areas of this region, the authors presented in this book have shown how similar dilemmas of the present and past have constituted a common basis from which this variety emerges. Thus, it is important to bear in mind that the common ground for this thought is to be found in the history of entanglements that have connected American history with the history of other parts of the world. As we have shown, the thinkers gathered in this book are representative of Latin American contemporary thought. However, to say that they are representative is not the same as saying that they are hierarchically more important than others or that they represent a synthesis of Latin American thought, which is as complex as it is varied. We expect that by becoming familiar with the thinking of the authors in this volume, readers will find new paths in a world that is much larger than the scope of this book.

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María Cristina Hall

## Translator's Note: A Rendering Situated in Movement

To translate is to honor the thoughts of another writer, but also to sublimate her words into a different language. For a text as long and multiauthored as this one, it is also an act of consistency. When it comes to a set of texts that have been grouped together due to their belonging to a given geographical region – in this case Latin America – it is also important to elucidate one's own situatedness as a translator. My lived experience will inevitably affect the way the text is ultimately presented in its new, English form. I come to this text as a Mexican-American translator who grew up in an English-speaking household in Guadalajara, Mexico, where my father is from, although my mother is from San Diego, a city twenty minutes north of the U.S.-Mexico border. I went to college in New York, where I studied creative writing and political science, after which I attended a master's in translation studies in Barcelona. Now, my day-to-day involves a mix of translating and writing. I write poetry (in English, Spanish, and Spanglish) about my own identity struggles and do research (in English and Spanish) on life in Mexico after deportation. I translate sociological texts (to the English) on the construction of modernity from a decentered, gender perspective for the editors of this volume, and I co-translate Catalan novels by the likes of Montserrat Roig and Susanna Rafart to be sold in bookstores in the United Kingdom and United States. As a research associate at the University of Mexico (UNAM), I also write about what a more open, humane migration system would look like in continental North America. Migration is something that I have benefited from. It's how I make a living, but it's also who I am. It was my time in Barcelona that led me to the team of researchers behind this book, who viewed my experience as apt for the translation of this book. That I am a Latin American woman writer whose language shifts according to what I'm thinking, who I'm with, or where I am is a fact that reflects the contents of this book. Multilingualism and decentered expressions have always been at the heart of my work as a writer and translator. This, I believe, is not only due to my personal experiences but is a manifestation of the Latin American condition today – indeed, the writers in this issue resist the national-sedentary, celebrate multilingualism, and refuse categories that would seek to put identities and expressions in a box. This is, perhaps, a response to the effects of capitalist exploitation and latent colonialism in the region today. I would venture to say that the perspectives in this book also pose a breaking point regarding the idea of the situated as explored in the *Epistemologies of the South* (2014), because we are now in a time of shifting languages and

migration. Thus, although our place of enunciation is of primary importance, it has become more unstable than ever before. This is where the importance of translation comes in, allowing for texts to remain vital as they shift and transition across space. Having said all of this, let us now dive into the texts themselves.

The first chapter in this book, Berenice Bento's "Sexual Difference and Abjection: What is the Gender of Enslaved Black Women?" was actually translated by Aurea Mota, one of the editors of this book and a researcher of critical historical sociology, modern spatiality, literary studies, and global entanglements. Mota took on this translation because the text was penned in Portuguese, and she, like Bento, is from Brazil. I then read her careful translation against the original and edited the text. The translation required plenty of archival research into the English-language editions of the books that Bento cited, and to situate the text, we kept certain Portuguese terms in place. This chapter is particularly sensitive, dealing with horrific examples of the mistreatment of enslaved Black women to show that they were not conferred the category of women throughout slavery, while the struggle for such recognition remains current today. In her text, Bento also made a point to note that this violence did not emanate from the masters alone, but also from the ladies, and even from visiting writers who failed to recognize their own participation in benefiting from slavery. Bento mentions "*senhores e senhoras escravocratas*", which we translated as 'slaveholding masters and ladies' to keep the explicit binary in place – the women, as she highlights, were both violent and complicit. We also kept the Portuguese terms for the positions that women held in the master's house, with the *sinhá* ladies and the *mucama* enslaved. Because of the nature of its contents, translating this required utmost care, but also a commitment to naming the violence that took place, rather than comfortably erasing the past in a way that does not recognize the struggles that remain urgent today.

The second text featured here is Alejandra Castillo's "Corpopolitics and its Reticular Movement". Following Jay (1993), Castillo writes that our politics are inscribed in a regime of light and ocularcentrism – one made more acute by social media (or the "scopic regime of screens" – in which the body must be deactivated for its narration). Castillo thus presents corpopolitics as a form of embodied activation, particularly through protest. The author names certain acts of protest without describing them. This leads to certain questions in translation, which generally considers which sets of knowledge target readers are assumed to have, with the translation clarifying certain contextual aspects when necessary. A translator would thus wonder if Castillo expected the readers of her Spanish-language text to already know of certain protests that spread across Latin America in the 2019 great feminist revolt in Chile – one of the most well-known being the performance of the song *Un violador en tu camino* – or if, rather, she is inciting her readers to look up the protests online, watching a video of them perhaps.

Does Castillo expect extra work of her readers? Or is it that including descriptions of the protest performances in question are outside the scope of her paper, one that positions itself in resistance to the ocularcentric regime? Concluding that her proposal mixed the former assumptions about readers with the latter resistance to graphic, visual descriptions, the editors and I decided to add a footnote to include a non-explicit description of one of the protests in particular, the *yeguada latinoamericana*, in which a group of women interrupts spaces considered oppressive against women with protest performances. Reader, whether you decide to look up the *yeguada* or satisfy yourself with the knowledge that this is an embodied, feminist protest performance is your choice to make. But now you will at least know that the search would participate in the ocularcentric regime. “The performance is transformed into an image, but this does not diminish the intensity of a body that opposes itself”, Castillo writes.

The next text, Mara Viveros-Vigoya’s “Intersections, Peripheries, and Heterotopias in the Cartographies of Sexuality” is particularly interesting because it highlights the power of language in politics. In her chapter, Viveros-Vigoya traces the usage of the term “gender ideology”, whose second word rather disqualifies the first. The term “gender ideology”, she shows, was co-opted by several right-wing movements – in France, Colombia, Ecuador, and Brazil – to revert certain progressive measures that, in many cases, were not entirely related to gender. In Colombia, much of the progress on gender-related policy happened through injunctions, court decisions, and litigations rather than through popular acceptance. This allowed “gender ideology” to be weaponized as a wedge issue, throwing a wrench into the peace process with the FARC-EP, for example. To trace such a term across so many different contexts and countries in three languages evidently involved plenty of research, care, and consistency in the translation. And while we haven’t made updates when it comes to current events, we did update certain terms, changing LGBT to LGBTQ+, for instance.

In the next chapter, Silvana Rabinovich’s “The Bedouin Paradox”, we may find one of the most interesting considerations when it comes to translation. Rabinovich emphasizes words – in Arabic, Hebrew, Spanish, and Latin – and their etymologies, pausing, for example, at the word *morada* in Spanish. *Morada* means ‘home’ and stems from the Latin *morari*, ‘to stop’. If we skip over to the French, we could say it is a place *pour se demeurer*, a place where one stays. How to translate this to English? “The Bedouin Paradox” demonstrates that the sedentary connotations of the home have been used to expel Bedouin Palestinians from their lands, time and again. The idea of inhabiting has been interpreted as a sedentary act as *opposed* to nomadism as civilization strives to take over the land. My translation of Rabinovich’s articulation demanded an entirely new etymological exploration: I transitioned from Latin roots and instead chose the word “abode”, which

preserves the meaning of *morada* but comes from Middle English. “Abode” is the verbal noun for “abide”, to wait, an act that is equally unmoving. While the Israeli State exploits the stilled meanings of home to force the Bedouin into sedentary lifestyles – laying claim to the deserts through acts of forestation to create a fantastical landscape – Rabinovich takes us on a journey across Biblical translations. She alludes to Spanish-language translations of the book of Leviticus to demonstrate that the sedentary accumulation of land is *not* sanctioned by the Bible – which says, “and the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is Mine; for ye are strangers and settlers with Me” (Leviticus 25:23). The text in Leviticus also states that the land must rest every seven years and be returned to its original owners every fifty years, as per the Jubilee. This arrangement precludes land accumulation and views all inhabitants as strangers and settlers, not adjudicating the land to any of its dwellers. This discussion on words, leaning on the translation of ancient texts, leads me to another aspect that has certainly stuck out to anyone reading this introduction: that the text has not been updated. From October of 2023 to our mid-2024 manuscript submission, Palestine has been ravaged, pillaged, *genocided*. That Rabinovich’s text, first published in 2017, has not been fully updated stands as a testament to the many years in which the Israeli State has used the sedentary connotations of inhabiting in order to strategize for the casting out of its *other*, now expressed through blatant destruction.

The fifth text in this book, Cristina Burneo Salazar’s “Heterolingual Movements vs. Vigilance: New Counter-Sedentary Narratives”, dovetails Rabinovich’s notions of the sedentary but explores them in literature. In today’s age of displacement, with migratory movements marking the entire Americas, literatures have emerged that no longer simply fit into the idea of the “national”. Proposing a “fugitive corpus”, Burneo cites, for example, texts by Sonia Guiñansaca penned in English, in New York, about the Ecuadorian experience. We have languages braiding, testaments of movement. The jump from monolingualism resists control. The translation of this chapter in particular was perhaps the one that involved the most back-and-forth between author and translator, as we tinkered over the translation of *corpus de fuga*, to name an example. Should this be translated as a corpus in flight, a fleeing corpus, a fugue? In the end, we negotiated between the cognate that the author sought to preserve and the modern usage of words in English and went with her proposed “fugitive corpus”. To be translated and published, at the end of the day, involves striking a balance between a certain acceptance of publication criteria and upholding the styles and meanings proposed by the author.

In this vein, we might explore the resistance to fixed identity and monolingualism in the sixth chapter, Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil’s “A Manifesto on Linguistic Diversity: Five Essays”. In her work, Aguilar Gil explores the complexities of

identification: is speaking an Indigenous language central to being Indigenous? Perhaps not. But is the struggle to accrue more speakers of Indigenous languages central to Indigenous struggles? Certainly. Aguilar Gil socratically explores her positions on such labels, and though she calls for a unified movement to revindicate the Indigenous, she declares that there is no such thing as Indigenous literature. If anything can characterize the Indigenous, it is diversity – and, in our view, the same is true of the Latin American. For this translation, we chose to include self-designations for Indigenous communities that have gained recognition in the last few years: we changed Huichol to Wixárika and Tarahumara to Rarámuri. It is worth noting that Aguilar Gil's original texts were penned in the mid-2010s, before these self-designations became widely revindicated.

Kozak, in the seventh chapter, “Latin American Digital Literature: A Close-Distant-Material-Collaborative-Localized Reading”, also casts geopolitical categories as unstable and metaphorical. She writes about – often multilingual – digital literature as a manifestation that reflects the movements of Latin Americans, which resist fixed labels and belongings. Still, what she proposes is a contribution to literary studies *from the South*. Perhaps it would be surprising to contemporary readers that Pascale Casanova (1999) once dared to suggest that “areas distant from the literary Greenwich meridian” produce anachronic, outdated texts, trailing behind the innovations of the more central regions in the “world literature space”. Kozak points out Casanova's blatant Eurocentrism and posits that “the world literary space would be better understood [. . .] if we were to move past this biased dialectic between the center and periphery and instead build readings of more shifting, less linear, crossings between parts”. It is through this important dialogue that Kozak points to the ways that digital literatures, which are often produced in movement and multilingually, can overcome such biases. In terms of the translation, what was most challenging about this text was tracing concepts around the “literature of the device” in multiple languages, while also parsing out Kozak's long and complex sentences, in the style of academic writing in romance languages that has marked Latin America.

This leads me to the eighth chapter, Analía Gerbaudo's “Argentine Jetties”, which explores the factors conditioning the consecration of certain academic contributions (or jetties) as theory. In doing so, she writes about how experiences in the Global North and even certain friendships can end up having more of an effect on consecration than the face value of a given jetty. She thus enlists the theoretical contributions of her Argentine colleagues as a way of making them visible. In the translation, we chose to keep the Spanish terms that Gerbaudo cites in the text rather than displacing them to footnotes. We concluded that securing their searchability required that we highlight the Spanish, as, to her point, most of Gerbaudo's cited authors remain untranslated, except in the abstracts to their papers.



Perhaps it is worth noting that I translated the terms myself rather than recurring to these abstracts, mostly because I did not find them to be perfectly accurate in their translations – a self-bias, perhaps. For texts that have been translated in the long form, I did look up the ways that certain terms and texts appear in English, for consistency and searchability.

Lastly, we have included an interview with Ochy Curiel by Dennys Silva-Reis. In the interview, Curiel considers the importance of translation and addresses what it means to take on a feminist translation in light of our modern/colonial system. What contributions does this system highlight, and how can we redress its biases in such a way that we resist reconsecrating the work of mostly men, but also women, with class privilege? The critical, antiracist, and decolonial South-to-North perspective is one that we have tried to adopt in this very book. Still, tensions can arise. When I translate, I tend to use U.S.-American English, because that's the English that I know and speak. This helps ensure consistency. Still, there is a layer of hierarchization that also needs to be considered. As Derrida writes and Gerbaudo cites, the United States is now the center of academic theorization. Thus, considering Curiel's philosophy, should the terms coined by Afro-Caribbean and Latin American writers be translated into U.S.-American terms? Even self-identifications vary: U.S.-American academic lexicon would likely prefer the term Black Caribbean, and we could go on and on about the term Latinx, some definitions of which view the Latina, Latino, and Latinx as encompassing only those who have lived in the United States, even when Latin Americans have never viewed themselves as separate from the term "Latin". In this chapter and across the book in general, Latina is often used to refer to Latin American women, regardless of where in the continent they live. We did capitalize the words Black and Indigenous and tended to use the suffix "Afro" when the original texts stressed the latter term in particular, following Ochy Curiel's directive that translators abide by the terms used by the writers themselves, especially when North-South or Black-white hierarchies come into focus.

Now that we have introduced each of the book's chapters, please allow me to expound upon my translation choices. I would like to note that we used "the Americas", "continental America", and sometimes simply "America" when referring to the Abya-Yala, that is, the continent spanning from Alaska and Canada to Chile and Argentina. I used "United States" to refer to said country and the form U.S.-American as its adjective, although we would like to respect the self-identification of the people who inhabit said country, including, for instance, Mexican-Americans. Interestingly, in Spanish, the United States is often called *Norteamérica*, which we view as imprecise. When *Norteamérica* was presumably used to refer to French- and Anglo-North America (Canada and the United States), we clarified the term. Indeed, North America in fact includes Mexico.

Working with a multilingual bibliography is no simple task. Often, our writers cited translations of works that were first penned in English, which I would then have to look up in order to avoid inaccurate back-translations. In these cases, we added the source publication in brackets following the citation to the text that the author of each chapter first consulted. When I used altogether different texts – as with various versions of the Bible or different, editorialized versions of texts (which varied enough that we could not tie a given text to a given translation), I added my Translator's Sources at the end of the Works Cited section in question. This was the case with Mara Viveros-Vigoya's citing of Chantal Mouffe, for example, who had been interviewed in English but whose responses seem to have been editorialized into a concise, more formal text in Spanish. Furthermore, we decided that, when working with translations in our bibliographies, we would name the translator, adding them to the Works Cited pages at the end of each chapter.

Now, a few technicalities. As per De Gruyter's guidelines, we have preferred double quotation marks in general, while words in foreign languages are italicized, with their translations placed in single quotation marks. Yet, translations are generally not required from the Spanish and French but are from the Portuguese – these being the three non-English languages that have peppered this book the most. Translations of book and chapter titles (from the Portuguese) are placed in brackets, with no quotation marks or italics if the titles themselves remain unpublished in English.

I would also like to note that a few of our authors have chosen to include brief updates at the ends of their texts, but many have not, and this seems important as a way of honoring the impacts that the writers in this book have had for Latin American understandings of feminism, Black feminism, multilingualism and language diversity, migration, social movements, right-wing political cooptation strategies, Indigenous studies, and the conditions around the circulation of theoretical contributions or *jetties* from the South. For those unfamiliar with these authors, a quick look at their biographies would hint at the breadth of their work. These women's texts have thus been translated as they *were* at the time of their publication in Spanish or Portuguese, with brief footnotes (marked with the label "Translator's Note") intervening throughout. In this book, we may glean the texts in the very forms with which they first made an impact, but in English.

Translating, we also know, is an act of visibilization – although writers like Castillo would dispute the term as tied to the paternalistic idea of "giving a voice to the voiceless". This book is an attempt to displace the "center" – a construction understood in opposition to the "periphery", whether of given countries and regions or around the world. In this volume, we may consider displacing the "center" we call the Global North, but also other "centers" of power on different

scales. In Mexico, for example, Aguilar seeks for the monolingual system of power to give way to the expressions of Indigenous communities. This book is an attempt to revindicate the various *jetties* of the South in their own terms.

Lastly, we should touch upon the importance of feminist translation – one of the ultimate goals of this book, which is also addressed by Ochy Curiel. We believe that to read in a feminist way, and to translate in a feminist way, involves, first or all, reading and translating women, and, secondly, doing so with the gender perspective. The third level of feminist translation would be to translate feminist thinkers, including those who theorize about translation. Here, we are presenting a group of Latin American women whose feminist thinking has already made a lasting impact in the Global South. This not only implies that we have sought to work in a feminist way, but also in a decolonial feminist way, *from the South*, as Kozak writes. The perspectives herein account for the migrations that the Southern position demands, with literatures traversed by multisitedness and multilingualism. We have literature in resistance to the national-sedentary and its borderizations, as Burneo writes. To translate to English, a language of the Global North, has the potential of turning Latin American *jetties* into contributions recognized as theories – but the idea that any production in the South would require a sanctioning from the North is problematic in itself. Is translation an act of validation or of mere dissemination? Time and reception will tell, but here, we merely seek to share this impactful work. In our view, the contributions in this book have already proved their status as theory, with or without our recognition.

Now, to translate with the gender perspective involves a number of strategies. Let us delve into the particulars. In Spanish, the *x* can be used as an indicator that a certain term may be applied to multiple genders – writing *trabajadorxs* instead of *trabajadores* or *trabajadoras* – for example. Yet, the latter strategy, which only became popularized in the last decade or so, has only selectively been taken up in formal writing. Another strategy that more easily fits into normative and academic language use would be to use the word *personas* to encompass this variety – saying *personas trabajadoras* to broaden the span of application to any person. All of these examples would translate as “workers”, which is utterly devoid of a gender tag. In English, most nouns aren’t gendered. *Nosotras y nosotros* simply translates as “us”. Yet, English-language possessive forms are gendered (“his”, “her”, and “their”, in contrast to Spanish’s neutral *su* and *sus*), as are pronouns (“she”, “he”, “they”). It has been my feminist choice to use *she* as a universal pronoun that is equal to *he*, but also to use *they*. I also used *he* at times, especially when the original texts seemed to refer to more male groupings. In general, though, I have sought to cast these pronouns as equal and interchangeable. Why not have a universal *she* or a universal *they* when, for centuries, we have endured the universal *he*?

As a salve for this centuries-long malady, we are presenting a universe as conceived by women – even when the category of *women* itself has been disputed throughout history, as Berenice Bento writes. The translations grouped here cannot be presented as a united whole. Rather, we have Afro-Caribbean, Indigenous, Black, migrant, diasporic, and *American* writing, among many others – but these categories cannot be piled on as hyphenated identities that erase the struggles that each individual term carries, as Bento argues. Mixe writer Yásnaya Aguilar would ask whether the word Indigenous can be used to group hundreds of different communities into a single, homogenous entity. The answer, of course, is no. Thus, we present a set of readings in resistance to the Eurocentric feminist idea that all women must move forward hand in hand, as if nothing (slavery, colonialism, or exploitation) had ever set us apart. What you are holding here is a kaleidoscope of perspectives. Through their translation, we hope that the English reader may now enter the terrain of the unresolved, the transitory, the reticular, and, to recall Gerbaudo, the earth shattering.

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Berenice Bento

## Sexual Difference and Abjection: What is the Gender of Enslaved Black Women?

In research, at some point, a sort of paralysis can take hold. This usually occurs when one concludes that the concepts one is applying are not working properly. The notion of utility – whether something works or not – can lead us to ask why restricted/narrow definitions are useful. I have heard that they are tools – a statement generally supported by an exchange between Deleuze and Foucault (Foucault 1989). A set of concepts could be a tool, a device. Distancing myself from these functional metaphors, I would say that definitions of a particular reality create an academic narrative, not because they contribute to putting together otherwise fragmented pieces, but because they allow the thinker to produce new images, leading us to ask new questions that did not exist earlier. More than helping us reach certain conclusions, concepts allow us to notice different paths, creating new problems and making us bend and unbend our thinking. It is you, and only you, who will build certain images, sounds, and colors from an original articulation of testimonies, films, poems, and scientific and historical texts. Even though a definition may be available to all, each researcher will produce new and unexpected scenarios.

There are moments, however, when a certain concept stands at such a distance from what one seeks to investigate that it seems best to set it aside and look for new sources of inspiration. When I wrote my master's thesis, the concept of gender as proposed by Joan Scott (1990) opened my eyes to the ways heterosexual men can experience certain conflicts with hegemonic masculinity (Bento 2013). At that time, I did not problematize the binary established around the idea of gender. Neither did I question heterosexuality as a norm that seeks to regulate bodies and desires.

The importance of a conceptual apparatus lies in its potential to awaken certain dimensions of observation, but also to obliterate them. This was the first dilemma that I experienced in my research on dissident genders. I remember that in a conversation with a historian, I pointed out the limits of Joan W. Scott's conception of gender, since sexual difference entered her formulations as a given rather than as a problem. This sedimentation of sexual difference would lead one to theories that analyze trans existences as disorders. My historian colleague defended Scott's concept of gender because of its usefulness to historical studies. At the time, the argument seemed coherent to me. However, in my article "Gênero, uma categoria útil de análise?" [Gender, a useful category of analysis?] (Bento

2022), I set out to refute this argument by pointing out how Scott's gender category is grounded in a Eurocentric gaze. From the examples Scott provides to the utter lack of any discussions around race, the whole of Scott's gender category can only be applied to approaches that invisibilize internal disputes around gender, as with bodies that may appear to belong to a certain gender but are not recognized as such. Black women have long struggled for the recognition of the very existence of their gender identities, as historically linked to a past in which Black women were enslaved. Among the many points in their agenda, their struggle for the right to the recognition of their motherhood stands out. As I shall discuss, for Black women, mere recognition of shared sexual dimorphism as per the ontological category of gender has never been enough.

I thus abandoned Scott's concept of gender in my later research on the transgender device (Bento 2017a). In this new context, the formulations of Judith Butler (2003) and several transgender<sup>1</sup> theorists seemed more appropriate to me (Bento 2017b) because the binarism that had been perceived as grounded in assumed biological difference shifted to being reflected upon not as a preexisting given but as a problem that deserved consideration and deconstruction.

To record the various conceptions of gender, I proceeded to systematize the theoretical debates within gender studies (Bento 2017a). In so doing, I suggested that three descriptive tendencies may be observed in the processes of theoretically constituting gender identities. I have called these the universal, the birelational, and the plural. I presented these analytical tendencies through a historical-theoretical perspective based on works that I considered referential: those of Simone de Beauvoir (universal), Joan Scott (birelational), and Judith Butler (plural). I should note that I did not seek to present these descriptions as a chronological line or history of theories within gender studies, as these perspectives still coexist across the worlds of PhD theses, dissertations, social movements, and public policies. In the realm of State policies, for instance, the universal conception of gender remains prevalent, although feminists have problematized these policies by proposing intersectional public policies instead.

With this theoretical work, my main objective was to show why I came to choose queer studies as a theoretical support when interpreting the transgender device. I pointed out that, both the *universal* and the *birelational* perspectives did not consider sexuality, gender, and subjectivity beyond the binary relationship. It was queer studies that pointed to the heterosexism of feminist theories and allowed, on the one hand, the depathologization of identity and sexual experiences

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1 Translator's Note (TN): Berenice Bento uses the expression in Portuguese *transviados*, a play between *viados*, a derogatory term used to designate gay men in Brazil, and the prefix *trans*.

that had been previously interpreted as “individual problems”, and, on the other, a heightened focus on those performative actions that disrupt gender norms. The queer theoretical-methodological perspective was and continues to be fundamental to disputing conceptions that deny the rights and recognition of individuals who do not abide by biological imperatives and are subjected to the pathologization and criminalization device.<sup>2</sup>

Though powerful, queer studies have their own pitfalls – notably, the fact that the function of gender and heteronormativity is solely interpreted through gender and/or sexuality. The solution to this problem would be to move towards intersectionality. However, another issue arises here, because the operation of articulating identities in order to add complexity to analyses is one of juxtaposition – as if layers of oppression mashed-up with a hyphen could sufficiently describe the exclusion and vulnerabilities shaped by our social structures of stratification. Even when adopting intersectionality as a method, how can we understand that there are bodies that will not be reached with the categories we are articulating in our analyses? Can intersectional “layers” interpret differentiated levels of dehumanization for bodies constructed as abject?

Intersectionality as a methodological device, as proposed by Crenshaw (2002), is relevant to understanding the struggles for reparation and justice that unfold in the sphere of the State. However, crystallized and overlapping identities ultimately fail to elucidate why there are differentiated patterns of recognition for certain populations. Does including an intersectional label displace the body from the category of oppressed to that of abject?

In 2018, I began an in-depth analysis of the debates around the 1871 bill in the Brazilian National Congress that proposed the indirect abolition of slavery. Among other things, the bill, submitted by Emperor Dom Pedro II, determined that the sons and daughters of enslaved women would be born free with the promulgation of the law, which came into effect on September 28, 1871.<sup>3</sup> Initially, the goal of my research was to understand the discursive strategies that parliamentarians used to defend or attack the project. The initial problem I faced was understanding what senators and members of Parliament meant when they spoke of the “uterus of enslaved women”. What concept could help me understand the continued abjection of enslaved Black women, on the one hand, but also the discourses of those parlia-

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2 For information on countries where dissenting sexualities and genders are considered crimes, with penalties ranging from imprisonment to the death penalty, visit [www.ilga-europe.org](http://www.ilga-europe.org).

3 TN: This bill became known as the Free Womb Law (in Portuguese, ‘Lei do Ventre Livre’).



mentarians who defended the bill, announcing a certain valorization of these same bodies, on the other?<sup>4</sup>

In the article “*Gênero, uma categoria útil de análises*” [Gender, a useful category of analysis] (Bento 2022), I expose the impossibility of understanding the place of enslaved Black women in the social structure of the time through the gender category alone – with profound reverberations and continuities into the present. The challenge, therefore, was and still is to give conceptual meaning to an intersectional perspective that is more than a mere juxtaposition based on the assumption that simply combining race, gender, sexuality, generation, nationality, and religion – to name just a few markers of difference and social inequality – would allow for complex theoretical-political analysis. This juxtaposition does little to destabilize the foundation of exclusion policies emerging from the State, since the structure of these policies, through the essentialization of populations, does not involve political contention. Thus, if I say “enslaved Black woman” as per the perspective of intersectionality-by-addition, it is assumed that simply affirming and combining the three social markers of difference and inequality (woman = gender; Black = race; enslaved = ontological condition) is enough to position this group at the lowest rung of the social structure. Here lies the impasse that I intend to work through. There are terms in this operation that, when placed side by side, end up changing the *nature* of the hyphenated arrangement. There is no such thing as an “enslaved Black woman”. We continue to use this term due to the inadequacy of language. “Woman” produces a false identification among all women, while “enslaved Black” ultimately subtracts this ontological gender recognition.<sup>5</sup> If one of the terms of this arrangement is altered, the totality changes, too. The multiple ways of defining gender are not modalities of gender but, themselves, another substance.<sup>6</sup> One might counter that I am invoking an experience from the

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4 Ariza (2021) points out that members of Parliament advocating for the Free Womb bill presented a new interpretation of motherhood for enslaved Black women, thus beginning to attribute qualities to them that had previously only been recognized for white women. These qualities included kindness and selflessness regarding the wellbeing of their children. Prior to 1871, in debates around the slave trade (in the 1820s), other texts had already expressed concerns regarding the care of enslaved pregnant women and the high infant-mortality rate of their children (Taunay 2001), marking a proto-valorization of Black motherhood.

5 I do not seek to discuss the fiction of ontologies in this article. When I refer to the ontologizing nature of gender, I distance myself from conceptions that view the constitution of being (in this case, gendered being) as a substance. Thus, I align myself with discussions on the production of being within the frameworks proposed by critical theory (social ontology), with an emphasis on the formulations by Honneth (2003; 2018) and Butler (2015).

6 I do not use *substance* as a given, a thing, or an essence but as historical and political processes that perform the work of substantializing identities.

past to methodologically point to the limits of using intersectionality-by-addition today. However, the continuities between past and present still motivate different feminist understandings and agendas.

The objectives of this contribution are twofold: 1) to problematize the concept of intersectionality-by-addition; and 2) to point out how theories of performativity can help us understand the relationship between free and enslaved bodies. My attempt to interpret the place that enslaved Black women occupied in the social structure will be articulated through the concept of performativity and non-layered intersectionality. I seek to reach these two general objectives through the following three deliberations: 1) a discussion of how sexual difference produced a false interpretation by which free women and enslaved Black women inhabited the same ontological world of gender – here, I will present “honor” as a differentiating attribute between the world of free women and enslaved women; 2) a revisiting of the book *The Masters and the Slaves* by Gilberto Freyre (1900–1987) as an intellectual device that contributed to representing women of the master’s house and the Black women of the slaves’ hovel,<sup>7</sup> with certain variations, as parts in a gender order based on the idea of “femininity”; and 3) a presentation of how, in a shift from the private sphere to the sphere of the State, free women moved within the biopolitical sphere, and enslaved women, within the necropolitical sphere. This discussion will be based on the analysis of the Brazilian Annals of the National Congress of 1871.

## Gender and Slavery

In her reflections on the relationship between sex and gender, Judith Butler states that what is called *sex* may be an effect of *gender*, a proposal that would ultimately undo a distinction that had guided feminist studies and instead distinguish between culture (gender) and nature (sex) as an organizing axis. To define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex is a main feature of the kind of constructionism that considers sexual difference as a given upon which a theoretical framework can be built.

The so-called “truth of gender” underlies those historical processes that present the masculine and the feminine as natural, which Butler has called a “fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies” (Butler 1999 [1990]: 174). Rather it is repeated practices over time that give genders their intelligibility. By enabling this practice as a category that determines which genders should be reproduced, we arrive at Butler’s most important formulation: that gender is not based

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7 TN: The original word in Portuguese is *senzalas*. The *senzalas* were the places where enslaved persons lived within the farms where they worked.

on any essential form and that there is no inherent constitutive or fundamental form that ontologically marks beings and their genders. We all create gender – acting out and negotiating with the preestablished norm, with varying degrees of tension, as we define the truth of our gender identities.

The malleability of gender reveals the complexity of the fact that one is inserted in social structures at the same time as one can transform this very structure. In Butler's philosophy, the deontologization of gender, given the centrality of reiteration, ends up blurring the boundary between truth and imitation. Social performances open up the possibility of proliferating gender configurations that produce fissures in the prevailing structures of domination within gender norms. Thus, gender can be defined as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame, that congeals over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 1999 [1990]: 44). When considering the process of making gender, we are faced with the impossibility of separating gender identity from the practices that create it.

Could it be that a set of practices impose themselves on certain bodies to remove the realm of gender intelligibility from them? As I will discuss, the construction of the bodies of Black women and men as materialities based on a set of indicators created the conditions with which to deny them the possibility of inhabiting the category of gender. It is here that tension with Butler's philosophical formulation of gender arises. Gender performativity is not confined to gender and sexuality. In contexts of slavery, race is taken not exclusively as a given that needs to be intersected with other givens, but it is race itself that precedes and produces the framing of bodies. It can be argued that gender comprises just one of the social markers of difference in Butler's work, since intersectionality is already assumed as a methodology in the early pages of *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1999 [1990]).

To counter universalist claims that woman is the other of man, Butler states that being a “woman” is not the totality of a person, since gender discursively intersects with different modalities. Hence the notion of *gender* becomes inextricable from the multiple markers that position bodies in the world. Bodies acquire their gender appearance through historically regulated practices, opening the possibility for a variety of gender expressions. Denying the importance of sexual difference opens spaces for gender fluidity, articulated with multiple markers of social difference. So, did enslaved Black women have a gender? And could it be that corporealities whose attributes were constructed to be recognized as feminine were nonetheless abjected as outside of gender? If this is so, should the intersectional operation be performed? Butler's assertion that if someone is a woman, it is not all that she is, being intersected with other discursive modalities, still starts with a given: that gender exists, even if it is the product of those iterations

that perform gender. Was Sojourner (2014) wrong and delusional to ask “Ain’t I a woman?” to an audience of men who must have muttered their response under their breath: “You’re a black”?

During slavery and also at present, Black women continue to fight to claim their genders. For Black women, gender is not given by nature, as it is to white women, but a political agenda. However, among universalist feminists, the mantra that gender oppression is universal persists. But African American, Brazilian, and Latina feminists (Gonzales 1983, 1988a, 1988b, 1988c; Carneiro 2020; Davis 1981; hooks 1995; Collins 2000) continue to insist: Black women are not considered women. Universalist feminists, whose deafness is complicit with Eurocentrism, reply that gender oppression is universal. Sueli Carneiro (2020) addresses the matter:

Black women have a differentiated historical experience that the classic discourse on women’s oppression has been unable to recognize. Just as the classical discourse has not accounted for the qualitative difference that the effect of oppression has had and still has on the feminine identity of Black women [. . .] Feminist didn’t understand a thing when feminists said that women should take to the streets and work! We are part of a contingent of women seen as objects. Only yesterday, at the service of fragile ladies<sup>8</sup> and lascivious plantation owners. (Carneiro 2020: 1)<sup>9</sup>

They seized sexual difference as a given and built their theories of gender oppression upon this difference. When they included enslaved Black women in this sphere, feminists overlooked the fact that in the world of life, enslaved Black women were not considered women. Even in those attempts to negate universalist theoretical foundations by proposing intersectionality, enslaved Black women came to compose hyphenated identities that did not problematize the place that Black men and women occupied in social structures. They (the Black men and women) arrive at this operation bearing gender identities, but the inclusion of a previous, racial label of difference distances them from their genders.

Enslaved bodies are removed from the cultural sphere and presented as reflections of the natural realm. This absence of culture would transform them into matter that came into the world with the ultimate purpose of serving those bodies constructed in the image and likeness of God. In this conception, there is life in Black bodies, but not life that is identifiable with that of human beings. What reiterations are required so that, when looking at these Black bodies, any identification with humanity is denied, rendering them purely biological matter? What is

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8 TN: Here the author used the Portuguese word *sinhazinha*, literally translatable as ‘little ladies’. During the colonial period, the *sinhazinhas*, *sinhás* or *sinhá-moças* were those women who lived in the master’s house as members of the family (wives, daughters, etc.).

9 TN: Unless otherwise cited, translations are my own.

needed so that nothing about them can hold any interest: religion, politics, life history, kinship, music, cuisine, aesthetics? What mechanisms must be triggered to produce a non-being, a slave?<sup>10</sup>

## How to Turn People into Things

In those institutions that work to erase individual stories and memories, we may observe rituals of dehumanization. From Nazi concentration camps to prisons, marks of individualization are erased from bodies. However, it was with slavery that repeated practices of dehumanization became the foundation that allowed this system to function for centuries. Hartman (2007) takes us on a long journey of forgetfulness-production as enacted by the crossing of the Atlantic. There was no choice: “the past slowly disappeared over the course of years, or the shock of enslavement destroyed it in one fell swoop. How long did it take for the mother tongue to be eradicated by the new language?” (Hartman 2007: 75). It was not enough to place people on “slave ships”.<sup>11</sup> The long crossing of the Atlantic followed a temporality that was necessary for the process of emptying the soul, a temporality that had already been preceded by that of capture and that of waiting time, in filthy captivity, along the ports of the African coast before embarkation (Hartman 2007; Conrad 1983).

For a slave to be produced, the human being must be removed from her original social and political community. Hannah Arendt (2009 [1951]) discusses the fiction of human rights by which a set of inalienable rights is established with the individual as a reference point. The fiction lies in assuming that an isolated subject can hold all the rights within her. The emergence of nation-states proved that any individual without political recognition is an outcast in the world, the wretched of the earth, a human body that wanders without being heard or respected. Because of that, the individual becomes an outlaw, with no obligations

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**10** One could argue that this assertion around the lack of interest in the world of enslaved people is erroneous, since African cultural influence has permeated all levels of Brazilian society (language, food, religion, music), as repeatedly pointed out by Gilberto Freyre. However, what appears in the work of the sociologist as an encounter between cultures, producing hybrid effects that characterize national identity, was actually the result of the continued resistance of Africans and their descendants on Brazilian soil. The Black presence in Brazilian culture exists despite those policies aimed at erasing the “cancer that the slave represented”, as widely repeated by members of Parliament in 1871.

**11** TN: The author uses the word *tumbeiros*, translatable as ‘graves’, which is what ships that transported enslaved people were called.

or protections. Arendt sought to reflect upon the paradox of human rights when it came to refugees and the stateless.<sup>12</sup>

From the beginning the paradox involved in the declaration of inalienable human rights was that it reckoned with an ‘abstract’ human being who seemed to exist nowhere, for even savages lived in some kind of a social order. If a tribal or other ‘backward’ community did not enjoy human rights, it was obviously because as a whole it had not yet reached that stage of civilization, the stage of popular and national sovereignty, but was oppressed by foreign or native despots. The whole question of human rights, therefore, was quickly and inextricably blended with the question of national emancipation. (Arendt 1973 [1951]: 291)

I believe that some of her ideas regarding the production of “laying waste the whole world” (Arendt 1977 [1963]) can be framed within the continued project of transforming subjects into slaves. Enslaved people did not exist under the law. The Brazilian Constitution of 1824 did not include a single mention of their existence. Arendt’s thesis helps us understand the drama of enslaved people who were torn away from a human community, from a place of belonging, in order to become matter. But if there were no possibility of political recognition for an immense mass that was abducted from their lands, the alternative would be to create and invent other forms of political belonging. The *quilombos*,<sup>13</sup> as structures of political community, would become such spaces. These spaces allow us to understand how enslaved people strived to occupy those gaps that they found in the law as a form of resistance. Luiz Gama’s<sup>14</sup> efforts to free people who entered Brazil as slaves as of 1830 (Ferreira 2020) are also celebrated. Enslaved Black women used all of the possibilities that the Free Womb Law heralded in order to secure their right to the custody of their children (Machado et al. 2021).

