

Judith Butler and the pomba-gira*

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Abstract

This article examines the pressure that conservative sectors in Brazil continue to exercise against progress made in the fields of gender and sexuality. It also comments on the violence of these groups' protests and rallies. Based on research experiences, the article calls the opposition between religion and alternative forms of sexuality and gender into check. Considering Judith Butler's theories, the work examines possible openings, as well as the possibilities of mediation, and the limits of thinking in accordance with fixed categories. It also signals that the best path for considering these questions may be by drawing closer to the multiplicity of agents and their unprecedented forms of agencies, as well as the creativity of their poetics when associated with religion. Furthermore, the work defends the necessity of *bending* agency, including *bending* Butler's own theories.

Keywords: Judith Butler, Gender Ideology, Human Rights, Religion, Inclusive Churches.

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Judith Butler seeks to reflect on the insidious violence inflicted on bodies and subjectivities framed by the power that organizes social life in fixed, binary terms. This same power establishes categories of that which can enter into the world of the possible, but what is left out? What is excluded? Butler analyzes the excluded figures that mark social life, as well as the epistemological and ontological operations that sustain these figures. Her theoretical movements aim to escape a petrified viewpoint that removes social subjects from their historicity, diversity, and complexity. She insists on showing the destructive process of frozen and fixed categories. Experiences of dissident bodies show this architecture and these operations of ontological and epistemological violence, but they also indicate the possibilities of rupture and of transformation (Botbol-Baum, 2017).

Butler shows the violence behind these processes of exclusion while simultaneously placing these experiences as means of thinking about the world in another way. An opening toward and for the Other permeates her work; namely, for these Others who are excluded from the world of the possible, but who still show their presence. As a result, they demonstrate the incomplete nature of a universality that does not embrace them, the lack of reason of the power that excludes them, and the emptiness of an architecture that denies them. Dissident bodies increase the world of possibilities: this is the poetics that Butler aims to reveal. However, if her proposal is to open toward Others – if what torments her is violence – who, ultimately, is afraid of Judith Butler?

Performances

On October 7, 2017, I was in front of SESC Pompeia, an arts and cultural center in downtown São Paulo, Brazil. It was a tense moment that had been preceded by rumors and attacks on social media. The conditions for violence against Butler had already been announced. These conditions, in turn, provoked numerous collectives of women, LGBTQIA+ people, Afro-Brazilians, and

human rights-focused groups to mobilize. These groups organized the *Occupy Democracy (Ocupe a Democracia)* vigil in order to guarantee Butler's presence in "The Ends of Democracy," a series of discussions and lectures sponsored by SESC.

Face to face with those who were at SESC to defend Butler were roughly one hundred members of groups like *Right [-Wing] São Paulo* and *Tradition, Family, and Property*. The scene could be drawn in the following way: people holding signs; angry shouting against Lula, Brazil's former president; chants in defense of children and families, and against the UN and UNESCO; chants against the legalization of abortion (which remains criminalized in Brazil); signs advocating a return to military dictatorship; a sign with the phrase "Boys are born boys;" shouts against the "ideology of gender;" and, finally, people flourishing bibles and crucifixes.

The protest against Butler was so grotesque and simplistic that I was tempted, at first, simply to ascribe it to the realm of the ridiculous, to smile awkwardly at its shameful display. But soon I perceived that these performances highlighted the nuances of many of Brazil's existing conflicts, laying bare certain factors that, in other times and places, are often articulated in more sophisticated or polished terms. These conservative groups' performances aimed to question the rights and social advances that have slowly taken hold since Brazil began the process of re-democratization. As we see now, this process is still fragile, and myriad legal exceptions suggest that we still have significant work ahead of us.

