Analytical perspectives on indigenous homosexualities: Considerations from a comparative study

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Abstract

This research is about Native homosexual activism in a comparative perspective between Brazil and the United States. The idea is to work as starting points with the queer theory, the coloniality of gender and two-spirit critiques in order to understand homosexuality as a Native critique of colonial apparatus (bureaucratic and missionary) normalizer, heterosexual, male, white and European. Several writings of two-spirit in the United States reflect a critique of queer studies in the sense that queer theorists share a Western, white and modern perspective. Thus, they could not fully understand the native sexualities as an attitude of opposition to the colonization process.

Keywords: queer theory; colonialism; native sexuality; two-spirit; ethnology; South American Indians.

Perspectivas analíticas sobre homossexualidades indígenas: Considerações de um estudo comparado

Resumo

Esta pesquisa trata do ativismo homossexual indígena em uma perspectiva comparativa entre o Brasil e os Estados Unidos. A ideia é trabalhar tendo como pontos de partida a teoria queer, a colonialidade de gênero e as críticas two-spirit, a fim de entender a homossexualidade como uma crítica nativa do aparato colonial normalizador (burocrático e missionário), heterossexual, masculino, branco e europeu. Vários escritos two-spirit nos Estados Unidos refletem uma crítica aos Estudos Queer no sentido de que teóricos queer compartilham uma perspectiva ocidental, branca e moderna. Assim, eles não conseguem compreender plenamente as sexualidades nativas como uma atitude de oposição ao processo de colonização.

Palavras-chave: teoria queer; colonialismo; sexualidade indígena; two-spirit; etnologia; índios sul-americanos.

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On July 27th, 2008 the newspaper *Folha de São Paulo* published a story entitled "Indian gays are victims of prejudice in the Amazon" (Brasil 2008):

> Among the ticuna tribe, the most populous ethnic group in the Brazilian Amazon, a group of young people do not want to paint the neck with jenipapo to have a deep voice, or accept the rules of traditional marriage, in which the couples are set in childhood. This small group took over homosexuality and says they are suffering prejudice within the village, where gays are beaten and called derogatory names such as "half thing." When they walk alone, they can become targets of stones, cans and mockery. [...] The social scientist and ticuna teacher of Portuguese, and history, Raimundo Leopardo Ferreira says that among Ticunas, there were no previous records of the existence of homosexuals, as we see today. He fears that, because of prejudice, there will be an increase of social problems among youth, such as alcohol and cocaine. "It [homosexuality] is something that my grandparents spoke it did not exist," he said.

Almost one year later, on May 23rd, 2009, the *Agência Estado* publishes a news report entitled "NGO denounce sexual exploitation of young gays and transvestites indigenous in Roraima". The story chronicles the lives of indigenous people of the Raposa/Serra do Sol Reserve, which flee violence from family members in their homes, and prostitute themselves in cities such as Boa Vista. Some months before, on March 02nd of that year, the press publicized on the news portal *24HorasNews a* report headlined "Revealed the drama of gay indigenous people of Mato Grosso." As in the case of Ticuna and Macushi, Umutima youngsters who declare their homosexuality suffer verbal and physical abuse, having to flee away from their families to live in the city of Barra do Bugres, and end up becoming prostitutes. Besides those mentioned here, there are several other reports, and also news that emerge, here or there, in conversations ethnologists, researchers and health workers with aboriginal peoples (Fernandes 2015). Thus, the question remains: do we have analytical tools to work with these issues? In this sense, the group of authors who, in one way or another, indicate practices that could be interpreted as being gay by indigenous peoples, are divided mostly between: (a) chroniclers and travelers who mention such practices as something exotic or monstrous, and (b) authors who analyze the phenomenon reinforcing its characteristic "cultural loss" or "defect coming from the contact" (D'Abeville 1945; Gandavo 1858; Léry 1941; Nóbrega 1931; Thevet 1944; Sousa 2000, for example). In this case, these authors reproduce speeches of leaders, employees of government agencies, missionaries, and indigenous teachers, according to which "before the arrival of white men there were no gays here." (Tota 2013).