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<sup>12</sup> I am interested in approaching Hannah Arendt’s positions regarding the relationship between citizenship (the subject of political rights) and the production of the “human” (the denial of political recognition) as pure biological matter. However, I would distance myself from her comparison between the stateless person and the slave. Arendt claims that the condition of slavery would be preferable because enslaved persons were guaranteed a place in the law, with their importance secured in the social structure. Exactly for the opposite reasons (as enslaved persons were *not* represented by the law and because they constituted abject bodies), I wonder whether it was Eurocentrism or ethnocentrism that led Arendt to conclude that “To be a slave was after all to have a distinctive character, a place in society – more than the abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human” (Arendt 1973 [1951]: 297).

<sup>13</sup> TN: The word *quilombo* stems from the African Bantu word *kilombo* which literally means camp. In Brazil, the *quilombos* were the places where those who had escaped from a slave farm came to live, as isolated outlaw communities.

<sup>14</sup> TN: Luiz Gama was a Brazilian abolitionist. He was the son of a Black mother and a white father. Enslaved at the age of 10, he remained illiterate until age 17. He then studied to become a lawyer.

The constant production of enslaved bodies was based on the repetition of imposed performances that removed any point of unity between them and free persons. The non-recognition of their humanity was not limited to the absence of the practice of the Christian faith or to the notion that their levels of intelligence would never qualify them for adulthood (Taunay 2001). Producing an abject body is not the result of a single desire or an isolated act in history. Dehumanization had to be reiterated and materialized through indicators that confirm the truths of the solid edifice of abjection. The production of aesthetic standards by which the hair, skin, mouth, and nose of Africans would be considered ugly was not yet set in motion. Ugliness and beauty are on a continuum. Abjection, on the other hand, eludes the concepts of representation.<sup>15</sup> It was the microphysical production of abject bodies that was underway (Bento 2021b).

Performativity theory, as proposed by Butler, can help us understand the rhizomatic policy around slave production.<sup>16</sup> Although a body would provide stability to this production along with an ontological condition based on race, the latter of which was secured through the principle of biological inheritance (*partus sequitur ventrem*),<sup>17</sup> this biologized stability, itself a result of the work of producing abjection, had to be secured through other factors. I am appropriating performance theory in a “twisted” movement. The idea is not to point out those practices that do the work of producing the intelligibility of sexual and gender dissidences. Rather, I am interested in highlighting the effectiveness of slave production in the microsphere, based on a socially shared language that allowed the gaze, in the blink of an eye, to identify an enslaved person. Questions would arise when this body carried certain indicators (jewelry, dressed bodies, shoes, or hair ornaments) that suggested either of three possibilities: that one was facing a freed person; that one was before an enslaved person who had escaped and who was trying to deceive the

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15 The valorization of Black aesthetics and corporealities points to the importance of politicizing dimensions of existence that, in the sphere of macro disputes, are not considered relevant. “Black is beautiful” has become a fundamental milestone in problematizing policies of abjection. Regarding the relationship between beauty/ugliness/abjection, see Bento (2021b).

16 I use the expression “production of the slave” because the work sought the essentialization and abjection of the slave. When I refer to “enslaved people”, on the other hand, I seek to call attention to the field of historicity and contingency. In the realm of official discourse, no one becomes enslaved, but is born a slave. What I am proposing here is to understand the everyday policies that sustained the ontological presupposition of the slave condition.

17 *Partus sequitur ventrem* (that which is born follows the womb) was a legal doctrine that defined the legal status of newborns. All children inherited the legal status of their mothers. As such, the children of enslaved women would be born into slavery. This norm was based on Roman civil law, specifically regarding slavery and personal property (movable assets).

onlooker; or that one was before an enslaved person whose master or lady cared for his or her flock.

Dr. F. J. T. Meyen was a physician and naturalist aboard the Prussian ship *Princesa Louisa*. He offered an apt description of the market for enslaved people in Valongo, Rio de Janeiro.

We visited the Slave Stores in Rio, and found many hundreds nearly naked, their hair almost all cut off, and looking frightful objects.

They were sitting on low benches, or huddled upon the ground, and their appearance made us *shudder*. Most of those we saw were children, and almost all these boys and girls had been branded with red-hot irons on the chest, or other parts of the body. Through the filthiness of the vessels in which they had been brought over, and badness of their diet, (salt meat, bacon, and bean-meal), they had been attacked by cutaneous diseases, which first appeared in little spots, and which soon became spreading and eating sores. Through hunger and misery, the skin had lost its black and glossy appearance, and this with the whitish spotted eruption, and their shaven heads, with their stupid, gaping countenances, they certainly looked creatures which one would hardly *like* to acknowledge as fellow-beings. To our astonishment, we found at Rio, persons in repute for cultivation and humanity, who coolly assured us, that we must not suppose that the negroes belonged to the human race. According to their extraordinary principles, the slaves were (as the people of Rio boast) very mildly treated. One must have lived long enough to be accustomed to their misery and degradation, to *understand* such a way of speaking. (Meyen 1837: 39)

In another passage, we may read about the reasons why the Marquis of Lavradio relocated the enslaved-people market and deposit to Valongo.

There was in this city the terrible custom that as soon as the blacks disembarked at the port from the African coast, they would enter the city through the main public thoroughfares, not only laden with numerous diseases but also naked. And because this kind of people, if not given greater instruction, are like any wild brute, they did everything that nature suggested in the middle of the street, where they sat on some boards placed there, causing not only the worst kind of stench in these streets and surroundings but also offering the most terrible spectacle that the human eye can witness. Decent people did not dare go to the windows; the inexperienced there came to know what they did not know and should not know; and all this was allowed without any restriction, solely to yield the absurd profit that the slave traders, their owners, obtained by bringing them at night to the ground floors or pantries under the houses where they lived. My decision was that when the slaves disembarked at customs, they were to be sent by boat to the place called Valongo, which is in a suburb of the city, separated from social contact; there the many shops and warehouses were used to lodge them. (Amaral 1941: 148–149)

The Marquis of Lavradio seems to suggest that lack of hygiene or decency (given their absence of clothing) was a natural marker of the brutality of these beings who disembarked on the port of Rio de Janeiro. It is as if, during their long jour-



ney inside the slave ships, they had refused to wear clothes, take baths, and use the allocated spaces for personal hygiene. They were so thin that they certainly must have refused the food they were offered. And upon arriving at the port of Rio de Janeiro, even with public bathrooms scattered throughout the city streets, they insisted on doing everything nature required in the middle of the street. All signs of civilization were lacking in those savage brutes. The inner nature of those creatures was what led them to act this way. The representation of wild nature was a socially shared language. After being traded, the work of producing abjection, presented here by the Marquis of Lavradio, would continue. The slave owner's radical alienation from the conditions of this production guaranteed the absence of any sort of ethical dilemma. What characterizes the production of abject bodies is their reification, their objectification, yet the success of this historical undertaking only materializes if the story about the other is told and retold without the narrator being part of the story, taking no responsibility for the narrated events.

Maria Graham's diaries also record scenes in which enslaved bodies are exposed.

I have this day seen Val Longo; it is the slave-market of Rio. Almost every house in this very long street is a depot for slaves. On passing by the doors this evening, I saw in most of them long benches placed near the walls, on which rows of young creatures were sitting, their heads shaved, their bodies emaciated, and the marks of recent itch upon their skins. In some places the poor creatures were lying on mats, evidently too sick to sit up. (Graham 1824: 227)

There is a considerable difference between the narratives of foreigners such as Dr. F. J. T. Meyen and Maria Graham as compared to that of the Marquis of Lavradio. For the Marquis, the problem lay in the visual proximity of Black people, necessitating public policies to relocate them to another space in order to spare decent people from witnessing the Dantesque scenes he describes. The foreigners, on the other hand, present scenes that already take place in Valongo (the transfer proposed by the Marquis had already been carried out) and express indignation before the situation of those "poor things". Certainly, compassion does not exempt them from their alienation and complicity regarding the production of slaves, since the foreigners do not articulate what they have seen with their own lives in European metropolises. The existence of those "hideous objects" is also what secured them clothing, food, and comfortable lives. The death policies implemented by slave owners and the State in Brazil ensured *them* a good life *there* (in Europe).

The statification of the biological by the State and the invention of the population, which Foucault (1999) termed biopower, was preceded by the biologization of bodies, not as a population, but as a race. Necropolitics preceded and became a

structuring part of biopolitics. While in European cities, sovereign centralized powers could determine who could live or die, in the colonies, sovereignty became fragmented and controlled by the men and women who owned slaves, with the protection of the State and the church. The horror that the travelers expressed upon seeing those animalized bodies exposed for sale did not pit them against the Marquis. They stand in continuity. What remained of humanity? What recognizable mark of humanity was there in those bodies? These were enslaved women and enslaved men. However, sexual difference does not authorize us to affirm that we stand before gendered bodies, which is a quality of recognizable bodies. It is as if, by saying “enslaved women and men”, they are pushed toward humanity, yet the condition of slavery expels them. Sexual difference is another name for naked life, a life lacking culture. Free people had gender; enslaved people had sexual difference, a difference valued exclusively for the purposes of commodification.

It can be argued that the men and women who owned slaves did not wish to expend an excessive amount of resources to cover the bodies of enslaved people or that, in the spirit of the Marquis of Lavradio, they were naturally wild beings and that this nature made any morality associated with the decency that clothing would confer strange to them. The two arguments are not contradictory. However, I suggest that keeping enslaved bodies in a state of near-nudity did not respond to economic or moral reasons. This practice did not seek to describe a certain moral state, but to produce enslaved people as object beings.<sup>18</sup> What I am suggesting is an inversion. It was not the enslaved persons who presented aesthetic marks and signs revealing this condition on their bodies, but the masters and ladies who owned slaves who meticulously developed an economy of memory that repeatedly produced the condition of slavery. Standing in contrast to performative gender theory, the situation I am analyzing is not about subjects who present themselves to the world while constituting their genders (whether to produce fissures in the norms or to reaffirm them), but about the microphysical work that the slave-owning masters and ladies ran, supported by the State and the church, to propagate the daily birthing of slaves. Skin color and phenotypes were not enough. Every gesture, every inch of skin had to reveal that one was facing a body fulfilling its biological destiny: to be a slave.

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**18** I am not claiming or proposing that the men and women who owned slaves dressed the enslaved people in the same clothing as their own, but pointing out that a clothed or unclothed body was a fundamental indicator of morality (in the context of Christian morality) that could bring the body closer to or distance it from being recognized as human. Intentionally keeping the bodies of enslaved people semi-nude may suggest that this was a fundamental mechanism for the reiteration of abjection.

Little importance has been given to the processes or policies that produced abjection in the context of slavery. The prohibition of wearing shoes, control over haircuts, the use of miserable rags to partially cover the body, and branding with the owner's initials through cauterization have entered historical narratives as descriptions of dehumanization. However, we are not witnessing descriptive scenes but the continuous producers of abjection. The meticulous control of all performances of enslaved bodies guaranteed that the boundary of the human would not be crossed, that Black bodies would not dare to migrate from one territory to another. Those who managed to gain freedom would live under constant surveillance and suspicion. The freed people never became free. Their lives were regulated by specific legislation. They could ascend to the objects that ensured them a certain incarnation as human beings, but they had to carry some form of proof that they had been freed attached to their bodies, under penalty of being interrogated in the streets by the police or by any free person. In the absence of these documents, they could be imprisoned.

## Covered Bodies, Honorable Bodies

How can a body repeatedly produced as abject occupy the same ontological space as that of the woman? How is it possible for enslaved Black women to become women? I now turn to consider the relationship between the production of the performativity of enslaved bodies and honor as one of the fundamental attributes for the recognition of femininity in bodies constructed as women. If a white man were to violate a free white woman, depriving her of the defining aspect of her social worth – her virginity – he would become legally responsible for her, through the contract of marriage.<sup>19</sup> One of the sentences for this crime was to establish a family. I will now present two historical cases, both of which discuss honor in enslaved Black women. I chose these two cases because honor is one of the fundamental attributes of women. The first case takes place in England in 1791, and the second, in Brazil in 1884.<sup>20</sup>

In 1791, John Kimber, captain of the slave ship *Recovery*, transported about three hundred enslaved people to be sold in Granada. The ship left Africa on September 1 and arrived in Granada on October 28. During the crossing, twenty-seven slaves died,

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<sup>19</sup> The term “defloration” appears in the Penal Code of 1830, defining the crime of rape in Article 219: “To deflower a virgin woman under the age of 17” (Sartori 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Regarding Honorata's case, which unfolded in the city of Olinda, see Bento (2022a; 2022b) and Nequete (1988).

including a fifteen-year-old girl who did not survive the torture she was put through. Reports of her torture and death reached London, leading to legal prosecution. For refusing to dance, the young girl was hung by one leg on the ship's deck while being repeatedly assaulted by the captain. In Parliament, the MP William Wilberforce called for Kimber's condemnation. In his speech, the parliamentarian emphasized the innocence of the girl who had refused to dance naked before men. The refusal was linked to an illness that caused a lack of energy, exacerbated by the damage caused by her torture.

Why did Wilberforce stress, in his arguments, the fact that the young girl was naked? We cannot know whether this was an intentional strategy to produce identification with the suffering of the young girl or whether he recognized a point of unity between free and enslaved women. The desire to preserve honor through the manifestation of shame is a differentiating attribute between genders. Beyond exploring the parliamentarian's intentions, we might consider that the worth of the girl's life was conditioned by a materiality external to her body. Having a covered body would be an indicator of the humanity of the body. Wilberforce had to subject her to a local intelligibility matrix for there to be any kind of outcry and provoke a call for justice. He went against the current of cultural translation. The girl was not pure biological creature, not pure sexual difference. Other substances, beyond blood, flesh, and viscera, constituted her: she had honor and shame. To save the young girl, the parliamentarian made her a Christian and Western woman. Refusing to show her body in public would prove that she had been admitted into gendered humanity.

Drawing on the victim's shame was the abolitionist's way of emphasizing how slavery had "robbed" Black women of their feminine virtue. It was as if he were saying, "She's just like our women". He needed to make her white in order to produce some kind of empathy. The creation of an abolitionist consciousness involved inserting her into European, universalist frameworks.<sup>21</sup> What was the context of Wilberforce's speech? Who proffered him such arguments? England was witnessing a unique moment in the rise of the abolitionist movement, with free women as its protagonists. As Sousa (2021) points out, there was considerable complexity within the movement, but we may infer that the parliamentarian aligned himself with those who saw enslaved Black women as mirroring the virtues of the femininity of European women. With this as the main axis of the En-

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<sup>21</sup> The MP anticipated a strategy that is widely used today to recognize the rights of populations excluded from the frameworks of citizenship—through assimilation rather than through respect for their singularities and differences. Black people have to know their place; gays and lesbians cannot show any displays of affection in public. Recognition through assimilation ends up reinforcing norms rather than questioning them.

glish abolitionist movement, he must have chosen this rhetorical stance that was being disputed in the public space.

The recognition of an honored body was not offered to enslaved Black women. There are very few cases of enslaved Black women who succeeded in taking legal action against masters who raped them.<sup>22</sup> I don't know of any cases in which these masters were effectively punished. In Brazil, one of the rare cases in which sexual violence reached the courts was that of Honorata. The same day she was purchased, at the age of twelve, she was raped by Henrique Ferreira Fontes, her new master. That child who bore a name that meant dignity and respect had no honor.<sup>23</sup> The judge ruled in favor of the master, because the law did not provide for rape when the violence was committed against an enslaved woman.

Defloration or rape is not included in Article 222 of the Criminal Code; [the rape] of a slave under the age of seventeen by her master is undoubtedly an act contrary to good morals, immoral, revolting, and worthy of severe punishment; however, given our legislation, it, unfortunately, escapes criminal sanction. Recife, 20.6.1884. (in Nequete 1988: 67)

Honorata's case unfolded in the context of a divided world. White women had honor, a family, and the right to motherhood. It's important to stress that by pointing out the limitations of a concept that takes sexual differences as a basis for the recognition of genders, I am not denying the internal hierarchies between free men and women. The murders of women by their husbands, to defend their honor, cannot be disregarded as a fundamental piece of information when interpreting the violent structures that also operated within the master's house. There is considerable literature discussing so-called honor crimes.<sup>24</sup> But honor was a qualifier for free people. An enslaved Black woman could not use the argument of honor to defend herself, as we saw in Honorata's case. This problematization leads us to the conclusion that sexual difference is not the criterion for women and men to be recognized as members of a gender.

The discussion of the recognition of the presence/absence of honor leads to another sociological problem. Here we may observe the emergence of the kinship configuration that still marks the Brazilian context today. How can we speak of patriarchy – a category that refers to and is confined to the sphere of the family based on the figure of the father as the locus of power – when referring to the absolute appropriation of the bodies of enslaved women? In this context, are we

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<sup>22</sup> Under the law in force, the enslaved Honorata could not sue her master. A representative had to be appointed to this end.

<sup>23</sup> TN: In Portuguese, Honorata means 'honored'.

<sup>24</sup> See Caulfield (2000), Correa (1981), Morgan (2004), and Ramos (2012) on honor killings motivated by "honor washing".

moving towards a type of “patriarchy” with no father? If free men had the social authorization to freely access the bodies of enslaved Black women and were not subjected to any legal or social constraints to assume paternity or any other responsibilities (for example, marrying the victim), can the same concept (patriarchy) be used to refer to radically different relationships?

## The Myth of Sorority: A Corollary of the Myth of Racial Democracy

When discussing the concept of gender and its history, it is common to find definitions in which individuals assigned as men and women follow a primary-socialization script aimed at producing ways of acting, feeling, and perceiving the world based on certain links that are grounded in sexual difference. This universalizing perspective for genders forgets that for almost four hundred years, slaveholding societies did not prepare (or socialize) enslaved people to perform social roles, including motherhood and fatherhood. While the sex/gender system was established as a conceptual and political tool, it also contributed to producing a narrative of denial of the race category as preceding the sex/gender pair.<sup>25</sup> This theoretical conception ends up contributing to the narrative of the myth of racial sorority. This type of epistemological sleight of hand, through the gender route, reinforces the official ideology of the Brazilian State: the myth of racial democracy. It is as if the myth of sorority were the expression, in the private sphere (the place of women), of the symmetrical relations that occur in public life (the space of men).

Gilberto Freyre’s texts are still recurring sources for interpreting “gender” in colonial and imperial Brazil. His work *The Masters and the Slaves*, first published in 1933, can be seen as a fundamental framework with which to sophisticate the myth of democracy. I believe that certain pillars sustain this myth, including the

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<sup>25</sup> Oyěwùmí (2021 [1997]) inaugurated a discussion in gender studies regarding the Eurocentric nature of the gender category and the impossibility of understanding the functioning of Yoruba society by invoking an interpretation of the place that bodies occupy in social structures based on sexual difference. What I am proposing is not a shift to other societies to deny the heuristic value of the category. We need not turn to the Yoruba to argue that the gender category does not encompass all social relations. The non-belonging of Black bodies to the gender order could stand as proof that gender has been used to signify radically different relations. As I seek to point out, sexual difference has never been the foundation upon which the acts of recognizing a belonging to a certain gender identity are distributed.

relationships between women, that is, between the ladies (*sinhá*) and the enslaved women (*mucamas*). It is essential not to forget that Freyre also points to the violence that slaveholding ladies committed against enslaved women.

There are tales of *sinhá-moças* who had the eyes of pretty *mucamas* gouged out and then had them served to their husbands for dessert, in a jelly-dish, floating in blood that was still fresh. Tales of young baronesses of adult age who out of jealousy or spite had fifteen-year-old mulatto girls sold off to old libertines. There were others who kicked out the teeth of their women slaves with their boots, or who had their breasts cut off, their nails drawn, or their faces and ears burned. A whole series of tortures. (Freyre 1986 [1933]: 351)<sup>26</sup>

The anger of the ladies (*sinhás*) was triggered by the envy they felt towards the superiority of enslaved women, as they were seen as holding secrets in the art of seduction unknown to white women.

Black women seem to possess certain unknown skills in the preparation of some delicacies, skills that the white ladies are unaware of. The same seems true for certain ways of not only seducing but also keeping a man: the common mulatto woman is superior to the noble white woman. (Freyre 2006 [1933] 367)<sup>27</sup>

According to the theory of seduction that Hartman (1996) proposed to explain the meanings assigned to American slave-owning masters' raping of enslaved Black women, the strong (master) would become weak in the face of the temptation posed by the Black woman. Through her cunning and seductive nature, she was deemed responsible for the master's loss of control over his actions. Freyre thus would appear to be an academic spokesperson for the theory of seduction. Through the apparent description of the beauty, vitality, youth, and allure of the slave, Freyre leads us to conclude that seduction originated in the enslaved women.

But the relationships between the ladies (*sinhás*) and the enslaved women (*mucamas*) is not only characterized by violence. There are other scenes of enslaved women who were always available, their ears open to the complaints and sorrows of their mistresses as they picked lice from their hair. From scenes of violence, the text slides into depictions of complicity between the opposing pair and into scenes marked by the presence or protagonism of "black mammies", seducing the reader with a sweetened reading of slavery.

As for the "black mammies" (*mães-pretas*), tradition tells us that it was truly a place of honor that they held in the bosom of the patriarchal family. Granted their freedom, they

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26 TN: The author of the text cites the book in its original language, Portuguese, titled *Casa-Grande & Senzala* (Freyre 2006 [1933]). However, for this fragment, we have used the English translation of 1986.

27 TN: In this case, we translated the text from the original in Portuguese because we were unable to find this fragment in the English translation of the book that we consulted.

would almost always round out into enormous black figures. These women were given their way in everything; the young ones of the family would come to receive their blessing, the slaves treated them as ladies, and coach men would take them out in the carriage. (Freyre 1986 [1933]: 369)

The narrative structure of the text leads us from complicit bonds to ties of violence between enslaved and free people. This is a fundamental line within the book. From the confidences that the young *sinhazinha* ladies utter to their enslaved *mucama* companions, to the eyes of Black women floating in the soup that ladies served husbands, Freyre makes us forget that we are standing before a context marked by the radical asymmetry of power. The reason why *sinhá* ladies would rip the nipples off enslaved Black women and serve them on trays was, according to Freyre, the beauty and youth of the young Black women. Driven by insecurity, white women were consumed by an uncontrollable envy that led them to sell or disfigure the faces and bodies of the young Black women.

We are at the center of the female world: jealousy, beauty, youth. These are women competing for men. In this economy of desire and sex, the Freyrean white women are at a disadvantage because they age earlier, gain weight, and lose any charms with which they might arouse a man's libido. But this is ultimately just women's business. At times, the women hate each other. Other times, they interweave their secrets and complicity. It is these internal movements within the work that contribute to obliterating the framework in which the descriptions of such encounters take place. We are not faced with women who possess the same gender capital or even different or unequal gender capitals. White women had gender; enslaved Black women, sexual difference.

In Freyre, we observe an idyllic kind of tale in which everyday passages are immersed with the apparent communicability between enslaved individuals and masters/ladies, a vision that is utterly in line with the narrative of the universal oppression of the female gender. The disputes among Freyrean women do not fissure their point of unity – after all, they are all women. With universalist feminism, oppressions stem from the patriarchal order to construct this field of unity and forge the necessary solidarity and sisterhood among women, whether free or enslaved. But is it not Eurocentric epistemic arrogance that transmutes the radical difference between bodies into the fiction of “we women”? The children of free women would have a name and compose the population of the nation. For the slave, the whole body is inserted into the logic of “commodities”: workforce, milk, household-management skills and tasks, sex. It was in the economic logic of commodities that sexual difference mattered.

Dimorphism (with enslaved Black women and enslaved Black men) participated as a factor that could either increase or devalue the “piece”. Enslaved Black women who had recently given birth were rented out as milk nurses to feed the



children of free women. Young enslaved Black men in good health commanded the highest prices. The shared signifier (woman or man) did not produce shared expectations.<sup>28</sup> Sexual difference, as the remnant of a possible semblance of humanity, was nothing more than an indicator of the possible ways of exploiting bodies. Dimorphism in enslaved bodies did not remove them from the condition of being biological creatures, on the contrary, it was pure sexual difference that kept them in the condition of bare life.

The myth of sorority assumes that there is something inherent to the female experience (motherhood and patriarchal oppression) that leads women to produce alliance politics against the patriarchy.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps a first step in considering alliance politics would be to recognize that the categories used to interpret oppressions are not the same, while, as a theoretical-historical reparation, we must recognize that Black women have been denied the right to belong to the feminine. This denial is echoed today in the voices of those mothers (almost all of them Black) who have seen their children executed by the State and incessantly cry that “nothing has changed!”<sup>30</sup>

The theoretical impasse of using a single category to name such disparate relations when it comes to the labor market, access to health care, and access to justice has been resolved by adding on other layers of identity (intersectionality), which ultimately leads us back to gender as a closed, self-absorbed category. This theoretical-methodological procedure, as I have pointed out, continues to produce the false interpretation that, despite our differences, we are all still “women”.

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28 Sexual difference was one of the factors behind the final price of the “piece”. Age, health, and the presence/absence of teeth are among the items that regularly appear in advertisements for the sale of people in nineteenth-century newspapers. Sexual difference, in this context, serves other functions that cannot be seen as similar to the sexual difference between white men and women. These advertisements are an interesting source of research to understand the expectations regarding enslaved Black men and women (Telles 2018).

29 There is no possibility of political and social transformations without alliance politics. What I am suggesting here is the impossibility of producing an artificial field of identity and unity as a foundation upon which to propose political agendas. Perhaps the path is the opposite: To recognize the differences and, through them, structure possible channels of dialogue and points of political unity.

30 TN: The phrase *nada mudou* has been used to protest the killing of Black youths at the hands of the police as well as drug violence in Brazil’s *favela* neighborhoods.

## What is the Gender of Necrobiopolitics?

When I started researching the Annals of the Brazilian National Congress of 1871, I focused exclusively on debates about the “servile element”.<sup>31</sup> However, at some point, I began to read the document in its entirety. I was working on the concept of necropower in articles and conferences (Bento 2018). With this concept, I propose an analysis of the State that connects death-promoting policies with life-promoting policies, as articulated and articulating dimensions of the State. If one can research populations subjected to ongoing death policies by the State, then one cannot deny that there are policies of care for the lives that matter, the lives worthy of composing the nation-state.

While analyzing the 1871 Annals of the Brazilian Parliament, I noticed that the economy of the differential distribution of life and death had been laid bare before my eyes. And once again, I found myself facing the impasse of using gender as a category that unifies women’s lives. I decided that I should analyze this material by separating it into two blocks. The first involved discussing what one might call life-caring policies. The second would focus exclusively on the “servile element” in the debate around the bill that would go down in history as the Free Womb Law.

Between May and September of 1871, parliamentarians discussed conceptions about the ownership of enslaved women’s children; created theories about family, sexuality, morality, the State, and religion; manifested their panic before the possibility of a slave revolt; and calculated the country’s economy and the impact that the end of slavery would have for the country. They registered no names or life stories of enslaved women, nor of their parents. Once the agenda around the “servile element” was dealt with, they moved on to the sphere of care, with public policies: we have the approval of resources for hospitals and schools, the approval of pensions for the widowed wives (with first and last names) of those who fought in the Paraguayan War, and the allocation of resources for road construction.<sup>32</sup>

Could it be argued that women were inserted in the sphere of necropolitics? It can be argued that there were differences in the state policies directed at en-

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31 Although the title of the discussion in the *Annals* is *elemento servil* or ‘servile element’, when the debates begin, the word “servile” disappears while “slavery” and “slaves” emerge. It is worth asking ourselves why the parliamentarians did not adopt the expression “slave element.” Could it be due to some kind of embarrassment or shame? Could it be that the word “servile” highlights the supposed difference in the treatment that the masters proffered to enslaved people, which, according to parliamentarians, was characterized by kindness?

32 In almost every section of the national congress of 1871, issues related to pensions were voted on. On May 15, 1871, the deputies approved “the pension of \$600 a year, granted by the decree of February 25, 1871, to D. Maria Thereza dos Reis, daughter of the late Francisco Sotero

slaved Black women and free women, but that both were under the yoke of the patriarchy and lived under regimes of differentiated oppression. Their genders would condemn them to dangers arising from the power of men. And enslaved Black women would have to deal with the oppression of enslaved Black men on top of this. Here, a fiction of unity is produced, one that finds, in the formulation of “differentiated levels of oppression”, the argument it needs to make the radical difference between free people and enslaved people vanish before our very eyes. It is as if one were trying to transform water and oil into a single substance, diluting their differences and forging a new substance altogether.

Enslaved Black women inhabited the sphere of necropolitics (Mbembe 2011), and free women that of biopolitics (Foucault 1999). There is no doubt that free women were vulnerable to the violence of their husbands and fathers. Inhabiting the sphere of biopolitics (although, in 1871 biopolitics were scarce, especially those with gender distinctions) was no guarantee that, in the private sphere, the lives of white women would not be at risk. By affirming that they were included in biopolitics, I am highlighting the fact that they composed the population – though they lacked the right to vote – and were citizens of the country as outlined in the 1824 Constitution: they had a first and last name, bore children, had families and honor, and were the guarantors of family respectability in the public sphere.<sup>33</sup>

The honor of a family man was tied to the behavior of his wife. The murders of women who “besmirched” their husbands’ honor have marked the entire history of Brazil. What characterizes these sexual and romantic relationships is the construction and maintenance of socially shared and recognized bonds and commitments. The murders of women motivated by honor occurred in this sphere. Thus, when I signal the impossibility of using the gender category to describe and analyze the situation of enslaved Black women, I am not disregarding the structure of hierarchical and asymmetrical gender relations of the legal sphere;<sup>34</sup> nor would I disregard the internal diversity among free women in the multiple constitutive dimensions of social relations.

A considerable body of academic work has tried to understand the meanings of the human. Precarious lives, killable lives, and abject bodies form a lexicon

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dos Reis, retired professor of Latin at the Liceu da Província do Maranhão” (Annaes, Volume I, 16/05/1871, p. 53).

<sup>33</sup> Regarding the importance that the family held in the nation-building project of the late nineteenth century, see Costa (1979).

<sup>34</sup> In the debates around the bill for the Free Womb Law, it was argued that it would be unconstitutional to free the children of enslaved women because “the offspring” were private property and everything derived from the enslaved bodies would thus belong to the master. The counter-argument was much to the point: there was nothing unconstitutional about the bill, since there was no mention of enslaved people in the 1824 Constitution. In fact, the Constitution was exclusively created for those who were born free.

that leads us to theories that help us consider the disputes around the meaning of humanity. What I am proposing is to continue our dialogue with formulations on the production of abjection, pointing to a contradiction within it. If enslaved people were not considered people, why is it that, when discussing gender, enslaved Black women and men are inserted into an ontological status that did not include them? Black women share the same natural attributes as white women, one might argue. However, this reproductive capacity is not of the same order. The sexual difference of white women is embedded in gender. In fact, it is not embedded: *it is* gender. Unlike with enslaved Black women, sexual difference is separate from the attributes that were socially constructed to define femininity.

Sexual difference, here, is another name for *homo sacer* (Agamben 2013); it is pure biology, energy, and matter in the form of people. Enslaved Black women's breasts, milk, sex, wide hips, strong arms, good teeth, youth, skills in managing domestic chores, and strength for agricultural tasks, are all commodities. An enslaved Black woman is defined as the opposite of the free white woman. Her physiological structure predisposes the Black woman to endure pain, lack emotions, have excessive sexuality, and be unfamiliar with maternal love and honor. Sexual difference without culture is pure bios, but pure bios does not exist. Looking at enslaved bodies and not finding culture, but females and males, is already the work of operationalized abjection. The production of abjection secures the moral foundation to continue the work of producing slaves.

It is not sexual difference that guarantees unity among women. The construction of sexual difference through gender would ensure white women a gender identity as well as recognition of their belonging to humanity in a hierarchical position inferior to that of white men. For enslaved Black women, sexual difference would be another factor confirming certain inherent qualities as commodities, for example, breastfeeding. In both situations, there is a prior condition defining who will be a woman and who will be a commodity: race.

Yet, it was the bodies that inhabited the sphere of necropolitics, through their work, along with the existence of the State, that ensured the creation of policies aimed at caring for life – as I pointed out in the passage in which European foreigners were shaken by the mistreatment to which enslaved people were subjected. Thus, there is no antinomy between the promotion of life and the promotion of death. The two are inseparable and constitutive dimensions of the State. When we move from the sphere of biopolitics to necropolitics, we must remain attentive to such sliding categories. In the scope of this article, I am relating necrobiopolitics to gender. The recognition of gender identities disappears as we move within the realm of necropolitics. Although I am taking the two spheres (bio and necro) as separate to analyze the framing of State policies, they are actually impossible to separate.

## Conclusions

Firstly, recognizing a body as male or female is already an ontologizing act. When Butler discusses the processes by which bodies become intelligible, she bases her ontologization on the categories of gender and sexuality, but Butler does not consider that there is a previous baptism by which the processes of producing the enslaved, in which the referential feature designating their lack of recognition, namely, race, is already at work. Perhaps it can be argued that, by bringing the dimension of intersectionality into her reflections to rethink and deny essentialized identities, the philosopher divests gender of its deterministic power. However, if intersectionality is activated as a theoretical-methodological resource by juxtaposing social layers of difference and inequality, then we are led to suppose that we are already facing a being that we could call a Black woman, even though her race would push her away from that gendered place.<sup>35</sup>

Second, before asserting that we should activate intersectionality as a methodological tool, we must ask ourselves who is recognized as a woman. Significant cohorts of Black feminisms view the struggle for the recognition of gender identity as key to their agendas.<sup>36</sup> In the model of intersectionality-by-addition, it is as if everyone had gender and it would suffice to cross a few intersections to point out that Black women occupy the least qualified positions in the labor market and are paid the lowest wages. We are led to suppose that these women's gender identity is altered by race and class. However, what I am suggesting is that we need to take a step back and problematize this operation. Why not use the peripheral-white-woman? The bodies of white women press on without the markings of race. If I say *woman* and do not add *Black* to this label, I know that the reference is to the white woman who remains the universal of the female gender.

Third, there is no chance of problematizing the production of abject bodies outside the frameworks of intersectionality. Yet, we need to find other ways to stress the levels of exclusion by which concepts such as abjection, oppression, and stigma bear different weights, acquiring other symbolic representations. The hyphen is not enough. Would changing the positions of the terms be enough to bring an identity closer to the world of life – for example, saying Black-woman-lesbian?

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<sup>35</sup> The reflections outlined here have focused on the relationship between enslaved Black women and free women, but I believe it is possible to make connections between these reflections and the debates around the production of transgender existences.

<sup>36</sup> The contemporary struggle of mothers (mostly Black women) who lose their children to State terrorism in Brazil is a demand for justice that falls in line with the denial of gender identity for enslaved Black women.

Fourth, gender is one the devices with which to recognize humanity in bodies that have been previously subjected to a matrix of human intelligibility. Recognizing a body as human, however, should not by itself create scenes that convey an equitable distribution of rights and violence. The matrix of intelligibility is race. Evoking the matrices of gender intelligibility as structuring structures of norms, without inserting them into contexts that condition and determine who can be recognized as a man or woman, reiterates the misguided idea that sexual difference is the defining factor for the positions of bodies in gender relations.<sup>37,38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> By focusing on the relationship between gender-abjection-enslavement to refute the primacy of sexual difference, I am not proposing that there is a single matrix with which to recognize the other as a human being. There are bundles of matrices of intelligibility that are historically structured. The exclusion in this matrix of transgender people, for example, intersects with other social markers of abjection. Each of these bundles requires nuanced analyses separately but also in connection to broader frameworks.

<sup>38</sup> English translation by Aurea Mota, edited by María Cristina Hall. First published in Portuguese as Bento, Berenice. 2024. *Diferença Sexual e Abjeção: Qual o gênero das negras escravizadas?*. In Bento, Berenice. *Abjeção: a construção histórica do Racismo* [Abjection: a social construction of racism]. São Paulo: Cult Editora.

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Alejandra Castillo

# Corpopolitics and its Reticular Movement

*The forms that surround/outline and define a knot are distinct, different, incongruous with other knots. But all of them, within their environments, tend to accommodate for their own unfolding of movement, so that they will mutually come together at some point and distance, which is unforeseeable from the point itself; to form a new and singular continuity of life.*

Julietta Kirkwood (1990: 24)<sup>1</sup>

## The Corpopolitical

Politics narrates and delimits a body. Every narrative visibilizes and hides. I believe I am not mistaken in defining politics as a regime of light and ocularcentrism (Jay 1993). In this sense, the political philosophies of visibility – whose principal aim seems, above all, to merely make visible those who do not already enjoy visibility (by granting them such visibility) – are no more than a variation of the social historiographies that have called for giving a voice to the voiceless. Both positions are equally limited and failing. These limitations and failures are tied to the weight of presence and identity that they assume. Through this pretense, gaze and voice reproduce the coordinates of the ocularcentric regime of light. From times of old, these coordinates have been used to describe the space of what is held in common on the other side of the idea of the luminous – reason – while also producing images of a passionate body (Castillo 2020).

These coordinates organize a paradoxical scenario: to narrate – or see – the body, it must be deactivated. The body is only there upon its removal. By removing the body-organ, the *living body*, and, by extension, *the body of man*, become visible in this political-cultural narrative. This has been so ever since the first myths of the anthropogenesis emerged (Blumenberg 2011). The movement of removal that allows for the visibility of the “body” also subtracts a multiplicity of sexual differences, as if there were nothing but the body-organ. The removal (or deactivation) of sexual difference – understood as the pure organ, flesh, and fluids destined toward the reproduction of the species – nonetheless allows for the exposure of a body whose sexual (cultural) nature describes functions, roles, places, and times framed within a heteronormative gender device.