These protests against Butler lead us to think about our ghosts (Butler, 2017; Miskolci, 2018), which include: a new right wing in Brazil; moral crusades that insist on attacking small advances achieved through long-term struggles; the open persecution and violence against African diasporic religions in Brazil; and, finally, the evangelical delegation in Brazil's congress and its nefarious role in combating human, sexual, and reproductive rights. With their war-like format and their full-on opposition to progress, these protests seemed to characterize contemporary Brazil: they were

performances of intolerance. Finally, the event of the protests against Butler opens the possibility of understanding something of Brazil's situation exactly in terms of the clear contrasts it presents: highlighting the wave of conservatism that threatens to overtake us, laying bare the violence and intolerance of a context that some Brazilian theorists have previously referred to as "cordiality" or "racial democracy."

However, the aforementioned protests presented these conflicts in overly light-and-dark contrasts. If, in these conditions, we can learn more clearly about some of these events by drawing ourselves closer to the social contexts that made them possible, we will note the enormous quantity of variations in tones that even a well-trained observer might have difficulty differentiating. Therefore, we must be cautious and subtle in our approach, and capable of avoiding temptation.

Temptations

And the first temptation might be to link this wave of conservatism to Religion – generalized, with an uppercase "R" – and to do so directly and carelessly. On the day of the protest outside of SESC, I recall hearing someone say, "Those are the evangelicals," to which someone else responded, "I think those are the conservative sectors of the Catholic Church." In fact, as Ronald Almeida (2017) points out, the discourses of both Catholic and evangelical religious conservatives highlight the necessity of contesting secular advances in both behavior and values. And anyone who is more or less attuned to our current political scenario will recall these religious people's actions regarding themes like genetic research, abortion, gay marriage, and same-sex adoption. For example, the evangelical delegation in Brazil's congress increasingly orients itself toward the intense regulation of sexual and reproductive behaviors, dissident bodies, genetic research, and same-sex marriage and adoption (Almeida, 2017). Legal projects like the so-called "Gay Cure" are clear demonstrations of these regulatory intentions. Meanwhile, violence

against African diasporic religions highlights religious intolerance through the invasion of *terreiros*¹, the persecution of clergy people, arson in “saints’ houses,” as well as the actions of members of neo-Pentecostal churches who invade places of worship to destroy altars and break religious images (Silva, 2005, 2007). While I recognize the presence of these sectors and the pressure that they exert against advances in the fields of gender and sexuality – as well as the violence of their protests – I would like to problematize this narrative by exploring possible openings and mediations, as well as the limits of thinking in fixed categories. For those who believe in religion as a form of knowledge (Velho, 2010), it may be that, in this dramatic moment through which we are living, a point of view that does not succumb to compartmentalizing into larger categories and valorizing the point of view of our interlocutors could continue to be a valid and strategic position.²

I say this because, guided by the *travestis*³ with whom I have conversed about corporalities and embodiments, I have grown closer to African diasporic religions in Brazil. I have been struck both by their corporal constructions and their general approach to life. In some of my previous writings, I have shown how *travestis* construct sophisticated forms of agency to deal with their exclusion from the power that establishes categories of what can and cannot enter into the world of the possible, and that designates their bodies and their subjectivities as being unthinkable (Pereira, 2012, 2014, 2015). For several years, I have accompanied *travestis* from Catholic or evangelical families who have had to negotiate their transformations and options within a shared language, building

¹ The terms *terreiro* and “saints’ house” designate the religious space of African diasporic religions in Brazil. They are spaces with their own distinct rituals, relationships, and social dynamics.

² Here, I use Otávio Velho’s definition of *religion as a form of knowledge* (Velho, 2010). In my personal correspondence with Velho, he also alerted me to the dangers of reducing everything to pre-defined categories.

³ “Travesti” is a form of self-designation, and it will not be translated in this article.

new forms of communication. Here, obviously, both symbolic and physical violence takes place, which in the vast majority of cases, puts an end to all coexistence and to any possible communication. Yet other forms of action also arise and even though these are the exception, they make spaces of coexistence possible (Pereira, 2015).

