

To Unlearn the Queer from the Tropics

Written by: Jota Mombaça

Translated by: Lilyth Ester Grove

Stonewall Didn't Happen Here

There exists a current narrative on how *the queer*¹ emerged in the field of contemporary micropolitics, starting with the riots at Stonewall Inn in the United States at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 70s. From this perspective, before becoming a theoretical discourse with academic backing on a global scale, the term *queer* marked a radical political position, problematizing sexual and gender normativity from within the context of the struggles for liberation taking place in the United States – and in other parts of the world – during the same period.

The queer strategy *par excellence* is the reappropriation of injury and the consequent affirmation of marginalized difference as a privileged vantage point for an anti-normative critique of normativity. Stemming from a radical turn, it is the queer creation – gender defiant and sexually dissident – that positions itself in the center of contemporary body politics, reclaiming a body, a voice, and an ethics that are wholly diverse with respect to those imposed by the dominion of heteronormativity.

Affirming this narrative, which credits queer activism in the United States with the genealogical mark of all the theoretical practice currently flooding the academic archives of the world, has the effect of decentering the logical axis of knowledge production. After all, if *queer* is first and foremost a key for political action and a principal for the aggregation of experiences, bodies, and lives that are marginal to

¹ Translator's note: *the queer* is a direct translation of the Portuguese *o queer* which roughly signifies *all that is designated as queer*, and is used to encompass *the term* queer, queer theory, and queerness, among others, when given in the South American context.

the heterocapitalist system, any knowledge wanting from thence to unfold must assume its inevitable politicization, which not only countervails the epistemological domains consecrated by the theoretical traditions of hetero thought, but also defies the grammar, gymnastics, positions, and life practices prescribed as the norm by the heterosexualization of life itself.

It happens that, as an effect of its internationalization as a key concept and as a program for practices and discourses defiant to gender and sexual normativity, the queer emerges not just in one, but rather in a diversity of distinct scenarios. Although there is an official history of the queer, compulsorily linked to the axis of a North American genealogy, the ways in which this keyword penetrated multiple local vocabularies created a proliferation of alternate narratives. In short: the queer of Pindorama, of the hot south of the tropics, did not emerge from the same processes as the queer from above.

Here, for example, before directly informing the everyday activism of *translésbixa*² people, *queer* appears as an academic event. This does not necessarily imply its total depoliticization, nor does it define the scope of possibilities for the appropriation of the queer in the tropics. But certainly it implicates, in representing the academy and the institutions as battlefields, the central axis of queer struggle and politicization in Brazil. If here there was an inaugural queer activism, it occurred predominantly within the realm of academic institutionality.

In this way, the queer of Pindorama emerges from an inverse motion to that of the official history of the queer in the United States: it moves from theory to ethics. It is an approach before it is a way of life and its affective geography is less that of the club, the night, the street fights, the little hellholes and dark corners, the conflicts with the police, and more so that of the classrooms and departmental corridors of the formal institutions of knowledge production. This kind of queer, wrought by

² *Translésbixa* is a neologism that joins the terms transgender, lesbian and *bicha* as a way to affirm the confluency of these identity positions in the project of liberation of sexual dissidents and gender defying people in the Brazilian context.

scientific articles and doctoral theses, though partially rebelling against hegemonic theoretical frameworks, cannot completely escape the modulations of its encompassing field. As an academic phenomenon, the queer pronounces its network of objectified subjects, projects its framework of theoretical fictions, and formulates its own socioanthropological, historical, and aesthetic analyses, ascribing to the here-and-now of gender-sexual relations a new vocabulary, replete with taxonomies self-proclaimed to be the correct way to grapple with the phenomena of corpopolitical dissidence in the tropics.

Hija de Perra, in her essay “Filthy Interpretations on How Queer Theory Colonizes our *Sudaca*,³ Poor, Aspirational, and Third Worldist Context, Disturbing with New Generic Constructions Humans Enchanted with the Heteronorm,” which reflects on the inconspicuous continuities between the queer and colonialism in the South American context (specifically that of Chile), presents — using personal experience as a starting point — a critique of the character of interpellation that the queer acquires when it arrives here. When referring to herself as “a young Latina mestiza from the Southern Cone who never intended to be identified taxonomically as queer,” Perra assigns gender theorists the responsibility for its neat fitting into this classificatory axis, thereby revealing the extent to which the proliferation of references to the queer in our context — historically marked as it is by the effects of colonialism and subalternity — depends, at least initially, on the labeling enacted by way of theoretical initiatives which remain relatively separate from the ways of life that have characterized sexually dissident and gender defiant existence in the *sudaca* world.