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<sup>1</sup> Translator’s Note (TN): Unless otherwise cited or specified, all translations are my own.

The visibility that these subtractive movements grant, firstly, allows for the affirmation of the self (this body is mine) and, secondly, for the certainty that identity is ineffable (I am seen the way I see myself).

This affirmation of the self and of identity are described from the possibility of visibility, being part of a scopic regime (Metz 2001). We should add that visibility is a condition of identification. This causal relationship is even clearer today given the teletechnological transformation of the visual order. Surveillance cameras and facial-recognition devices are indicative of the ironclad relationship between presence, visibility, and identification (Wajcman 2011). And there is more to add. The double subtraction of the body, first as an organic system and then in its sexual multiplicity, paradoxically allows for the manifestation of a body whose sex is *one* and whose narrative traces the outlines of a sexual-reproductive order. That identity is made visible in a sexed, heteronormative body implies the upholding of a mandate. The double of identity is guilt. What this affirmation teaches us is that identity (presence) narrated through the light-register of the visible entails the following of a set of rules and the acceptance of functions and roles. Not satisfying this mandate is assumed as an act of guilt. The fictions of the anthropogenesis inadvertently retrace the fictions of mythical-religious stories.

A corpolitics warns us of the double of identity (its implied mandate and restrictive guilt) and exposes it by showing a body enunciated from multiplicity. We should not overlook the fact that the coordinates mentioned above establish hierarchies and represent an order of colonial, racial, and sexual domination. The current scopic regime of screens has not debilitated these coordinates; rather, it has made them even more luminous. Nonetheless, the archive of sexual difference that granted them intelligibility is in decline. By archive I understand the set of texts, images, and technologies that define an era in terms of its hegemonic outline. Our era, and its archive, is opening with the possibility of assisted reproduction, not only transforming the idea of “filiation” but also altering our self-perception of the body. Part of this archive, and of this era, takes shape in the society of the image. We must not fail to observe that this is the archive of the liberal politics of eugenics as well as of the telematically mediated governmental world order. It is through this framework (archive) that all politics of the body (its image) now risk being transformed into a crease within the order of dominion: the body is what lies at the center of the calculations of contemporary politics. If this is so, if it is in the body itself that the calculations of an individual-local-global politics are bound, then that is where the politics that alter this new order of dominion should be articulated.

Still, we must keep in mind the complication implied in a politics whose politics is calculated in the body. This complication is that of time. Every mode of production generates its own temporality. Temporality is tied to subjectivities,

practices, and technologies in relation to modes of work. The vertiginous transition to digital technologies and the migration of work to platforms tends to reduce temporality to a singular present. The circulation of information and images on social-media networks seems more like a loop than a progression.

From another zone, the climate-change crisis is providing the certainty of the end of time or, perhaps, the certainty that there is no more time. This reduction of time into an absolute present is lived as a return to the body. When time is reduced to the experience of the everyday, it is not surprising that the body becomes the site of this reduction. The symptoms are varied and diverse: that the body is valued as an individual experience; an expanding market for bodily care and invigoration; a materialist turn that aims to recover the corporalities that have been forgotten in studies, analyses, and genealogies; and performance as a fetichized word to describe subjects' every action. For some time now, everything has become a performance. This is where the complication I mentioned earlier lies. One of the modes through which the order of dominion unfolds involves reducing the present time to the body. How to calculate, in the body, the possibility of altering the dominant order? Perhaps this does involve our insistence on the body, but in the form of corporalitics.

## The Feminist

A politics of the body should be called a "corporalitics" (Castillo 2014). This is a politics whose enunciation makes explicit what has always been a part of it: the body. Further still, this should be called a "feminist corporalitics", as this politics opposes the conservative persistence of the heteronormative gender device. No light, no shadow, no center, no margin. Rather, a feminist corporalitics seeks to alter the visibilities, hierarchies, and classifications of the domination coordinates of the current political-visual order. For this alteration to ensue, feminist corporalitics must integrate the narratives of other archives into its practices – with the presents of other struggles that have been overlooked by the histories of emancipation – thus activating its own present by altering, transforming, and liberating it.

The staging of a feminist corporalitics entails a paradox: while it is a necessarily situated intervention – we should bear in mind that a feminist corporalitics is always a protest and a reclaiming of a body in rebellion against an unjust order – its vocation is that of iteration. Thus, a corporalitics' action always exceeds action itself. A repetition never repeats the same thing. The act of repeating – a cry, a dance, a performance – insists upon bringing a movement of

unknown origin, of impossible traceability, to the present. The act does not refer to identity. Thus, the act of repetition is more akin to a contagion that casts aside nations, treaties, and languages. There are only bodies affecting themselves and each other. It is because of this paradoxical moment in corpopolitics that its movement is reticular, networklike, connecting one point to the other in a mesh that expands and contracts. Corpopolitics is the name of multiplicity, of a network that goes on connecting in the absence of a predefined plan. Corpopolitics questions: its calling is collective, yet the subjectivation it promotes is particular, as tied to bodies, names, and acts. It is from this particular contagion that counter-institutional machines are reticularly constructed. Its anomalous origin is what makes corpopolitics materialism in action, a movement of bodies that open and close on an infinite plane.

A corpopolitics is propagated without a fixed itinerary. It is difficult to establish how one action will affect another. We should insist that, while the action is taken so that its effects will trace a predetermined line (seeking a direct effect, as it were), there are ways in which this action will continue to branch off and act. The action's reverberation does not simply seek to evoke unintended effects. The action, which is and is not the action itself, is a staging of the body in unanticipated contexts. Thus, we might say that the action is disseminated reticularly.

## The Reticular

A corpopolitics is a reticular politics: its unfolding describes a network. In this sense, a corpopolitics is not organized through a proliferation of actions that resemble a family, but through scattered or dispersed actions. Yet, situating women near nets, textiles, and cloths is nothing new.

Since times of old, the image of the woman has been associated with threads, embroidery, and textiles. Western mythology is no exception. Athena is skilled with her sword but also with threads, and one of her tasks is to protect weavers. Not only that, but Athena declares herself a weaver unrivaled among gods and human beings. Ignoring these claims and full of haughtiness, the young weaver Arachne tells anyone who will listen that she's the best weaver on the face of the Earth, better than Athena herself, and she challenges Athena, in her mind, to a duel of threads and looms. Hearing of her arrogance, Athena shows up at Arachne's home, disguised as an old woman and expecting an apology of some kind from Arachne, but her contrition never comes. With no choice but to face her challenger, the competition on two looms begins. The challenge is simple: both are to weave a story, and she who weaves the most realistic tapestry within the

allotted time shall win. Athena weaves of her victory over Poseidon. Arachne weaves a complex scene with twenty-two stories of rape or sexual violence against women – goddess or human – committed by the gods of Mount Olympus. Though Arachne's dexterity is admirable, with even Athena complementing her, her topic of choice proves far from prudent. Taking note of this effrontery, Athena transforms Arachne into a tiny spider as punishment (Graves 2001). Athena thus seems to be the goddess who protects male violence, enshrouding them from blame.

And that is not the only story tying women to threads and meshes. Many stories come to mind involving women, their bonds, and their networks. Practicing the art of deceit, Penelope weaves by day while unweaving her work by night in order to dissuade those who wish to wed her, given Odysseus's seeming disappearance. In a story of revenge, Clytemnestra plans to murder Agamemnon by using a cloth net to immobilize him. The Fates – Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos – painstakingly braid together destiny, time, life, and death. Every day, Clotho spins the thread, Lachesis measures out the thread, and Atropos cuts it. Moreso, when androcentric western imagination has women kill themselves, the rope is their chosen material, tightening around their necks and asphyxiating them (Loroux 1985).

No, associating women with threads, ties, and meshes is nothing new. What is innovative, however, is for philosophy to seek to imagine politics beyond straight lines, programs, and treaties in order to make way for curvatures, inclinations, and crossings. The shape of this inclination is that of the reticular. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Mille plateaux* (1980), a network that births one, two, three, or more threads, describes a system called the "rhizome":

Principles of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order. The linguistic tree on the Chomsky model still begins at a point S and proceeds by dichotomy. On the contrary, not every trait in a rhizome is necessarily linked to a linguistic feature: semiotic chains of every nature are connected to very diverse modes of coding (biological, political, economic, etc.) that bring into play not only different regimes of signs but also states of things of differing status. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 [1980], par. 2)

A rhizome is simultaneously a specific network, root, and body. The roots expand, but the body keeps them from becoming fixed in just one place. What defines a rhizome is its extension, the crossing of lines that continue or stop according to an arbitrary path woven from knot to knot. The figure of the rhizome evokes a surface, or territories. In a sense, a rhizome is spatiality. A net or mesh that progresses from point to point without a predetermined design, refraining from taking root or plunging into the deep. It's important to highlight that while the

metaphor of the rhizome may evoke networks or meshes, these do not hearken back to the binary of the masculine and feminine or assign roles, spaces, and times. The reticular figure that a rhizome describes is not limited by the heteronormative gender matrix. The rhizome does not call forth binaries.

It is because of its singular topology that the rhizome metaphor does not, and cannot, call up the coordinates upon which the body of philosophy or the body of general thought has been written: there is no mystery, no occult sense to seek out in its depths. There is no center toward which one must go. We cannot overlook the fact that a rhizome is not a nautical chart or a map with directions. The rhizome is an exposed network – a body exposed through a union of knots.

The reticular metaphor of the rhizome disorganizes the coordinates that have guided the writing of philosophy, while the alternate modes around which today's politics is organized seem akin to the reticular shape. The crisis of the subject (time, narrative, corporality) in the history of emancipation, the rebellions against vertical and elitist modes of political activity, megacorporations' deepening colonization and expropriation of nature, and the complex duplication of life in the new digital sphere have led us to imagine other possible forms of association with which to organize under another sign of what is held in common.

In the 1990s, in his anarchist manifesto, Hakim Bey used the term Temporary Autonomous Zone to describe those political or cultural practices configured in local spaces of intervention beyond the tutelage or bidding of the State (Bey 1991 [1985]). The Temporary Autonomous Zone doubly assumes the shape of the network. Turning back to when the State was nothing more than an ironclad desire for power and the force of conquest, its figure was no different than that of Bey's "islands in the net", places weakly united under a central order. With its step-by-step progress, domination, and consolidation, the State has taken over more and more places, turning all territory into a measurable, legible, and identifiable map. With the State shape having reached the cusp of its hegemony through its ties to the capitalist mode of production – touching the limit of its decline and transformation by the same token – these islands in the net have become cartographies, information, and calculations.

How can we imagine other forms of association and affection beyond those that have been promoted by the figure of the State since the seventeenth century? The proposed form of the Temporary Autonomous Zone is the paradoxical figure of the antinetwork. The island in the net that configures the (trans)national State (in which everyone is identified and possibly connected but simultaneously isolated and separated in terms of affection and solidarity) is subverted through the emergence of other body-territories (actions and places) that superimpose themselves on the dominion map traced by the State shape. These body-territories

weave other modes of inhabiting what is held in common, and through their superimposition, they give way to the antinetwork.

Conceived under a different political sign, some time later, Benjamin Arditì described the Temporary Autonomous Zone as a manifestation of a type of post-hegemonic political-cultural practice (Arditì 2010). The posthegemonic, in this particular politics, could be described as a situating and collective effort to organize labor beyond statist and commercial logics. Drawing from the Internet-era turn, Arditì calls posthegemonic politics “viral”. The viral, its contagion, and its zones imply a practice of circulation through nodes that are not necessarily interconnected. Yet, we must note that the Temporary Autonomous Zone, in the sense described by Hakim Bey, has an ambivalent relationship to viral politics given that the latter mainly occurs through the existence of digital platforms. The Temporary Autonomous Zone incorporates the virtual sphere in a limited way, understanding it as a simple sphere among other spheres. Thus, the quest for the massive that the “viral” involves is not a part of its political action. Furthermore, Bey warns of the problematic articulation between financial capital and platform capital.

Removed from the enthusiasm around viral politics, in his book *In the Swarm*, Byung-Chul Han states that the networks brought together around digital platforms have not succeeded in constituting a collective subject – only isolated individuals (Han 2014). The swarm is a set of individuals but not a multitude or *we*. Indistinction is what describes the swarm. With the word “swarm”, Han seeks to define the kind of action carried out by subjects constituted in the digital fabric. These digital actions direct their movement toward a specific goal, usually by discharging an arsenal of violent comments and disparaging opinions.

There’s a palpable gap between Han’s ideas and the theses that Antonio Negri and Michel Hardt sustain in their books *Empire* (2000) and *Multitude* (2004). In Han’s interpretation, the digital network is not the place to put together a collective subject. The digital swarm is a movement carried out by a fragmented entity that does not, with time, successfully become a collective form of identification (Han 2014). The digital swarm does not propitiate subversions and revolts. Actions in the digital swarm will never bear a body. The digital swarm is a moving algorithm, a computed pulsation of isolated subjects that are not capable of political intervention.

Without ascribing to these positions, what we are interested in here is in a “body in the network” that is able to alter the androcentric sign of what is held in common. Perhaps because of this, the reticular multiplicity in which a corporalitics presents itself is beginning to take on the specific shape of the membrane, perhaps as a second skin that covers a body, or as a thin and extended mesh that, stitch by stitch, brings the knots together. Multiplicity is not the same as non-



intentionality when it comes to action. Regarding policies against sexual violence, Catharine MacKinnon has proposed the figure of a “butterfly politics” (MacKinnon 2017). With multiplicity, the occurrence of a simple action can set off a storm in a faraway place. Though removed from determinism, the mathematician and meteorologist Edward Lorenz has called this delayed consequence the “butterfly effect”: the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Hong Kong can produce a storm in New York. The butterfly effect seeks to establish that the multiplicity of events, even when apparently unrelated, ends up having unpredictable consequences.

To MacKinnon, feminist politics are like the flapping of wings. If the androcentric order is affected by a small, feminist action, such as by regulations against sexual harassment in public institutions (whether academic institutions or at the workplace), the order will be transformed in an unpredictable way. The 2018 great feminist revolt in Chile originated with student demands against sexual harassment at the university. More than fifty years after regulations were approved in the United States, the flapping of the butterfly’s wings finally led to a feminist storm around the masculine republic of Chile.

In butterfly politics, as MacKinnon explains, a small intervention in an unstable political system can, sooner or later, produce complex reverberations (MacKinnon 2017: 8). Political-critical interventions can provoke transformations in the gender system as a whole. While butterfly politics is not an individual policy but collective in its insistence and recursion, MacKinnon does not stop to establish the modes in which this “action” that is the feminist flapping of wings becomes an act that will trigger, in a non-predetermined time and space, a storm in the androcentric order. MacKinnon assumes that the action and its consequences have not been determined, as per chaos theory.

What interests me here is not so much the stochastic relationship between actions and their effects, but the possibility of describing a feminist body for politics. Thus, I believe the figure of the network is crucial. Perhaps, we might conceive of a feminist politics as a set of knots whose dispersion paradoxically weaves together another body for politics. Each knot is a place and a struggle that not only lays bare the dead ends of an unjust order, but also the possible paths available to change and reorganize what is held in common. The Chilean feminist theorizer Julieta Kirkwood proposes feminist action in this body-network through the figure of the knot:

The forms that surround/outline and define a knot are distinct, different, incongruous with other knots. But all of them, within their environments, tend to accommodate for their own unfolding movement, so that they will mutually come together at some point and distance, which is unforeseeable from the point itself, to form a new and singular continuity of life. (Kirkwood 1990: 24)

Knots begin to give shape to a body, stitch by stitch. This body is more akin to a mesh, being expansive and porous, than to a closed-off block. A feminist politics is woven knot by knot. Its openness is what characterizes this body, mesh, or network through its chance diagram of knots. It is perhaps there, in that opening, hole, or orifice, that a politics emerges in its multiplicity. This is a body-network that breathes in the absence of oppression: what binds it together, what unites it, is not a closing. Despite its openings, holes, and orifices, what is true of this politics that describes a body, knot by knot, is the impossibility of getting rid of one of them without running the risk of undoing the weaving as a whole.

To untie a knot is a difficult task. One must delicately handle each end in order to loosen up the knot. There is no policy for untying or unbinding that won't come up against a tight, interior resistance. Nothing can be subtracted from the knottedness that the knot represents. Thus, through each of its elements, the knot features the properties of a tie that persists in keeping together the ends, extremities, and loose pieces that accompany political feminist actions. We thus have a politics of extremities, and just where salvation was expected to come from a single bond – the uniqueness of an art of interiority and proximity – what we find are the loose ends of a democracy that is yet to come.

But there are other “knots”, too, other figures that demand to be introduced into feminist thinking. There are knots that set the senses in motion, that seem to drive us in other directions, to other landscapes and places. Knots that propose other meanings for the metaphor of the knot: knots that speak other languages. Thus, in a way that's removed from the knots of the textile metaphor, Julieta Kirkwood approaches *knots* as concentric prints, registers of growth and change. Drawing from this variation, I would like to describe them as such:

Trunk, plant, growth, projection of concentric circles, development – perhaps neither soft nor harmonious, but enveloping an intromission or wrong course, which I would not call a hurdle – that forces the totality into a new geometry, an unfolding of turns in a different, shifting, changing, but essentially dynamic direction. The forms that surround and define a knot are distinct, different, incongruous with other knots. But all of them, within their environments, tend to accommodate for their own unfolding of movement, so that they will mutually come together at some point and distance, which is unforeseeable from the point itself. (Kirkwood 1990: 24)

In a notably different gesture, Kirkwood decidedly describes knots as tied to the language play of roots and trees. Coinciding with Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille plateaux*, Kirkwood focuses on tree metaphors and defies those closed thought systems rooted in the dichotomies of exclusion. In contrast to the image of the tree as generally understood in Latin American thought – as a central place of origin and reproduction – Kirkwood prefers the image of the tree as organized in net-

works, in knots, and in a geometry of curved lines that lean against each other – an image that might appear akin to that of the rhizome. Through this turn, Kirkwood explores not only another metaphor of the knot metaphor itself in order to conceive of the politics of women but, more importantly, she proposes another way of understanding politics in general. A politics of discontinuities and multiplicity that can articulate,

seriously and once and for all, the verb to be in twos, in threes, and in five-hundreds without our number or sex adding or subtracting consistency when it comes to our ties as we humanize humanity. (Kirkwood 1987: 121)

In line with the essence of this proposal, we could say that a politics situated beyond the ideas of origin and uniqueness should begin by questioning the metaphysics of the individual who constitutes it. Yet, in this direction, we know that reflecting upon the political will inevitably lead to the problematization and putting-in-tension of some of the basic categories of modern philosophical discourse. Knots, as we know, necessarily involve a politics of extremities, as they name those loose ends that have not been tied. Thus, if we aim to move towards a politics centered on the metaphor of *knots*, one that is shifting, changing, unlimited, and monstrous, then we must do so through a politics of *democratic invention* that interrogates the uniqueness of what lies at the base of the individual/community relationship. To interrogate from the roots, from the extremities tied together in a bind, so that we can labor with our “fingers, nails, or whatever one prefers” (Kirkwood 2019: 195) towards its necessary and urgent unchaining.

It is precisely this insistence that will allow us to question the names with which masculine misogyny has defined the limits of community and of the individual. In this limit, we can blot out the coordinates upon which the body of politics has been conceived. We need names that refrain from evoking binaries, exclusions, and violence. Other names, such as those granted by network politics. These names seem to correspond to those of other bodies for politics.

These are the knots of a treelike politics that *grows in between*, in the midst of things, and that could lead us to conceive of feminism as an

untied verb [. . .] a leap of the “id” into the abyss of all heightened desire . . . with this dominating, hegemonic, uncalculated, with no previous suspension or savings, with no appropriation nor accumulation with which to fill in the voids and with everything reproduced through *maternities* . . . With all of this, it is true that civilizations are not constituted in the way we know. (Kirkwood 1990: 12)

The inclination of knots, and the feminist reticular politics it yields, proposes, without a doubt, a singular metaphor with which to consider the knotting of

politics, feminism, and the body. This inclination is far-removed from western mythology/thought.

## The Imaginal

We should note that a reticular politics establishes a double plane of action: the time of its production and the time of its reproduction. In this sense, a reticular politics allows us to consider action as connection and connectivity, as an association between individuals and collectives, and as interconnectivity in the space of social networks and platforms. Images are part of a reticular politics; they are a mode of political subjectivation.

While a corpopolitics reticularly relates bodies, affects, and actions, it never defines the total outline of the figure it unfolds. There is no map or identity bordering such politics. As corpopolitics unites and weaves a network, it unweaves the public from the private. Strangely, the publicity of corpopolitics unframes the public as known and the private as unknown. This double movement is so because of the presence of bodies undetected by the light of masculinely described publicity.

A feminist corpopolitics unweaves the masculine public and the private feminine, the here and there of spheres and territories, and, at the same time, proposes itself in conflict with the straight line articulated in the ironclad knotting between identity, origin, and the natural. As this thread unravels, we should stress that the feminism of any corpopolitics must be affirmed in a dissident, feminist way.

Corpopolitics is a movement, a walking, a song, and a march, but it is also duplication and repetition, an image that swiftly circulates across mobile devices, following the algorithmic network. Images reiterate the body that takes place in movement, walking, marching. Undoubtedly, corpopolitics places itself on the streets, but it also inhabits an unknown, expansive, and vague territory. The situating of corpopolitics is intensive, and the logic of its propagation, extensive, technical, and visual. We should continue to consider what diagram these street-codes describe. This diagram-territory will not stop being, in a way, dangerous. We know that the algorithmic map is the command, light, and brilliance of unique senses: despite the apparent visual abundance that networks offer, there is no place for detours or winding paths. The algorithmically viralized image works like anesthesia.

Images alone do not have the power to alter the senses. Furthermore, mediated images do not incorporate alteration into their commands. When corpopo-

itics touches an image, or, better yet, when corpopolitics enters algorithmic calculations through its virtualization across networks, it only retains the power of alteration if its incursion is unexpected, like an infiltration. When corpopolitics becomes images, these become deserting images, images oblique to the dominant order, antiocularcentric images.

This is why a corpopolitics is a politics that is enunciated by calling out the lines, edges, and borders that demarcate and make visible. Not only that, but a corpopolitics dissents from the straight line, from the temporality of the absolute present – and its vocation is counterarchival.

A feminist corpopolitics knows that merely returning one's gaze to the narratives of emancipation provided by the leftist political tradition is not enough. In more than one sense, its narratives, practices, and images only repeat the ocularcentric coordinates of the West and thus reiterate their androcentric order. A feminist corpopolitics also knows that invoking the time of emancipation and utopias simultaneously invokes the time of masculine humanity. Thus, a feminist corpopolitics strays from the straight line that has tightly thread together past, present, and future. There is no time beyond the one waiting to be conquered, perhaps because we need to question the idea of unlimited development that it assumes and the plundering order it implies. The time of feminist corpopolitics is the time of the present revolt, and its gaze will always take an oblique angle when considering the narratives, histories, and images that built the body of hegemonic politics, just as our gaze will remain oblique when directed at the narratives of emancipation.

The modes of action of feminist corpopolitics surpass the modes of traditional politics. If the body is at the center of today's political calculations, it is so because the body itself is where feminism unfolds. It is thus unsurprising that performance stands among its privileged modes of action. We should warn that a performance entails more than the mere presence of "a body". A performance is the staging of a corporal archive, and a feminist performance is always the iteration of an archive – of the unfolding order of domination – and its alteration. It is because of the affinities between the body, performance, and repetition that a feminist corpopolitics is an intervention in and through images, and its position is necessarily anti-ocularcentric.

A feminist corpopolitics is a politics that expresses itself through bodily movements. It is thus unsurprising that it is associated with performance. I am interested in considering artistic practices and feminism as two zones that mutually alter each other. On the one hand, feminism alters artistic practices by posing the question of sexual difference. At the same time, artistic practices alter the concept of politics that feminism bears, turning it into a concept that incorporates the questioning of images. Undoubtedly, the relationship between art, feminism,

and images is complex. This seems still more complex today, as the complication emanates from the images themselves. A well-known position in the field of art theory is calling attention to visual artists' inability to produce images that successfully make an impact or elicit a provocation beyond the small circles of artists. This inability threatens to turn all radical gestures emanating from political art into simple, hedonistic gestures of limited exhibition.

Furthermore, the biopolitical turn in today's artistic practices, which seeks to resist the order of neoliberal domination from the place of the "body" itself, through performance, may reinforce this failure given that it abandons the space of artistic "representation" in order to install itself in "presence", the space of media communications par excellence. This shifting would inevitably make artistic images compete with, and always lose against, the images of terror and violence transmitted by the media. Artistic performances, and especially performances in Latin America, have nonetheless followed a diverse path.

Beyond mistrusting the image, they have deterritorialized politics from the place of the image – from the body – thus interrupting not only artistic hierarchies but also political ones. I am thinking, for instance, of two feminist corporalitics that took place during the October revolt in Chile: "Un violador en tu camino" [A rapist on your path] by Lastesis, and "La yeguada latinoamericana" [The Latin American harem of mares] by Cheril Linett. Both interventions have sought to expose the patriarchal violence that is reproduced, through inertia, by society as a whole. In contrast to the art world, whose artistic practices have been criticized for their scant provocation, "Un violador en tu camino" provokes something every time it is performed in Chile or anywhere across the globe: it is always the first time. This provocation seeks to expose the violence against women that is exerted daily by institutions in general and by men in particular. The performance is transformed into an image, but this does not diminish the intensity of a body that opposes itself. The image/body succeeds in intervening in the eternal present of mass media communications while altering the repetition of the metaphors of the uniqueness of identity upon which dominant images ultimately rest. Meanwhile, "La yeguada latinoamericana" is both a provocation and a parody.<sup>2</sup> The name echoes that of the Collective *Las yeguas del apocalipsis*, but in a feminist divergence, and also repeats the patriarchal name that women are called when they don't abide by domestic mandates, with *yegua* meaning 'mare'. Likewise, the performance parodies the pornographic pose that the masculine gaze

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2 TN: The *yeguada latinoamericana* is a protest-performance group of five women in Chile. Notably, they interrupt spaces they view as abusive against women, often in thong underwear, with horsetails. Their protests are silent and led by Cheril Linett.

sets onto the bodies of women. Again, in this intervention, performance mutates, through the image/body, into an image whose index of politicity lies in its reiteration, which shall never lead us to the territories of originality but through those that interrupt the masculine gaze from its own object desire.

These are images of a revolt of the present. The October 2019 revolt in Chile unfolded in and through images. These filtered images sought to lay repression and political persecution bare. The ultimate purpose of such operational images was to recognize this repression and persecution in order to encourage the searching for and capturing of those who may have broken the law. The first of these registers are furtive, blurry, and out of focus, yet the second ones are clean, and their register, sequential. The infiltrated images are dissenting, while the operational images are images of dominion. We should note that, considering the above, the October revolt was the first great social revolt to unfold in the scopic regime of screens and digital images in Chile. The revolt not only took place on the street but also in its simultaneous, digital duplication: but what was being doubled? That is the true question: what does the digital image double? Putting the cinematographic signifier besides the register of the imaginary, the screen image exposes a mechanism of perceptive pulsation that is in no way different from the object being shown on the luminous surface.

The screen image is thus akin to direct voyeurism and pornography. It is perhaps because of this voyeuristic impulse that we desire images. While the screen image shows itself “entirely”, it only does so as an effigy. Its truth is always inaccessible. There is nothing behind the screen. The screen image is infinitely desirable, but it can never be possessed. The screen image always presents itself in the absence of the object, and if we look behind the image we will find nothing but the image itself, projected over and over. The screen image not only exposes itself at a distance, as in theater, rather, what is observed at a distance is no longer an object in itself but its replacement. Here, we should again ask ourselves, what is that which is offered as its replacement? We should not seek the falseness or veracity of images but pay attention to the operations that they show, through speed, luminosity, reiteration, quality of register, functionality, etc. Images are nothing without the operation of what is done with them. So, beyond seeking the image’s truth, we should ask ourselves what an image does. What do the images of the feminist performances in the revolt accomplish? They place a multiple, collective body in movement, one that alters the coordinates of the dominant order.

The politics that these images unfold seems to be nothing other than that of a corporalitics and its reticular movement.<sup>3</sup>

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# Intersections, Peripheries, and Heterotopias in the Cartographies of Sexuality

The notion of gender and the debates around its societal and political effects have played a crucial role in a myriad of social processes across various countries. For instance, we may observe the debates in France, both around the votes to instate the civil solidarity pact (commonly known as PACS) in 1999 and the legalization of gay marriage in 2013. In Ecuador, we may note President Rafael Correa's disqualification of social movements, including the feminist and indigenous ones. In Brazil, we have President Dilma Rousseff's removal from office in April of 2016; while, in Colombia, we may look to the negative results of the October 2, 2016, peace-agreement referendum that put the peace accords between the national government and the FARC-EP to a vote.<sup>1</sup> These examples help illustrate the dilemmas now unfolding before those of us who work in the field of gender and feminist studies in terms of how the field has come to be understood (Scott 1996 [1986]): either as an academic expression of the broadening of the democratic space in contemporary societies (through the recognition of the equality and liberty of groups that have been devalued due to their gender and sexuality), or as a threat to the transcendent foundations of the social order.

In this text, I have sought to identify some of the forms of organization of gender and sexuality in the Colombian sociopolitical space through a case study: that of sexual policy in Colombia. Using what may be called a play of scales, which ranges from the global to the local and vice-versa, and my situated experience, I shall analyze the questioning that gender is being subject to as a nodal issue of contemporary sexual policy in one of the most intense periods of recent Colombian history.

To this end, I shall explore three ways in which actors interrelate with gender and sexuality policies in order to map the landscape of sexual and reproductive rights at the time of this text's publication in 2017, with an emphasis on the Colombian case. The first kind of relationship or modality is that of the intersections and interfaces produced between the logics and interests of religious dogmatism along-

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<sup>1</sup> In the October 2, 2016, referendum, 50.21 percent of Colombian voters said "no" to the final agreement reached with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People's Army (FARC-EP), after almost four years of negotiations in Havana, Cuba.

side those of the conservative sectors of society that defend tradition, family, and property, on the one hand, in opposition to those who defend the inclusion of the gender perspective and sexual diversity in public policy, on the other. The second modality alludes to peripheries as spatial and symbolic metaphors that account for those aspects of gender and sexuality that have been excluded from the nucleus of sexual policy. The third modality is that of heterotopias – those *other* places that constitute, in reality, a challenge to the hierarchical order of gender and sexuality, albeit temporarily. Now, these three modalities will not be addressed separately. Rather, I will identify them as I trace a cartography in which I include references to the unfolding of sexual policies in various countries (France, Ecuador, Brazil, and Colombia) where attacking so-called gender ideology was used as a political instrument.

## Intersections and Interfaces around Gender and Sexuality

Several examples from France, Ecuador, Brazil, and Colombia – a few of the countries in which the term “gender ideology” has been used as a conservative rhetorical strategy – have allowed me to account for the constant interfaces produced between those religious and political sectors opposed to the societal changes that have taken root around gender and sexuality. In this space of interaction and exchange that the interfaces produce, intersections are also generated between the sexual order and those orders that define ethnoracial, national, or age-group frontiers. These interfaces and intersections are telling of the notoriety that gender and sexuality issues have gained regarding the definition of national belonging and what democracy and citizenship constitutes today.

Before we begin, we should clarify how the notion of gender ideology originated as well as how it is used in different contexts. While the contexts addressed here are specific, they illustrate how gender and sexuality debates are inscribed in an international network and global narrative, allowing us to better understand the intellectual, sociological, and financial connections between religious thinkers and religious activists across the globe (Robcis 2015: 903).

## Gender Ideology: Antecedents and Contemporary Uses

Gender ideology is a discursive strategy ideated by the Vatican. Many Catholic and Christian<sup>2</sup> activists and intellectuals have alluded to this concept in their counter-attacks to the rhetoric around the equal rights of women and LGBTQ+ persons. In a 2011 article titled “A Double-Edged Sword. Sexual Democracy, Gender Norms and Racialized Rhetoric”, Fassin noted that, by 2005, the term gender ideology had been associated with the debates around the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 and with the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. Indeed, at the Cairo Conference, discussions related to health, sexual and reproductive rights, population increases, and AIDS generated resistance among representatives from several participating countries. The delegates from the Vatican and from a number of Latin American, North African, and Middle Eastern countries expressed their reluctance before the chapters in the final document addressing the health and reproductive rights of women. Meanwhile, those who attended the 1995 Conference on Women in representation of the Vatican, along with Christian lobbyists, rallied around the perceived risks of systematically integrating the gender perspective and of understanding gender as a social construct of sexual difference (Butler 2006 [2004]) in programs and public policy.

One of the most active proponents of extensively deploying the term *gender* in the Beijing Platform was Dale O’Leary, who represented the National Association for Research & Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH) and the Family Research Council (Fillod 2014). O’Leary took up the task of alerting a network of Christian lobbyists of the risk that the positions of the so-called “gender feminists” posed to their religious values. Among others, she referred to these feminists’ questioning of maternity as a woman’s primary vocation, their tolerance toward homosexual identity and orientation, and the denaturalization of sex and sexuality, opening up the possibility of marriage among same-sex couples (Fassin 2011). Before the conference began, O’Leary denounced “gender ideology”, with the high dignitaries of the Church quickly appropriating (Fillod 2014: 323) and popularizing the expression.

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<sup>2</sup> With the adjective “Christian” (on its own) I am referring to the Pentecostal Evangelical movement expanding across Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. Today, 16 percent of the Colombian population sympathizes with or takes part in this movement, which is the second most popular religious expression in Colombia, after Catholicism (Beltran 2013).

We should also highlight another curious fact that Corrêa has pointed out (2009: 27), noting that, “at the Preparatory Committee for the 1995 World Conference, several allied conservative religious groups, the Vatican, and other Islamic countries openly opposed the use of the term ‘gender’”, which they associated with the work of deconstructing the binary sex system as undertaken by the feminist biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling. This theory, which was unknown to most of the women participating in the Conference, was used by these conservative sectors to generate a “wave of moral panic (and restore the order) based on the disqualification of the idea that the binary system could not adequately include the entire spectrum of human sexuality” (Corrêa 2009: 27).

In 2001, Jutta Burggraf, a theologian with close ties to the Vatican who developed her work at the University of Navarra, a pontifical institution administered by the Opus Dei, published the text “¿Qué quiere decir género?” [What does gender mean?] in Costa Rica. This publication subsequently grew into an article titled “Género” [Gender] included in the *Lexicon on ambiguous and debatable terms on family, life, and ethical matters* published by the Catholic Church Pontificium Consilium pro Familia<sup>3</sup> in 2004. Since then, it has been cited constantly among those who brandish their rejection of gender ideology.

That same year, then-cardinal Joseph Ratzinger made the Church’s position very clear in a letter from the Vatican to U.S. American bishops. In his letter “on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and in the world”, Ratzinger writes of “active collaboration between the sexes precisely in the recognition of the difference between man and woman” (Ratzinger 2004). Biblical anthropology defines the role of men and women based on their complementary nature in physical, psychological, and ontological terms, as well as regarding the primary vocation of women: to care for their children and husband. To Catholic theology, then, the social order has a natural foundation in sexual difference, which requires that God be identified with Nature. Let us not dismiss the privileged role assigned to sexual policy in Catholic political theology (Fassin 2011: 147–148).

Since then, campaigns to disqualify those academic fields researching gender and sexuality have multiplied and been globally disseminated and locally resignified. Over the last few years, as I will further address later on, these campaigns have experienced great dissemination and significance in Latin America, “where gender is paradoxically qualified as ‘ideological colonization’ by a Church that was, in fact, imposed there as part of a colonial process” (Motta 2015). In what

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<sup>3</sup> The author of the preface of *Lexicón* was the Colombian cardinal Alfonso López Trujillo (Robcis 2015: 909), president of the Pontifical Council for the Family for the Vatican City from 1990 until his death in 2008.

follows, I will refer to the usage of this conservative rhetoric and to the interfaces and intersections it has produced in different contexts, stopping to consider the French case as emblematic of such situations.

## The Political Denunciation and Instrumentalization of Gender Theory: The French Case

The denunciation of so-called “gender theory” emerged in public French debate in 2010, sparked by the alleged introduction of the “gender doctrine” in school textbooks on “Earth and Life Sciences” published by the Ministry of Education. This alleged interference immediately generated reactions from the founding president of the Christian Democratic Party,<sup>4</sup> who stirred a political mobilization through an open letter signed by eighty deputies who publicly demanded that the Minister of Education withdraw the textbooks. They affirmed that “sexual identity is a cultural construct” and was considered dangerous, as was its definition of persons – no longer as men and women, but as “practitioners of different forms of sexuality” (Fillod 2014: 326).

In 2012, several manifestations rejecting so-called “gender theory” converged. In September, thirty-seven Christian associations gathered in Paris to define a strategy against the bill on same-sex marriage and adoption.<sup>5</sup> In November, the collective *La Manif pour tous* [Demonstration for all] gained official status through its official bulletin and protest marches, gathering from 70,000 to 200,000 people in Paris (the count varies from source to source) and thousands more across a dozen other French cities (Girard 2013). This collective formed the movement called the “French Spring”, the most visible crusade for the “traditional family” as opposed to same-sex parenting (including adoption, assisted reproduction, and surrogate gestation), equal marriage, and the teaching of “gender theory or ideology” understood as an ideological justification for the aforementioned practices (Robcis 2015).

This confluence of oppositions makes evident that what was at play in this discussion on gender was the possibility of understanding the social order as something that is not founded upon a transcendental authority, be it God, Nature, Tradition, or any other transhistorical principle that would shield it from political criticism (Fassin 2010). Even though the French Spring presented itself as apolitical and secular for a long time, in April of 2015, it became a political party. We

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<sup>4</sup> Translator’s Note (TN): This party has changed its name to “Via: La voie du peuple”.