The reports mentioned above, when read carefully, make it clear how this perspective is permeated not only with prejudices deriving from the contact with white people, but especially show the power relations that operate in

the everyday life of those people. Somehow, part of the explanation for this discourse lies in an attempt to decrease the symbolic inequality, derived from the relations of domination imposed historically on these social groups, which stands between the indigenous and non-indigenous worldviews. Stated another way, by incorporating the discourse of stigmatization, such natives seek to assume a speech outside their subordinate position, assuming the categories of power and normalization of the colonizers as if they were their own.

There is, on the other hand, a series of texts that are noteworthy. As an example, the chapter titled "The bow and the basket," in *The Society against the State*, in which Pierre Clastres writes about Krembegi, a gay Indian from the Guayaki tribe. This interesting character, found by Clastres during their field in Paraguay, in the 1960's, was, in the words of the author,

> […] actually a sodomite. He lived with women and, like them, had generally distinctly longer hair than other men, and only performed female jobs: he knew "weave" and manufactured with the teeth of animals that hunters offered him, necklaces that demonstrated a taste and artistic arrangements much better expressed than in the works of women. Anyway he was evidently the owner of a basket [in contrast to the arc, epitome of masculinity] […].This incomprehensible pederast lived as a woman and had adopted the attitudes and behaviors of this sex. He refused, for example, the contact of a bow like a hunter the basket, he considered that his natural place was the world of women. Krembegi was gay because he was *pane* [i.e., had bad luck in hunting]. […] To other Guayaki he was a *kyrypy-meno* (anus-making love) because he was *pane*. (Clastres 2003: 126)

The author also would reserve him a chapter in another book, *Chronicle of the Guayaki Indians*, entitled "Life and Death of a pederast" in which part of the argument set out above is more evident:

> Man = hunter = arc; woman = gathering = basket: dual equation which accurately regulates the life course of the Aché Indians. There is no third term, no third-space to cover which is neither arc nor the basket. Ceasing from being a hunter, one loses so even the quality of man, and he turns, metaphorically, a woman. Here's what Krembegi understood and accepted, his renunciation to be which is incapable of being—a hunter—designs him immediately in the women's side, he is at home among them, he accepts himself as a woman. (Clastres 1995: 212)

Interesting to notice that, although have emerged in the Brazilian anthropological literature few references to the figure of Krembegi, this occurs in authors that seek to discuss general aspects of the work of Clastres without to be given, in most cases, detailed consideration to what postulates the author in the passages cited above in relation specifically to Krembegi's sexuality.

Another text, published recently, deserves to be mentioned: it is an article about the "experiences and values related to homosexual relationships of people of the ethnic groups Guarani Nhandeva, Kaiowá and Terena, in Dourados, Mato Grosso do Sul" (Cancela et ál. 2010: 199). The authors indicate that in the Brazilian literature there is a perspective of native homosexuality as something learned from the non-indigenous: homosexuality would therefore be "an emotional and sexual anomalous experience due to the post-contact, as an expression of colonial economy of bodies and controllable by dominating desires" (Cancela et ál. 2010: 217).

I would, however, draw attention to a particular aspect of the text written by Cancela et ál. (2010: 212): her analysis of the term *tibira*. According to the authors, the Brazilian anthropologist Luiz Mott associates this term with "presence of 'homosexual Indians' among indigenous people," and among the Tupinambá tribe they would be called "tibira" (for gays) and "çacoaimbeguira" (for lesbians). The expression comes from *tevi* (and its possible variations), a word which in Tupi-Guarani languages refers to the buttocks (Canese 2000). However, the excellent work of Chamorro about corporeality Guarani will bring us new information.

