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To be a _____: A Review on the Concept of Gender

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In Colombian Spanish, we have no words for what I am. Indigenous communities in Colombia have multiple gender designations but it is not simple to borrow their words to label myself from the outside. Similar to the English language, there is not an original neutral personal pronoun in Spanish, but more than that, almost all the nouns are gendered with an 'a' for feminine and an 'o' for masculine. This means that any word that I will use to address myself, to think about myself, will come from another context or will need to be invented. As Hortense Spillers says

beautifully, “In order to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time [...], and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness” (Spillers 65). Following the echo of these words, I realized I needed to take layers off and think about the very root of my questing: gender.

“I’m a woman who likes men and women!” I admitted to my lesbian friends with fear and a bit of shame when I was 20 or so. It seems that I needed a model or permission from my community to embrace my desire. A couple of years after, without expecting it, I met a trans man for the first time at a poetry reading. I knew about the existence of trans women (sadly, due to the fetishization of them) but never thought about the opposite, not even about something in between. And I liked that trans man I saw, I was inspired by the freedom exuded by his life choices. From that day, I got to know more transmasculine folks and ended up as an activist for trans rights in the city where I was born, Bogotá, Colombia. At some point, I thought that maybe I was also a trans man, but after reflecting and trying to fit in that identity, I realized that I’m not a man or a woman. So what am I?

Through activism and sharing, while adapting the ways my friends and allies were referring to themselves (transsexual, transvestite, transgender, transmasculine), I started to identify as “trans” without any further word attached. But I didn’t know in detail where that term came from or how it was used in other places inside and outside my home country. My research led me to United States-based, white frameworks, theories from philosophers, scientists, and activists.

As an academic and artist, I’m interested in the archeology of the western concept of gender and its binarism. Gender has created in my life a sense of not belonging, separation, and real consequences, like being rejected in public spaces such as bars, bathrooms, and restaurants. In addition, my gender identity has caused alienation by strangers, dates, friends, and family. This drove me to the question: How is ‘gender’ defined and determined, and how is it intertwined with categories like ethnicity, class, culture, and race that are also related to who I am? Achille Mbembe says in *The Critic of Black Reason* that “the *work for life* consists in distancing oneself time and time again from memory and tradition at the very moment that one depends on them to negotiate the twists and turns of life” (149). I needed to take distance from a tradition that comes from colonialist and imperialist practices.

I have seen in my own body the power of concepts and practical consequences, so I walk this path into theory. I subscribe to Dr. Gargi Bhattacharyya’s idea that: “If the stories you believe define your range of possibility, then you have to change the story to be something else” (31). To write, speak and perform new stories about myself, I need to learn a lexicon and understand its content and my position in relationship to it. The review that follows is only the beginning of my adventure. It deals with notions of gender that take into account race, ethnicity, class, capitalism, and technology. I chose foundational authors, pioneers in their proposals such as Hortense

Spillers to think about blackness and gender; Chela Sandoval to understand the tactical oppositional consciousness of US third world feminist; and Donna Haraway to reflect on gender (or the abdication of it) in a context of global capitalism.

First stop. Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book (1987)

In her foundational text, Hortense Spillers analyzes what happens with gender when meeting experiences of blackness in the context of the U.S. The author traces the characteristics that constitute gender in a social and legal sense to show how, according to those standards, the female black slave had no gender. This evaporation of the gender difference ultimately means the loss of gender privilege. "I wanted to point out what is problematic about black women stopping at the gender question. Because the refusal of certain gender privileges to black women historically was part of the problem" ("Revisiting" 304). The author visits the past to talk about the present:

[Spillers's essay] brings together a historical consciousness of the traumatic effects of slavery (<http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&u=txshracd2598&id=GALE|CX2761100163&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon>) on American race (<http://go.galegroup.com.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/ps/i.do?p=GVRL&u=txshracd2598&id=GALE|CX2761100163&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon>) relations and a feminist awareness of the possibilities and problems posed by black families' failures to live perfectly within socially defined gender roles. According to Spillers, as a result of the destabilizing effects of slavery [...], traditional divisions between masculinity and femininity do not operate fully in black communities. (Saxon 105)

As Saxon notes, the legacy of the slave trade extends consequences to the present, and can be seen in the relationship between black communities and gender.