<sup>5</sup> Adoption by same-sex couples.

should keep in mind the rhetoric employed by this group, which presents itself as defending the rights of the weakest among us (children) and as safeguarding a more humane society through the promotion of lasting humanism. It is also worth noting that the French Spring manifesto never refers to marriage among people of the same sex, but it does rail against François Hollande's government for defending a denaturalized society through the Taubira law and through its favoring marriage equality (Robcis 2015: 893).

While the connection between the notion of gender and marriage among persons of the same sex is historically and theoretically inscribed in the French context, we should bear in mind the international character of collectives like *La Manif pour tous*, which has branches in Italy, Poland, Spain, and Belgium. More generally, we might note that the Vatican's vigilance around gender research and theorization should be analyzed in the context of a mobilized and increasingly globalized Christian Right (Robcis 2015: 903). The former had already been expressed in the Conferences of 1994 and 1995, which had been decried for promoting a gender agenda that allegedly sought to undermine motherhood and the "natural family". In 1995, the Vatican even proposed the elimination of the term "gender", calling it nothing other than a code to refer to homosexuality (Butler 2006: 258 [2004: 181]).

The increasing institutionalization of gender in political and legal platforms, and the changes that have unfolded in the western world in terms of gender and sexuality as of the 1990s, has sparked interests and fears around gender issues in the Vatican. We should bear in mind Catholicism's references to secular arguments to justify its doctrinarian stances (following the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, the council took up the task of revising its activities in order to adjust them to the needs and methods of the modern world but did not give up its restrictive conception of sexuality (Vaggione 2012: 58–59). At the same time, the battle against same-sex marriage has coincided with various scandals and internal debates within the Catholic Church around pedophilia, homosexuality, celibacy, and the ordainment of women.

## The Racialization of Sexual-Democracy Rhetoric in France

The rejection around the idea that public French schooling was promoting gender theory may be better understood by considering the historical role that French schools have played as privileged institutions for citizen integration within the nation. The fear that schools would become "incubators of gender deviance and homosexuality" piled onto fears that ostensibly religious symbols in schools and

public spaces could be tied to radical Islam, as expressed years earlier (Robcis 2015: 900). We should also keep in mind the centrality that sexual policy has acquired today, both in contemporary Islam and in French and European society.

While, in the first case, this has been partially interpreted as a reaction against the “West”, the contrary is increasingly true: the claims around sexual democracy that western countries make against Islamic countries and those perceived as “Others” are expressions of the racialization of the rhetorics of sexual democracy and secularism (Nader 2006; Fassin 2010). To Fassin, such claims do not seek to question the normative foundations of the sexual order but to strategize in order to stigmatize others as “antidemocratic” in the name of sexual modernity. Such ploys, and the false dilemmas between antiracism and antisexism (Delphy 2006), were common to several French feminist currents that adopted secularism as a foundational value (Fassin 2010; 2011).

This kind of racialized rhetoric was used by French president Nicolas Sarkozy to justify immigration controls as a way of defending the values of the Republic, which he defined as equality between men and women, secularism, and the ideal of French integration to which immigrants were to subscribe. Through these values of sexual democracy, Sarkozy constituted a contemporary, national French identity in which divorce and abortion were cast as essential goods. The French example clearly demonstrates the extent to which the racialized rhetoric of sexual democracy can be politically instrumentalized to create borders between a French “us” and a “them” of “others”, namely racialized immigrants whose containment was sought within the peripheries of the nation, given their sexual values.

## **Two Latin American Cases, One Rhetorical Strategy: The Phantom of Gender Ideology**

### **The Ecuadorian Case**

In one of his weekly addresses, in December of 2013, Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa discredited gender, feminist, and queer studies by calling them expressions of a gender ideology “that cannot resist the slightest academic analysis”. Likewise, he mentioned that everyone has the right to choose – “the man, to be effeminate, and the woman, to be manly” – but he added that he prefers women who look like women and men who look like men, while anything other than that went “against biology and natural laws”. In this same speech, he attacked reproductive rights, especially the right to abortion, and he reiterated his opposition to same-sex marriage.



A year and a half later, just before a national strike against the government that the country's main unions had planned for August 13, 2015 – insisting that the government modify a number of economic policies – several Ecuadorian Indigenous groups shut down various highways and led mobilizations to denounce government policies, because “they have not governed in favor of the working class”, even though the government has constantly claimed the opposite.<sup>6</sup> In this context, Manuela Picq, a Brazilian university professor and correspondent for *Al Jazeera* who advocated for feminism, Indigenous movements, and ecological issues was put behind bars. She was arrested for attempting to stop the detainment of her partner, an Indigenous leader. Instead of being taken before a judge, as the law prescribes, her cultural-exchange visa was revoked, and she was threatened with being expelled from the country where she had lived and worked for eight years.

Upon being questioned about Picq's violent arrest, President Correa's response was to lay out his perceptions of her as his former student, disqualifying her as “immature” and “a liar” and presenting her as an imposter who liked to pass off as a journalist and Indigenist without actually being one. The way the president infantilized this recognized academic and activist is shocking. He disqualified her as a sham foreigner who lacked expertise and who had insulted several Ecuadorian police officers, thus justifying the gender violence exerted against her when she was detained. The anthropologist María Amelia Viteri (2016) has analyzed her situation, acutely pointing to the overlapping sexist, racist, homophobic, and xenophobic language in President Correa's statements in response to the episode.

As to the argument guiding the analysis at hand, Ecuador's political situation shows just how the interfaces and interactions produced between State violence, sexism, and xenophobia are used to affirm the notion that citizenship and free movement apply to a select few who share certain political and ideological affinities (Sabsay 2011). Likewise, Correa's political use of conservative rhetoric also stands out for being presented as a defense of the family in order to disqualify those who question the biological determination of gender roles and who would seek to educate their children with the gender perspective, with these aims then cast as fundamentalisms that seek to impose an ideology, pure and simple. The limits of governments that have sought to present themselves as “progressive” shine through: in practice, their opposition to those women and Indigenous communities who aspire for freedom and equality and who lie beyond government control is quite clear.

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6 <http://noticias.caracol.com/mundo/jornada-de-huelga-en-ecuador-marchas-favor-y-en-contra-del-presidente-correa> (accessed July 24, 2024).

## The Brazilian Case

In April of 2016, for three days, hundreds of members of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies shared their opinions for or against opening an impeachment process aimed at former Brazilian president Dilma Rousseff. The majority voted to begin the impeachment process, in the name of God and their families – sometimes mentioning them by name – while, in some cases, as with the members of the Humanist Party of Solidarity (PHS), certain deputies declared themselves in favor of the president’s destitution but against abortion, euthanasia, and “gender ideology” (Melo da Cunha 2016). The reasons and justifications that the PHS members provided for their vote showcase the centrality of issues of gender and sexuality in Brazilian political debates today. Furthermore, we should note that this party stands in opposition to the sexual-rights agenda that had been included in various legislative proposals as of the enactment of the 1988 Brazilian Constitution. Yet, what is new about this debate, as Melo da Cunha notes, is the use of the expression “gender ideology”, which gained notoriety in 2014 with the discussions around the approval of the National Education Plan. Ever since, it has been commonly deployed by various religious-political groups, almost all of them evangelical, in parliamentary activities and in struggles to eliminate the terms “gender”, “sexual orientation”, “sexual diversity”, and “gender equality” from educational plans.

The use of the expression “gender ideology” has been far from random and arbitrary. Rather, it has become a key concept within an efficient discourse that found, “in the legislative realm[,] a privileged field for its establishment and dissemination” (Da Cunha 2016: 12). The practical effects of its political usage are revealing: through a deliberate, systematic, and persistent effort, religious political groups have managed to backpedal the inclusion of the gender perspective from the main regulatory frameworks of Brazilian public education. Despite their differences, neo-Pentecostal and Catholic leaders have seen ample convergence in their strategies to encourage moral panic against “gender ideology”, which is presented as a moral enemy that must be persecuted, while also fighting to exclude expressions like “gender equality”, “orientation”, and “sexual diversity” from the National Education Plan. Now, these political-religious actors are not a homogenous group, with discrepancies mainly arising from their discursive sources and their varying emphasis on certain issues. While Catholics oppose the dissemination of gender ideology implicit in, for instance, reproductive health policies, due to the consequences it may have among youths, “changing their hearts and minds”, the neo-Pentecostals pose less resistance to “ideological content” around gender and emphasize certain subjects more: they constitute “homosexuals” as an abject category – enemies of childhood, family, and Christian morals.

The Brazilian case clearly illustrates the emergence and delimitation of sexual frontiers through social and moral conceptualizations that label non-normative practices and identities as dangerous, perverted, or pathological. These sexualities are perceived as a threat to the religious model of family, demarcating the limits between the center and periphery of this cartography. This case also allows us to identify the effects of the interfaces between politics and religion, with the case also generating spaces of dissemination and vigilance around gender ideology, as in the legislative realm. In Brazil, this space became a scenario of confrontation for conflicting or contradictory discourses around gender and sexuality rights, understood either as guarantors of liberty and individuality – or as mechanisms for the control and exclusion of certain ways of life.

## The Construction of a New Enemy to the Peace in Colombia: Gender Ideology

In August of 2014, Sergio Urrego committed suicide after being the target of multiple forms of discrimination at school due to his sexual orientation. He outlined his reasons in several notes before committing suicide. News of the young man's death spread across the media, causing national and international backlash against those who perpetrated the discrimination against him and especially against Urrego's school. The national government, as well as the Public Prosecutor's Office, committed to investigating the case, and Sergio's mother sued (via a *tutela* injunction) the departmental Ministry of Education, alleging that, at the time of the events, the school's guidance manual (*manual de convivencia*) did not reflect Colombia's legal and constitutional protections around freedom of sexual orientation. In fact, the guidance manual codified manifestations of homosexuality as "grave offenses". After many ups and downs in the investigation and criminal process, the Constitutional Court ruled in favor of Sergio Urrego's family with ruling T-478 in 2015, by which the Ministry of National Education was ordered to implement a National System for School Coexistence ('convivencia') and "extensively and comprehensively [review] all coexistence<sup>7</sup> manuals in the country in order to determine that they respect students' sexual orientation and gender identity and include ways to incentivize and strengthen school coexistence". Up-

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<sup>7</sup> These manuals include the educational community agreements on the values and norms meant to guide life at school and facilitate community building.

holding the Constitutional Court's order, the Colombian National Ministry of Education decided to review school guidance manuals.

This process generated an intense and polarizing political and religious debate around the Ministry of Education and its efforts to ensure that school environments be more inclusive and free of discrimination. The political debate pitted Minister of Education Gina Parody, who had publicly recognized her romantic relationship with a female colleague in the Council of Ministers, against the inspector general of the time, Alejandro Ordóñez, who was well known for his stalwart defense of conservative family values. In Ordóñez's words, the task of revising guidance manuals was a strategy that the Ministry had used to "indoc-trinate our children and grandchildren with gender ideology". The debate's detonator was an image of two men in bed taken from a pornographic Belgian comic that began to circulate on social media and was claimed to be among the manuals that the Ministry of Education distributed to schools.

This debate newly popularized the expression "gender ideology", which some Catholic and Christian groups had been using in Colombia to disqualify those who understood sexual identities, characteristics, and desires as social constructs. Thus, polarizing fields around the understanding of sexual difference started emerging in the debate, generating tensions not only in religious terms, but also in terms of citizenship. The expression "gender ideology" was deployed to hamper public policy as well as any substantial changes that would guarantee gender equity in Colombian society and, more recently, the approval of the peace accords through a referendum.

During the "no" campaign around the accords, several strategies were deployed to attempt to equate the Havana peace accords'<sup>8</sup> inclusion of the gender perspective with an imposition of gender ideology. While part of the population celebrated the unprecedented inclusion of the gender perspective in a peace process, another sector used the gender-ideology argument to rally people around the rejection of the alleged changes to family values that the peace accords signed by President Santos would usher in.

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<sup>8</sup> According to the official communication, the inclusion of the gender perspective in the agreement signed July 24, 2016, sought to "create the conditions for women and people with diverse sexual identities to enjoy equal access to the benefits of living in a country free of armed conflict".

## Interfaces and Intersections in Colombian Sexual Policy

According to many analyses, it was the inclusion of the gender perspective in the Havana accords that “was the detonator for the evangelical church’s<sup>9</sup> massive support for the ‘no’ vote which, by the same token, forced the country to recognize its growing presence and influence in national life” (Zabala 2016). While the accords do not touch upon issues that have traditionally been categorized as gender ideology, such as same-sex marriage, families, and adoption, a few elements – such as that the differential gender perspective traversed the entire text while the use of the term “gender” was not limited to women alone – were signaled as matters requiring revision. It was believed that by unlinking gender from sex, sexuality, and biology, the door to an equality of rights that society had not previously agreed upon was thrust wide open, leading to, for example, equal marriage, same-sex adoption, and “the manipulation of educational discourse” through school guidance manuals.

Yet, the relevance of the evangelical vote was not the product of a conscious strategy but the result of a confluence of interests around support for the “no” vote. A decisive factor for civil-society activists coming from various branches of Christianity and Catholicism was the debate around the school guidance manuals, which were perceived as the Ministry of Education’s imposition of gender-ideology criteria in institutional education projects.<sup>10,11</sup> Another two elements played an important role: that Cuba was chosen as the host country for negotiations, and that the gender perspective was included in the peace accords in order to highlight the differential impact of conflict upon women and LGBTQ+ groups. The first aspect reinforced the claim that communism and Castro-Chavism stood behind the accord; the second was interpreted as a strategy to promote gender ideology and homosexuality, imposing a societal model whose negotiation in Havana had not been anticipated. The discourses of former president Álvaro Uribe, who led the campaign that opposed the accords, vastly coincided with those of the conservative former inspector general Alejandro Ordóñez as well as those of several Christian pastors, mem-

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9 As José Fernando Serrano has written for the issue in which this chapter was originally published, what is usually referred to as “the evangelical church” is not a homogenous bloc. The cited article published in *El Espectador* (Zabala 2016) fundamentally refers to the Pentecostal current that weaves the foundations of the Protestant creed with several popular expressions of the Catholic religion. The churches that declare themselves heirs of the Protestant Reformation, such as the Presbyterian, Mennonite, and Anglican churches, have adopted divergent positions regarding the agreement as well as gender ideology and have sought to distance themselves from fundamentalist Christianity.

10 [http://caracol.com.co/radio/2016/08/09/nacional/1470752686\\_387127.html](http://caracol.com.co/radio/2016/08/09/nacional/1470752686_387127.html) (accessed July 24, 2024).

11 See *Semana*, printed edition 1800, October 30 to November 6, 2016: 27.

bers of the (Catholic) Episcopal Conference, and politicians from various parties. They all agreed that the gender focus described in the final accords was a covert expression of “gender ideology” that attacked the traditional concept of family and incited children and youths to become homosexuals.

What do these political, religious, and moral interfaces tell us about sexual policy in Colombia? Firstly, much of Colombia’s progress in sexual and reproductive rights has not galvanized broad sectors of society. Among other reasons, this is because many of these milestones – such as the decriminalization of abortion, same-sex adoption, the recognition of transgender persons’ identities, and same-sex marriage – have not been the product of legislative debate but of injunctions (*tutelas*), decisions in high courts, and high-impact litigation, leading to institutionalization via the judicial route. This implies that such decisions, which originated via the aforementioned processes and courts, have not succeeded in creating the needed bonds between these changes and large swathes of population that would ultimately guarantee these rulings’ social and political support.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, we cannot ignore that the application of these rulings has been disparate among urban and rural contexts as well as between the country’s central and peripheral zones.<sup>13</sup>

Given this scenario, in which parties from the political realm have lost their prominence, Christian groups have made inroads, capitalizing on the concerns and fears that these changes have spurred since the 1990s with the passing of the general education law. Indeed, this law changed the notion of what it meant to be a youth, constituting youths as political subjects with rights, while the new legislation of the time included sexual and reproductive education as a State duty (Morales Borrero 2010). Since then, the various proposals that have been put forward to address gender and sexuality in schools have elicited countless manifestations of resistance among conservative sectors of society that have sought to sow moral panic among parents and educators. One of the effects of these reactions is the limited scope of the sexual and reproductive education provided at Colombian schools, being closer to a form of moral control and a sanctioning of youths’ and (especially young) women’s behavior than to a rights-based focus (Morales Borrero 2010) as founded in a “new” secular regime of sexuality (Carrara 2015).

In this sense, we should bear in mind that those who opposed the revision of the guidance manuals rooted their arguments in the rights of parents to provide their children with a sexual education aligned with their principles and values. In

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<sup>12</sup> This phenomenon is not unique to Colombia. Rather, it is an expression of the global tendency toward the weakening of political institutions, such as congresses, as parties have ceded their territory to non-representative organs like courts. See *Semana*, printed edition number 1800.

<sup>13</sup> See Franklin Gil Hernández in <http://sxpolitics.org/es/la-politica-sexual-en-julio-de-2016/3429> (accessed July 24, 2024).

the discourses of those who present themselves as defenders of the traditional family, youths and children are not portrayed as subjects who can make decisions regarding such matters, that is, as rights holders. Paradoxically, in August of 2016, those who marched against the school guidance manuals that were being reviewed in order to better protect minors against potential violence at schools<sup>14</sup> claimed to defend childhood and the “heterosexuality of children”. Youths, and especially children, were portrayed as representations of innocence and vulnerability in order to generate moral panic regarding the changes, which could thus be easily stigmatized as hostile to children and the family order.

Likewise, conservative political and religious sectors have pointed out that, “without families, there is no peace”, thus associating the affirmative vote in the referendum with the imposition of gender ideology at school. This same argument accompanied the controversies around the textbooks in France and Brazil, although the political situations in each of those countries marked their debates’ specificities. In the Colombian case, including the gender focus in the peace accords was understood as opening the door to the inclusion of LGBTQ+ rights, and these were (and are) simultaneously perceived as an imposition of values that were foreign to Colombian idiosyncrasy. However, the gender focus in the accords only examined issues related to the origin and development of armed conflict. Specifically, it involved the importance of tracing a differential focus when describing how violence is specifically experienced by women and LGBTQ+ victims in the context of armed conflict within Colombia, as some of these experiences are particularly violent and problematic, being exacerbated by women and LGBTQ+ persons’ subordinate positions in society.

The definition of family, same-sex marriage and adoption, as well as the rights of LGBTQ+ persons as recognized in Colombia’s Political Constitution as well as by constitutional jurisprudence were not included in the accord, as one communication signed by several LGBTQ+ organizations and the FARC-EP noted. This communication sought to maintain the gender focus in the peace accords, listing five points that should be “freely and democratically discussed within the corresponding institutions”.

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14 See Manuel Rodríguez Rondón. 2016. *La infancia como símbolo y moneda de cambio*. Centro Latinoamericano de Sexualidad y Derechos Humanos (CLAM/IMS/ UERJ).

## The Critical Thread of Heterotopias

Having clarified my reasoning up to this point, I would like to focus on another kind of relationship between social actors and gender and sexuality policies. This will allow me to include certain political actors who have been sidelined to the peripheries of the cartography of Colombia's gender and sexuality debates: youths. The youth movement "Peace to the Street" (*Paz a la calle*), which emerged on October 3, 2016, in response to the disappointment around the referendum's results restored youths' place in the spotlight through various heterotopic practices, reversing their displacement from the debates around the school guidance manuals' revision. The two heterotopian expressions that I will mention in this last section include, firstly, the massive march on October 5, 2016, demanding that the government and the opposition reach an immediate peace agreement with the FARC-EP, and, second, the encampment for peace that took place after the march.<sup>15</sup>

The march on October 5 took place across at least 16 Colombian cities and gathered 30,000 to 60,000 people in Bogotá (with estimates varying according to source). In this heterotopian political expression, bodies marched in multitudes, donning t-shirts and white flowers and taking their claim to coexist in peace to the streets. Through their shared revindication and solidarity, they politicized the disillusion that the referendum's results produced. The movement of the march across the city's public space implied a citizen movement's political reappropriation, as spearheaded by youths. Likewise, it destabilized the time of everyday routines and inscribed them with a certain citizen demand that seemed to have become a utopia: the implementation of the peace accords.

A few days later, a group of youths pitched a few tents in the emblematic Bolívar Plaza of Bogotá – a key seat of political, administrative, and religious power in the city ever since the colonial period – with the tents proliferating until a camp was established. There, around 150 people – mainly youths, Indigenous people, Black people, and victims of armed conflict – convened to demand peace. In a single place, this encampment juxtaposed groups whose ways of life seemed, or were supposed to be, incompatible. In this space outside of habitual time, a small country emerged, organizing some 70 peoples who came from the places that had experienced violence most acutely: this was a strategy for memory making. This small country defined its particular government system, divided up tasks, and outlined an economy according to the potential contributions that its inhabitants

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<sup>15</sup> According to Michel Foucault (1978), heterotopias are those "other" spaces, which, breaking with the space of the environment and traditional time, have the power to juxtapose, in a single real place, incompatible mental or social universes.



could make to the space's organization and upkeep. Not everyone who camped out at night would spend the day there, as some worked or went to school. Still others simply visited, temporarily joining the group and supporting the cause with their presence at the occupation for peace. Educators from diverse institutions joined the cause as well, staging teach-ins on the street. As a pedagogical strategy, inside the "Peace to the Street" group, subcommittees, such as on gender and sexual diversity, were brought together to provide information on several aspects of the accord, including the scope of its gender focus.

In contrast to utopias, which propose a societal ideal with no real location, this heterotopia was situated in the city center itself. Throughout the month and a half that the encampment lasted, it was inscribed in a heterotopic temporality (Foucault 1978), ruled by a clock that did not mark the passing of days, but the time that separated the country from the installation of the peace. Those who inhabited the plaza committed not to abandon it until it was certain that the armed conflict in Colombia would come to an end. This temporal horizon led to a surge in ideals of collective wellbeing – including the right to a fulfilling life and to peace – being implemented in a symbolic microcosmos that originated with new forms of resistance. Thus, discussions on the country's situation and its future interwove with songs, laughter, dancing, and artistic actions in general as these discussions were performed with creativity and imagination.<sup>16</sup>

In the heterotopian space of the march and the encampment, shared joy and mutual care emerged as political resources to process the pain but also as antidotes to hopelessness. Through this movement marked by youths, Colombian society learned new ways of casting out the ghosts and demons within the discourse around "gender ideology" but also in the everyday experience of living in a country marked by widespread armed conflict.

## Conclusions

In this text, I have sought to map out the current landscape of gender and sexuality policies, including references to episodes related to sexual policy in places as diverse as France, Brazil, Ecuador, and Colombia, whose references to gender ide-

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<sup>16</sup> We should mention the general invitation of the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo for people to pay respects to the countless victims of Colombia's armed conflict in an activity called the "Sum of absences" (*sumando ausencias*). For six days, thousands of people used ash to trace the names of more than 2,000 victims across seven kilometers of white fabric, which were cut into pieces and later sewn, one by one, into an enormous shroud that covered Bolívar Plaza.

ology and attacks against it have showcased the inextricable interdependence between gender and the political.<sup>17</sup> In this and other public, contemporary debates, several questions arise as to what comes into play when gender is called upon to explain or justify a political position, or in the way various social institutions incorporate gender in their assumptions and organizations (Scott 1996 [1986]). If we understand that “gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated” (Scott 1986: 1069), beyond the unequal relationships between men and women or references to transgressive sexualities, we may glean why gender ideology can be interpreted in terms of religion, race, class, and national interests.

The examples we have analyzed lay bare the intersections and interfaces produced between the logics and interests of those who defend tradition, family, and religion as transcendental foundations of the social order, on the one hand, and those who seek the inclusion of sexual diversity and the gender perspective in public policies as a way of democratizing societal relations, on the other. These calls to uphold or defy the natural order of sexual difference are instrumentalized as ways of promoting or hampering political affinities. Likewise, in each of these cases, we may identify the areas and social actors excluded from the nucleus of national sexual policy: immigrant and non-Christian populations, gender and feminist studies, homosexual persons, and youths. Lastly, understanding that gender and policy are mutually constituted while both realms are inherently unstable allows for the possibility of producing heterotopias that question the fear of change as well as totalitarian impulses, generating hope and revamping our forms of political struggle.<sup>18</sup>

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17 When I speak of the political, I seek to reflect Mouffe’s (2001: 98) distinction between “politics” and “the political”. Mouffe writes the following: “What I call ‘the political’ is the dimension of antagonism—the friend/enemy distinction. And, as Schmitt says, this can emerge out of any kind of relation. It’s not something that can be localized precisely; it’s an ever/present possibility. What I call ‘politics,’ on the other hand, is the ensemble of discourses and practices, institutional or even artistic practices, that contribute to and reproduce a certain order. These are always in conditions that are potentially conflictual because they are always informed by, or traversed by, the dimension of ‘the political’” (Mouffe 2001: 98). Translator’s Note: the author cites the Spanish edition: Mouffe (2011: 16).

18 English Translation by María Cristina Hall. First published in Spanish as Viveros-Vigoya, Mara. 2017. Sexualidad, Salud y Sociedad. *Revista latinoamericana* 27. 220–241.

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Silvana Rabinovich

## The Bedouin Paradox

*If ever you arrive  
at a land smooth and white  
in the company of great black statues  
and the listless walking of Bedouins and camels  
remember that there exists a land with no owner or master,  
soul and mirror of all innocent beings.  
Ali Salem Iselmu<sup>1,2</sup>*

The Bedouin name is home to a paradox. Its meaning in Arab, ‘desert inhabitant’ (*badawī*), describes an impossibility: if one were to inhabit the desert, it would no longer be a desert. The definition of the word desert is that of an uninhabited or depopulated place. *Bedouin* is an adjective, but when it comes to the term as a noun, one of the definitions proposed by the Royal Spanish Academy – the official institution dictating Spanish-language usage around the world – is “*hombre bárbaro y desaforado*”: a ‘barbarian and ungoverned man.’ With a stroke of the pen, our Academy has deprived the Bedouin of culture and government . . .<sup>3</sup> We might ask ourselves what sort of threat a nomadic herder poses to the law and culture of the sedentary State.

In what we shall call the Bedouin paradox, drawing from heteronomous ethics – that is, from the perspective of the other – we will question the meanings of the word *inhabit*. From the position of the other that the nomad represents burgeons a radical criticism to land appropriation. To start, we will approach two cases: that of the Bedouin in al-Naqab or Negev, and that of the Sahrawis who have taken refuge in the Algerian hamada.

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<sup>1</sup> Translator’s Note (TN): The author cited the Spanish version published here: <https://www.poetrytranslation.org/poems/tiris/literal> (accessed July 24, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> TN: Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> The Spanish-language *María Moliner* dictionary, in contrast, takes a libertarian (republican) perspective and does not disqualify nomadism in its entries.

## *Habitare . . . habere: An Incipient Linguistic Deliberation*

*And the land shall not be sold in perpetuity; for the land is Mine; for ye are strangers and settlers with Me. Leviticus 25:23<sup>4</sup>*

In Classical Latin (Gaiot 1934),<sup>5</sup> *habitare* is the frequentative form of *habere*, meaning that to inhabit is to frequently have. Thus, *habitare* is to habitually have, yet it does not imply possessing in perpetuity. The nuance is worthy of our attention: to have is not the same as to possess. We might relate this to the idea of becoming custodians, but not owners, of an inheritance, since the inherited legacy is passed down through the generations (from a heteronomous ethical perspective, even a person who becomes an owner of an inheritance and then decides to destroy it will have to respond to the generations preceding and following her).

The word *abode* (a place where one stays or abides) invokes a sense of shelter – thus standing in opposition to the elements. An abode may be precarious to varying degrees. It might be made of cement, or be a simple tent, but its function is, invariably, to protect.

Now, the frequentative form of the verb *habere*, *habitare*, places limits around the pretense of definitive possession. To frequently have is not the same as to own. We might go back to Leviticus 25:23, as cited in the epigraph: in the context of Jubilee, the text warns that since the land belongs to God, it must not be sold permanently, for we “are strangers and settlers”, as per the 1917 Jewish Publication Society Tanakh. The 1985 version,<sup>6</sup> states that we are “but strangers resident with Me”. The first term, stranger (*ger*, גר), denotes he who dwells (*gar*) among us,<sup>7</sup> and

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4 TN: While the English version reproduced here quotes the 1917 edition of the Jewish Publication Society’s Tanakh (<https://biblehub.com/jps/leviticus/25.htm> (accessed July 24, 2024)), the author cites the following version: Alonso, Luis. 2009. *La Biblia de nuestro pueblo: Biblia del Peregrino América Latina*, Mexico City: Buena Prensa.

5 I would like to thank Dr. Concepción Abellán for her references and clarifications.

6 TN: <https://nocr.net/hbm/english/engtnk/index.php/Le/25> (accessed July 24, 2024).

7 The translations vary. The Spanish version by Luis Alonso Schökel (2009) translates the original *foreigners* as “huéspedes” (‘guests’), and the Hebrew *inhabitants* as “están de paso” (to be ‘passing by’). We prefer this translation to that by Reina Valera, who chose “forasteros y extranjeros” (‘forasters and foreigners’) rather than “extranjeros y habitantes” (‘foreigners and inhabitants’, גרים ותושבים). We may find tension in the Hebrew version: while *ger* means ‘foreigner’, its root implies that this foreigner lives among us, while *toshav* indicates that the person is ‘settled’; thus, this grammatical construction accentuates the fact that the person is not rooted in the land. In these words, we read across two perspectives: the human (which perceives the time spent on the land as local) and the divine (which reminds us of our foreignness).

the second (*toshav*, תושב), he who has settled (*yoshev*, *mityashev*) in a place. The Jubilee marks the seventh sabbath year, when not only is the land to rest (as it does every seventh year, when slaves are liberated as well), but when, every fifty years, as per the 1917 version, one is to “proclaim liberty throughout the land unto all the inhabitants thereof” (Lev. 25:10), who may go back to their families. As per the book of Leviticus, every fifty years, acquisitions are to be returned, and debts, condoned. Every half century, the Jubilee is presented as a mirror of freedom in which humans see themselves stripped of possessions (or, from another perspective, liberated from property). This instruction from the Bible – the pillar of what we now call the West – emanated from nomadic ancestors. Explorer and humanist Théodore Monod took up the task of registering and reflecting upon mentions of the desert within the Bible. With a deep understanding of the inhabitants of the Sahara, he showcased its forgotten and little-understood Bedouin roots, which have been overlooked by our narrow, evolutionist gaze (Monod 1989).

Perhaps to rebel against the binary into which all humans are categorized – foreigner or inhabitant – “civilization” has tried, with all its might, to take over the land. To be sedentary emerges as key: one must possess the land in order to farm it. Culture – whose root is *cultus*, which stems from *colere*, meaning to cultivate the land – stands in opposition to nomadism – which is why the Royal Spanish Academy deems the (nomadic) *beduino* a ‘barbarian’, someone devoid of culture. As per the late-nineteenth-century *Nuevo diccionario latino-español etimológico*, a Latin-Spanish etymological dictionary by Raimundo de Miguel (2000 [1897]), a *cultor* is he who cultivates [the land], a farmer, an inhabitant, a neighbor. To inhabit, in this cultural sense, reminds us to the sedentary. With a dichotomous structure – following Edward Said’s (2004 [1978]) *Orientalism*, which reflects the West’s sense of superiority vis-à-vis the Oriental – civilization is opposed to the barbarian, just as the sedentary is opposed to the nomadic. The *western*, the *civilized*, and the *sedentary* are valued in inverse proportion to the *oriental*, the *barbarian*, and the *nomadic*. Yet, Pierre Clastres (2011) notes that for a society to lack agriculture does not necessarily mean that it is nomadic; rather, the main distinction lies in the State: that is, between societies with a State and societies that lack a State. As we shall see, the Bedouin are at the antipodes of such social structures.

Civilization creates oppositions as a form of exclusion: if all nomads disturb the State, which seeks to administrate possessions, then the Bedouin – who is hard to pin down – is a principal threat. A paradox by definition, this desert dweller, an inhabitant of the uninhabited, this “barbaric and ungoverned man”, becomes an *outlaw*. The law’s bottom line involves the custody of private property (why else would it so clumsily *defend* lives and bodies?). Transhumance – a form of inhabiting the inhospitable – establishes a relationship with the land: one of belonging, but not of appropriation. The nomad belongs to the land but would



never think of appropriating it. In the poet's words, we "remember that there exists a land with no owner or master".<sup>8</sup>

## Transhumance

*There are two words: one is war and the other, peace. Sahrawi proverb*

The land is a palimpsest of the footprints of those who have inhabited it. Sedentary civilizations leave deep marks – which are presumed indelible – while the nomad's footprint is more ephemeral. Transhumance (to transit the land) implies understanding oneself as part of an environment without seeking to dominate it. Rather, one seeks to learn from it and requests its hospitality.

Comparisons between the desert and the sea, between the Bedouin and the sailor, are commonplace. In fact, one can often find traces of marine fossils in deserts. That in both cases one transits through immensity brings the two apparently opposed spaces together. Théodore Monod (1989) compares oases and wells to ports and archipelagos but states that "the true port is the inhabited locality". This is where hospitality in the desert originates. The visitor brings news from the clouds and wells, a direction in which to walk.

In his march across the desert, the Bedouin learns to listen to (and respect) the advice offered by the wind, clouds, birds, and livestock so that he may find the long-awaited wells, experiencing the hospitality of the barren land. The herder plays his lute, and, in this amicable interlocution with what we call *nature*, unfurls a poetic language:

The wind roars and wraps the earth/ the oasis struggles/ before it dries/ and, desolate, drowns the mirror/ of teeth and thirst/ cleaving/ to the earth's damp throat.// With the parched, bone-tired leaves/ and the like,/ the lacerated flock and frenzy,/ I go back to the origin./ Wells have no owner.// And on the arid path, I sniff and seek,/ until I find a well's soul,/ and from the cool water's edge,/ I wet my bare feet./ Shining and unfettered/ the well's generous hand gleams,/ with water for all,/ the loving echo/ of a fertile cloud./ Wells have no owner. (Boisha 2012: 127–128)

This poem lays bare the human vulnerability of the antipodes to possession. In the Bedouin experience, precariousness (involving thirst, to be parched, to be exposed to death) is assumed as a genuine form of human life. In the Bedouin, the subject of heteronomous ethics is made flesh, marked by the fragility of their

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<sup>8</sup> "Tiris", a poem by Ali Salem Iselmu.

kind. We understand that in the beginning . . . was the other. Without this other, we would be unable to say, “I am”, because language comes to us from others: in this sense, we are subjects. The other is more than merely human. Rather, the other is everything else, including what our civilization calls *nature* (as if nature were alien to what is human). To assume one’s own vulnerability is the nomadic way of transiting through life, in an economy of non-accumulation (Ibn Khaldūn 2008 [1377]) that, with time, learns to exercise patience . . . Transhumance becomes a heteronomous form of inhabiting.

At this point, we should stop to consider the perspective guiding this work. In heteronomous ethics, vulnerability is humanity’s most essential feature (the sphinx’s riddle would suggest this as well). Human beings cannot survive without each other’s hospitality (needing care at birth, to be clothed and fed, and, upon death, to be buried and live on in others’ memories . . .). From this perspective, time itself is experienced through the other (who exists before us and outlives us). Another feature of the heteronomous is *passivity*, understood not as inaction but as the ability to be affected by the other, or what is other. This passivity is tied to *sensibility*. At the antipodes of sentimentalism, the subject is seen as exposed to being hurt by all that is other, in a time that is experienced as patience since it emanates from the exterior. Now, modernity has tried to fight against all of these human features (passivity, sensibility, and exposure) that can be summarized as vulnerability, seeing the latter as anomalous. Modernity has thus sought to produce technological placebos enshrouded in an unbridled activity called *progress*. This activity – based on its quintessential calculations of instrumental reasoning – seeks to annul passivity, tame sensibility, avoid exposure and, above all, in its impatience, submit time. This is not a mere triumph of rationality over the arbitrary aspects of nature. Rather, we have two different rationalities that propose two different life experiences: while instrumental reason is seated in logic and calculation, imposing objective relationships among individuals while these relationships are centralized and administrated by the State, ethical reasoning transits across the territories of intersubjectivity that foster community life.

The heteronomous perspective forces us to think from a place beyond the nomad/sedentary opposition (and its backwards/progress connotations, including the precarious/secure, rich/poor, barbaric/civilized, and vulnerable/strong binaries). Our position demands that we break with the logic of such oppositions. Thus, when we describe – through poetry – the Bedouin experience, we should not confuse it with an Orientalist portrait that merely provides the exotic a place in the encyclopedia. To understand the needs of a world that is other, the poetic has a political effect that is inherent to the utopian. Théodore Monod (2000) describes various forms of nomadism that tend to occur in mixed ways, responding to diverse logics according to the coordinates of time and space. We have seasonal

nomads and seminomads who also practice agriculture, with various rhythms involved. Horizontal nomadism is like the systole and the diastole: a succession of expansions and retractions that give way to an elliptical movement whereby the return follows a different path than that of departure. Meanwhile, vertical nomadism takes on medium-to-long trajectories.

That we are before a culture that inhabits the most inhospitable places on the map yet defines itself through hospitality guarantees that our heteronomy will not be reduced to infantilizing alienation<sup>9</sup> nor to a simple lack of autonomy. Rather, our task is to view in this land, with no master or owner, the mirror and soul of all innocent beings. Yes, *innocence*: a candor, simplicity, a courage to expose the limits of a seizure disguised as knowledge . . . Without appropriation (going back to Boisha's poem), there is no need for a state to administrate the guilt of stealing wells. It is because of the innocence of the generations to come that they – free of guilt – must be defended from dispossession (this is why the proverb cited in the epigraph alludes to just two words: *war* and *peace*).