The author writes that

> *Curiosamente, Gabriel Soares, entre otros, registró que el término tibira era aplicado a líderes espirituales que siendo hombres "servían de mujer" en los actos sexuales.* […] Según Ronald Raminelli, algunas mujeres "esquivaban contactos carnales con los hombres, viviendo un estricto voto de castidad. Dejaban, por consiguiente, las funciones femeninas y pasaban a imitar a los hombres, ejerciendo los mismos oficios de los guerreros: 'Usan los cabellos cortados de la misma manera que los machos, y van a la guerra con sus arcos y flechas'. Cada hembra guerrera poseía una mujer para servirla, 'con quien dice que está casada', y así se comunican y conversan como marido y mujer". (Chamorro 2009: 237-238, italics added)[1]

The passages in *boldface* above do not resemble the description that the authors mentioned above bring on homosexuality among indigenous people in Brazil. Clastres presents Krembegi as a synthesis of the anti-system Guayaki while Cancela et ál. understand this practice as something coming from the contact, meeting the discourses that we find in the news cited above. However, the above excerpt has a number of references to a reality that simply do not appear in Brazilian ethnology, regarding the spiritual role of these individuals. Accordingly, such practices would refer to the two-spirit movement that characterizes the understanding of these non-hegemonic sexualities in indigenous peoples of the United States and Canada since 1990.

In that year, during the Third Native American/First Nations Gay and Lesbian Conference in Winnipeg, scholars, activists and indigenous people

decided to adopt the term "two-spirit", decision ratified by the American Anthropological Association in 1993, during the conference "Revisiting the North American Berdache, Theoretically and Empirically." However, the choice of the term two-spirit, from the Ojibwa term *niizh manitoag* has political implications. As written by Jacobs et ál.:

> The decision by Native Americans (indigenous people of the United States) and those of the First Nations (indigenous people of Canada) who attended the Winnipeg and subsequent conference to use the label *two-spirit* was deliberate, with the clear intention to distance themselves from non-Native gays and lesbians. It seems to us of interesting coincidence that this marked distancing happened at a time when the governments of United States and Canada were just beginning to respond to the AIDS epidemic in the gay community. Many urban Native American attempted to return home to their reservations to spend their last years with their families before dying from complications of HIV infection. Each of us has heard personal stories from men who were not welcome "home" because they had that "white gay man's disease" and that gayness was not part of traditional culture. Using the word "two-spirit" emphasizes the spiritual aspect of one's life and downplays the homosexual persona. (Jacobs et ál. 1997: 3)

Roscoe (1998) points as the starting point of this struggle the foundation of the GAI (Gay American Indian) in 1975. According to the Native Americans he inteviewed while conducting his research, the creation of this organization was only possible after the occupation of Alcatraz by native activists, in November 1969: the Red Power movement gave indigenous groups (including gay ones) courage to organize themselves and face the post-colonial apparatus.

Until then, according to two-spirit authors (see ahead) and by Brazilian Native women such as Ysani Kalapalo and Josi Tikuna (Picq and Tikuna 2015), the gay Indians were seen as outcasts, even by the natives, and a preferential target of the colonial action (which included practices such as forced conversion, sexual integrationism, haircut as a form of humiliation, and eventually murder). The discourse that indigenous leaders uttered was, mostly, in the sense that homosexuality reflected attitudes seen by all Western heteronormative discourse that homosexuality correspond to depravity. Roscoe indicates also that the struggle against AIDS also meant the struggle against homophobia, making it possible for many gay Indians to emerge as native leaders, as well as several Native Americans diagnosed with the disease returned to their communities.

More than that: it also grew the awareness of alternative traditions of gender, not only through oral memory, but books that sought to portray these realities—such as *Living the Spirit* and *The Spirit and the Flesh*. Thus, native gay organizations have started as a struggle to recover the role of "traditionally sacred" of two-spirit in their own cultures.

In the words of Sue Beaver (Mohawk):

> We believe there exists the spirits of both man and woman within. We look at ourselves as being very gifted. The Creator created very special beings when he created two-spirited people. He gave certain individuals two-spirits. We're special people, and that's been denied since contact with Europeans […] What heterosexuals achieve in marriage, we achieve within ourselves. (Roscoe, 1998: 109)

In fact, more than the use of terms such as gay, alternative gender, berdache, etc., "two-spirit" recovered a traditional role and, more than that, a sacred one—unlike the other terms. Moreover, this attitude means taking an attitude of anti-colonial criticism for not accepting more western categories of classification of native practices.