Thus, while queer-theoretical approaches confront the notion of identity as being fixed, and are based both on a radical denaturalization of subject positions and on a relation of resistance to corpopolitical impositions and subjectifications, they do not

³ *Sudaca* is before all, a perjorative term used to refer to people from South America. In a large context, it indicates pertinence to third-world contexts of the Global South. Aside from this, the term has been communally reappropriated by activists in Latin America (especially in South America) as a way to demonstrate a position of frontline resistance to the imposed assimilations in the context of the globalized Eurocentric geopolitics.

cease to produce, as an effect of their emergence in the tropics, that which Hija de Perra has made evident: a gesture that is simultaneously colonial and disturbing, that precipitates its own capture, before even shaking the order against which it promises to rebel.

Dismantling the Queer Caravel

It cannot be said that the problem of colonialism has gone unnoticed in Brazilian academic queer studies. In the same year (2012) that Hija de Perra published her essay, cited above, an interesting movement of decolonial critique gained force in the official Brazilian production of *the queer*. Here I highlight two texts from this wave that have become significantly popular among scholars of the subject: “*Queer in the Tropics*,” by Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira, and “*Subaltern Who, Pale Face? Notes on the Margins of Post-colonialisms, Feminisms and Queer Studies*,” by Larissa Pelúcio, both published in the Dossier of Contemporary Subaltern Knowledge – Contemporary Sociology Magazine of UFSCAR (2012).

These two texts share a highly critical perspective on the ways in which, regarding a geopolitics of knowledge honed on a global scale, Brazilian queer theoretical production must challenge, from the margins, the assumptions designated as truth by the colonality of knowledge, a regime that aims to define – following a hierarchy in which the knowledge of the “Global South” is necessarily inscribed by the effects of subalternity, while productions from Europe and the United States are hyper-stimulated and overvalued – what does and doesn't count as “cutting-edge theory.”

Such reflections are important for situating the terms defined by the global queer canon, questioning their universality at the same time that they affirm (from the equally situated context of Brazilian queer theoretical production) a singularity against the generalizations made by authors from Europe and the United States. It is in this regard that the propositions of Paul B. Preciado, especially those contained in *Testo Junkie*, are evaluated and confronted critically in both of these texts. This is

not, however, an attempt to invalidate the contributions of the author, but rather a pointed problematization as to the universal characterization of these propositions with a view to the insufficiency of their models for making a concrete analysis of Brazilian reality.

Of the two texts mentioned, it's "*Queer in the Tropics*" that goes deeper into this problematization of Preciado's work. Lending a critical revision to the concept of "pharmacopornopower" – which, roughly speaking, posits the preponderance of pharmaceutical *dispositifs* (biotechnological) and porn (technical-semiotic) in the processes of subjectivation and in the contemporary production of gender – Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira evokes the experience of Cida, a *travesti* living in a shelter for people inflicted with AIDS outside of Brasília in 2004, at the time that an ethnographic study took place.

After briefly presenting Cida's life story and drawing a parallel with that of Preciado, the author devotes special attention to the relationship "of his source" with the Umbanda religion. He emphasizes how this mythical-religious knowledge and the ritualizations that it implies interact with a series of other elements – technical, discursive, performative – in the production of Cida's body. In the text, the relationship between Afro-Brazilian religiosities and processes of subjectivation and embodiment of trans women and travestis is approached through a string of references to other academic studies on the subject. Taking existing narratives on travesti devotees of Umbanda, Candomblé, or Quimbanda into account, Pedro Paulo seeks to problematize the centrality given by Preciado (and other European authors of import to the development of queer studies, such as Michel Foucault) to the array of biotechnological elements involved in the production of bodies, to affirm the insufficiency of universalist models by way of a framework further complicated by the interaction of mythic and ritualistic elements with image flows, silicone, hormones, etc., within the bodies of Afro-religious travestis in Brazil.