## On the Value of Transhumance

To keep unsettling the orientalist and aestheticizing gaze that has set itself upon Bedouin exoticism, we must consider the words of Ibn Khaldûn (cited in Spanish as Ibn Jaldún). By politicizing nomads, he highlights their bravery in the desert, which is lost in cities (since the sedentary entrust security to governments and guards, submitting to authorities and laws that diminish their fierceness). This fourteenth-century thinker studies the transition from nomadic to sedentary life and explains the bravery of nomads as follows:

The Bedouins [. . .] live apart from the community. They are alone in the country and remote from militias. They have no walls or gates. Therefore, they provide their own defence and do not entrust it to, or rely upon others for it. They always carry weapons. They watch carefully all sides of the road. They take hurried naps only when they are together in company or when they are in the saddle. They pay attention to the most distant barking or noise. [. . .] Fortitude has become a character quality of theirs, and courage their nature. (Ibn Khaldûn 2015, tr. Franz Rosenthal: 168–169)

The fact that they are not submitted to government laws or authorities does not mean that they do not respect any authority at all. As Ibn Khaldûn, the author of *The Muqaddima*, notes, hostilities among tribes cease upon their elders' request, given the immense respect that they wield.

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<sup>9</sup> In the Kantian sense of the term, we have *sapere aude* ('dare to know').

While a misguided few might find traces of nomadism in today's capitalism (which undoubtedly seeks to cross borders), we should clarify that capitalism is not compatible with transhumance as a way of life. The keys lie both in the heteronomy that explains the nomad's way of inhabiting the desert as well as in their economy, which bars accumulation and only sees value in actual use – overlooking the double character of commodities as possessing use-value but also exchange-value, as founded in capital. While the desert dunes shift with the wind, capital pushes settlement on the land for the purpose of taxation in a way that opposes desert living. On the Bedouin, Ibn Khaldûn (Jaldûn 2008) noted that, in contrast to the settled, the Bedouin only worry over material goods when these are indispensable. Furthermore, given their need to feed their camels, the herders' relationship to the earth is extensive (Baroja Caro 1955). In contrast with the parameters of sedentary societies, which find protection in the State order and occupy defined spaces with solid constructions, the pastoral economy involves a portable beduin tent, a dwelling known as a haymah (Baroja Caro 1955), which – in line with the extensive character of transhumance – intermittently occupies vast portions of territory. Just as the sedentary accumulate objects in their abodes, nomads are forced to have few possessions and to find multiple uses for them, so that they become worthy of being carried wherever the nomads go.

Given all that we have described up to this point regarding the term *value* – which, in the nomadic case, we may summarize as an economy created from a space of vulnerability that, lacking surplus, is outside the scope of the capitalist market (Clastres 2011) and maintains nomads in a relationship of self-respect and courage rather than submission to authority – the State might react . . .

## **A Contemporary Note on Two Colonial States Set Against “Their” Bedouin Communities**

Nomads, those free men, disgust central powers because they escape them. They bother governments and bureaucrats who cannot dominate them with carrots or sticks, and governments become tempted to exterminate them. The great camel tribes do not care about borders, but about territories. They obey but one authority: that of the desert and that of God. Africa constantly falls prey to killings thanks to the installment of guerilla governments. The cake is divvied up among the Western powers. (Monod 2000: 59)

## The Nakba in al-Naqab

### The Green Bulldozer: Seizure through Farming

David Ben-Gurion dreamt of “making the desert bloom”. He took the dictionary to heart, no longer seeing the desert’s *inhabitants*. Ben-Gurion settled the Negev desert, which the Bedouin call *al-Naqab*. In the leadup to 1948, a polymorphous and systematic settlement policy took root: the Jewish National Fund (KKL) would plant forests, established collective, agricultural populations, enclosed military zones, and industrialization – all with the goal of taking over the land and displacing the Bedouin. What to do with those nomads? Those *squanderers of the land*? They were to be modernized, confined within sedentary areas, settled in *cities*. They were to be cultivated . . . or ignored as *unrecognized villages*. The implications of the latter are lethal: through the lack of State recognition of their existence, the literal concept of the *desert* as a dead territory and State property is affirmed, denying the lives of those who people it and making them *sacrifice-able* (as making the desert bloom requires *sacrifices*).

Photographer Fazal Sheikh have documented how afforestation was put at the service of this erasure. His project invokes the struggle of an emblematic Bedouin population: *al-'Araqeab*. Despite the claims that Bedouin families have made before Israel’s courts, documenting their historic tax payments both to the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate that preceded Israel, the State has refused to recognize their property. These lands are situated in al-Naqab (known as the Negev desert in Hebrew), and the considerable rainfall there has made its “blooming” feasible. Since 2010 (Strickland 2017) until this text was published in 2017, *al-'Araqeab* had been demolished 113 times<sup>10</sup> by the State of Israel (which has argued that the territory had been unduly appropriated) with the goal of planting a “green belt” around Be’er-Sheva, the capital of Negev. The men in green uniforms have their bulldozers at the ready for the “noble task” of planting trees (what soulless person would ever dare oppose a forest? To “make the desert bloom” one has to put up gates around the trees, so as to protect them from animals). Photographer Fazal Sheikh has stated that his work is an elegy for a place in transformation. In what follows, we will stop to analyze three of his photographs (Pessah 2015).

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**10** TN: This text was submitted in 2017 and has been published with a few updates. The author chose not to fully update the numbers for 2024 and to instead submit the text as a dynamic photograph of an era. The author, however, would like to stress that the “lack of protection for the Bedouin among the ‘unrecognized’ population of the Negev became brutally acute over the last few years. They were impacted by missiles from Iran on April 13, 2024, causing the death of a child”.

## The Green Belt

October 4, 2011. Plantation work for the Ambassador Forest organized by the KKL, using the method of “savannization”: a mixture of sparsely scattered acacia or eucalyptus trees with bushes and grass between, as found in the savannah region [which is a transition between rainforests and semideserts] [. . .] Irrigation comes from long terraces that collect rainwater, optimizing the water retention. The fields around the planted area are cultivated by Bedouins, and are distinguished by the shallow plowing or “scratching” technique of cultivation. The small spots within the field show where wheat was collected in previous years. The forest was planted atop the Bedouin village of Abu ‘Abdūn, of the Tiyāha tribe, evacuated and destroyed in the winter of 1948. The path, accompanied by a pair of shallow fences that run diagonally from lower left to top right through the center of the image, coincides with the planned route of a railway line, construction of which began in early 2012. The forested area has since been overridden. (Sheikh *Desert Bloom* 35)<sup>11</sup>

To shake up the traditional Passover song, the State brought the train that burned the forest that killed the Bedouin village.<sup>12</sup> This document demonstrates that the “desert” was and is inhabited. Here stands the greenwashing of the colonial State.<sup>13</sup>

## The Mines

November 22, 2011. Evaporation ponds at the Arad Phosphate Mine. Resources in the Negev include copper, iron, manganese, phosphates, and uranium. The Arad facility mines the highest grade phosphates, with estimates of between thirty and sixty thousand tons of uranium contained in low-level phosphate ores, much of which is extracted in the three mines of the parent company, Rotem Amfert Negev Ltd. Established in 1952, initially as Negev Phosphates, the company’s Arad site is adjacent to the Dimona Nuclear Research Center. The state acknowledges the existence of the site, but maintains a policy of nuclear ambiguity, neither confirming nor denying that it contains nuclear weapons. (Sheikh *Desert Bloom* 21)

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11 TN: As the website cited by Rabinovich is no longer in service, we have taken the caption from the photographer’s website: [https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online\\_editions/desert\\_bloom](https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online_editions/desert_bloom) (accessed July 24, 2024).

12 A play on the “Chad Gadya” (‘one little goat’), traditionally sung on Jewish Passover.

13 The Arab word *Nakba* designates the catastrophe provoked by the incipient State of Israel in its campaign to de-Arabize Palestinian land. The Bedouin are Palestinian, which is why many of the inhabitants of al-Naqab/Negev were sent to refugee camps in Gaza and the West Bank as of 1948.



**Image 1:** Photo 30.<sup>14</sup>

Photograph by Fazal Sheikh, for the publication *Erasure*

*Trilogy*. Source: Pessah (2011), [https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online\\_editions/desert\\_bloom/35.html](https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online_editions/desert_bloom/35.html)

Meanwhile, the bold former worker of the nuclear center who spoke with parrhesia, Mordejai Vanunu, remains deprived of liberty and is currently under house arrest, after having declared, in 1982, that Israel possessed nuclear warheads.

Constructed in secret (beginning in 1958) with French assistance, outside the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection regime, the airspace over the nuclear research center is closed, and the area around it is heavily guarded and fenced off. Bedouin tribes are kept 15–20 kilometers from the fence. (Sheikh *Desert Bloom* 21)

And they are evidently exposed to dangers.

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<sup>14</sup> TN: Rabinovich cites a website that is no longer in service (this-place.org). On Sheikh's website, this is photograph 35. [https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online\\_editions/desert\\_bloom/35.html](https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online_editions/desert_bloom/35.html) (accessed July 24, 2024).



**Image 2:** Photo 10.<sup>15</sup>

Photograph by Fazal Sheikh, for the publication *Erasure*

*Trilogy*. Source: Pessah (2011), [https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online\\_editions/desert\\_bloom/21.html](https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online_editions/desert_bloom/21.html)

## The Ephemeral Footprint of Transhumance

October 9, 2011. Abu Asa family homestead in the vicinity of the recognized Bedouin town of Bīr Haddāj, of the ‘Azāzme tribe. The dark circular stains in the center of the image indicate the former presence of *sire*, livestock pens for camels, goats, and sheep. Staining is created by the bodily fluids of the herds that were kept there. Each year, the pens are shifted and the former space disinfected by fire. The stains remain on the ground for several years, the gradient of their saturation indicating how many rainy seasons have washed them away. Such traces help gauge the minimum duration of their presence in years. In 1978 Bīr Haddāj was declared a closed military area, forcing its inhabitants to relocate to Wādi al-Na‘īm, near Beersheba. In 1994, when they learned that land on which they had previously settled was no longer used for military purposes, but had been converted into a moshav, they returned and settled beside the moshav. (Sheikh *Desert Bloom* 10)

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<sup>15</sup> TN: On Sheikh’s website, this is photograph 21. ([https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online\\_editions/desert\\_bloom/21.html](https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online_editions/desert_bloom/21.html) (accessed July 24, 2024).



This photograph is a testimony of desert life – an ephemeral footprint of the passing of the Bedouin people. These photographs bear witness to the forced sedentary lifestyle with which the Bedouins who resist are punished. Condemned to domiciled exile, they are forced to inhabit “unrecognized” villages. Lacking all services, these places concentrate the Palestinian Bedouin in a defenseless state in the face of attacks against Israeli people during armed conflicts.<sup>16</sup>



**Image 3:** Photo 18.<sup>17</sup>

Photograph by Fazal Sheikh, for the publication *Erasure*

*Trilogy*. Source: Pessah (2011), [https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online\\_editions/desert\\_bloom/10.html](https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online_editions/desert_bloom/10.html)

Photographer Fazal Sheikh’s work makes manifest the footprint’s vitality on the land. Through photography, we may glean the relationship between transhumance and respect toward the land, which feeds the nomads and their livestock. Given this, the nomads would never dream of draining the land for exploitative

<sup>16</sup> In 2014, the “iron dome” that shielded the Israeli population did not cover the Bedouin population, who were instructed to lie flat on the ground to protect themselves in the event of an attack.

<sup>17</sup> TN: On Sheikh’s website, this is photograph 10. [https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online\\_editions/desert\\_bloom/10.html](https://www.fazalsheikh.org/online_editions/desert_bloom/10.html) (accessed July 24, 2024).

ends (less so for extractive mining). To transhume is to caress the earth as one walks, thanking it for its sustenance. The photographer writes:

In fact, for the Bedouin communities, the strongest groups historically were those that moved and returned to the land throughout the year, as opposed to those that settled. So then, what are the lasting traces? Where is it that we look for proof of the Bedouin's rights to the land? [. . .] This also depends very much upon who is making the enquiry [. . .] Under closer scrutiny, the things that you find are the cemeteries, sometimes there are old ruins from when a house was built in stone, which was not that frequent, and then there are the cisterns and wells; but other than that, there's not much. Indeed, their lack of insistence for dominating the land is the very thing that allows them to be dispossessed. (Sheikh, n.d., n.p.)<sup>18</sup>

### **Persistence: To Resist the Bulldozer (Al-'Araqeab)**

Bulldozers were made to raze the ground. The State showcases the bulldozer as its most threatening tool. With its evidently violent and cruel form of execution, the Bedouin perhaps experiences bulldozing as a clumsy imitation of the power of nature. The Bedouin often face the fury of floods and, unlike us sedentary people, for whom the world comes to an end when our houses are destroyed, they go outside and come to terms with the saying that “what the rain destroys, the rain repairs”. This Sahrawi proverb implies that, while rainfall can destroy homes, it also refreshes pastures for the livestock and fills the wells. At the end of the day, water is life.

Perhaps this is why at the time this publication, Al-'Araqeab dwellers have rebuilt their town more than 223 times, all in just seven years. Yet, there is a resistance that has demonstrated its solidarity. Some Israelis in the region who are free of orientalism are able to view the Bedouin not as anachronic caricatures akin to the contemporary patriarch, but as testimony, through their transhumance, of the Palestinian *al-Naqba* itself. The “Negev Coexistence Forum for Civil Equality” denounces the systematic demolition of Bedouin homes in the region. Among others, its Recognized Project documents and bears constant witness to the demolitions.<sup>19</sup> Yes, this decolonial voice in the desert has echoed across the gates and, ironically, even made incursions in the academic discourse that can be heard at the Ben Gurion University in Be'er-Sheva today.

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<sup>18</sup> TN: English version consulted here: <https://medium.com/this-place-exhibition/fazal-sheikh-6ee820f8e06e> (accessed July 24, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> See: <http://www.dukium.org/recognized-project/> (accessed July 10, 2024).

## Persistence in the Sahara: Resisting the Mines

To destroy a people that knows how to live in autarchy, that seeks self-determination and free circulation across a few hectares of sand, is a beautiful example of a free dictatorship. Back in the day, De Gaulle had strategized to keep the Algerian Sahara because of its oil and gas. To solve the alleged problem of the underdevelopment of nomads, governments sought to make them sedentary, or, in other words, they sought their mental death. Governments don't like freedom. But forced to keep still, the nomads are neutralized, drowned. (Monod 2000: 64)

From the Bedouin who call themselves 'children of the clouds' (*aulad enau*) I learned that justice is nomadic (which is why it becomes unhinged in the hallways of court systems). They also showed me that true democracy exists in exile. In exile, the Sahrawis founded a republic – like pitching a haymah tent only to pack it up again and then pitch it further along the path – as they return to a land currently occupied by the Moroccan Kingdom. Their return has been delayed by a 2,720-kilometer wall of sand, with some 7 to 10 million mines behind which – from the exiles' perspective – the native population is being tortured while the land and adjacent sea are exploited. This is all about the treasured phosphate buried in the earth.

Though made sedentary by the Spanish protectorate of the Sahara established in 1912 (Jiménez 2014), nomadic traditions were kept alive in the Sahrawi *ethos*, as we may glean from its poetry. As to its political organization, the Yema'a, or the Assembly of Notable Peoples or Community Assembly (Jiménez 2014), was composed of the most respected men in the community given their wisdom, knowledge of Muslim law, customs, and skill in interacting with other communities. This organism, which was governed through consensus, ceded its place to the Polisario Front.<sup>20</sup> We may note that despite the pain and difficulties of their desert struggle, the exiles remain hopeful, keeping alive the memory of the Bedouin experience and way of life (as well as their survival amid wars).

The process of decolonizing the Western Sahara failed because of Spain, which, in 1975, undermining its prior commitments to the Polisario Front – which represented the tribes of the Sahrawi desert that used to be represented by the Yema'a – signed a tripartite agreement with the governments of Morocco and Mauritania in order to divvy up the Sahrawi desert among themselves (Martínez 1991; Jiménez 2014). Despite Spain's double-dealing, on February 27, 1976, the Polisario Front proclaimed the birth of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR),

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<sup>20</sup> This is a Spanish-language acronym for Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro ('Popular Liberation Front for Saguia el Hamra and Río de Oro').

whose national unity government includes three branches. While half of the population undergoes atrocious human rights violations under the occupation of the Moroccan government, the other experience of the republic involves living in the refugee camps along the most inhospitable parts of the Algerian Desert. As Carolina Jiménez Sánchez (2014) has described from the legal point of view, the nation-in-exile's administration is divided as follows: the *wilayat* ('provinces', which today coincide with the five refugee camps), *dawair* ('municipalities'), and *baladiat* ('districts'). As to the three branches of the Republic, the executive is steered by the Polisario Front, while the legislative branch involves two chambers: the Sahrawi National Council and the Council of Ministers (which adheres to the traditional Yema'a structure). As for the judicial branch, at the time of this text's submission in 2017, the branch is being developed by the National Justice Council. The armed forces are constituted by the Sahrawi People's Liberation Army. Recognized by many countries, including Mexico,<sup>21</sup> SADR – a republic in exile – is presented under the format of sedentary States but wrapped in a profoundly nomadic spirit. In the refugee-camp experience, the economy and lifestyle follow nomadic criteria, as practiced by a part of the Sahrawi population.

While the justice apparatus remains under construction from the legal standpoint, in an ethical sense, it poses an alternative, nomadic, and unfinishable way of conceiving justice. Recognizing that justice is nomadic requires that we question the prevalence of private property and individual landowners. This heteronomous act reminds us of the prophetic warning (let us not forget that, in the Bible, those who spoke boldly were hated for publicly criticizing the king) by which Bedouin existence is to become a public affront to State authority. Though the nation-state boasts its monopoly on violence – guarding a judicial apparatus founded on individualism and private property – it feels threatened by the “danger” of nomadism. The power of hope lies in both fragilities. This is why Monod, the mystical scientist who crossed the Sahara for almost an entire century, claimed that “saving the nomads is now one of our duties” (Monod 2000: 66), as “they’ve kept alive their sense of poetry and laughter more than we have” (2000: 69). This is how he explains his exhortation:

While I am not against material progress when it can save us trouble as human beings (not prevent it, as the phrase usually goes), I fear the power of technocrats. Those Fausts want to claim the World for themselves. We would then have a wave of blind consumers who ignore everything about the Earth, its cycles, and its wealth [ . . . ]. The time of the four seasons has disappeared in the heart of this society of button-pushing. (Monod 2000: 69–70)

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21 TN: Where the author lives and works.

## A Preliminary Conclusion: Two Questions and One Intuition

I would like to conclude by presenting a few ideas and heteronomous reflections that have emerged from the crossroads of ethics and politics, reflections which also concern the poetics of language.

First: why should we be interested in two experiences that are so geographically distant from Mexico, my place of enunciation, on two faraway continents? The reason is that they hold the promise of community life, with alternative economies and political organizations that have been familiar to our continent for more than ten jubilees, given our resistance to colonial State power. As I write in Mexico, the Indigenous populations here are defending their territories against the ravenous lust of mining companies and other forms of predatory mega extractivism,<sup>22</sup> a final step in “our world and its unhinged Cartesian project” that Pierre Clastres warned of in 1974 (2011). From the perspective of international law, approaching the colonial experience of the al-Naqab/Negev Bedouin along with that of herding Indigenous peoples, tribal communities, nomads, and seminomads who are subject to the laws of colonial States shows a common path to follow, as laid out in the text coauthored by Rodolfo Stavenhagen and Ahmad Amara, *International Law of Indigenous Peoples and the Naqab Bedouin Arabs* (Amara et al. 2012). Meanwhile, solidarity between communities has served to establish a mutual-support front for Indigenous people on the American continent, but this solidarity crosses oceans.<sup>23</sup>

Second, what is it that concerns us, here and now, about the nomadic experience? Even though SADR expresses itself before the United Nations as a State, the political language and nomadic memory – and the careful use of language that

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22 In November of 2014, the Permanent People’s Court (Sentencia del Tribunal Permanente de los Pueblos) had registered 433 socio-environmental conflicts in Mexico. In many cases, the defendants are members of Indigenous communities for whom the territory is sacred.

23 At the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) we took up the task of translating the poem *El discurso del “Indio”. El penúltimo ante el “Hombre Blanco”*, [The “Indian’s” discourse: the next to last before the “white man”] by Palestinian poet Mahmud Darwish, from Arabic to Spanish. On the occasion of the five-hundredth anniversary of the conquest of America, this poem imagined the experience of colonization in continental America, in Arabic. It is still being translated to Indigenous languages today. As of its Spanish translation, versions have emerged in Mazatec, Chinantec, Mixe, Isthmus Zapotec, Yucatecan Mayan, Totonac, and Farsi. The poem will continue to be translated, establishing bridges among Indigenous communities in our continent and the Palestinian people. This project was the first of its kind within “Heteronomías de la justicia: de exilios y utopías”, while the book *Retornos del discurso del “indio”* (for Mahmud Darwish) will soon be published, with the project continuing.

burgeons in societies without walls, in which even when everything is said, one understands what one wants to understand – as well as the political form of their organization, is more like that of the “societies without a State” that Pierre Clastres describes. Yes: the three branches of the republic in exile are *genetically* Bedouin, considering the descriptions put forth by Ibn Khaldūn. Far from undermining the legitimacy of their self-determination, this feature reveals them as a promise, an act of political imagination (in the most serious sense of the term).

In the project “Heteronomies of Justice: Nomadism and Hospitality in Language” (National Autonomous University of Mexico), we have sought to become messengers between Sahrawi youths and youths from the Comcaac nation (inhabitants of the Sonoran Desert whose seminomadic ancestors were persecuted for a very long time). Our fieldwork consists in the transhumance of words, across two peoples whose second language is Spanish and who keep the nomadic experience fresh in their memories – at sea and in the desert – with the goal of conceiving alternative policies and economies to that of a technocracy that has become drunken with progress, ravaging our planet. This is but a small contribution.<sup>24</sup>

Echoing the Biblical experience, the Borgesian Bedouin paradox in *Fragmentos de un evangelio apócrifo* calls us to humbly assume the human fragility that concerns us: “Nothing is built on rock; All is built on sand, but we must build as if the sand were rock” (Borges 1974, 1012). To translate this (*po*)ética, this poetry of ethics, into political language is our task.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The project’s website is <https://www.iifl.unam.mx/justiciadelotro/index.php> (accessed July 10, 2024).

<sup>25</sup> English translation by María Cristina Hall. First published in Spanish as Rabinovich, Silvana. 2017. *La paradoja beduina. Nómadas 47*. Bogotá: Universidad Central.

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Cristina Burneo Salazar

# Heterolingual Movements vs. Vigilance: New Counter-Sedentary Narratives

The ties between writing, movement, and translation in twenty-first-century texts have comprised archives that are putting notions like national literature, mother tongue, and belonging in tension. These notions, in turn, are built upon an implicit sense of foundational immobility: a sense that culture is reproduced through closed archives, definitive languages, and hereditary communities. Yet, migration, sexual transitions, and the spilling over of identities across multiple dimensions have established a transnational field of writing that has been in dialogue with the notion of origin for some time now – without ascribing to strict senses of belonging. Displacement lays the foundation for unstable modes of storytelling and for changing materialities. Languages we acquire, languages that we sort-of speak, and the unexpected communities that we build create alternate paradigms to those traditionally viewed as tying writing to belonging. I seek to explore such tensions by describing a space that positions itself against sedentarism, after which I will conduct a brief review of diaspora writings of Ecuadorian origin in order to link this counter-sedentary position to such works.

Indeed, in the United States today, we may find contemporary writing of Ecuadorian origin that is characterized by different ways of relating to this geography. Though Ecuador is connected to multiple global spaces through its migrations (Alvarez Velasco 2009), what these connections produce in literature has not been sufficiently explored as a field whose excess spills past the limits of the national. In writing from the last ten years, we may find a proposed aesthetics composed of English, Spanish, and, often, Kichwa. These texts showcase a plurality of belongings and a multiplicity of geographic connections through different migrations. Such texts give rise to questions about national literary archives; about what it is that Napoleonic<sup>1</sup> statements would deem the “Latin American”; and about why translation and bilingualisms in tandem with the English language are not always considered part of the American continent’s reality. These works do not limit themselves to thematizing what has institutionally been called *human mobility*; rather, they are founded upon movement as a principle of creation that organizes the writing itself.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a term of imperial expansion used to describe Napoleon III’s need to situate France as a center before the growing power of the United States. Nineteenth-century intellectuals from the Americas coined the term, which was later disseminated by France.



The Ecuadorian diaspora in the United States stands at about one million persons in 2024, having come from a country of 18 million. The writing of the diaspora integrates translation as a mode of existence but also integrates those bilingualisms that migration leads to, given the reconstitution of diverse communities in the United States. These elements, when tied together, function as modes of dissent before the edicts of twenty-first-century nation-states.

## Heterolingualism and Transnationality

Among other functions, the languages that we speak operate as regulatory entities comprised of classification indexes that crosscut our subjectivities. National language, mother tongue, language as a closed linguistic system, and languages whose grammars are divided into two genders – masculine and feminine – have determined our modes of being without us entirely deconstructing their dimensions. To decompose such dimensions, which constitute us as speakers and writers, would lead us to observe all of the ways that contemporary life causes language to spill over. Let us observe Edouard Glissant's work on the imaginary of languages:

What characterizes our era is what I call the imaginary of languages, that is, the presence of all the languages in the world. I believe that in the Europe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even if a French writer knew English, Italian, or German, he did not take this into account. Writing was monolingual. Today, even if a writer does not know another language, she considers, knowingly or not, the existence of the languages in her environment during her writing process. We can no longer write monolingually. (Glissant 2010: 12)<sup>2</sup>

This reality spills past the very notion of language as a system that is impenetrable to signs outside of it – for instance, we have mixtures like Spanglish, *Portuñol*, and *Palenquero creole*. This necessarily puts our national conception of literature in crisis. To critically distance ourselves from the institution of literature, I will refer to a set of writings in mixed languages, or in languages unfolding in proximity to other languages, even when apparently monolingual. Through this reflection, I hope to reveal the fiction that national literatures have constructed given their limited understanding of space. Indeed, national literatures have actually constructed themselves as borders.

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<sup>2</sup> Translator's Note (TN): Unless English-language publications are otherwise cited, translations are my own.

The imaginary of languages is an expression of the *chaos-monde* or ‘chaos-world’, as Glissant called the coming together of peoples, imaginations, and cultures as dis-organized by its speakers. Yet, given the asymmetry between languages, we know that defenders of languages with great vehicular power or imperial pasts do not welcome such chaos. Thus, monolingualism should also be addressed as a mode of power that is sustained upon the erasure and minorization of languages that are considered “oral” or tied to ethnocides and colonial, linguistic occupations.

Recently, Myriam Suchet took Glissant’s notion of the “imaginary of languages” together with Rainier Grutman’s concept of heterolingualism (1997) and, in her *L’Imaginaire hétérologue* (2014), she proposed the creation of alternative paradigms to the conception of language as a closed system of signs. Suchet leans on languages’ ancient resistance to the world’s monolingualization by constantly turning toward their constitutive heterogeneity. Thus, language, conceived as heterogeneous materiality, produces imaginaries that come into tension with the methodological nationalism with which we conceive of notions like writing, space, text, and translation. Where do we say *I*? With our body in what place? With a language transmitted to us by whom and under what circumstances? How shall we reexamine language through fugitive, non-national writings?

Heterolingual writings question the fact that “the monolingual norm assumes that the speaker, always in perfect alignment with herself, does not speak normally but rather one, single language” (Suchet 2014: 18). Languages considered foreign, or outside of a given reality, are nothing but the result of a “gradual work of differentiation” (Suchet 2014: 19). Suchet thus proposes the de-essentialization of language as a source of authenticity in favor of a continuum of alterity by which all languages are somewhat foreign between themselves. In a heterolingual relationship, translation is in itself foundational to every encounter, not a mere tool for linguistic exchange. Its mode of operation decenters those languages that have come into contact, making them proliferate in a space of referentiation based on diverse realities and origins that coexist among speakers.

Meanwhile, Naoki Sakai’s work expounds upon the specific problems of translation in order to situate it as a perspective that encompasses the social order. In *Translation and Subjectivity* (1997), he proposes translation as a hybridizing instance, suggesting that social ties are not based on common homogeneity and would instead communicate a mode of “heterolingual address”. Translation would be a mode of language itself, not a mere bridge between sealed languages. In his reading of Sakai, Sandro Mezzadra recurs to the heterolingual address to consider a political subject who does not submit to unique linguistic or national affiliations so as to “disturb the idea of community itself that underlies the homolin-

gual regime of translation, [which] allows us to question the most simple notion of ‘Us’ that we might refer to in our political practices” (2007).

In his later work, Sakai (2012) relates the heterolingual address to transnationality. It is according to this fundamental crossing that we understand the heterolingual politics of writing proposed here. Where a border lies, there was first a “bordering”, he writes. In this sense, transnationality precedes nationality, the latter of which is only possible through the act of bordering. Likewise, translation is not derived from national languages, nor is it a mere passing between them. First there was translation – with a proliferation of languages that were mixed among themselves – and then there were national languages. These were also borderized and subject to attempts at purification through lexical bodies that were only finished and self-referential in appearance. I should also add that translation precedes monolingualism: it is a *mode* of language itself.

Sakai inverts our notions of nationality and transnationality in order to leave behind the normative methodological space that conceives of movement and culture as functions of the nation-state. Methodological nationalism has become an organizational tool charged with supporting a national objective as well as the borderized spaces that we inhabit. Native perspectives, citizenship, and belonging have become implicit and less-questioned categories in cultural- and literary-studies archives. By approaching textual corpuses and diverse materialities, we often arrive at an organization that looks more or less like this: we encounter literary texts organized according to institutionalization and national literatures, with representations of the body constructed on the basis of a citizenship project – a project that is thus heteronormative; while language is presented to us as a monolingual entity that is closed in on itself. Sakai adds that our way out of this regime requires methodological examination: what deep concepts of the national-sedentary crosscut our ways of thinking?

## Counter-Sedentary Writing

By describing the national-sedentary, I have intended to contest the reformist criteria administering the movement of the human species – and affecting all other species – across the planet. In doing so, I revisit various genealogies of autonomy, just as studies organized around the autonomy of migration have done. I understand autonomy in the sense that those social movements around migration have defined it: as a practice that counters power in the face of the rigid system of national laws that administrate life.

I describe the national-sedentary as a globally coordinated State-regime that impedes the movement of the body, whether individual or collective. The movement in question is not only geographic. To govern, the national-sedentary requires a series of classifications that are fixed throughout a human being's life: a proper name, a gender, a nationality, a mother tongue, and identification papers. The administrative empire that sustains it would prefer no displacement across its system of classification – whether geographical, sexual, linguistic, or in terms of “migratory status”. To settle upon a single identity from the beginning of life all the way to its end would imply accepting a single language as one's mother tongue, a single gender inscribed in the body, and one condition: to be a *national* of a place and to account for a domiciled narrative, following an explanation of the world that is understood as rooted. This rootedness, understood not as a dynamic belonging but as dogma, yields control over the body and its movements in defense of a pristine origin.

The national-sedentary defines its otherness in absolute opposition: the *other* would be a *foreigner*, one who misspeaks someone else's *native* language or one who is at the mercy of someone else's magnanimous character and is thus “included” as a deviant. The *other* must always assimilate to dominant codes, learn to lower her voice, and take up the task of *working for equality*. In my previous work, cited above, these were some considerations with which to dispute the subalternization of these other existences:

The act of moving around the planet, [and] the decision to govern one's own destiny [. . .] [are] dimensions of vital affirmation capable of spilling past the notions of citizenship, the body, [and] the nation-states. This spilling over designates a common proposal that has modified, with its own meanings of belonging and community, those notions of the “macro” that have sought to confine it within a channel. Resistance through movement suggests that we can still find each other in this world differently, in order to experience it. Movement points to possibilities for finding forms of life that are still possible on the planet, even if these are dwindling and becoming more fragile. More broadly, freedom founded upon geographical, sexual, and identity transit; the fugitive escape from “work to death”, as Bertrand Ogilvie (2017) calls it; “bodies on the run” from the cisgender norm, as Sasa Testa (2018) has written; and trans and transvestite bodies, all create confluences. These all comprise a political statement characterized by its non-conformity in the face of the so-called reform policies that are actually no more than touch ups. Migrations, trans life, and communing against debt,<sup>3</sup> form comprehensive perspectives with which to gaze at the present, not only because of the elements they share, but because they permeate the entire social order. (Burneo Salazar 2023: 43)

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<sup>3</sup> As Silvia Federici (2018) has written extensively.

At the same time, counter-sedentary expressions of culture challenge the administrative systems of documentation with which national-sedentary States classify our identities. Anything that disrupts the fossilized identification between existence and its administrative order puts this order of control, in which the restraint of all movement unfolds as a government technique, into crisis.

Expressions of autonomy, such as that which unfolds through movement across the planet, are being halted today through their depoliticization and dehistoricization. Depoliticization unfolds through bland reforms that seek to quell social protests, reducing them to clientelist negotiations. The mandate to ensure “orderly and regular migration”, the state’s domestication-washing of claims, and NGOs’ promotion of entrepreneurship as a way to forge refugee and migrant “success stories” are only a few forms of depoliticization. Depoliticization requires tearing movement away from time and depriving it of its historic density, in order to reduce it to the bureaucratic management of an ever-repeating present. To remember movement, and to narrate it, is a form of resistance against the hostile impassibility with which movement is governed. (Burneo Salazar 2023: 36)

Today, movement takes shape through migrant caravans, ships, boats, everyday comings and goings between countries, and nearby micromobilities. The narration of these movements is not exclusively in the hands of international organisms, in administrative forms, or in social science as an object. Poetry, non-fiction, the novel, short stories, and chronicles are all forms that restore the indomitable force of experience – a force as tragic as it is vital. In opposition to “regular and orderly human mobility” forms, we have a constant search for the language with which to name the extreme situations in which migration plunges people, their vindications even at the risk of death, and their memory and critical visions – which are not subordinated to the administrative management of the word even when such management crosscuts them.

In the following texts, the untamed memory of movement, codeswitching, the appropriation of English, the coexistence of languages that intermingle, heterolingualism, and transits of other kinds present counter-sedentary forces with which aesthetics and languages are forged – potencies of the word that model visions of the world.

## A Fugitive Corpus

Although counter-sedentary writing is often classified within “national literatures” in State and university institutional imaginaries, such writing spills past these limits. Indeed, given that some authors were migrated as children or migrated as adults, their works also constitute a fugitive corpus.

What I call fugitive corpus is any possible body of texts produced as a result of a departure, a change of language, the breach of an identity, or a loss stemming from moving from a place considered the *root*. The act of writing opens the possibility of turning loss into a reconstitution of the self. This self becomes another through the processes of writing: registering, remembering, shifting perspective, and creating a language that can never be anchored in a native gaze again. A fugitive corpus would ultimately be produced by a resistance against identity.

Composed of various accounts, this corpus establishes correspondence with the diasporic, as determined by space. Given this relationship, the accounts cannot be fathomed within a single archive, while space, conceived as immobile in its traditional geographic understanding, becomes unstable, disorganized. In fact, the space in the Abya Yala-the Americas has been reconfigured as such given that migrations have showcased its diversity and historic inequality, opening transnational paths of transit but also paths with which to understand what the word *space* itself might mean – as a limit, site, and extension (Álvarez Velasco 2022).

These tensions demand searches for expression beyond the national language, not only in terms of translation or mixture. Mixing becomes a narrative condition. The chaos produced by coexisting lexicons, accents of all kinds, diverse sonorities, and permanent switching, along with undetermined meaning, all produce a distinct concept of language and thus of the instrument of human expression itself. Movement understood as such takes the instrument of expression to its limits: language is diasporized.

Though fundamentally hinged upon movement, a fugitive corpus should not be reduced to certain thematic coincidences. Furthermore, in what we understand as writing, such a corpus would explore those dislocations that account for the shortfalls of the instrument of expression itself – language. And it is through the force of the will to name an experience that language becomes a creative condition. Thus, the definition of diaspora cannot be limited to its geographical understanding. In a corpus like this one, we see a dissemination of meaning that, when expanded, weakens the sedentary understanding of notions like authorship, archive, identity, and the *I*.

The diaspora writings that make up this specific corpus are not affiliated to national literatures. Thus, national archives are not an appropriate unit of research for this purpose. These texts are produced in heterolingual environments or integrate mixed languages, producing decentered aesthetics that do not seek legitimacy in the authors' country of origin. At first glance, the label *postnational* might seem to fit for these writings, which are crosscut by such circumstances of textual production. Yet, the texts do name realities that remain tied to the order of the national. Notions of the postnational tend to erase the forces that control movement as well as global inequalities – obliterating the center in order to give

way to textual production that is created in movement. Instead, my approach includes theoretical perspectives on translation like those of Patricia Willson, Suzanne de Lotbinière Harwood, and Amara Moira, among others. Respectively, they view translation as a political project, posit the eradication of the masculine universal as used in the language of the master, and argue for a transfeminist concept of language. Likewise, I have recurred to the work of writers on the autonomy of migrations such as Soledad Álvarez Velasco, Amarela Varela, Eduardo Domenech, and Shahram Khosravi, who view migration as a historical, social movement that constitutes denationalized realities that nonetheless cannot be detached from the national.

On the basis of this reflection, the existence of a transnational and heterolingual field of writing should be examined in relation to the notions of national literature and language at hand. We may also ask what renewed relationships heterolingualism and transnationality might establish between writing, imaginaries, and nation. Lastly, we may ask what characterizes a given corpus taken from a diasporic, twenty-first-century archive of writing and what this archive designates in regards to transnationality as a literary space. These questions may contribute to conceptualizing migration in relation to writing through transnationality. Likewise, they may dismantle monolingualism as a life-organizing regime.

In what follows, I will briefly review counter-sedentary writing that has originated with Ecuador as a starting point. This is a germinal corpus that remains in permanent construction, and I merely seek to outline a few of its features.

## The Ecuadorian Diaspora in the United States

The Ecuadorian diaspora in the United States cannot be completely determined by numbers alone, nonetheless, according to official US measurements, we may note that it is growing. From 2021 to 2022, US Customs and Border Protection registered 300,000 encounters with Ecuadorian migrants at the border. This does not include those who managed to cross the border at unofficial points of entry or those who migrated regularly. In total, one million Ecuadorians live in the United States today – the result of a long history of migration that dates back almost one hundred years.