Spillers dedicates her essay to understanding the particular relationship between gender and black people under slavery. According to her, the conditions that imply gender in a social and legal sense can be summarized as follows. The first condition is to be considered as a *human*, not an animal, not an object. Slaves were treated and named as commodities in the Middle Passage. Because they were not considered as human, they couldn't have gender. Spillers uses the term "flesh" instead of black captive body or subject to point out the brutality of this dehumanization and objectification of black people in a condition of slavery (68).

The second condition that indicates gender is to be able to mother or father and to pass this ability on. The condition of parenting is attached to a patriarchal definition of family and to the possibility of marrying thereby inheriting name and property. However, in captivity “the offspring of the female does not «belong» to the Mother, nor is s/he «related» to the «owner», though the latter «possesses» it, and [...] often fathered it, *and*, without whatever benefit of patrimony” (Spillers 74).[1] Even when female slaves gave birth, this was not an indication of mothering, because they were not able to have their children within a family.

The third condition of gender is domesticity. Because of the lack of a traditional family and proper names, slaves weren’t able to create a domestic realm (Spillers 74). Slaves were named by numbers in ledgers that kept account of them. They had no home but the ship and the ocean. Under these conditions and seen as “quantities,” they were not female nor male (Ibid.).

Finally, if gender in a social and legal sense requires for a subject to be recognized as human with a domestic realm and the capacity to mother or father, slaves had no gender. As consequence, contemporary black subjects also have a problematic relationship with traditional female/male roles. Is this a pessimist conclusion or a possibility? The fact that Spillers was in a “battle” against white academics (“Revisiting” 301), feeling frustrated and trying to be heard, could reinforce the pessimistic reading of her essay. She wrote the article “with a feeling of hopelessness [...] on the verge of crying about what I was writing about” (“Revisiting” 308). However, a hopeful interpretation is also possible: “black women are the ones in positions of responsibility and power. Whereas many twentieth-century sociologists interpreted this as a sign of the downfall of black communities [...] Spillers’ article contends that such a deviation from dominant American gender norms presents an opportunity for social transformation” (Saxon 105). Already pushed out of the rules of the gender system, black people can create themselves as something else, being blackness a “condition of possibility” (Riley 2).[2]

Within the conversation started by Spillers, other contemporary positions have been proposed to understand the particular relation between blackness and gender. For example, C. Riley Snorton (a dedicated interpreter of Spillers’ work) proposed in *Black in Both Sides* (2017) the ever-present confluence of blackness and transness: “‘trans’ is more about a movement with no clear origin and no point of arrival. Here, trans—in each of its permutations—finds expression and continuous circulation within blackness, and blackness is transected by embodied procedures that fall under the sign of gender” (2). For Snorton, trans and black are continuously circulating together. Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley (2008), as another example, suggests the perpetual coexistence of queerness within black people: “fluidity is not an easy metaphor for queer and racially hybrid identities but for concrete, painful, and liberatory experience” (192). For her, the queer character of black people seems both liberating and violent. Finally, British activist and artist Travis Alabanza asserts that: “black people on western culture are already trans because how gender is constructed and de-gendered” (7).

To end with this first stop I will say that what resonates to me is the fact that, as a non-white subject, I also have an already de-centered gender identity, and I am also a different social subject determined not only by the slavery of my native ancestors but also by the neocolonialist and imperialist dynamics that end up falling back into my body today. To explain that, next I will analyze the “oppositional consciousness” proposal of Chela Sandoval’s third world feminism.