In this way, "*Queer in the Tropics*" aims to incite a potential reconfiguration of the queer theoretical framework consolidated in the studies of trans experiences, and reclaims, to that end, a queer analytic that is sensitive to the way in which different contexts activate different mediators in the production of gender and sexuality. As a result, the author is able to unseat the geopolitical power relations that guarantee the knowledge projected from the global centers of knowledge production the privilege of defining the analytical models to be applied in the margins. Seeing this through, however, depends on the reconstruction of the experiences of Cida and other travestis using their own voices.

For example, in comparing Cida's story to that of Preciado, the author never alludes to his own history, nor assumes the implications that his own body has on the type of conceptual production that he puts forward in the text. What Pedro Paulo offers in counterpoint to the experience of Preciado, which is narrated in the first person, is the experience of Cida, narrated in the third. In this way, despite overcoming the universalizing tradition of Eurocentric knowledge production from a perspective that is singularized by the density of the Brazilian context, his text is ultimately sustained by the systematic erasure of the corpopolitical inscriptions of its author's own body – revealing the unsuspected continuity between what this author does and what he criticizes.

If, in critiquing the colonial dimension of the queer in the *sudaca* world, Hija de Perra evokes her own experience to interrogate, from the vantage point of her own sexual and gender dissidence, the matrix of queer knowledge, offering in this way an effective resistance to the queer interpellation resulting from academic power, then the decolonial turn of gender theorists in Brazil remains limited to the signaling of hierarchical balances between different academic contexts (those of the North and those of the Global South), without ever questioning the role of the academy itself – with its normalized theoretical language, its thematization of the lives of real people, and the rigid systems of institutional evaluation underpinning its hierarchies – as a

key territory in the activation of the queer as a referent that is inseparable from the coloniality of knowledge in the Brazilian (*sudaca*, and third world) context.

Thus, it is up to the elite of tropical queer theory to recognize the ways in which queer coloniality does not only move from the outside in – that is, from Europe and the United States into peripheral contexts – but also from the *inside* in, by way of an “internal colonialism” carried out by the same gender theorists involved in questioning the supremacy of the queer from the North over the queer from the South. In this sense, the presence of the macro-structural dichotomy of North and South paradoxically erases South-South tensions and contributes to the perpetuation of epistemological, ethical, and political modes of domination unforeseen by authors such as Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira.

Unlearning the queer from the tropics, therefore, means a radical denaturalization of academic procedures, including the problematizing of subject-object relations that helped consolidate the Brazilian queer theoretical elite, as well as a critical reassessment of the effects of the interpellation that the appropriation of the queer has unfurled in territories such as our own. At the same time, I cannot but recognize that this text does not necessarily escape what it sought to critique, since it consists of yet another theoretical exercise about the queer, produced from the position of a fat, non-binary, academic *bicha*⁴ and not within an organizing for sexual and gender dissident people. The difference with this text being that, if it disrupts anything, it is the queer elite itself and their critical procedures, making objects out of those whom until now have had no part in the debate except as subjects: the researchers.

p.s.: when I say the “Brazilian queer theoretical elite,” I am referring to the consolidated network of gender and sexuality theorists, well established in the formal rankings of knowledge production, employed by renowned universities,

⁴ *Bicha* is a local Brazilian category, historically used as an insult against gay men. Recently, the term has been reappropriated to reference non-binary gender performance.

mostly white and cisgendered. I'm talking about people like Richard Miskolci, who during the *I Seminário Queer do SESC* [First SESC⁵ Queer Seminar] (which not by chance became known as the *Cisminário [Cisminar]*) asserted that the absence of trans, racialized, and sexually dissident people in the event's programming was a result of a "lack of vocabulary" that he, and the group he had put together, were trying to correct with their research, presentations, and publications.

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Jota Mombaça

Jota Mombaça is also known as Monstra Errática and MC Katrina. They are a non-binary *bicha* from Northeastern Brazil, that do academic studies on monstrosities, *kuir* and decolonial perspectives, feminism, contra-humanism and speculative fiction; they also love chit-chat, action art, and funk. They love to *rebolar*.