The 2020s have seen substantial changes in Ecuadorian migration to the United States, as compared to that of the late twentieth century. Increasingly risky migration conditions and enhanced securitization have revealed a very different terrain. “Leaving, settling, and joining the labor force are happening in increasingly risky and precarious environments [. . .] This is a forced and far more

precarious transnationalism” (Herrera 2019). Though the Ecuadorian diaspora in the United States is very diverse in terms of class, racial markers, ethnic belonging, and more, the above analysis would reflect a broad swath of this diaspora.

Some heterolingual, counter-sedentary, or diasporic work published in this context showcases the persistence of migration as *another* mode of life that stands against the borderization of the world. To outline a possible fugitive corpus, I will briefly review four works: *El viaje del pollo* (2014) by Fabián Quito; *Nostalgia and Borders* (2016) by Sonia Guiñansaca; *The Undocumented Americans* (2020) by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, and *American Abductions* (2024) by Mauro Javier Cárdenas. In the span of a few years, diasporic writings of Ecuadorian origin have cropped up, narrating migrations from the 1998-2000 period; the growth of migrant children from the adult voice; and, very relevantly, the delocalization of the “Ecuadorian” memory into a transnational narrative. Arrival, undocumented status, the reconstitution of communities, and the formation of dynamic, non-national identities based on migration are all present. These forms of writing, which have been called extraterritorial, transnational, and migrant, are far from “rare”. Though they could be seen as anomalous, they must be taken outside of the decontextualized logic of “exceptionality” that conceives of writing as an expression derived from national, monolingual, and classifiable literatures in closed archives.

In 2014, Fabián Quito self-published *El viaje del pollo. La odisea por el sueño americano* in Spanish. He commissioned Angélica Salazar Leal with writing his story, presenting himself more as the main character of his experience than as a writer. The tale begins with his father’s migration in the early 2000s, after Ecuador’s banking crisis (1998) and the country’s subsequent dollarization led to Ecuador’s economic collapse. At 18 years old, Fabián chooses to enlist in the armed forces in order to subsist, though he wants more from life. Yet, his family situation forces him to repeat his community’s well-known strategies: recurring to usury, indebting oneself to dodgy characters, and paying off what one owes with the work of the years to come. Led by *coyotes* or ‘human smugglers’, Fabián travels to Peru, to Bolivia, and then back to Ecuador with a group, seeking ways of evading border controls from city to city. After such exhausting travels, he flies to Mexico on a fake visa.

*El viaje del Pollo* is a detailed chronicle of twenty-first century migration as chained to the *coyote* smuggler economy: extortion, temporary kidnapping, abrupt family separation, and sudden departure. We don’t get the ceremonious middle-class goodbyes of children who are sent off to attend universities abroad. Far from it: the twists and turns of a global working class that does the legwork for the North are revealed. The silent exit is a form of departure for those who prepare to engage their bodies in the operation of large economies in order to sustain, at the



same time, their own countries' economies. Fabián finds out that he is going to migrate when his mother offers him the first beer he's ever had:

He had only taken a few sips of the beer and found himself waiting for some kind of answer. Fabian hears a noise. A truck arrives and parks in front of the house. A man he doesn't know gets out of the truck, looks at his mother, and asks, "Señora, who is the person traveling?", she, with a gesture, points to her son with her finger. The man says, "Let's go, kid. The bus leaves in half an hour". (Quito 2014: 19)

Fabián will leave from Guayaquil, one of the most violent cities on the continent today. Then, he'll cross the *chacra*, a route used for irregular transit, with people from Peru, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Panama. He will learn the art of the accent. He'll change his vocabulary and intonation. One always carries one's origin within, but, at the same time, it becomes blurred when non-national, migrant identity stands between one's national origin and one's trajectory. The narrative accounts for the transnational space that those who cross the continent produce but also for the dilution of national identity within another, dominant one, as determined by the act of migrating in risky conditions. If any collective identity is possible in these corridors, it is not national: this is an identity based on itinerant risk.

Fabián joins the US workforce. Then, he's faced with the crushing task of watching his father die. Children carry out the migration relay: they join the labor force while witnessing the wear and tear on their parents' exhausted bodies. This relaying links lives together through work while supporting family members who have stayed in the place of origin. Migrant bodies always breathe in two places. "I managed to repatriate my father's body, and now his remains are at rest in his town, in the land that witnessed his birth, near his family" (Quito 2014: 195). While, here, the emphasis is placed on the subject matter, Fabián Quito gestates his narrative in an undetermined space. This narrative is heavily marked by strategies including shifts in accents, vocabulary, and gestures. Such strategies cannot be taken as separate from the narrative itself. Rather, they account for the itinerant and transnational conditions of such writing.

At the end of the twentieth century, Sonia Guiñansaca was migrated from Cañar, a province in southern Ecuador. Their<sup>4</sup> grandfather had migrated, then their parents, and then, at age five, they were sent for, too. They grew up speaking English, in New York, and have now built a life in Los Angeles. Of Kichwa Kañari origin, Guiñansaca is recognized for their fight for queer, undocumented lives and for making their own undocumented status public. In recent years, Gui-

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4 TN: The plural is used here as a non-binary pronoun for Sonia Guiñansaca.

ñansaca has returned to Ecuador as a poet and artist. In 2016, their work appeared in English in the self-published *Nostalgia and Borders* poetry volume. In one of their languages, English, Guiñansaca rebuilds their memory of migration as inscribed in their family history.

I am told that borders are imaginary  
 As a way to offer me consolation  
 But they have not seen the monstrosity that has been built  
 My abuelito crossed a real river  
 Almost died in a real desert and climbed a real wall

(Guiñansaca 2016: 9)

The border is the current of water moving the body, with the river's depth uncertain as one places one foot before the other, only to find no bottom. A memory of fear is transmitted from grandfather to grandchild. Instead of settling, this transgenerational memory sharpens with time. Just as the speaker feels nostalgia for the place where they were raised, a complex scenario presents itself: the transformation of a Kichwa Kañari child into a transnational subject.

In those 20 years you've been asked to hide your accent  
 Sew your tongue  
 So that no more rrr's roll out  
 Straighten up  
 So that white Jesus accepts you  
 So *lawyers help you*  
 Dig out the roots of your home from underneath your nails  
 Cut your trenza

(Guiñansaca 2016: 5)

The accent and memory of their first languages – Spanish and Kichwa – resist assimilation. Sonia Guiñansaca's politics of writing constitute modes of reading movement itself, in its poetic force, as crosscut by the problematic coexistence of languages, but also by those hinges that constitute children like them, those who incarnate *settlement* in the United States.

We have many scenes in which the young student translates for their parents. The text is also crosscut by the narrative of how a migrant child as young as them acquires English, relegating Spanish to a different place while Kichwa is lost. Trauma also finds a new place. The young Sonia's teacher does not know how to pronounce their name, yet she teaches Sonia how to say it:

in between pauses she teaches you how to say your name  
 Sonya Guinansaca  
 You hear the anger in her voice as she takes attendance

(Guiñansaca 2016: 10)

To defy the monolingual order may temporarily lead to silence. The young child learns to keep quiet in order to protect their name and lineage. Until they come to wield words again, through writing.

Being diasporic, identities like the one in the poem cannot be captured by discourse. They produce alternate meanings of “literature” and citizenship and thus perform deborderization. Here, poetry is conceived as a self-ethnography, showcasing the documentary and historical potential of writing as it recovers a transnationalized memory that is nonetheless anchored in an origin.

Writing like that of Sonia Guiñansaca proposes nothing short of the abolition of the figure of “the foreigner”. Racialized, outspoken, and queer, some existences will be feared because they incarnate the very possibility of this abolition. Once the national-sedentary has been displaced – along with the idea of having to come from a single place of origin, with a single system of national papers, speaking a single language with “no accent”, and keeping a single gender identity for life – then plural belongings will crop up, with transnational schemes of affection and multiple papers across various systems, whether authentic or *falsified*.

More recently, Sonia Guiñansaca has integrated Kichwa – one of their languages – into their writing. Here, we may read the poem “Runa in translation”, which is part of the broader, trilingual edition of *Nostalgia and Borders* published in Ecuador in 2023:

There is a longing to write this poem in Kichwa / I speak broken Spanish / English with a heavy New York City accent / I wonder if my tongue will ever heal from the breaking / A breaking like when I am around other Kichwas and I cannot understand them / I wonder sometimes (most times) if I'm real / At age five I am plucked from Ecuador and flown to the U.S. / For a brief moment I am given a new name and my hair is cut / and my burgundy luggage goes missing / So I arrive with nothing / I think that I am nothing through middle school / And in high school I stop existing / I nest in my mouth / Quietly / Kikinka maymantatak kanki (2023: 156)

Meanwhile, in *The Undocumented Americans* (2020), writer Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, a New Yorker of Ecuadorian origin, has used English to narrate her migration memoir from her perspective as a daughter. Like thousands of children at the time, she was left in Ecuador with extended family while her mother and father started working in the United States. In her work, Ecuador stands as a far-off starting point rather than as a lost paradise or site of nostalgia. Migration, in her writing, constitutes a critical, broad perspective with which to understand the world and the passing of time. Instead of a geographic anchoring, what this text presents is a condition, an act: to have migrated.

*The Undocumented Americans* gathers an extensive, creative investigation conducted alongside undocumented dayworkers and families, migrant workers, sanc-

tuary churches, organizations, and people at risk of deportation as the author writes her family history. The book is organized into six chapters, in which, for instance, we may read the untold story of migrant workers at the World Trade Center on 9/11: “The first responders were firemen and EMT workers. The second responders were undocumented immigrants”, Villavicencio writes (2020: 32). It is through the lives of dayworkers in migrant-heavy industries that a study on the demand for certain jobs (like construction and plumbing) and their payrates unfolds. In a study that is as rigorous as it is poetic, we also come to appreciate the solitude of those who migrate on their own. The author recounts her own family separation, which happened when she was 18 months old, and writes about how that trauma must have affected her mental health. She goes on: “It’s just not those early years without my parents that branded me. It’s the life I’ve led in America as a migrant, watching my parents pursue their dream in this country and then having to deal with its carcass, witnessing the crimes against migrants carried out by the U.S. government with my hands bound” (Villavicencio 2020: 59).

This vital movement and its pragmatism – as the legitimate flight from an administrative catastrophe produced by the global system of national papers – point to a prefigurative tale whose potential we have yet to fully imagine. This is partly because migration escorted by death appears before our eyes too many times a day, as does the material sacrifice that the *American dream* implies. In 2020, Barack Obama recommended Karla Cornejo Villavicencio’s book just as her family was under threat of deportation, in a pornographic exhibition of how administrative machinery works.

The author also describes how migrant populations have been affected by suicidal thoughts. She delves into the psychological and social pain that sedentarism can cause when one undertakes the sacrifice of migration and then has to settle in a place that demands labor but creates conditions for death at the same time. In Flint, Michigan, she traces the way water contamination has spread across migrant and racialized neighborhoods, writing about how it can cause temporary blindness, cancer, and slow poisoning.

In “Cleveland”, another essay, she tells the story of a several parents who are about to be deported, torn away from their families, cut in two in a matter of days. These are *The Undocumented Americans*: people who have built their lives in the United States, had children there, poured all their strength, all their workforce, in its lands, buildings, pipes, cables, and restaurants. And at the drop of a hat, they’re expelled. National literature cannot understand the fact that one of the most relevant stories of Ecuadorian migration to the United States has been written in English by a queer author who identifies as a New Yorker.

Finally, we have *American Abductions* (2024) by Mauro Javier Cárdenas. This is a narrative of vigilance: it traverses thousands of families in the United States

who are under constant threat of deportation. Based on the stories of different diasporas, the novel revolves around Ada and her sister Eva, who must face their realities as migrants in the United States after their father, Antonio, is captured by immigration officers while taking them to school and is subsequently deported to Colombia.

While this family story articulates the rest of the novel, *American Abductions* is written from an oneiric, geographical, and simultaneously documentary space. If one can even describe its setting, we could say that it is the concrete territory of fear: a constant paranoia of being persecuted by abductors, fear of being watched while communicating, and the lacerating uncertainty of deportability. The territory of fear is determined by the permanent reproduction of the act of deportation: the video that the little girl takes of her father being deported goes viral. She has registered her family's story just as thousands of other stories are recorded in different ways, reproducing vigilance through communication devices that appear constantly. Thus, a meta-reflection on surveillance society comes to alter all the possible narratives by which life is explained in this universe. Here, deportation is a control policy over all lives. In continuous, vertiginous prose, the politics of deportation are described as a real nervous system composed of countless bodies. We may see this through the character Elsi:

where did you live, Antonio says, are you recording this on your device they can monitor our devices do you think their voice recognition software can detect me, Elsi says, why are you concerned about being detected here in Mexico City, Antonio says, it's irrational I know, Elsi says, but sometimes I imagine them tracking me here to notify me I am not far enough away from them, so you tried to locate a pay phone, Antonio says, but you know even then there weren't that many pay phones left, Elsi says, and the ones that remained were already probably monitored by the American abductors. (Cárdenas 2024: 57)

In Cárdenas's novel, this fragment accounts for the monolingualism with which life experience is enunciated in the space of control that is the United States: it is a geography and a nightmare space at the same time. It is a monstrous ear that hears all and translates all into the language of deportation. This is the language of migratory status, documents, paperwork, and expulsion processes. Elsi's paranoia is the result of a vigilance system whose many devices produce a certain language: an administrative, confining, and reductive one. At the same time, Cárdenas's writing produces constant flight: we have art, dreamscapes, and chapters that pour out like torrents, with no paragraph separation. This is counter-sedentary writing in the most material sense: its words won't let themselves be captured.

By developing a heterolingual listening, we partly contest the monolingual regime that determines the ways in which we narrate our lives and listen to those of others. By displacing my listening toward these sonorous fields and their move-

ments, I hope I was able to transmit their beauty in a way that disarranges our “national” ways of encountering each other, in everyday reality and in our study of it.

## An Addendum from 2024

This chapter draws from two separate reflections that I have previously published: the first approaches a poetics of movement, while the second proposes a category with which to consider today’s revamped national regimes of classification: the national-sedentary. My work around what I have called the counter-sedentary started in 2022 with a first text titled “Contra el nacional-sedentarismo”, published in *Disenso*, a political-thought journal from Chile, within the dossier titled *Reformismo reaccionario*. As to the notions of the poetics of movement and their relationship to certain texts’ diasporic condition, I took a feminist approach in the essay “La simple noción de nosotr\*s. Poéticas do movimento: diáspora, corpo e gênero” [The simple notion of us. Poetics of movement: diaspora, body, and gender], which has not yet been published in Spanish but was translated to the Portuguese for the collection *Temas para uma história da literatura hispano-americana* [Topics for a Hispano-American literary history], in the volume *Interpeleções da diversidade/ Releituras críticas* [Diversity interpellations/critical reinterpretations], a Brazilian interuniversity project that seeks to revamp literary studies in a way that contrasts with linear, national periodizations. Here, I have tried to move forward with a new combination of the two fields to further develop my work. This research work was financed by Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Ecuador.<sup>5</sup>

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Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil

# A Manifesto on Linguistic Diversity: Five Essays

## To Be or Not to Be: Bilingualisms

In my town, and across my entire region, I recall there being two kinds of elementary schools: formal education schools where all subjects were taught in Spanish, and bilingual ones where classes were also taught in Ayuujk<sup>1</sup> (but only as long as us students learned Spanish as well). The way these schools tended to be seen was peculiar, to say the least. Parents generally believed it was best to avoid sending their children to bilingual schools, as students were said to receive an inferior education: their facilities were precarious, and the bilingual professors earned a much lower salary than did professors in the “formal” system, who only taught classes in one language: Spanish. This was so despite the fact that most of us children spoke Ayuujk as our mother tongue. Of course, bilingual professors would try to switch over to the formal system as soon as they could. The word *bilingual* was understood to have a negative connotation, one opposed to that of the *formal*.

When I took my first trip to Mexico City, I had already learned to read in Spanish. From signs advertising schools and from conversations, I soon inferred that bilingual schools existed there, too. In Mexico City, however, parents strived to send their children to such schools, and their professors earned higher salaries. Bilingual secretaries were more highly valued than monolingual ones, and I realized that the word *bilingual* had a positive connotation there. Just like my younger sister, back then, I believed that in Mexico City most of the population spoke Nawatl<sup>2</sup> in addition to Spanish and that they held the language in high esteem.

Soon, however, people explained to me that, no, to be *bilingual* was to know how to speak two languages: English and Spanish, in this case. It was then that I realized that the problem was not speaking two languages, rather which languages one spoke. I realized that there are different kinds of bilingualism and

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1 Translator’s Note (TN): This Indigenous language is spoken in parts of Oaxaca, Mexico. The language belongs to the Mixe-Zoque family.

2 TN: Though normally spelled Náhuatl, there is a new movement to leave Spanish-style spellings behind in Latin American Indigenous languages and to instead have each letter correspond to a specific sound. The goal is to make language learning easier. When able, I will use such spellings.



that at least one of them seemed to be undesirable: speaking an Indigenous language implied earning less money as a teacher and, on top of that, wielding less prestige in Mexico's education system.

It was then that I understood that being bilingual was not the same as being *bilingual*.

January 4, 2012

## In Speaking

*When uncertainty around identity  
grows, action is paralyzed.*  
Sheba Camacho<sup>3</sup>

I still haven't managed to understand the relationship between mother tongue and identity. It always seems so complex to me that, lacking conclusions, my pen will wander, and I'll pour my heart out, essay after essay. And it gets worse when it comes to what was, or still is, my own process. In Europe, I was a Mexican; in Mexico, I'm Oaxacan; in Oaxaca, I'm a Mixe; and in the Sierra, I'm from Ayutla.

At some point, I'm Indigenous, too, but that is something I was told or that I intuited through contrasts even before the name arrived. If alien forces ever attack us, I'll certainly be an earthling, and passionately so. I cannot understand identity without contrast, and with every new contrast, an identity is born within me – *now it turns out that now I'm a Latina, too, huh?* Given that, thankfully, we have the capabilities to speak more than one language (just imagining otherwise throws me into a panic), the relationship between language and identity cannot be taken as deterministic. There is a space in which both become a subset, but it is unstable – narrowing or overflowing depending on each case.

According to official discourse, self-identification is enough for one to be considered Indigenous. Yet for statistical effects, only those who speak a language belonging to one of the eleven linguistic families that were spoken here – in what is now called Mexico – before Cortés's arrival with his Indo-European tongue are said to count. When explicitly asked, my grandmother denies that she is Indigenous. She is Ayuujk, she says, self-assured. She's of the people with the mountain tongue. To me, the world was once divided in two clear parts: if you didn't speak Ayuujk, then you could only be *akäts* (non-Mixe), whether you were Jap-

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<sup>3</sup> Camacho, Rosa Elba. 2009. *Imágenes de una identidad migrante en las familias libanesas de Torreón, Coahuila*. Querétaro: Universidad Autónoma de Querétaro thesis.

anese, Swiss, Rarámuri,<sup>4</sup> Guaraní, or Zapotec. To me, you were simply called *akäts*. There's a reason why there's no word for *Indigenous* in most Indigenous languages. Establishing new, multiple, and simultaneous contrasts, I came to realize that, behind the label, a net was being woven – a net that could easily become a trap.

“My mother says that I'm no longer Mixe [ . . . ] that because I don't speak Ayuujk anymore, I can't call myself that”, I was surprised to hear someone say a few weeks ago. After a few questions and many mezcals, we came to the conclusion that she was as Ayuujk as the mist around the holy Sempowaltepēt<sup>5</sup> mountain. She is a Mixe who speaks Spanish. Yes, she's an M-I-X-E, every letter of it. A Mixe to the bone. Who could deny it?

Many of the revindication movements led by Indigenous peoples tend to wave the flag of language revitalization. Yet, as an extreme consequence, there's a certain tendency to disdain those who have lost the language – sometimes tacitly, sometimes explicitly. It's not that they have no mother tongue, it's that their mother tongue is now Spanish. I believe that our efforts toward linguistic revitalization and strengthening must steer clear of using the same mechanisms that have served to impose Spanish. To at least ensure baseline consistency with our fight for an intercultural society, we cannot disqualify someone solely because they speak Spanish.

Despite this context of linguistic lynching, I have found that the children of many Indigenous leaders don't speak a Native language at all, or only understand it. Their parents know the importance of language all too well, and they know that to lose it is to cancel out a channel for the direct transmission of knowledge. They know that in today's context, to speak an Indigenous language is to resist. Ideology is not lacking. So what is happening? I'm not at all interested in casting judgment. Rather, I want to understand. Ideologically positioning oneself when it comes to a language doesn't seem to be enough. To be proud of your mother tongue, appreciate it, and know it is also no guarantee that you will pass it on to your children. What is going on?, I ask again, this time more intrigued. Perhaps it

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4 TN: This text was published in 2012 and used the word “Tarahumara”, but now the preferred term is “Rarámuri”. The same is true of “Huichol”, with “Wixárika” now being the preferred term. For self-denominations that are less well known, I will add footnotes..

5 TN: In Nawatl, *sempowaltepēt* means mountain (*altepetl*) number twenty (*sempowalli*), as it was once common to give mountains numbers. In Mixe, this sacred mountain is known as E'px Yukp, which has the same meaning as in Nawatl. It's interesting to note that many places across what is now Mexican territory were given Nawatl names despite their local populations not speaking said language. Nawatl was a language of domination. Thus, we have a mountain called Sempowaltepēt (also spelled Cempoaltepēt or Zempoaltepēt) in Mixe territory (where a different linguistic family is used).

is that to speak a language is also a habit, an automatic and everyday practice, and once our first interactions in a given language are established it turns out that, like any habit, it's hard to shake. For some reason, I always speak Ayuujk with a certain friend of mine even though I know he speaks Spanish perfectly. For some other reason, I always speak Spanish with another friend whom I met in the city, even though I know full well that Ayuujk is her mother tongue and that she speaks it on the daily – but not with me. We're unaware, and we don't choose, or we rarely choose.

And what about people who learn up to three languages in childhood, at the same time? What role will each of these languages play in the constitution of their identity? What is the relationship between language and identity like for native speakers of English? I don't know. I was saying that the mother tongue weaves itself into the fabric that clothes our identity, but language doesn't determine our identity until what I call contrast awakens it. And while I'm saying all of this, if I'm honest, I cannot help but feel a tinge of joy whenever, in any old town along the Mixe Sierra, someone hears me speak and says, "Oh, look at that, even though you look *akäts*, you speak Ayuujk, so you're one of us . . . Tell me, then, what town are you from?", and then I invariably smile with relief.

April 4, 2012

## There is No Such Thing as Indigenous Literature

I don't wish to reproduce the discussions around using the word *literature* to describe the poetry being written in Indigenous languages today. The discussions more or less replicate the arguments that come up in discussions on whether the Aztec Calendar or the Coatlicue<sup>6</sup> can be called art or not. I don't think it makes sense to discuss whether or not a given label works for a certain phenomenon. Rather, I'm more interested in understanding the similarities and differences between poetry in different languages – languages that are distant both geographically and in terms of their genetic filiation.

Yet we cannot deny that this category – Indigenous literature – is being used and carries certain implications. We may find various articles and essays about the current flourishing of Indigenous literature in Mexico. We have the Nezahualcōyotl Award for Literature in Indigenous Languages, and, last year, the Guadalajara International Book Fair – one of the most important in the

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<sup>6</sup> Also spelled Kowatlikwe, this is a statue of the Aztec goddess of fertility.

world – announced an Ibero-American Award for Indigenous Literature with a prize of twenty-five thousand dollars.

Given the latter, one might infer that Mexican literature today is divided into what is produced in Spanish and what is written in Indigenous languages. This division seems illusory to me. Why should we assume that literature produced in Spanish is different from all of the literature written in the vast array of languages that we call Indigenous? What literary feature makes them different? What literary feature does Rarámuri poetry have in common with Zoque poetry that would allow the two to be bundled up in the same category? Why grant a single literary prize for all that is written in such dissimilar languages?<sup>7</sup> I don't think there is evidence that Indigenous literature exists as an entity.

The only two features that Indigenous languages share are the following: that these languages descend from other languages that were spoken in a territory that we call Mexico today, and that they have long been discriminated. To assume that such different languages, stemming from eleven phylogenetic origins that are radically different among themselves, would deploy the same poetic strategies and jointly stand in contrast to Spanish-language poetics seems unsustainable to me, for lack of evidence. And the grammatical, linguistic, and poetic strategies associated with each language – Indigenous or not – are radically different. Mixe poetics are as different from Spanish-language ones as Mixe poetics are from Seri ones. What is the real reason why these distinct literary manifestations, in different languages, are being grouped together? Perhaps because they aren't seen as able to compete for the same prizes as literature written in Spanish. Maybe these literatures are seen as too young or as lacking a poetic tradition – which is decidedly untrue.

Even though prizes and anthologies specific to Indigenous languages might be created with the best of intentions, I believe that segregation only perpetuates our current predicament. The possibility of publishing in languages besides Spanish remains small, with scant support for translation and a limited Indigenous-language reading public. In general, the efforts behind and the presence of literary production in languages beyond Spanish leave much to be desired for Mexico's literary panorama.

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<sup>7</sup> Note by editors of the 2023 Spanish edition (see footnote 19): Yásnaya probably considers these two languages so dissimilar because they belong to distinct linguistic families. Rarámuri comes from the Yuto-Nawa family while Zoque is from Mixe-Zoque. The linguistic distance between these two languages is comparable to that between an Indo-European language like Spanish, Kurdish, or Persian, and, for instance, a Mongolic language like Kalmyk or a Niger-Congo language like Igbo.

There's no such thing as Indigenous literature. Rather, we have literature in many different Indigenous languages. We have different literary traditions across a great diversity of languages. There is literature in Isthmus Zapotec, in Mixe, in Oaxacan Chontal, and in Spanish, but there is no single Indigenous literature, and if there is any Mexican literature at all, it is and must be linguistically diverse.

I believe that the movement to encourage literature in languages other than Spanish would be much enriched if publishing houses, festivals, book fairs, libraries, and readers opened themselves up to today's vast diversity of languages and poetics in their complexity, as equals. Though this might seem like an unattainable utopia, little by little, things are changing. The National Autonomous University of Mexico, for example, hosts the Carlos Montemayor Poetry Festival for the Languages of America, where one may listen to a Zapotec writer, a Portuguese-language writer, and a Mixtecan author, all under the same roof. And *that's* what should be normal.

January 23, 2013

## ***Hahahatl.* Should We Be Laughing?**

A few months ago, my friend Guillermo de León (you may read him on the Tumblr blog “De aquí y de allá” [From here and from there])<sup>8</sup> alerted me to a new phenomenon on social media: people were adding the ending *tl* to certain words so that they'd sound like they were in Nawatl. Once I began to explore, I found some true treasures – for instance, the moving *YOLOTL*, which plays with the acronym YOLO (which stands for the twenty-first-century *carpe diem*-like phrase *You Only Live Once*) and the word *yolotl* or *yollotl*, which means ‘heart’ in several Nawa languages. Besides the ingenious *yolotl*, I found a few other uses, like *hahahatl* or *fiestatl*, or even English-languages phrases to which the *tl* had been added: *I love youtl*, or *Like a bosstl*.

These kinds of linguistic plays are quite common, arising from interactions between speakers of different languages. I've always been curious about what mechanisms are activated when selecting relevant patterns to apply to one's own language so that it will “sound” like another. To make their language sound like French, Spanish speakers in Mexico will substitute their own article *el* for the French *le*, accenting words on the last syllable. *El perro*, or ‘the dog’, becomes *le perré*; and *el niño*, ‘the child’, becomes *le niñé*. To do the same with Russian, Spanish-speakers will add the suffix *ozky* to their words: *casa*, or ‘house’, becomes *cazosky*; and *mermelada*, or ‘marmalade’, becomes *mermeladozky*. The historian

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<sup>8</sup> TN: [tumblr.com/zeiashtar](https://www.tumblr.com/zeiashtar)

Sebastián van Doesburg once told me about how Dutch speakers add the suffix *os* to their words to make them sound like Spanish. To play these games and make such inferences a certain degree of interaction is required, of course. What Spanish-speaker in Mexico could take on a similar wordplay in reference to Swahili?<sup>9</sup> What suffix would we need to add to make it seem like our Spanish is actually Swahili? We don't know, because our interaction with Swahili speakers is in-existent, given our geographic distance. In Mixe, for example, I use the suffix *o* to make it sound like I'm speaking Spanish: I say *wo'ojko* instead of *wo'ojk*, which means 'comb'. I also use the suffix *ach* (*atsy*) to make it sound like I'm speaking mid-zone Mixe, saying *wo'ojk'atsy* instead of *wo'ojk*.

Up to this point, the suffix *tl* might appear to be inscribed within a phenomenon that arises from the contact between languages and our impressions of some of their features, allowing us to play word games with our own languages. Yet, this phenomenon is not as simple as it seems. The first oddity regarding the use of the suffix *tl* is that it is not simply used to make Spanish words sound like Nawatl, but to make them sound "Indigenous" in general, as if all Indigenous languages comprised a homogenous whole. This is symptomatic because it's not about far-off languages but about languages that have coexisted with Spanish for centuries. The images used in memes with phrases that end in *tl* are of people who hail from starkly different Indigenous communities. Why should the suffix *tl* accompany an image of Rigoberta Menchú,<sup>10</sup> who speaks a language from the Mayan family? The Mayan language family is utterly distinct from the Yuto-Nawa family to which Nawa languages belong.

Even after centuries of coexistence, those who share such memes do not appear to understand the profound linguistic differences between Mixtec, Rarámuri, Tsotsil, and Nawatl. It's like using the suffix *ozky* for Russian and Japanese words alike, just because neither are from America. That, of course, would be unthinkable. Yet it's predictable when it comes to what we call Indigenous languages, whose only common feature is that they were spoken in this land before Cortés's arrival. To push this idea even further, we may note that Nawatl is not a single linguistic system. Rather, according to certain specialists, the family includes more than fifteen languages that are unintelligible among themselves. Not all Nawa languages use the phoneme *tl*, meaning that this suffix only works for a subset of Nawa languages.

All in all, this might be a mere matter of ignorance – serious, but plain ignorant. Yet the implications are deeper. What criteria do people use to select the

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9 TN: Its local name is Kiswahili.

10 TN: Awarded a Nobel Peace Prize, Menchú is from a Guatemalan Quiche Maya community. Even in the face of horrific adversity as the Guatemalan government tortured and killed her mother, father, and brother, she has continued to advocate for Indigenous rights.

images that accompany such phrases? Some of these images were chosen because the people in them are wearing something other than typical western clothing, but this isn't always the case. So, I ask, how can someone know if a person is part of an Indigenous community and that therefore their image is eligible for publication alongside a phrase that ends in *tl*? What might be said of their skin color? If it's not the way they dress, then what is at stake when choosing certain images for these memes? It seems obvious to me that the construction of memes that end in *tl* is racist. It racializes what it means to be Indigenous by assigning certain characteristics. It treats the Indigenous as a race rather than as a political category in a context of colonization. It categorizes the Indigenous as an inferior and homogenous race. Just because we inhabited this territory before the arrival of Hernán Cortés, in these memes, it would seem that all Indigenous people constitute a single race with a specific skin color and that we also speak the same language: Nawatl. Plus, we're an inferior race, as can be inferred from the comments under these memes. The use of the suffix *tl* shifts from being mere wordplay and ends up being a clear manifestation of racism.

These wordplays with suffixes might simply be the consequence of interactions between languages – but they're always inscribed in the prejudices and relationships of communities of speakers. Of course, there are people who use the Russian suffix *ozky* to characterize Russians as a violent, mafia-ridden people. It's not always the case, but it happens. The wordplay itself is not the problem but rather the context in which it is inscribed and used.

In an ideal world, Spanish speakers who engage in such wordplay would use a given suffix for a specific variety of Nawatl, another one for Mixe, another for Maya, and so on for each of the languages spoken in Mexico today. But no, in a context like today's, this is not mere wordplay. For now, I will put out there that one can use the suffix *at* so that words in Spanish sound like they're in the Ayutla variant of Mixe, my mother tongue.

One of the most deplorable uses of such memes is the one portraying Ixil women in a trial against the Guatemalan dictator Efraín Ríos Montt. These women were giving their testimony of the horrifying torture, rape, and massacre of the Ixil people at the hands of the Guatemalan army. These women acted with extraordinary bravery and dignity but ended up in a meme inscribed with mocking phrase *Ta' buena esta cumbiatl*,<sup>11</sup> which could be translated as 'This cumbiatl is popping'. Shameful indeed.

August 28, 2015

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11 TN: Cumbia is a folk-dance and music genre that is very popular across Latin America.

## Borders, Why Borders?

“Borders, why borders, if my music carries love?”<sup>12</sup> the Argentine Leo Dan sung in one of his most well-known musical pieces. Something similar could be said about languages and national borders. Despite the rather absurd idea that a single identity and a single language should correspond to each country, the borders of Indigenous peoples’ territories and their linguistic areas were never taken into account in the drawing-up of nation-states.

In analyzing Mexico’s political divisions,<sup>13</sup> the situation is rather striking. None of the country’s internal or external borders have upheld the delimitations of its peoples and tongues. For instance, let us look at divisions by municipality. In Oaxaca, the leaders of Indigenous communities often stand as municipal authorities. Municipalities are governed by the Indigenous communities themselves. That is, in Oaxaca, the unit dividing the state – that is, the municipality – often lines up with the unit comprising the Indigenous people in question – the community. Although this is common in Oaxaca (as compared to other states in which municipalities aren’t governed by Indigenous people) this does not mean that the municipal borders have taken linguistic borders into account. In a single Oaxacan municipality, one might also find various communities with significant linguistic differences or that even speak radically dissimilar languages. In other states within Mexico, the situation is far worse. Indigenous communities are almost always subordinated to lobbyists or municipal leaders who aren’t Indigenous. In these cases, the municipal unit does not coincide with the most pertinent unit – the Indigenous community – and thus does not coincide with linguistic borders either.

Mexico’s division into states presents even more striking agglomerations. Mixtecan languages are spoken in three states: Oaxaca, Puebla, and Guerrero. What would have happened if all the Mixtecan languages and Mixtecan peoples were to comprise a single territory or state? What would have been different if the whole linguistic area were contained within a single state? Whether this would have affected the vitality and strength of the languages themselves is worth exploring. As with municipalities, Mexico’s division into states does not align with the country’s linguistic borders, cutting off the country’s spoken communities as well as its Indigenous peoples across borders created by the Mexican State.

The breaking up of Indigenous communities through borders has had serious consequences. We should consider that the country’s borders themselves were long

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12 TN: The song goes, “Fronteras, ¿por qué fronteras? Si en mi música hay amor”.

13 TN: Mexico is divided into 32 states, which are subdivided into municipalities.



in flux, even during the colonial period, but the delimitations of Native peoples' territories were never upheld. The Yuma and Cocopah people ended up divided by the border between the United States and Mexico. To the South, the delimitations between peoples were not respected either. The Chuj and Mam languages are spoken on both sides of the border. Furthermore, given the displacement that the Civil War in Guatemala caused, we have speakers of other Guatemalan languages within Mexico now, too. Some friends have told me that given the context of migratory control, it's quite common for Mexican speakers of Chuj to be just as discriminated as their Guatemalan Chuj brethren – the authorities demand that they prove their nationality whenever they attempt to travel to more central parts of Mexico. We have one people divided by a border, and they were never consulted about this.

Still, I believe that borders would matter less if people decided to work in common, but it is true that no geopolitical division, whether into municipalities, states, or countries, coincides with the territories and linguistic areas of Indigenous peoples. Does this have consequences or not? And if so, which?

June 19, 2013

## Is There Linguistic Activism in Mexico?

*Activism around animal rights  
is more articulated and impactful  
than activism around linguistic diversity.  
-As stated over coffee*

Last month in Oaxaca, Doctor Lyle Campbell gave a conference on the Endangered Languages Catalogue, which is available on said project's website.<sup>14</sup> As expected, his forecasts were not hopeful. Every three months, a language dies in the world, and 6 percent of languages across the globe have fewer than ten speakers.<sup>15</sup> From the 1960s to date, 227 languages have died out. According to Doctor Campbell – a researcher from the University of Hawai'i – and the team behind the Endangered Languages catalog, addressing the record-breaking, accelerated loss of languages worldwide should be a top priority for humanity today. This lan-

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<sup>14</sup> The goal of the Endangered Languages Project, as stated on the website [endangeredlanguages.com](http://endangeredlanguages.com), is to “register samples of endangered languages, access them, and share them, researching these languages and providing advice and suggestions to those who work with the documentation and protection of endangered languages”. (TN: this is a back-translation of a quotation from 2014. The project description has been updated since.)

<sup>15</sup> TN: This essay was originally published in 2014 and has not been updated since.

guage loss is a direct reflection of the fact that the linguistic rights of millions of people are not being upheld. Mexico is evidently no exception.

In the face of this situation, language activists have made great strides in many parts of the world: Hawaiian, a language that was once at high risk of disappearing, is doing better: one may go to school in Hawaiian from pre-school to university, and its number of speakers has grown spectacularly. The Māori language nests in New Zealand have also secured new speakers, and there are many such examples across the globe. To ensure that the new generations learn at-risk languages requires great activism and militance.

In Mexico, we have seen many efforts to strengthen those Indigenous languages whose speakers are dwindling. Yet, these efforts have mostly focused on the development of writing skills rather than on guaranteeing that children learn Mixe, Wixárika, or Otomí<sup>16</sup> as mother tongues. Sadly – and despite extraordinary efforts under the worst of circumstances – these initiatives remain uncoordinated. It's not enough to translate the national anthem to Nawatl, nor to record songs and create *lotería*<sup>17</sup> games (guilty as charged). We need to make sure that all of these actions follow a strategic plan to ensure an increase in the number of children who speak languages like Nawatl, Otomí, and Mixe. We need to take several measures across different fronts in a systematic and planned fashion so as to secure as great an impact as possible.