Second stop. U.S. Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World (1991)

In this foundational text for the U. S. third world feminism (“pioneer” and “legendary,” as Angela Davis asserts it in the Foreword to *Methodology of the Oppressed*), Sandoval criticizes what she identifies as hegemonic white feminisms for their lack of an effective theorization of how race, class, language, ethnicity, and culture inform the category of gender. This article “developed Sandoval’s theory of differential consciousness, and revealed her ability to directly confront some of the most vexing questions facing contemporary social activists” (*Methodology* xii). The confrontation of white feminism in the light of women of color praxis is the core of Sandoval’s proposal.

The theory of differential consciousness is an alternative to the hegemonic frame that is not centered on fixed identities or ideologies but instead on *tactics*, mobilization and constant revision of ideas. This proposal is better understood in contrast with white feminisms, and that’s why Sandoval starts her text offering a review of the history of feminism written by white feminists. In this story, four ideological instances have been identified and “have fast become the official stories by which the white women’s movement understands itself and its interventions in history” (Sandoval 5)[3].

According to the first type of feminism, besides the apparent physical differences between man and woman, they are equal and thus must have equal rights and access to power. This first feminism is named as “liberal” by white women and “equal rights” by Sandoval. The second theorization of feminism asserts that women are, in fact, different from men and because of that, structural changes must be achieved according to that difference. This would be the Marxist feminism or what Sandoval names as “revolutionary”. The third approach to feminism says that women are not only different but superior to men, with privileged access to knowledge about the world especially in regard to ethics. This would be the “cultural” or “radical feminism” that Sandoval names as “supremacist”.

Finally, the last form of feminism would be the one which actually incorporates the vector of race in the equation and has the intention to be anti-racist and framed as «socialist.» Sandoval names it “separatist.” That this feminism doesn’t engage effectively with race is what she will explain when presenting her alternative. Now that Sandoval has presented the four typologies, she summarizes these “commonly cited four-phase feminist history of consciousness [...] «women as the same as men», «women are different from men», «women are superior», and the fourth catchall category, «women are a racially divided class»” (9).

The observation that Sandoval offers to this white hegemonic feminism is the fact that they don’t do justice to the complex relationship among race, class, culture, and gender. It doesn’t engage with difference but tries to be a unifier narrative: “Hegemonic feminist theoreticians and activists are trapped within the rationality of this structure” (Sandoval 10). In their rigid system, white feminism ignores the women of color praxis and resistance which goes through the equal rights framework to the socialist, back and forth according to strategic mobilizations: “practice of US third world feminism undermines the appearances of the mutual exclusivity of oppositional strategies of consciousness” (Sandoval 13). This would be the fifth kind of feminism that Sandoval names as «differential» and that indicates this «clutch» (a metaphor that she uses) to go when is needed to the other different positions as a tactic for liberation.

The four white feminisms are forms of oppositional consciousness, resistance to oppression that creates oppositional subjects. But these subjects are created as hegemonic, rigid, and definite. The differential consciousness would approach those as non-hegemonic and fluid. US third world feminism begins with the recognition of difference instead of an erasure of it. Differential consciousness doesn’t create alliances based on a unified category of women, race or class but according to goals for liberation. In this sense, their politics inspired the cyborg ones that I will address next.

Specifically, in a relationship with the conception of gender, Sandoval’s argument means that women of color have a different engagement with gender than white women, which was already seen in Spillers. In this case, this doesn’t mean that women of color have no gender but that: «one’s race, culture, or class often denies comfortable or easy access to either category [male/female], that the interactions between social categories produce other genders within the social hierarchy” (4, my emphasis). Those other genders Sandoval is referring create a colorful group of terms (that also include a lot in Spanish and Spanglish like “bucha” from butch, and “tortillera”).