The considerations of the activist Qwo-Li Driskill (Cherokee) confirms this:

> David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and Muñoz have asked, "what does queer studies have to say about empire, globalization, neoliberalism, sovereignty, and terrorism? What does queer studies tell us about immigration, citizenship, prisons, welfare, mourning and human rights?" *While these moves in queer studies are creating productive theories, they haven't adressed the complicated colonial realities of Native people in the United States and Canada. In an attempt to answer the questions posited above within specifically Native contexts, Two-Spirit critiques point to queer studies's responsability to examine ongoing colonialism, genocide, survival, and resistence of Native nations and peoples. Further, they challenge queer studies to complicate notions of nationhood and diaspora by paying attention to the specific circumstances of nations Indigenous to the land bases the United States and Canada are colonizing.* To push the above questions farther, I would like to ask what Two-Spirit critiques can tell us about these same issues. In addition, what can Two-Spirit critiques tell us about nationhood, diaspora, colonization and decolonization? What do they have to say about Native nationalisms, treaty rights, citizenship, and noncitizenship? What can they tell us about the boarding/residential schools, biopiracy, the Allotment Act, the Removal Act, the Relocation Act, and the Indian Act? How can they inform our understanding of the roles of misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism in colonization? What do they have to say about Native language restoration, traditional knowledge, and sustainability? What do Two-Spirit critiques teach us about survival, resistance and continuance?. (Driskill 2010: 86-87, italics added)

What seems clear here is that the two-spirit identity cannot be understood outside the context of post-coloniality. Thus, to understand the emergence of Gay Indian movements, it is necessary to understand them not just as a demand about the individual corporeality, but especially as a political phenomenon having to do with their relationships with the state, their own

communities and Western society in general. The accumulated literature from the ethnographic context in the United States can point us challenges and directions which, given the (still, maybe?) sparse academic production on the theme produced on indigenous peoples in Brazil, we have not focused enough attention.

Stated briefly, there are two questions on which my analytical concerns focus at this time: (1) How the homosexual movement in itself raise/create/generate/build identities in the inter-ethnic domain and (2) what can native gay activism allow us to understand about the power relations of indigenous policies and indigenous movements in different national contexts? What we see in these new contexts, is the production of new forms of interaction and reflection in the field of otherness; interstitial zones (boundaries) marked by the possibility of the redefinition of identities of the groups involved in these processes, which cannot be seen as mere contingencies of the contact or opportunism by certain groups seeking power, visibility and resources. Thus, I seek to recover the political aspects that made it possible, in the North American context, the emergence of a two-spirit identity guided by a discourse of traditionalism while in Brazil, homosexuality is not only seen as taboo among investigators, but is perceived by the natives as cultural loss. Therefore, it is imperative to establish a dialogue with the studies of social movements in general, and in particular indigenous movements in order to understand the processes and situations that engendered the postcolonial indigenous movements in these countries. Therefore, it is my point of view that the formation of these movements is not a mere reflection of state power, or an epiphenomenon of collective expression of identities previously subaltern (Escobar 2007), but is constitutive of the efforts of these movements to redefine "the meaning and limits of the political system" (Alvarez et ál. 1998: 7).

The issue seems to be much less about the uses that the natives make of their bodies (or of the concept of corporeality itself), or ethnic perspectives on sexuality but, above all, about the processes of power that permeate the relations to which these subjects are linked. We have a phenomenon that throughout colonial history has always been repressed and made invisible: homosexual practices among natives in its various forms. However, such practices should also be understood as *processes*, and over the last few centuries the various perspectives on these practices were being transformed and rearticulated (even internally) with concepts such as indigeneity, identity, masculinity, femininity, authenticity, etc. The ways these subjectivities emerge and the possible implications in terms of anthropological interpretation necessarily must take into account this wider contextual and relational perspective about power, taking it not only as a form of resistance to a colonial knowledge but also as a form of expression of the protagonism of these subjects.

Notes

[1] "*Interestingly, Gabriel Soares, among others, found that the term* tibira *was applied to spiritual leaders that even being men 'served as women' in sexual acts.* [...] According to Ronald Raminelli, some women 'dodged carnal contact with men, living a strict vow of chastity. They left therefore female functions and passed to imitate men, exerting the same offices of the warriors: They wear their haircut in the same way that males, and go to war with their bows and arrows'. Each female warrior possessed a woman to serve her, 'who says he is married, and so they communicate and talk as husband and wife'".

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