I understand that activism always emanates from civil society's efforts to pressure States and governments to take measures that serve a given goal, including specific actions and programs. For instance, the activism around gender equality that Indigenous women spearheaded has placed their demands on the agendas of national, international, and government organizations. Feminist Indigenous women have their own training spaces. They build their skills in order to make an impact, and they create strategic plans so that they can fulfill their goals. There are special funds and NGOs for Indigenous women, as well as awards to recognize their labor. Certainly, the Indigenous women's movement still has plenty of challenges ahead, but they've made considerable inroads compared to those of linguistic activism.

While many of us are aware of the enormity of the loss of linguistic diversity in Mexico, the truth is that we have not articulated a unified movement. We have no training spaces, nor are there NGOs that specialize in linguistic revitalization. There's no short-, medium-, or long-term strategic plan to revert this loss. There's

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16 TN: The Otomí self-denominations vary according to where communities live, with the terms including Hñähñu, Hñähño, Nuhu, Nhato, and Nuhmu.

17 TN: A traditional Mexican game similar to bingo portraying the illustrations and names of quintessential people and objects that reflect the culture.

no plan to sway the State to adopt effective measures, nor is there a strategy for concrete actions. I would venture to say that, in Mexico, there is no unified movement for linguistic activism.

I do not wish to discredit the extraordinary, daily efforts of many organizations and people, from their own battlegrounds, but I do believe that we should articulate our efforts further. I believe that it would be desirable for those activists in Mexico's Mozilla software community who are localizing (or translating) Firefox to Zapotec in the Sierra Sur, as well as to Chatino and Mixe, to collaborate with the lawyers at the Professional Indigenous Center for Advising, Defense, and Translation (*Centro Profesional Indígena de Asesoría, Defensa y Traducción A. C.*), which works to uphold the linguistic rights of Indigenous speakers given that many people have been incarcerated without ever having access to an interpreter during their trial. I imagine a scenario in which people who write in Indigenous languages engage with those who design vitality diagnoses, with the latter collaborating with political scientists who can help us influence the public and political agenda, as Tajëëw Díaz explains. I'd also like to imagine a scenario in which we better articulate the academic work of linguists with the everyday efforts of activists.

There is still plenty of work ahead, and the task seems almost as daunting as the challenge itself. Yet, we must begin. Luckily, social interactions are mediated by languages. Thus, we can work to strengthen languages and to guarantee new generations of speakers across multiple spaces. It seems to me that many spaces, including that of the Indigenous movement itself, still see language as akin to cultural manifestations like singing, dancing, and other traditional practices that we vaguely lump under "cultural activities". Yet language is more than that. The fight to revert the loss of linguistic diversity is, above all, a political one that is intimately tied to the struggle for the autonomy of Mexico's Indigenous peoples. As long as we don't realize this, the rescuing of our languages will be seen as equatable to the rescuing of our traditional dress, as someone once told me. Furthermore, we need to build alliances with other movements and with native Spanish speakers. We could do much more if the matter of language loss were adopted by the Indigenous movements for autonomy, the defense of our territories, and the fight for the rights of Indigenous women. We need to position the matter of language within the diverse spaces fighting for the recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples and human rights in general. Language extinction is among the direct consequences of social injustice and should be addressed in this context.

It's rather disheartening to hear people directly involved with Indigenous peoples condescendingly say that to "rescue" a language simply requires that we have *little poetry contests* or gatherings where we play traditional *tunes*. No, language is a far more radical matter. Language is not a mere "cultural" spectacle.

Nor is it folklore. The Indigenous movement itself should conceive of and discuss itself and its goals using Mexico's many languages. The Indigenous movement should officially use Indigenous languages as it analyzes and constructs its proposals. As the Euskera and Catalan cases have shown, the matter of language is evidently a political matter, too. As long as we don't realize this, it seems likely that we will press on with multiple actions that will barely address the plunge in speakers and usage spaces regarding the languages of Mexico.

Activists for the rights of Indigenous people in Mexico could also become activists for the languages of Mexico. Otherwise, the current trend might go on: at present, the children of the leaders of the Indigenous movement, and even the children of bilingual professors, have little chance of learning their parents' languages and are far more likely to acquire Spanish as a mother tongue.

The situation itself might lead us to questions that we could solve together. I don't have any clear answers still. How should we construct linguistic activism? How to articulate concrete and gradual strategies? How to make an impact so that specific policies and programs might be established on top of the many initiatives that already exist? Where can one receive training in order to take up this kind of work? How to stop the death of languages and the violation of the linguistic rights of speakers?

May 22, 2014

## Annex: Excerpts from Yásnaya Elena Aguilar Gil's Social Media

Most of the Mexican population is monolingual and Spanish-speaking, but most of us Indigenous people are bilingual. (Tweet by Yásnaya Aguilar from August 11, 2014)

*Tukyo'm*, my village, rising from the *mountain*. Shaded with trees and leaves like a piggy bank filled with memories. You'll see why a person would want to live there forever. Dawn, morning, mid-day, night: all the same, except for the changes in the air. The air changes the color of things there. And life whirs by as quiet as a murmur . . . the pure murmuring of life.<sup>18</sup> (Facebook post from November 13, 2016, in which Aguilar slightly alters a fragment of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* so that it will apply to her own town).

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<sup>18</sup> This post substituted a couple of words (marked in italics) from Juan Rulfo's novel *Pedro Páramo* so as to apply to Aguilar's town. TN: This quote has been reproduced using Margaret Sayer Peden's translation: Rulfo, J. 1994. *Pedro Páramo*. New York: Grove Press.

It would seem that maybe everything sounds more poetic in an Indigenous language. But watch out, that's discrimination by idealization. (Tweet by Aguilar, May 8, 2013)

Was the fact that, some one-hundred-fifty years ago, most of the Spanish-speaking Mexican population was illiterate a valid reason to stop producing books in Spanish? Then why is this same argument being used against Mexican languages? (Facebook post by Aguilar, November 28, 2012).

Indigenous peoples are: \_\_\_\_\_. \*Almost certainly, anything you write in this blank space will be an unsustainable generalization. (Tweet by Aguilar, June 4, 2014)

Indigenous is NOT a racial category. Repeat this one-thousand times. (Tweet by Aguilar, September 3, 2016)

You should know that Indigenous languages are also modern languages. (Tweet by Aguilar, November 14, 2013)

Nation-states are to linguistic diversity what water is to oil. (Tweet by Aguilar, January 12, 2015)

A Mapuche nation divided into two States: Argentina and Chile.

A Sámi nation divided into four States: Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Russia. (Tweets by Aguilar, September 25, 2017)

I'd rather have a living language with no grammar handbooks than a dead language with a thousand handbooks. (Tweet by Aguilar, April 18, 2013)

We Indigenous people shouldn't get into politics? PUH-LEASE, the category "Indigenous" IS a political category (not racial, not cultural. But racialized and culturalized, yes). (And I'm talking about politics, NOT political parties, which are a whole different story.) (Facebook post by Aguilar, October 15, 2016).

The Secretariat of Finance, the Tax Administration Service, the Superior Auditor, and all those who feel the need to charge property taxes on communal land URGENTLY need to take classes and intensive workshops and go to conferences so that they can learn about Indigenous peoples' rights to autonomy, self-determination, consultation, and about the ILO's Convention 169, etc . . . This isn't just about culture. (Facebook post by Aguilar, February 12, 2016).<sup>19</sup>

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**19** English translation by María Cristina Hall. First published in Spanish as "Ser o no ser: bilingüismos", "Hábitos al hablar", "La literatura indígena no existe", "Jajajatl: ¿es para reírse", "Fronteras, ¿por qué fronteras?", and "¿Hay activismo lingüístico en México?" in Yásnaya E. Aguilar Gil. 2023. *Áa: manifiestos sobre la diversidad lingüística*, Ana Aguilar Guevara, Julia Bravo Varela, Gustavo Ogarrío Badillo, Valentina Quaresma Rodríguez (comps.). Madrid: Almadía. These articles were first written from 2011 to 2015 for the online edition of the magazine *Este País*.

Claudia Kozak

# Latin American Digital Literature: A Close-Distant-Material-Collaborative-Localized Reading

This text is the product of several research projects in which I have addressed Latin American digital literature with the goal of making theoretical, critical, and historical contributions to the construction of this field of study in the region. I believe that we must account for the palpable transformations in the contemporary digital culture in terms of the literary texts within the literacy period of western culture, without ascribing to the technologist and acritical perspectives that exalt technological novelty for its own sake.

Thus, this text aspires to make a contribution, *from the South*, to the field of digital world literature studies, allowing us to emphasize modes of reading that question the homogenization of production, circulation, and reading processes *from the North*. Here, North and South are not used as closed or literal geographical categories. Rather, these are simultaneously unstable and metaphorical geopolitical categories, as I will develop later on following the Epistemologies of the South (de Sousa Santos; de Sousa Santos and Meneses).<sup>1</sup>

One of my research axes seeks to account for reading processes of such literatures using an approach that I call a *close-distant-material-collaborative-localized reading*. The goal is to debate different modes of approaching the critical reading of digital literature so that we may then propose readings with a certain degree of specificity regarding Latin American digital literature. Without recurring to identity essentialisms around what is deemed Latin American, we instead lay out mobile differentials that are nonetheless tied to localizable spaces of enunciation, in tension with a literature that is simultaneously quite international. This approach combines several aspects that I consider particularly relevant: the politics of the materiality of digital literature against its invisibilizing naturalization, which is so characteristic of hegemonic digital culture; collaborative reading processes that may go beyond the standardized *user* readings that follow trends we could also

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<sup>1</sup> The original version of this article was published in Spanish in the first semester of 2022, before accusations of sexual harassment and intellectual extractivism against Boaventura de Sousa Santos were made public. Such behaviors would appear to stand in contradiction with the concepts of decolonial thought and the epistemologies of the South. In highlighting the meanings of these concepts, which were often developed in collaboration with other people, I have chosen to visibilize those concepts that I believe are most valuable rather than a single, referential person.

deem hegemonic; and the tensions between geopolitical localizations and delocalizations in the context of globalization. To put this to the test, the latter part of this text will focus on a set of Latin American pieces of digital literature that comprise what I call the *migrant corpus of digital literature*.

## The Close-Distant-Material-Collaborative

With this – somewhat excessive, though necessarily so, and perhaps even incomplete – list, I seek to update a debate that is far from new in the field of digital literary studies by adding a few lines of my own. On the convenience or inconvenience of close and distant readings, we have come a long way.<sup>2</sup> Much has been said about which option is more appropriate: textualist and close readings that solely (or almost solely) focus on the textual surface, or distant readings, which observe larger sets of works at a distance from the texts and, in the computerized format we are considering, generally rely on computers' capabilities to deal with vast quantities of data without specifically stopping at the *texts* themselves (this term is somewhat provisional and not entirely appropriate).

Still, some criticism has insisted that, if what we are considering is a piece of literature, then we must not lose sight of the literature itself,<sup>3</sup> and we would have to read what the texts say and how (Koskimaa 2005; Rosario 2013; among others). Whether what concerns us constitutes literature would lead to another, long-winded discussion that I have taken up on several other occasions, though I could briefly state that I conceive of it as an *expanded, digital-born literature*. Even recognizing that this is a literature of the “apparatus” – drawing from Philippe Bootz (2011) – this line of research sustains that the device also produces textuality that may be subject to close reading, even if the textuality is not the same as that of printed literature. Thus Koskimaa conducts his reading by “applying the close-reading technique to the ultra-well-known fiction hypertext *Afternoon. A story*, by Michael Joyce (1987)” (2005: 177) but sustains that “to read and analyze a text like *Afternoon*, we must not only observe the textual layer (narrative, rhetorical,

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<sup>2</sup> I have addressed this in a more synthesized way in previous texts.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring to a kind of *digital textual art* production that includes both text with a preeminently poetic function—that is not secondary to other verbal-language functions—and mechanisms for production/circulation/reception as tied to language itself as well as to digital environments, which can also be charged with poetic function. This is a textual art of programmable mediums (Cayley 2002) in which programming itself plays a significant role as a compositional/poetic device. Its borders with other digital arts are blurry, meaning that its specificity with respect to other digital arts is soft but not entirely inexistent.

and linguistic aspects) as in any other fictional text, but also the hypertextual level [. . .]. These two levels may affect one another and cannot be approached in an isolated or independent manner” (2005: 191).

In a historical sense, the appearance of new kinds of textualist readings has largely and understandably come as a reaction to fascination around the device. As Saemmer sustains (2008: 123), in the face of readings that only accounted for such pieces’ novelty in a generalist way, a necessary change of perspectives emerged in order to not only read what was being said beyond the novelty but also to precisely characterize its stylistic peculiarities. This is, all in all, a new stylistics as well – at least when we go beyond the acritical reproduction of, for instance, classical rhetoric, incorporating a specific rhetorical analysis for digital language that specifically emphasizes the features of digital interfaces. Saemmer thus argues for the need to analyze the figures on the surface as well as those of the interface, specifically stopping to consider them. One aspect that I consider key to Saemmer’s analysis of digital poetry is the recognition of interface figures that *endanger* habitually used grammar in digital interactions (124). This allows us to highlight the estranged tie between digital poetry and the digital culture in which it is inscribed, denaturalizing its hegemonic modes of meaning construction. Thus, a close reading does not necessarily imply autonomizing formalism.

In fact, another area of literary studies – that is not specific to the reading of digital literature – argues that textualist close readings give way to ethnocentric formalisms. So goes Franco Moretti’s very well-known argument (2000), with the author identifying close reading with certain, specific models, such as that of *New Criticism*, or even with deconstruction, which we could tie to the epistemology of the Global North. To Moretti, the canon that such readings construct is restricted and ethnocentric (57). Yet, as I have noted elsewhere, in Latin America, we have other versions of textualism, since we often read from the texts themselves, without reducing them to the western canon; rather, we read them in line with life, that is, in line with politics. In arguing that we should recover several aspects of close reading, I do so from the standpoint of the politization of this form of reading. I do not consider this a self-sustaining mode of reading but one that is tied to other terms in the chain of readings that I propose in this paper, with localized reading allowing us to emphasize digital literature that discusses the hegemonic meanings of the global algorithmic culture (Striphos 2015).

Certainly, one aspect of interest when proposing a distant-reading for digital literature is that it provides for the possibility of geopolitical mapping – thus focusing not on the texts but on aspects that we cannot see from close up, as with sets of texts. The totality of the contemporary phenomenon of data visualization and the perspectives it yields so as to apprehend relationships between vast quantities of works has been associated with such distant readings. Yet, the data



visualization within contemporary algorithmic culture is still a central methodology of global capitalism that is especially applied in data mining. In the spirit of Moretti's criticism of close readings as ethnocentric, we should also consider the former when it comes to distant reading.

A general vision on the close/distant reading debate for the digital field may be found in the article by N. Katherine Hayles – a referential theorizer in the field – published in 2010, and rightly titled “How We Read”. The text does not specifically address the reading of digital literature but rather the differences between *print and digital literacy*, yet its contributions also apply to digital literature. While, in much of the text, the author addresses the debates that have cropped up around what (new) reading skills digital literacy does or does not provide – including the revision of neuroscience-based studies that discuss whether reading through hyperlinks augments or degrades brain capabilities, for instance – she also reviews different reading modes for digital environments, stopping to consider several pros and cons of ways of reading that appeal either to close or distant reading. It stands out that, in the first case, we have a reading of topics and their formalizations, with structures and textual rhetoric; while, in the second, we instead have a joint reading of vast corpora that do not consider their individuality as much as their articulation, a kind of reading that could now be conducted through machine reading, given that it is precisely through computers that we may access enormous amounts of data and process them to determine recurrences, semantic and syntactic patterns, logical ties between parts, and other aspects that could be considered within a text, though they are more frequently applied to groups of texts, hence generating an association between distant reading and machine reading.

Hayles adds to this by describing hyperreading, which is a form of close reading to an extent but is specific to the digital, as it includes reading actions like filtering by keywords, skimming the text, hyperlinking, scanning, juxtaposing several open windows at the same time, and more. I would sustain that Hayles's proposal aligns with close reading, but only to an extent, as it implies a reading of the textual surface but avoids considering this surface as if it were a printed text. In fact, hyperreading is both a reading of the text and of the interface, which speaks to how the author considers the differences in materiality between digital and printed texts, as experienced through on-screen reading. Alexandra Saemmer's aforementioned critical developments focusing on certain rhetorics of the interface could be associated with such hyperreading, for example.

Hayles does not propose considering each reading in isolation, but rather observing the synergies produced when these forms of reading are deployed simultaneously, thus producing extended or expanded digital reading. If we raise the stakes in terms of the synergy between close reading, hyperreading, and distant-

machine reading, we may add other necessary modes of reading: the material, collaborative, and localized.

The reading that I call material involves all the other materialities involved in digital reading – not just surface or interface materialities. In fact, in a much earlier text (2002), Hayles herself had already highlighted the way materiality intervenes in literature in general and in digital literature in particular (19). She had proposed the notion of “material metaphors” to account for the transfer of meaning not between words – which would be the case of the metaphor, as a verbal, rhetorical figure – but between a network of symbols (those in code, for example) and the material apparatus (22). In effect, the materiality of the machines themselves – the hardware which we can touch, but also those bits that, though intangible, aren’t entirely immaterial – intervenes in all digital devices, and thus in all digital literary devices. This would lead us to ask ourselves where all of these material components come from, who builds them, who distributes them, who has or does not have access to them, and to what extent this “dirty” digital matter acquired under flagrantly exploitative conditions – to quote Jusi Parikka (2012) – has incurred in our everyday lives. The meanings adopted in the aforementioned materiality of interfaces also have an effect, considering how they appeal to our sense of sight, hearing, and touch. Yet, the formal materiality of software, as Matthew Kirschbaum (2008) calls it, also interferes: we should note the materiality of the written code, including its visual aspect, and the entire universe of relationships between different parts that we do not see *on the surface* but that necessarily comprise the possible meanings of any piece of digital literature.

According to John Cayley (2002), we may also read certain, specific rhetorics in the materiality of code. For example, on the one hand, we have the rhetorics of confrontation between a symbolic construction that depends on strict, logical syntax (that of the programming language) along with the syntax and argumentation of natural language – here I believe we may consider potential parallelisms or inversions. On the other hand, we have what the author calls an “aesthetics of compilation”: the creation of linguistic or symbolic constructs that are read according to different levels of addressability; that is, these constructs are brought to the surface by different parts of the code, which I believe would allow for a mode of reading other relationships between the parts of the digital pieces, beyond those we may detect in plain sight when reading on the surface alone.

On the other hand, all phenomena of technological obsolescence and lability are also tied to digital materiality, as with the relationship between proprietary software and its being discontinued due to business reasons or because a given part has not been updated with the same phenomenic qualities across different devices. One important corpus of digital literature is now almost impossible to

access – unless the digital literature community were to heavily invest time, efforts, and money to remake or fix those works that had been created using Flash – not only because the company that managed Flash software decided to discontinue its support in December of 2020, but also because of Internet browsers’ decision to bar the Flash plugin.

Critical Code Studies complement the latter notion<sup>4</sup> by highlighting how the choices that the programmer makes between different possibilities when programming are *culturally embedded*. Following Mark Marino (2013) – a key figure in this line of research – we may affirm that these cultural ties have implications regarding, for example, affiliation (or not) to open-source code; whether one emphasizes a certain programming language, which implies subscribing to a given ethos and paradigm; the use of certain predetermined libraries; and the kind of comments added to the code, which Marino reads as the popular archive (bearing their own *lore*, or traditional knowledge [see par. 37]). All of this helps expose the modes of inscription regarding how we make sense of contemporary technoculture – hegemonically, divergently, etc. In certain pieces of digital literature, Marino has also read a certain kind of artistic communication at play. For instance, he reads this in *The Transborder Immigrant Tool*, an app created by Electronic Disturbance Theater (EDT) at an artistic residency at the University of California, San Diego, which aids migrants as they cross borders – such as the Sonoran Desert between Mexico and the United States – steering them to places with water using poetic instructions, that is, poem-instructions that are both instrumental and poetic. The piece that Marino analyzes also shares certain affinities with the Latin American migrant corpus that I will refer to later on. Although it was geographically produced in the North and has, to a certain extent, been associated with a university of the “center”, it could fit within the epistemologies of the South.<sup>5</sup> As to the reading of poetry in the code’s material, Marino reads the commentary in the code left by one of the piece’s main programmers – Jason Najarro – as parallel to the poems themselves,

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4 Marino explains: “Critical Code Studies is the application of humanities-style hermeneutics to the interpretation of the extra-functional significance of computer source code. It is a form of media-specific analysis that uses the source code as an entry point for discussion of technoculture [ . . . ] The goal is to develop a more detailed understanding of encoded objects through engagement with the unique, historically and materially situated signs of their code” (Marino 2013: par. 26).

5 As Marino notes, Amy Sara Carroll—the poet—considers the poems “conceptual writing” but also displaced writing: “Carroll notes that the piece moves away from the aesthetic-focus of North American [sic] conceptual writing toward the Latin American tradition, which embraces a more explicitly political mission” (par.13). She adds that: “the piece encourages the traveler to orient himself or herself by facing ‘south in the Northern Hemisphere’” (Marino 2013: par. 18).

which may be listened to on the phones that have installed the app.<sup>6</sup> According to Marino, the drama of some of these comments, for instance around the testing that the program conducts to detect whether the desert water stations remain active or have been contaminated or dismantled, can be read in consonance with the drama of the poem-instructions for finding water. In both cases, the drama is tied to survival within a highly hostile environment. These comments could thus be considered part of the work's poetic dimension:

I would like to examine the code itself as another channel of poetry and poetic intervention, not because it resembles the structures of traditional verse as is often the case in Perl Poetry or many instances of codework, or poetry that plays upon the semantic structures and conventions of code, but rather because the code represents a text of semantic signs which when performed (either through human or machine reading) intervene in culture by creating a poetic disruption. (Marino 2013: par. 5)

Now, to carry out synergetic readings that incorporate close, distant, hyper, and material readings, a collaborative reading would prove suitable as well. Indeed, not all people possess the skills to synergistically combine all of these forms of reading. One collaborative reading articulating close, code, and distant reading is that of Jessica Pressman, Mark Marino, and Jeremy Douglas, in their book *Reading Project. A Collaborative Analysis of William Poundstone's Project for Tachistoscope {Bottomless Pit}*. This is not a reading conducted in parts and then lumped together. Rather, this is a collaborative reading that mobilizes individual reading skills through collective reading. Any collaborative reading is necessarily experimental: it implies navigating reading processes for which we still lack sufficient established references and clear expectations. Being unable to predict results is, in fact, one of the features that Adorno (1983 [1970]) attributed to the experimental arts quite some time ago. And while much of the best digital literature remains experimental because it exposes the device by opening the black boxes of hegemonic, digital culture, collaborative-experimental reading can serve as a complement.<sup>7</sup> Ideally, this could mark the first step to boosting reading skills beyond those of the standard *user* readings characteristic of computerized societies, not only in the specific field of literary and cultural criticism but also for the broader reading public. Nor have the reading skills within the modern literacy culture

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6 In Marino's (2012) reading of *The Perl Poetry Generator 256 (ppg256)* by Nick Montfort, the poeticism of code is not reduced to the commentary in natural language but also focuses on constructive aspects of the code, such as concision, elegance, and work with specific restrictions as an Oulipian experiment.

7 I have analyzed the creation of digital literature in experimental, collaborative communities, creative laboratories, and disruptive social technologies elsewhere.

quickly consolidated across all participants. As Walter Ong's developments have shown (1982), the masses have not only been faced with trudging the long path of literacy but also the path of cultural preparation regarding the ways of reading an artifact, such as a book.

## Localized

Lastly, I would like to include the notion of a situated or localized reading. Indeed, digital literature is in concert with the "world literature space" which puts in play relationships of power between positionalities assumed and acquired both in the national and international space at the same time, as Pascale Casanova suggests (2001 [1999]). Still, the world literature debate as proposed by Casanova is not free of ethnocentrism, as it conceives of anachronic differentials of temporality within the world concert, which, to Casanova, becomes clear when peripheral regions develop "outdated" literary concepts while, in central areas, literary conceptions have already moved to another place. Casanova states that "Anachronism is characteristic of areas distant from the literary Greenwich meridian. [. . .] These discrepancies explain the difficulties that specialists in comparative literature face in trying to establish transnational periodizations" (2004, 101). The world literary space would be better understood, however, if we were to move past this biased dialectic between the center and periphery and instead build readings of more shifting, less linear, crossings between parts. Still, such crossings in the world space could not be read independently of the debates, differences, and hegemonies that Casanova herself recognizes in any case.

As to digital literature, the fact that it is world or international literature is worth highlighting, as it necessarily participates in the state of globalized computational development at a historic moment in which the idea of the nation has blurred, giving way to financial globalism (Beck 2000) with cultural processes surpassing national barriers. Verónica Gómez (2018), for instance, has analyzed the way printed literature – associated with what we know as literacy and book culture (Steiner 1990) – is also historically tied to the consolidation of nation-states. Consequently, Gómez argues, we must consider that in "digital literature, the sovereign territory is reformulated under the vector idea of the interzone territorialities of cyberspace, which produces the corrosion of the nation-state as an axis for the construction of foundational discourses [about digital literature]"<sup>8</sup> (2018: 2). Leonardo Flores, meanwhile, questions the "narratives of national and re-

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<sup>8</sup> Translator's Note (TN): Unless English-language texts are cited, translations are my own.

gional literary traditions that refer to electronic literature in order to show how it is primarily tied to digital technologies and international influences” (2017: par. 5). While Flores recognizes that the national, through the “subjects and cultural traditions that have forged the author” (par. 38) may have an effect, he believes that such literature is above all digital, before being Caribbean or Latin American (par. 38). In my perspective, the digital literature that I am addressing is *at the same time digital and Latin American*, being *interrelated* to the extent that we cannot prioritize one condition above the other. I subscribe to the idea of interzone territories that Gómez puts forth, so long as we can recognize that they are not necessarily identical across different geopolitical contexts. Otherwise, we would risk losing sight of the computational development that took root as of the mid-twentieth century, accelerating in more recent years and very significantly formatting the technical image of the contemporary world in a weaving of economic, political, and cultural ties, in essence, *from the North*. As noted at the beginning of this text, South and North are not literal localizations, but metaphorical ones – and the case of *The Transborder Immigrant Tool* proves this.

[There is] a field of epistemic challenges that seeks to repair the damage and impact historically caused by capitalism in its colonial relationship with the world. This conception of the South partially overlaps with the geographic South, a set of countries and regions in the world [that have been] submitted to European colonialism and that, with exceptions – like Australia and New Zealand – did not enjoy the same levels of economic development as those of the Global North: Europe and North America.<sup>9</sup> This is not a full overlap because, on the one hand, within the geographic North, broad classes and swathes of society – workers, women, Indigenous people, people of African descent, and Muslims – have been subject to capitalist and colonial domination while, on the other hand, within the geographic South, there have always been “small Europes”, small local elites who benefited from capitalist and colonial domination who, after their [countries’] independences, continued exerting [this domination] against subordinate social groups and classes. (de Sousa Santos and Menezes 2014: 10–11)

Latin American digital literature is thus an object of two-front localization: on the one hand, this literature emerges from the heat of computational developments in a western/westernized world and is thus framed in globalized digital cultures. On the other, this is also a localized literature that habitually questions the *central* hegemonic meanings ascribed to digital culture. In digital literature produced *from the South*, the impregnation of this gaze has become palpable – a gaze toward literary works in sync with a critical gaze that recognizes in this practice a very specific art form of the digital age, one that does not always abide by the

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9 TN: By North America the authors are likely not referring to the continent, which includes Mexico, but to the hegemonic space to the north of said country.

norms of mainstream digital culture. That digital literature is also a thing of the place that it occupies in the world is easy to observe from Latin America, not only because it is easier to detect relationships of power when one is not in a central or dominant position, but also because ties to other languages, specifically to computing language – which is central to the processes of contemporary economic globalism – easily steers us to this subspace of world literature, outside its relative autonomy as a literary space, in the form of technological modernization. This was also true when literature was the stuff of books alone, but it is much more evident now that it is not.

Likewise, when it comes to the study of Latin American digital literature itself, we must account for this two-front situation given that, on many occasions, the digital humanities have also attempted to adapt the humanities to digital culture without questioning the modes in which the digital is enmeshed with global techno-financial capitalism. Following Domenico Fiormonte's questions about the digital humanities *from the South*, we might state that “the Digital Humanities not only need more cultural criticism [. . .], but also more politics” (2018: 28). Thus, I do not advocate for the denial or abandoning of digital humanities studies, or of digital literature in my case, but propose a critical digital humanities that can bear the weight of its glocalizations (Robertson 1991) from the decolonizing of technology (Martini 2017).

Within this framework, I will now delve into the notion of a *migrant corpus of Latin American digital literature* as tied to the epistemologies of the South, a notion that I have mentioned elsewhere to refer to a set of Latin American pieces of digital literature that turn their displaced, decentered positionality into a disruptive device for intervention in the techno-global, hegemonic *sensorium*. This is not only because of their thematic relationship to people's displacement or migration, which is so characteristic of globalization, though these topics do appear within the corpus quite frequently, but also because of the migration of meanings that makes clear the need to displace those hegemonic techno-global meanings – which may nonetheless emerge in other geographies. This need is especially heightened in Latin America. Thus, as a simultaneously inherent and surplus manifestation of contemporary digital cultures, Latin American digital literature transits the borders of multiple migrations: texts migrate from book to screen; languages migrate toward a codependence between binary numerical codes, words, sounds, images, and mobile gestures; natural languages migrate under the *mandate* of a globalized, vehicular English; the bodies themselves that produce and read this literature in movement, which has been de- and relocalized, migrate as well. For example, this may be read in procedures that assume error as a politics of meaning, against the alleged transparencies of global discourse,

laying bare the strangeness that linguistic difference produces. While Spanish is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, it is nonetheless a *minority* language.

For at least two decades, people born and raised in Latin America who produce digital literature have often moved to other geographies. Sometimes, they take up permanent or long-term residency in the places where they have migrated, but it varies. For example, they may continue their migration elsewhere, or travel for artistic residencies abroad more than once, perhaps residing alternately between their places of origin and their territories of migration, or they may return to their home countries after a given period. The motives behind such forms of migration may be personal or family related but are often tied to opportunities to develop one's work, as with travel for artistic residencies, postgraduate studies, or incursions into artistic circles with better opportunities of visibility and recognition.

A non-exhaustive but representative list of Latin American migrants and travelers in this canon of Latin American digital literature, which is still taking shape, would include artists who primarily produce digital literature as well as artists using new media who, on occasion, produce digital literature: Amaryllis Quintero (Cuba-Venezuela-Colombia); André Vallias (Brazil-Germany-Brazil); Belén Gache (Argentina-Spain); Diego Bonilla (Mexico-United States); Doménico Chiappe (Peru-Venezuela-Spain); Eduardo Navas (El Salvador-United States); Eduardo Kac (Brazil-United States); Eugenio Tisselli (Mexico-Spain); Gabriela Golder (Argentina-France-Argentina-Canada-Argentina); Gustavo Romano (Argentina-Spain); Iván Marino (Argentina-Spain); Juan B. Gutiérrez (Colombia-United States); Luis Correa-Díaz (Chile-United States); Milton Läufer (Argentina-United States-Germany); Romina Cazón (Argentina-Mexico); Santiago Ortiz (Colombia-Spain-Argentina); Tina Escaja (Spain-United States); Vinicius Marquet (Mexico-Holland-Mexico-Belgium).

It is not that Latin America only produces digital literature that migrates, but we may note the degree to which the practice is constituted in tandem with the geographic migration produced by globalization. It is relevant that Latin American pieces of digital literature that may be included in the *migrant corpus* often specifically play with linguistic hybridization and/or confrontation, which occurs more generally in almost all migrant literature, digital or not. As we will observe later on, when we shall analyze *Grão* (2012) by Álvaro Andrade Garcia, this can also occur in pieces produced without the mediation of geographic migration, as estranged critical commentary on the migration of languages emerges from the heart of computational globalization itself.

I will quickly overview a few of the pieces in which the latter becomes apparent: in *Postales* (2000) by Gabriela Golder, produced during a self-affirmation trip



to France, which was also a trip of uprootedness, the interactive piece is presented mixing Spanish and French while exposing a certain discomfort with the cultural-territorial ties of language. In *PAC. Poesía asistida por computadora* (2006) and in *The 27th/ El 27* (2014), both by Eugenio Tisselli, processes of automatic translation between languages are used as functional and poetic devices involving either politics of error in the translation chain (due to translations and retranslations), or languages that have become estranged due to the fallibility of automatic translations. It is also significant that Tisselli has worked on collaborative projects like *ojoVoz*, whose website describes it as “an open-code mobile/web platform for the collaborative creation of community maps and memories”. *Los ojos de la milpa*, a project created in Oaxaca’s Sierra Mixe, can be read in the Mixe (Ayuuk) language but also in Spanish and English; *Sauti ya wakulima*, which was created in Tanzania, may be accessed in Kiswahili or English. Eduardo Navas, who has lived in the United States from a young age and whose work is generally in English, has not fully abandoned Spanish nor the estrangement of linguistic uprootedness, which may be gleaned in his experimental writing in his Twitter project *@poemita*, which specifically uses remixes as a device. While the texts are in English, it is significant that the text’s title is still in Spanish, which produces estrangement. Meanwhile, in an ironic gesture around technological conceptualism of the South, Belén Gache sells words in English on the *Word-Market* (2012), producing property certificates so that only those with the certificates can use the words.

If we stop at a piece like *Grão* (2012) by Álvaro Andrade Garcia, with programming by Lucas Junqueira, we may note that the first interaction seems unfriendly, since we see the work of a Brazilian poet enclosed in a screen whose implicit user instructions (in menu form) are in Chinese. Something unexpected precludes easy and comfortable reading. Something unlikely in a world of standardized digital formats – not in the sense of the computer program’s own probabilities, since the piece was effectively programmed so the menu would show Chinese ideograms, but in the sense of the cultural programming tied to habitual literary expectations as well as to those around efficient online communications, which are also habitual or standardized. In its version as an object, that is, in the box that contains the pen drive with the offline version that the poet has also used to circulate his work beyond the world-wide web, *Grão* is presented almost as an artist’s book: a beautifully designed cardboard box contains a small, fold-out sheet with a description, credits, and instructions, while a pen drive sits on foam padding, like a small jewel.

Before the piece runs, it states that the reading may be performed linearly, without jumping from part to part, that is, without clicking on icons that nobody

is likely to understand, since, according to the description of the work, the ideograms that appear are actually in ancient Chinese. Yet, one can in fact jump around, intervening in the piece's fragmentation, seeking different meanings to those that would emerge in a linear reading. We have the option of *choosing our own adventure*, which hypertextual digital literature has somewhat accustomed us to. Furthermore, as I have mentioned, the reading/experience of the piece signals that a menu exists (in a traditional book, to name the object with which literature has been identified until very recently, the menu would be called an "index" or "table of contents"). Yet the menu is elusive to anyone who does not speak Chinese. It would take time to discern what poem responds to what ideogram, as the poems' titles are mobile – that is, they are not always in the same position on the menu. With time, they could be deciphered, though. One can more quickly note that one of the ideograms – due to its positionality (on the lower left) and its different color (red, rather than black) – leads to the piece's information page, while another (on the upper right) leads back to the menu, if one is transiting through a poem. It is also easy to tell that a third ideogram (on the lower right) leads to the next poem. Thus, the piece plays with and against our digital-spaces reading skills: sometimes the *intuition* of digital interaction quickly permits fluid navigation; other times, fluidity and transparency appear under threat, with obstacles to legibility.

Meanwhile, if one were to attempt to read the code, the piece would unfold in layers: that of the code itself, that of the *transitoires observables* (Bootz 2011), updated in the code's addressability and in the device, and in the *text-à-voire* (Bootz 2011), which is accessed through visual and auditive perception, beyond the reading of code. Even without delving into code, which, for most people, is the piece's opaque underbelly, the piece indirectly alludes, through its interface rhetorics, to the notion of the layer implied in all digital works. In *Grão's* case, what we may more easily read is its software guide. The guide was developed at a digital-art workshop led by Andrade Garcia and Junqueira, *Ciclope*, which produces, among other projects, open-software platforms under the GNU/GPL license, along with contents using Creative Commons licensing (Attribution NonCommercial ShareAlike). Like the *Managana* software that produced *Grão*, this can help us create our own works of digital literature.

The piece thus plays with our more-or-less standardized digital-reading skills, putting in tension the two extremes of the *program* with which we are programmed to interact when it comes to such pieces: expected/unexpected; probable/improbable. Yet, the piece does not fully align with the unexpected in terms of our cultural-digital skills, or even with the improbable when it comes to the prob-

ability function of software. In fact, the full improbability of software would be unviable, as it would not allow for the device's "correct" functioning.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, one can read the tension between the expected and the unexpected in other aspects of the piece. On the credits and information screen, the piece describes that "ancestral semes are animated and mixed with words and sounds in an attempt to create the world through the word. Poetic cosmogony with texts in Portuguese, English, Sanskrit, and Ancient Chinese".<sup>11</sup> Thus *Grão* emerges as a work *in tongues*, some being more habitual to globalized, western readers than others – with some being less common or even inaccessible. At the same time, the languages are crossed and out of step; thus, the same poem that the voice recites in one language – English, in this case – shows on-screen "text" in Portuguese.

This takes me back to the migrant corpus. Why does the digital poetry of a non-migrant, Brazilian writer cross languages? If one pores through the migrant corpus that I have proposed, one may find an impulse to *speak in tongues*, not so much to have a communicative effect but rather its opposite, that is, to stop speaking the language of the digital times: migrating tongues, mining foreign tongues with one's own, and vice-versa.

One could say that all poets are interested in language; this is generally true. Still, in a society like our computerized one that increasingly inclines us toward vehicular languages that allow us to circulate more or less efficiently, mixing Portuguese with Sanskrit, with English, with Ancient Chinese, at the very least, unaccustoms our instrumental gaze toward language. We might say that poetry is, or might be, precisely that – in this case, though, in the time of technoglobalization.<sup>12</sup>

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**10** Though this is not the case with *Grão*, there are many works of digital literature that experiment with random algorithms, that is, with generative algorithms that produce countless updates and that, being countless, seem governed by randomness, when, in reality, they are governed by probability calculations. These works are also inclined toward the unexpected (cultural-digital) and, up to a certain point, toward the improbable, even though—even if one does not read code—it is easy to infer that a program is actually guiding these unexpected generations. Extreme computing improbability only occurs with program errors, such as the glitch (Crouzeilles 2012).