Third Stop. A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminist in the Late Twentieth Century (1991)

In her book *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, Haraway situates her position about gender in the discussions around white feminism and the complexity of what have been politics based on identities. In «'Gender' for a Marxist Dictionary: The Sexual Politics of a Word», Haraway visits different feminist approaches to gender (starting with Beauvoir and reaching to Anzaldúa, Spillers, and bell hooks), in a discussion that prepares the presentation of the cyborg proposal. She concludes her article about the concept of gender as follows:

'Gender' was developed as a category to explore what counts as 'woman', to problematize the previously taken-for-granted. If feminist theories of gender followed from Simone de Beauvoir's thesis that one is not born a woman, with all the consequences of that insight, in the light of Marxism and psychoanalysis, for understanding that any finally coherent subject is a fantasy and that personal and collective identity is precarious and constantly socially reconstituted, then [...] the identity of 'woman' is both claimed and deconstructed simultaneously. (Haraway 147-8)

This idea of the fictional quality of identity will be the start point for the cyborg proposal. Precisely, Haraway begins her manifesto acknowledging that a coherent subject, as well as a social reality, are collective *fictions*, fantasies. This is why she rethinks, within a feminist Marxist framework, the positioning of women in the context of global capitalism, science, and technology.

The author starts defining the cyborg to argue why this image is useful and empowering to think about the present. Her general claim is that "we are cyborgs, the cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics" (Haraway 150) and she would demonstrate why she thinks this is so. The brief definition of the cyborg stated at the beginning is: "a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction» (Haraway 149). According to this definition, the cyborg is an entity which is more than human, more than machine and more than animal, is not exactly a blend of all of that but precisely a disruption of this differences. In addition, although the cyborg comes from the sci-fi narrative, it reveals the contemporary ("late twentieth century") experience of the world.

According to Alison Kafer, "Haraway positioned her cyborg as an intervention not only in Western dualism but especially in Western feminism, and her critique was focused along two fronts: first, feminist dismissals of science and technology, and second, feminist reliance on

«universal, totalizing theory»” (103). The universal totalizing theory relies on identities and clear oppositional binaries to give account of humanity. As Haraway previously explored in her article about gender, the woman is proclaimed as a solid identity that actually felt short not only as unrealistic or not useful in a personal or collectively representation, but also as a political strategy. Haraway claims that: “The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world” (150) and it is so due to reasons that come from contemporary debates in human sciences and scientific developments in biology and physics, and also from an analysis of material conditions around labor and technology in relationship with bodies and their status as workers in the global capitalist context.

There are two main theoretical premises of the essay in support of a cyborg politics. First, the recognition of specific «boundary breakdowns» which make the cyborg framework possible and plausible. Those breakdowns are the erasure of the difference between human and animal in science; the difference between human/animal and machine due to technological advances; and the difference between physical and non-physical realms in contemporary physics. Haraway accuses socialists and feminist of sustaining uncritical dualisms that avoid their understanding of how these boundaries have been pushed, which also impedes a realization not only of the dangers but the possibilities and potentiality of the cyborg world, new ways of power and pleasure.

The second theoretical premise is the failure of certain notions of unity understood as a primordial source from which difference comes out. She criticizes the idea of woman as if there were a class or a group that could be reunited under this category by certain essential commonalities. When politics fixed on universalizing identities, it fails because “with the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in ‘essential’ unity” (Haraway 155). As well as in Sandoval proposal, cyborg politics are based on affinity, coalition, and political kinship: “people trying to resist worldwide intensification of domination” (Haraway 154).

The other main premise of the manifesto is an interpretation of the contemporary material conditions of capitalism and technology, which Haraway refers as “informatics of domination”. This means a complete switch in a wide variety of terms that touch on class, race, and gender but also ontology and epistemology such as reproduction vs. replication, labour vs. robotics, mind vs. artificial intelligence, etc. The possibility of revolution in this context is the challenge of the cyborg.