**11** The relationship that electronic-literature pieces habitually establish with their explanatory paratexts is significant because they generally work as user manuals, often not in the margins but as a central part of the works themselves.

**12** English translation by María Cristina Hall. First published in Spanish as Claudia Kozak. 2022. In *Revista Iberoamericana*, 279, Dossier de Literatura Digital Latinoamericana. Verónica Paula Gómez, Carolina Gainza, Luis Felipe González Gutiérrez & Marcos Wassem (eds.). April-June 2022. 499–515.

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Analía Gerbaudo

## Argentine Jetties

### Snapshots (or the Symptomatic Revelation of a Certain Cadence)

To jumpstart our discussion for this chapter, I will expose three snapshots in time. If, as we learned from Jacques Derrida, a symptom is “what befalls us” (2007b: 457), or what falls along “with another thing, at the same time or in the same place as another thing” (2017: 392),<sup>1</sup> then we should consider what symptomatic cadence would allow us to peer at the constellation of objects, scenes, scenarios, and actors in the field of literary studies.

We shall now present this field through the perspective of a snapshot. The first is taken from an essay by Nora Catelli that circulates in two languages and contexts: on the one hand, in English, in the second volume of the *Journal of World Literature* led by David Damrosch at Harvard University; and, on the other hand, in Spanish, in the magazine *Badebec* led by a collective of young women researchers from the National University of Rosario (Laura Catelli, Julieta Yelin, Carolina Rolle, Julia Musitano, and Fernanda Alle). From a nodal pole in a transnational academic field, on the one hand, and from the center of a peripheral space in the world circulation of ideas, on the other, Catelli tells the same story: one that revolves around one scene, its registration, and a conjecture.

The narration deals with a discussion between Roland Barthes and Paul de Man that took place at the now-legendary Baltimore gathering called “The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man”, celebrated from October 18 to 21, 1966, as documented in the volume *The Structuralist Controversy. The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Macksey and Donato 1972). This conversation, in which Georges Poulet, Jan Kott, Jean Hyppolite, Lucien Goldmann, Richard Macksey, Jean Pierre Vernant, and Richard Schechner participated, unfolded after Barthes’s celebrated conference “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?”. Catelli highlights that Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato synthesized the debate under the title “Discussion: Barthes and Todorov”. This eloquent synecdoche proved telling of the symbolic capital of these agents and of the position of a Paul de Man who, at the time, was “almost invisible” (2017: 23) in the field. Paul de Man would have stood out for the categorical and implacable nature of his observations, in line with the thesis of

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<sup>1</sup> Translator’s Note (TN): Unless an English text or translation is otherwise cited, translations are my own.

“The Resistance to Theory” (1982). This was perhaps his most outstanding theoretical essay both because of his precision but also because of the incontestable character of his arguments. He would write this text years later, which surely underwent many challenges before finally seeing the light. This is no tangent: the details matter, and it is through them that Catelli adumbrates her conjecture. Thus, in her musing on the “asymmetries” between institutions and languages, another asymmetry stands out, one tied to the assumptions of certain agents: “I revisit this exchange [ . . . ] because it manifests an unthinkable possibility for us Americans: refuting Barthes” (2017: 24). This “us” refers to those who participate in literary studies as articulated in the Argentine field, whose perimeter does not align with that of the nation-state (Gerbaudo 2019). If, as Miguel Dalmaroni observes, “research is a moral” (2009: 13), then we assume that, according to Argentine morals, there is no possible way for us to refute Barthes. And although there is more than one Barthes, the many Barthes’s whom we fabricate from these spaces do not contract him but expand him:

The Argentinean uses of Barthes, which are also scenes of translation, do not refute him but vitalize and amplify him: they are inclusive and serve to reflect on the national, the popular, on language, the narrative tradition, the gaze, the city and even the essence of literature when the idea of essence itself tends to vanish. There is the Barthes of Beatriz Sarlo, who projects him toward her own writing in various aspects [ . . . ]. There’s the Blanchotian Barthes, like the Barthes of Alberto Giordano, read in order to remain within the limits of literature as an aesthetic entity without the need for the word “aesthetic” [ . . . ]. There is Barthes through the use of whom Argentinian literature reveals itself: José Luis de Diego [ . . . ]. We include ourselves among all of those readers and users of Barthes, and we in turn revitalize him. We work as true cosmopolitans, without justifying our intrusion in a scene that does not include us. (Catelli 2017: 24)

The second snapshot revolves around María Barrenechea’s acute revision of Tzvetan Todorov’s concept of fantastic literature. The avatar, on which we have not sufficiently theorized (Louis 2012; Gerbaudo 2016), allows us to not only “solicit” (in the Derridean sense of causing to tremble, to question the foundations of a practice) the data one might use to reconstruct the national and international circulation of ideas, but also the stances of agents in the field of literary studies around the distinction between “theory” and “criticism”. In other words, just as the analysis of teaching and lecturing programs is excluded from studies on how texts and concepts travel, the labels “theory” and “criticism” are inextricable from their ties to certain institutions and, when it comes to theory specifically, certain languages – while the rest of languages are associated with criticism. Excluding courses and lectures eclipses what goes on in these spaces. Yet, these spaces function as the true laboratories of appropriation, production, and transference. And we should recall that institutions often function as synecdoches for cities as well, while cities are

synecdoches for countries. Thus, the effects of the field are confused with the properties of its constructs. This is how the arguably inconsistent *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* by Todorov, published in 1970 by the prestigious publishing house Seuil and disseminated from what was then the unchallengeable world center of literary studies, enjoyed a notable degree of circulation. This circulation cannot even be compared with that of the article “Ensayo de una tipología de la literatura fantástica (a propósito de la literatura hispanoamericana)” by Barrenechea, for whom being disseminated from the University of Pittsburgh in the United States proved insufficient. The latter’s scarce dissemination was not exclusively tied to its enunciation in a semiperipheral language (Heilbron 1999) or to its publication in *Revista Iberoamericana*, whose international circuit is limited to Hispanists and Latin Americanists. Observing the system of bibliographical citations, international mobility, and cooperation generated from those centers in the transnational academic field recognized as “the” producers of theory allows us to corroborate that, save for a few exceptions, these spaces only focus on production in the hypercentral language and/or central languages of academic exchange. Indeed, we may follow Johan Heilbron’s classification, which starts with what is articulated in English, followed by French and German in a very distant second place, with the latter shared through translation depending on the target country. But we are missing another detail yet: to make Barrenechea’s demolishing pages visible, publication in English probably would not have sufficed either. The text would also need to be taken up by those agents who model the fabrication of international theory from the blazing centers of the field.

We cannot otherwise explain the worldwide expansion of Ernesto Laclau’s concept of *populism*. Beyond its articulation in English, his proposed term was conjugated with his position as a professor at the University of Essex, along with his exchanges with Jacques Derrida, Slavoj Žižek, and Judith Butler, among others. Language, institutional position, social capital, and the transfer of symbolic capital on behalf of agents situated in central poles of the field at the international scale intersected the construction of a trajectory that allowed his concept to reach a level of dissemination that Barrenechea’s did not. The status of her work as theory was only recognized in the national field and, fundamentally, in university classrooms and handbooks published by small publishing houses. This conferred her reading a rather local, and thus practically secret, character (Pezzoni 1984a, 1984b; Link 1994; Arán 1999). Furthermore, we may observe that we have two intellectual trajectories whose internationalization was paradoxically marked by political State violence: both Barrenechea and Laclau converged at the Instituto Di Tella in Buenos Aires after being sidelined from university life during the Onganía dictatorship.

Having graduated from the University of Buenos Aires with a degree in history in 1964, Laclau secured a position at the National University of Tucumán but



was pushed aside during the dictatorship (Laclau 1997; 2010). Meanwhile, with a doctorate in the United States thanks to a scholarship at Bryn Mawr College, in 1958, Barrenechea took charge of the Spanish Grammar and Introduction to Literature courses for the literature degree at the University of Buenos Aires, quitting after the event known as the the Night of the Long Batons (*la noche de los bastones largos*) (Rotunno and Díaz de Guijarro 2003).

At Instituto Di Tella, Laclau joined a research project whose advisor, Eric Hobsbawm, had helped him secure a doctoral scholarship at Oxford. Just as he was planning to return to his country around 1973, the political situation in Argentina led him to accept a fellowship at Essex University, where he ultimately settled (Buenfil Burgos 2019). Meanwhile, Barrenechea developed a career in Hispanic and Latin American Studies in the United States (at Harvard University in 1968, at Ohio State University from 1971 to 1972, and at Columbia University from 1973 to 1984).

The third snapshot we will now observe is of a controversy around the status of Argentine production in literary studies. The episode took place at the colloquium titled *La resistencia a la teoría: literatura, escritura, lectura* [Resistance to theory: literature, writing, reading], organized at the National University of La Plata in September of 2017. In that colloquium, it was said that my studies conduct fracking. This was said almost in passing, without any details or specifications which, in any case, left room for ambiguity. First, we should note that fracking consists in extracting small and scattered concentrations of hydrocarbons from specific types of rock formations in the bedrock using water pumping, chemical additives, and high-pressure sand with the goal of fracturing the rocks so as to allow for the extraction of the gas or fluids stored in said rocks. Secondly, this process is as highly valued because it allows for the extraction of oil and gas as it is criticized for its polluting risks. Thus, the metaphor, as applied to literary studies, would open more than one discussion. In the heat of the gathering, I remember that the only answer to the comment I found appropriate was a question: How much of an effort are we willing to make to find the concept of “the morality of form” in the essays by Barthes and how much effort are we willing to put into recognizing the production of Argentine literary critic Josefina Ludmer, for example? Far from exhausting the metaphor’s potential, we should clarify that I would not overlook the fact that the intentions of those who produce concepts do not suffice for their concepts to function as intended in a given field. How could we not notice Noé Jitrik’s effort to highlight his own categorization contributions, to which he has returned persistently (see Jitrik 1975; 1982; 1987; 1988; 1992; 2000; 2010)? Nor would recognition from agents who do not occupy a key position suffice. Even when certain agents confer a given contribution the status of theory, if these agents have little impact beyond the national field, then it will be difficult

for a theory to have regional and/or global repercussions. Still, such agents' positioning in favor of a theory, even in their own space, matters given the heuristic and political paths the theory might take in the local sphere. In this sense, the not-so-emergent problematization of the status of our production, beyond the decolonial struggle, is something that "befalls us", as Paco Vidarte would say, following Derrida. This is a symptom, or a certain "cadence" (Vidarte 2008) whose course we should trace, given its uncertain fate (Szurmuk and Mckee Irwin 2009; Parra Triana and Rodríguez Freire 2018; Santucci 2018 and 2020; Cámara 2021; Rodríguez Ximenes 2021).

## Social Conditions for the International Fabrication of a "Theory"

Jorge Panesi translated "*Some statements and Truisms about Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and other Small Seisms*" into the Spanish but left the English title deliberately italicized in his translation, just as the compilation taken on by Thomas Dutoit and Philippe Romanski, *Derrida d'ici, Derrida de là*, also kept the aforementioned title of Derrida's conference in English. This decision is directly correlated with what the essay addresses in terms of the problems it sets forth but also with its writing. Like a "strange loop" (Hofstadter 1998 [1979]), the writing performs what it describes: the dominion of English in the international circulation of ideas.

This conference, which Derrida gave at a colloquium at the University of California, Irvine, in 1987 and later published in a volume of the same name as the gathering, *The States of "Theory"*, included a performance that was not devoid of sarcasm. Derrida explained that he had misread the name that the organizers had given to the gathering. His error consisted in reading "State" in singular, while overlooking the quotation marks around "theory", kickstarting several possible misunderstandings around the exploitation of certain semantic paths: would the gathering address the global state of theory? Or the State that produces it – that is, the State with institutions like the very one he was speaking at, with the power of visibilizing and consecrating something that would end up being called "theory" at the international scale? In this framework, Derrida highlighted the impossibility of tracing a map and stable taxonomy of theory while observing its character as a

State product.<sup>2</sup> It goes without saying that this was an allusion to the State that was disputing (and that continues to dispute) the centrality of France in the field of the humanities in general, and of philosophy and literature in particular (1994 [1987]: 63–65). On that occasion, Derrida was inclined to analyze a geopolitical construction process that was subject to the whims of the market and other powers: those of publishing, languages, and institutions. This was a game in which both the image of the “uncreated creator” that Pierre Bourdieu disparaged from the onset – wavering somewhere between romantic and naïve – but also any voluntarist illusion, would come crashing down. Derrida described the circulation of knowledge in terms of the field, with the latter defined as a space transited by confrontation (the proximity to Bourdieusian vocabulary is notable).

Structural reasons make this static and taxonomic tabularization impossible in its very principle – or limited in its possibility. Here is the first reason: the open and nonunified field of this “States General” is also a field of forces: in their usual phenomena and titles, those forces may be called libidinal forces, political-institutional or historical-socioeconomic forces, or concurrent forces of desire and power. Forces never go without their representations, their specular images, the phenomena of refraction and diffraction, the reflection or reappropriation of distinct or opposite forces, the identification with the other or the opponent, etc. – so many structures which divide each identifiable force, de-identify it, displace it in its very proliferation. (Derrida 1994 [1987]: 65)

This work proved more sociological in nature than he perhaps would have liked. Though he did not develop his hypothesis by upholding the demands of sociological analysis, he adumbrated a concept with important paths forward for the humanities and social sciences. Thus, in this conference that was extraordinarily parasited by English, Derrida affirmed that “in this field of plural forces, where even counting is no longer possible, there are only theoretical *jetties*” (1994 [1987]: 65). From different disciplinary backgrounds and argumentative logics, what Bourdieu and Derrida both demonstrate is that, given the state of things, the heuristic power of the concept in question is simply one of the factors impacting the fabrication of a theory. Without being deterministic or, in any case, at the border of non-deterministic determinations that dissuade us from any kind of voluntarism, we may establish the importance of relations of power between national languages and traditions, the processes of building an authorial signature and the places of institutional visibilization, the symbolic capital of publishing houses that circulate research findings, networks of interaction, and, finally, a text’s con-

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2 TN: Though Derrida refers to the state of California and to Southern California specifically in his ironic introduction, he considers “the two meanings of the word ‘state’” to note that “the plural of states destabilizes or points out the instability” (1994 [1987], 64).

tribution. In this sense, the concept of the *jetty* ostensibly showcases the relationship between circulations, circuits, taxonomies, and languages along with the fields of publishing, academia, and States:

In this field of plural forces, where even counting is no longer possible, there are only theoretical jetties. By the word “jetty” will refer from now on to the force of that movement which is not yet subject, project, or object, not even rejection, but in which takes place any production and any determination, which finds its possibility in the jetty – whether that production or determination be related to the subject, the object, the project, or the rejection.

Each theoretical jetty – as well as its reappropriation as a theoretical set, a theory with its axioms, its methodological procedures, its institutional structures – enters a priori, originally, into conflict and competition. But it isn’t only a matter of antagonism, of face to face confrontation, that is, a matter of opposition between two jetties which would face each other with their own stabilized identities. (Derrida 1994 [1987]: 65)

Without a doubt, the jetty concept requires that we become aware of our scant ideological control over our taxonomies and labels. A questioning put forth from a place beyond the fastidious litany of complaint.

## Theoretical Jetties of Local Visibility

Catelli has stated, in more than one language and in more than one context that “the translation of thought and theory that has accompanied literary writing in Latin American realms [. . .] has been little attended” (2018: 179). “There are only theoretical *jetties*”, Derrida observed (1994 [1987]: 65) while exposing the networks through which some of those jetties would end up being called “theory” and thus carry the weight of the word in the field. Would it be overly simple if, with these texts, I were to authorize myself to restore some of the categorization contributions produced from Argentina? While these contributions have remained invisible in the transnational circuit, they are central to the national Argentine one. By locating these theoretical “jetties” we may review some of these formulations, with their repercussions in the field standing as proof of their heuristic power. A non-exhaustive review would include “*literatura fantástica*” (‘fantasy literature’, Barrenechea),<sup>3</sup> “*trabajo crítico*” (‘critical work’, Jitrik), “*modernidad periférica*” and “*regionalismo no regionalista*” (‘peripheral modernity’ and ‘non-regional regionalism’, Sarlo), “*imagen de escritor*” (‘image of the writer’, Gramuglio), “*microrelato*” (‘microfiction’, Lagmano-

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3 TN: We decided to reproduce these jetties in their authors’ Spanish terms, alongside our English translations, so as to facilitate consultation.

vich, Pollastri), “*religación*” (‘retying’, Zanetti), “*espacio autobiográfico*” (‘autobiographical space’, Catelli), “*cuento*” and “*posautonomía*” (‘story’ and ‘postautonomy’, Ludmer), “*posoccidentalismo*” (‘postwesternism’ Mignolo), “*operaciones*” (‘operations’, Panesi), “*archifilología*” (‘archiphilology’, Antelo), “*guión conjetural*” (‘conjectural script’, Bombini), “*umbral*” (‘threshold’, Camblong), “*figura mediadora*” (‘mediating figure’, Martínez), “*diario de escritor*” (‘writer diary’, Giordano), “*cuentos de guerra*” (‘war stories’, Nofal), “*sujeto secundario*” (‘secondary subject’, Dalmaroni), “*cosmopolitismo marginal y/o periférico*” and “*cosmopolitismo limítrofe*” (‘marginal and/or peripheral cosmopolitanism’ and ‘border cosmopolitanism’, Aguilar), “*archivo*” (‘archive’, Goldchluk), and “*pospopular*” (‘postpopular’, Alabarces). We might also add recent jetties like “*baldío*” (‘waste land’, Bianchi), “*traducción editorial*” (‘publisher translation’, Venturini) and “*poética de la convocatoria*” (‘poetics of political galvanization’, Alle).

As Panesi warns, “to secure intelligibility, theory will always demand a framework, a contextualization, the care of weighing all the historical elements that take part in its triumph or retiring” (2013: 125). This observation may be articulated with that of Johan Heilbron and Yves Gingras, who warned of some research findings’ confinement within the national and/or local (Heilbron and Gingras 2009: 379). From this space, to exhume our jetties is no less important than unraveling the reasons why they are situated in one place or another within our taxonomies. “One transforms while exhuming”, Derrida would say (Derrida and Kamuf 1989: 821). And it seems that he was right.

## Our Cosmopolitanisms, Chance, and Social Capital: No Determinism or Voluntarism

Some recent research has confirmed that France has occupied, and continues to occupy, a dominant space in Brazil and Argentina’s humanities and social sciences (Wolff 2016; Gerbaudo 2019; Hidalgo Náchter 2019 and 2020; Sorá 2019; and Scramim 2021). On the one hand, such ratification would relativize the space that English as a lingua franca wields in the transnational production of these fields, according to their national perimeters (Ortiz 2009; Salatino and Ruiz 2021; Beigel and Gallardo 2021). On the other hand, the empirical data is also telling of the unequal exchange between what is produced in the South and in the North: “for every seventy titles by French authors in the humanities and social sciences that are translated and published in Argentina, only one Argentine title is translated and published in France” (Sorá 2019: 89).

When it comes to literary studies in Argentina, we have analyzed a database built with the CVs of 188 agents in the subfield, which was intersected with an interpretation of these agents' responses to semistructured interviews, with consultations via email. Its findings reveal the importance of intranlations from the French and the English (Gerbaudo 2019). In Argentina, French theory was appropriated without having to pass through the United States first, despite the international visibility that French theory gained in the United States as of the mid-1970s (Cusset 2003: 22). The intranlations are telling of three parallel flows traveling in not-always-convergent conceptual directions: theory produced in France, in the United States, and in the United Kingdom is imported from each of these countries directly. The texts travel to Argentina from the North, without these productions influencing each other. One indicator of this is how quickly the works are translated – just after being published in their countries of origin. One of the clearest examples is that of the Spanish translation of Bourdieu's *Leçon sur la leçon*, taken on by Beatriz Sarlo in Buenos Aires only six months after the work's publication in France. This was in the 1980s – much before the World Wide Web broke ground. In said period, the texts to be translated were bought directly during trips taken abroad with the goal (among others) of staying abreast of the literature, beyond what could be found in bookstores in Buenos Aires. Staying up to date with the transnational discussions of the field and making them circulate in Argentina was the way Sarlo found of disputing the hegemonic ways of reading both at the university and in Argentina's National Scientific and Technical Research Council, at a time when Sarlo stood outside of research and teaching institutions. The translations that Sarlo took on or commissioned for the Argentine journal *Punto de vista* played a central role in this struggle. "We wanted these issues to be talked about in a different way" (Gerbaudo 2019), Sarlo stated when consulted, (and that "different way" was what she pursued in the aforementioned magazine and, subsequently, in her courses and publications as a researcher from Argentina's National Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) upon the restoration of democracy). In the act of legitimizing a certain perspective that has been defended from a place of dissidence, translations played, continue to play, and perhaps will still play a key role (let us not forget that we are referring to a field within a peripheral and practically monolingual country, Argentina). While the circumstances vary, there is one dispute that cross-cuts them. What is at play are the ways of figuring out how to read what is constructed as literature in institutions (primarily at CONICET and in Argentina's universities). Thus, resorting to staying abreast of the discussions in the transnational academic field, along with the accumulation of symbolic capital abroad, are strategies that agents have used to intervene in the local and/or national space, especially when

coming from peripheral poles within this field, which is already peripheral itself, and when attempting to make an impact on institutions from outside of them.

Crossing these data with other data from the same sample but specifically from the languages of extranation that dominate the field of literary studies would help us understand, for instance, the ironic distance with which Catelli notes her lack of concern regarding what specialists in North American<sup>4</sup> literature might think of her response to the question “how was North American literature constructed (that is, responding to which questions) when it gained self-awareness of it constituting a North American literature?” In her answer, she highlights that “they did not know of my existence and probably still do not know of my existence” (2021). Her reference to how little that which is produced in the peripheral poles circulates in the transnational field makes sense considering the data on the dominant languages of Argentina’s extranated texts in the studied sample: Portuguese is the privileged language. That is, our research findings, published in Spanish, are fundamentally extranated to a peripheral language associated with the regional space.

The research is also telling of the importance of social capital in the international circulation of our production (Gerbaudo 2019). As Gustavo Sorá notes, this capital is “primitive, not institutionalized” (2021). Though its directions are often guided by chance, it has become one of the most utilized resources in making Argentine research transnationally visible, as our public policies for science and education have been discontinued and there are only partial, sporadic, and very recent specific policies for internationalization, including extranation (Szpilbarg 2019). Let us consider just two examples from our aforementioned sample to help visualize the role of chance in the international circulation of our research findings. First, let us examine Nora Catelli’s response to our question about her international connections (Gerbaudo and Fumis 2014: 365):

The most relevant international connections are the Argentine ones, of course. For instance, we have some with the United States, as with Harvard University (I recently gave a seminar there) and New York University, [there’s also the University of] Paris VIII, where Julio Premat works. Yet these are not organic connections. (Catelli cited in Gerbaudo 2024)

Second, we have Leonardo Funes’s response to our question about “the texts he would have liked to have written” or those texts that “marked his work or those he most admires” (Gerbaudo and Fumis 2014: 365):

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4 TN: Catelli is presumably not referring to North America as a continent, which would include Mexico, but to the Global North of America.

The first book that marked me was a study on *Mocedades de Rodrigo* by Alan Deyermond called *Epic Poetry and the Clergy*. I loved it as a way of researching the text because everything was in it: philological analysis, historical analysis, context, literary elements, and even a paleographical transcript of the text. Alan Deyermond was one of the great, British Hispano-Medievalists. He died in 2009. This was the first whole book I read in English. I was still studying, I was a student, and I must have practically translated the whole thing in order to absorb it more. In 1995 I was lucky enough to meet Deyermond – one of the great luminaries of Hispanism. He was enormously generous toward those younger than him – and this was very important to me. [He was] One of the great personalities, a person who carried immense work, with the whole world paying him homage all the time, yet, when we met, he chose to go have coffee with me and for me to tell him what I was up to. He isn't just a person who gives you a few minutes of his time, but the kind of person who seeks you out, invites you out, and gives you all his attention so that you can talk. He wants to listen to what it is you're doing. And not only to listen but also to think about how he can help you. Actually, it was from that conversation that the possibility of publishing my first book, in 1997, emerged, in a collection that he directed in London at the time. It was a chapter of my thesis. He was also a great force behind my later publication of an edition of *Mocedades de Rodrigo*. Now, when I was at the helm of the lectureship and was admitted as a researcher at CONICET, Alan stopped answering my emails, or he'd excuse himself saying that he didn't have any time. Still, he was permanently at the service of the people who were with me: the younger ones. When one was more or less on their way, he would think, "okay, they're all set". Honestly, that was a huge life lesson for me. (Funes cited in Gerbaudo 2024)

As part of a larger series, these two examples allow us to revisit the scenes we described at the beginning. Studying populations by taking a representative sample reveals social trends and dynamics whose reconstruction would allow us to understand, for starters, how our fields work at a national scale. Thus, when Martín Prieto asks himself, in the first-person singular, "how does national literature change if I add one author to it?" and "what does an author become upon entering that literature?" (2020), we must take note of who is allowed to "add" an author to the national literature. From what space (from what institutions and/or credentials) might one contribute, or dare to contribute, or try and then succeed in taking on such an intervention? The person laying out this question and enunciating a complex response that involves operations in literary criticism, the teaching of literature, and the literary and publishing fields is doing so from a central pole in the national field, with symbolic capital accumulated via his practices as a writer, university professor, cultural manager, and publisher.

When the question jumps scales and involves theory, things change, because there, one not only requires recognition in the national field, but also in the international one. The available empirical evidence is not encouraging regarding the possibilities of intervention of those of us who produce from marginal institutions in the transnational circuit of theory construction and who publish in semiperipheral publishing houses and languages.



Thus, by analyzing the reasons behind and the trajectories of our internationalization processes (migrations, cooperation, publications, intraslations, and extranlations) and institutionalization (teaching, researching, publishing, and professional organization) we may add nuance to our assumptions. Certain assumptions have too quickly been conceived of as colonization processes. In many of these practices, we may note distinct strategies for the accumulation of symbolic capital that have allowed agents to visibilize and/or legitimize their own production in the national and/or regional sphere, whether because one occupied a peripheral position in those spaces or because one intervened, from outside the institutions, against the hegemonic lines installed within them. Furthermore, in these practices, we have a construction of agency similar to our insistence upon visibilizing the theoretical status of our Argentine jetties. The latter adjective not only refers to a space of production but also one of circulation. This circulation, with very few exceptions, has not surpassed the *among ourselves* circuit. Gingras and Heilbron would likely value this circuit beyond any self-pitying, being as wary of the logic around methodological nationalisms (Wimmer and Schiller 2003) as much as of the radicalisms of the epistemologies of the South (De Sousa Santos and Meneses 2014).

## Coda

A few days ago, in conversation with a friend's son who is an engineer in hydrocarbons extraction, the ambivalence around the question of fracking – in that metaphorical transference that took place at the conference I described in the introduction to this chapter – reemerged. I will transcribe his reading of the episode, which followed a long explanation of the process in question: “fracking something could be interpreted as doing things that, without necessarily being gentle, could be earth-shattering in a field that has gone stagnant or that needs a little push. The operation involves plenty of risk, but, in the end, there's a reward”. I will not deny that this comment by Emiliano Ceridono (my friend's son) proved quite encouraging, despite whatever meaning the original comment was meant to convey, one that I understood at the time (as clearly not in line with the sense that Emiliano sought to ascribe . . .).

## An Addendum from 2024

This text is an offshoot of a research project led by Gisèle Sapiro on the institutionalization of the human and social sciences in different countries, dealing with their internationalization as well. I was charged with researching literary studies in Argentina from 1958 to 2015. This context helps explain why a text like this would require constant updating. It's a matter of the problem under study. I would like to underline two reasonings: 1) why we should speak of *jetties* rather than concepts; and 2) why we should add a word that induces geolocalization. Firstly, using this unusual term (*jetties*) to refer to category-production would remit us to an essay by Jacques Derrida, which *solicits* (in the Derridean sense of causing to tremble) that we reflect upon the way that theory production has been conceived: as an inextricable fabrication of languages, countries, institutions, and publishing houses that are central to the international circulation of ideas. Second, circumscribing “Argentine” jetties involves not only pointing to the place of the production of certain articulations but also to their circulation. With wind behind their sails, these articulations might manage to circulate in non-Spanish- or non-Brazilian-Portuguese-speaking countries. Lastly, listing such jetties is an exercise that's destined to fail: despite the deplorable structures conditioning Argentine science, production goes on. That this text was twice updated proves the point, though we'd nonetheless require further updates today, with jetties like “*lo materno*” (‘the maternal’) by Nora Domínguez and “*masculinidades líquidas*” (‘liquid masculinities’) by Gonzalo Aguilar demanding inclusion. The fantasy of keeping this list up to date is nonetheless irrelevant. What's important is the problem that we are called to discuss – a matter that would also demand a transnational morphological study to ascertain what it is that unfolds with jetties produced in other peripheral or semiperipheral spaces. Who might pick up the gauntlet?<sup>5</sup>

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5 English translation by María Cristina Hall. First published in Spanish as Gerbaudo, Analía. 2022. Espigones Argentinos. In Gonzalo Aguilar, Claudia Amigo Pino & Annalisa Mirizio (eds.). *Travesías, desvíos, obstrucciones. La circulación de la teoría francesa en Latinoamérica y España*. Sao Paulo: FFLCH.

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Ochy Curiel and Dennys Silva-Reis

## On Translation and Black Feminism

An Interview with Ochy Curiel

**Dennys Silva-Reis [D.S-R.] Do you have any experience with the practice of feminist translation?**

**Ochy Curiel [O.C.]** Yes. Jules Falquet and I have translated work by the French materialist feminists Colette Guillaumin, Paola Tabet, and Nicole Claude Mathieu. We condensed their work in *El Patriarcado al desnudo, tres feministas materialistas* [The patriarchy laid bare: three materialist feminists], which was published in 2005 with the independent publisher Brecha Lésbica.

Then, in 2017, the Latin American Group for Feminist Studies, Training, and Action (GLEFAS), a collective I'm a part of, translated the Nigerian Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's *The Invention of Women* to *La invención de las mujeres. Una perspectiva africana sobre los discursos occidentales del género*,<sup>1</sup> with our publishing house en la frontera, which is also independent.

**[D.S-R.] Do you view the profession of being a translator or interpreter as sexualized? What are the causes and consequences of this?**

**[O.C.]** Like in almost all of Western society, social relationships are generally sexist, racist, and classist. This is tied to the hierarchies that have been constructed since the beginnings of colonization and that continue into contemporary coloniality. Translation cannot escape this. It's part of our modern/colonial system. The most validated knowledge is that which is produced by white men with class privilege, but also by a few women with class privilege. This means that their knowledge is the one that is validated for recognition across many parts of the world, through the translation of their works.

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's Note (TN): Published in English as *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*.

**[D.S-R.] In your opinion, to what extent can a given culture’s notion of gender be translated into another culture?**

**[O.C.]** As the Argentine Maria Lugones has explained with her concept of the coloniality of gender, gender is a modern, colonial category because it recognizes the sexual dimorphism between men and women through the experiences of white and bourgeois men and women and is thus not universal. In many other cultures, gender does not exist – not even the category of man or woman. For instance, we might look at what Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùní writes in *The Invention of Women* regarding Yorùbá society in southwestern Nigeria. Gender did not exist in these societies before contact with the West, which was imposed through European colonization.

**[D.S-R.] Do you believe that there is a distinction between feminine translation and feminist translation?**

**[O.C.]** Of course. The feminine is a quality that stems from the differentiation that heterosexuality entails, a quality that women are assumed to have. This is mistaken, because men can also have qualities that are assumed to be feminine. At the end of the day, these are social constructs. Feminist translation implies adopting a political stance, although this is also problematic because there isn’t just one kind of feminist translation. It all depends on what current of feminism one inscribes the translation in.

**[D.S-R.] How important is it to translate feminist theories in the contemporary world?**

**[O.C.]** I believe that many feminisms have added complexity to our analyses of social relations. There are feminisms, like Black feminism or decolonial feminism, that allow for a contextualization of the situations of groups that are not only affected by gender but also by race, class, sexuality, and geopolitics in a way that is enmeshed in specific contexts. The translation of these theories is important precisely so that we don’t generalize or universalize experiences, which is the mistake that hegemonic feminism has made – as a feminism with white theories and concepts that centers its gender analysis on the experiences of white women, who are generally from the North.

**[D.S-R.] What is your opinion of translation and activism (intellectual or not)?**

**[O.C.]** I believe it fundamental to strengthening transnational coalitions. Activists should translate those works and proposals that allow for a better understanding of the complexity of social relations. I believe it is important to not only translate works with a critical perspective from North to South, but also from South to North. For instance, we have gotten to know the work of African-American feminists because it has been more translated than the contributions by Afro-Latinas and Afro-Caribbeans, and this is so because the United States is still a privileged center of knowledge. This stands in alignment with the geopolitics of knowledge, even when it comes to subaltern groups. The North should get to know our proposals as a way of decolonizing knowledge.

**[D.S-R.] Does the circulation of feminist ideas through translation support the emancipation of other groups of women?**

**[O.C.]** Of course. And not only women, but other subalternized groups as well. To the extent that we get to know the experiences of other groups from different parts of the world, we will better understand the diverse experiences, struggles, and resistances of other places, and that contributes to a transnational coalition, as I said before.

**[D.S-R.] Do you agree that only white women can translate white women and that only Black women can translate Black women?**

**[O.C.]** No. I believe that, even though we Black women need to translate more Black women, we should not essentialize this exercise. There are critical thoughts, theories, and concepts by Black and white women that would prove interesting to our political projects, and their translation is important. What I believe is that white women have more access and privilege, and they often take the experiences of Black women as mere testimonies or primary sources for their own academic credit. This is why I believe it important for Black and Indigenous women to translate our colleagues' work, thus preventing the utilization and instrumentalization of our experiences and thoughts.



**[D.S-R.] Do you think that men (feminist or not) are sensitive and able to translate feminine and feminist texts? What are the challenges and potentials?**

**[O.C.]** My answer to this question is similar to the last question's. It all depends on which men. There are men who have racial, class, sexual, and geopolitical privilege, and there are others who don't – which is the case for most Black and Indigenous men in our continent. In this sense, they can be our allies, especially if they take similar political stances to ours. What's important is that we know what the purpose of this translation is.

**[D.S-R.] In your opinion, can feminist agendas be compatible with the structures of publishing houses? How can we seek gender parity in this field?**

**[O.C.]** I think that there is a diversity of feminist publishing policies. There's more than one kind of publishing strategy, and I don't think that all publishers limit themselves to seeking gender parity alone. There are antiracist and decolonial feminist proposals, too, just as there are many other feminisms – most of them, I'd say – that aren't antiracist or decolonial.

**[D.S-R.] There are few well-known women translators and interpreters in the history of translation, especially Black ones. Could you share some of their names? Could you tell us more about them?**

**[O.C.]** I think that there are very few of them, especially very few Black and Afro ones. Those of us who have translated do so from a space of activism rather than as a professional activity.

**[D.S-R.] In your opinion, is translation to blame for the fact that there's more white feminist theory disseminated around the world?**

**[O.C.]** I don't think it's a matter of translation being "to blame", but a matter of possibilities and access. Most Black, Afro, and Indigenous women on our continent don't have enough time or money to prioritize the translation of texts. Nor are there a lot of publishing houses interested in translating their work. I think that this is more of a structural matter that has to do with the coloniality of knowledge, though, luckily, some of us are gaining a greater understanding of the

importance of translating texts by Black and Indigenous people so that their thoughts and struggles will reach more readers.

**[D.S-R.] Can translation contribute to renewing the canons of feminist literature across the many areas of the humanities?**

**[O.C.]** Of course, especially when it comes to translations of subalternized people's work. That is what can contribute to decolonizing feminist knowledge and knowledge in the humanities in general.

**[D.S-R.] Do you know of any non-hegemonic translation projects? If so, could you share them with us and talk about how they work?**

**[O.C.]** Well there's the one we're taking on at GLEFAS, with our publishing house en la frontera, and there's also the work that Brecha Lésbica has been doing. Both are independent publishers.

**[D.S-R.] What advice can you give us as we seek a less sexist (translational) language?**

**[O.C.]** I would suggest finding modes of writing that refrain from reflecting the ideology of sexual difference and gender binaries, but I also suggest translating from a decolonial position. This implies avoiding racist, colonial, and heterosexual categories, concepts, and words, and it especially implies sticking to the meanings proposed by the writer rather than substituting in Western words and concepts. Language, too, is political.

**[D.S-R.] What would be a good metaphor for (Black) feminist translation?**

**[O.C.]** We could consider Leila González's *amefricanidad* ('Amefricanity').<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> TN: A concept that brings together the experiences of Black and Indigenous people in a way that is critical of their disavowal at the hands of Latin identity.

**[D.S-R.] Is it possible to teach how to translate feminism or how to translate in a feminist way?**

**[O.C.]** Yes, but it all depends on what kind of feminism. They're not all the same. A translation can be feminist and still be quite racist. I believe that it is possible to develop methodologies that allow for decolonial translation.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> English translation by María Cristina Hall. First published in Spanish as Curiel, Ochy. 2019. Pensar la traducción y el feminismo negro – entrevista con Ochy Curiel. Interviewed by Dennys Silva-Reis. *Revista Ártemis* 27(1). 236–240.

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Her research and papers address the interweaving of racism, sexism, classism, and the heterosexual regime from a decolonial perspective. Among her publications, the following books stand out: *La Nación Heterosexual. Análisis del discurso jurídico y el régimen heterosexual desde la antropología de la dominación* (2013) and *Un golpe de Estado: la Sentencia 168–13. Continuidades y Discontinuidades del Racismo en República Dominicana* (2021).

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