The actual situation of women is their integration/exploitation into a world system of production/reproduction and communication [...] with large consequences that themselves are very different for different people and which make potent oppositional international movements difficult imagine and essential for survival. (Haraway 163)

The union is necessary, but it doesn't work as white feminist thought before. The necessity to imagine what can unify without essentializing or erasing the difference is an exercise of imagination that the cyborg is trying to fulfill. "The cyborg is a kind of dissembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self [...] that feminist must code" (Haraway 163). As in Sandoval, cyborgs reunite according to goals and tactics and they form cyborg collectives that aggregate and disaggregate subjects according to their present.

One of the main criticism of the manifesto is the examples that Haraway gives about cyborgs. Although, as I mentioned, she states that «we are cyborgs», which could be understood saying that everyone in the contemporary world is a cyborg, she says then that "‘women of colour’ might be understood as a cyborg identity, a potent subjectivity synthesized from fusions of outsider identities" (Haraway 174). How it is that the cyborg disrupts the binary men/women and white/non-white when Haraway herself insist on the idea that women of color are the cyborgs per excellence? As Jasbir Puar mentions: "the theorization of cyborgs winds up unwittingly reinscribing the cyborg into the binary logic of identity which Haraway hopes to circumvent" (Puar 57).

Alison Kafer engages with this criticism (even though she finds the cyborg figure useful), claiming that:

Joan Walloch Scott worries that Haraway's naming of women of color as cyborg adheres to an all-too-familiar pattern of white women idealizing, and thus otherizing, women of color as repositories of wisdom; "What," she asks, "is the difference between Haraway's looking to these groups for the politics of the future and... the romantic attribution by white liberal or socialist women to minority or working-class women of the appropriate (if not authentic) socialist or feminist politics? (Kafer 114)

Some questions that this criticism leaves open for the cyborg are: does the cyborg actually disrupts the binaries? who determines who is a cyborg and who is not? Is this attribution liberating, unrealistic or oppressive?

First lap. Conclusions

This journey through three ways to understand the concept of gender from Spillers, Sandoval, and Haraway allows me to understand the reasons why the gender is way less stable than what I envisioned while considering race, class, or even technology. After this review, I keep asking: Why do I need to find a word for what I am?

In the first place, I want to communicate my positionality in the sex and gender system (its temporality, mutability, lack of fixation, its behavior according to strategies) to create bridges with people who feel similarly. On the other hand, I am interested in continuing my advocacy for rights to medication (hormones), inclusive restrooms, or legal changes in identification. Finally, I also want concepts to talk about this in academia, to subvert the frameworks that label me as mentally ill or sinful or confused in order to create alliances, and keep dreaming about freedom.

What I learned from these authors is that I can have all this without needing a fixed identity. I can be tactical with my naming and create political kinship according to goals and necessities, instead of according to a shared identity. As Chela Sandoval added in her second version of the article on third world feminism: “The differential maneuvering required here is a sleight of consciousness that activates a new space: a *cyberspace*, where the transcultural, transgendered, transsexual, transnational leaps necessary to the play of effective stratagems of oppositional praxis can begin” (*Methodology* 62). Besides “trans”, notions such as “non-binary”, “non conformative” or “gender queer” are at hand and I have started to use them since living in the US as a way to communicate with others. They are all foreign to my native language, but that’s another place to critically explore. However, my other journeys must lead me close to home, to South American and Colombian thinkers as well.

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Notes

[1] The use of ‘it’ referring to the child is from Spillers and is used from the perspective of the master.

[2] However, this hopeful side of Spillers’ argument is re-considered by herself in 2007: “I am probably not talking about a thing that is somehow male and female, but I think it is a kind of humanity that we seem very far from, and that I used to think black culture was on the verge of creating. [...] people did whatever work was to be done, whether it was «men’s work» or «women’s work,» [...] success in black culture has brought us a lot closer to appropriating gender dynamics that I do not necessarily like. That a black man can be an entrepreneur and a capitalist and a black woman can be «feminine» and sit at home we’re getting much closer to those binaries” (*Conversation* 304).

[3] I will cite the original version of the text and in the conclusion will address the additions she did for the book *Methodology of the Oppressed*.

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Deja una respuesta

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