Accompanying *travestis* and seeing how they insert themselves into Brazil's public health system while following their own itineraries (Souza et al., 2014) taught me something that I was able to share in discussions held at the Nucleus for Studies, Research, Extension, and Assistance of Trans* People at Unifesp (the Federal University of São Paulo). It was a learning experience, an exchange that was both intellectual and affective. And it was this experience that allowed me to meet a female pastor from *Cidade Refúgio (Refuge City)*, an *inclusive church*.⁴ She learned about the Nucleus at Unifesp and sought me out; she was interested in supporting the trans* people who frequented her church, but – among other things –she didn't know what their relationships with the healthcare system was like, or what their specific health needs were. In other words, she wanted to grow closer and to relate more fully to the imaginations of bodies and subjectivities that had been designated as being impossible. Soon, she told me the story of *Cidade Refúgio*'s founder.

The church's founder converted to Protestantism in 1995, when she was 21 years old. She travelled throughout Brazil preaching Scripture, which made her a well-known figure. At the time, she declared herself capable of "curing homosexuality." Her "gay cure" and her fervent prayers relating to sexuality prompted other women in similar situations to ask: which words and actions

⁴ *Inclusive church* is a term used by so-called "gay churches" – in which homosexuals can be pastors and observe ecclesiastical roles, as Natividade (2006) observes – to describe themselves.

had led her to this cure?⁵ Even as she preached about the cure, however, she fell in love with a woman, and decided to turn her back on her church. A short while later, she was involved in a serious accident that almost killed her. It was then that she had a revelation: she ought to return to preaching and found a church that served as a safe harbor for the LGBTQIA+ community. This is how *Cidade Refúgio* came into being. At first, the church was a small temple with a congregation of at most thirty worshippers, primarily gay and lesbian evangelicals. Today, it hosts more than a thousand people for certain weekend services.

Cidade Refúgio is not alone. For example, Marcelo Natividade (Natividade, 2010) designed a cartography identifying “inclusive churches” in the Brazilian cities of São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte, Brasília, Salvador, São Luís, Natal, and Fortaleza. Meanwhile, Fátima Weiss de Jesus (Weiss de Jesus, 2010) carried out an ethnography of an “inclusive church” in São Paulo, registering different forms of dealing with sexual diversity. In addition to showing how differences in theology and in moral (sexual) conduct arise, Weiss de Jesus signals the rise of an inclusive or gay theology, as well as of a *queer* theology (Althaus-Reid, 2005; Althaus-Reid; Isherwood, 2007; Musskopf, 2004, 2008, 2012).

As previously mentioned, I became aware of the reality of *inclusive churches* and of *Cidade Refúgio*'s story through a pastor who contacted me in order to learn about how to better care for the trans* people who sought out her church. At the time, she told me: “They look for us. They want to know the *Word*.⁶ They want to know if their options will lead them to hell or whether there is salvation. They want to know what the Bible says.” On this occasion, I brought up the evangelical delegation in Brazil's

⁵ For a further discussion of homosexuality, gender, and cure in pastoral perspectives, see Natividade (2006).

⁶ *Word* is a syntethic way of saying *Divine Word*, which refers to Divine Scripture.

Congress, which she criticized in some detail, along with the actions of “false moralists”. She also spoke about the pastors who work in communities to mold the faithful (in other words, members of their congregation) without critical thinking.

This article is not the place to analyze this specific story in more detail, but I would like to highlight a few points that arose after this experience:

First, the presence of homosexual people within evangelical churches, even the most conservative among them. This presence is made evident by, among other things, the existence of retreat centers, such as Vale da Benção (*The Valley of Blessing*) and Missão Jocum (*Jocum Mission*) with programs dedicated to “gay cures.” It is as though the very possibility of a “gay cure” emphasizes and reiterates the existence of dissident bodies as an imminent phenomenon. In this sense, it is similar to rituals of casting out demons in neo-Pentecostal churches: by making such rituals central to the practice of faith, they put forth an effective religious grammar (Silva, 2005, 2007). Thus, as more demons are expelled, more possible demons arise.

Second, this homosexual presence involves a process of unspeakable suffering: gay pastors who come out of the closet and see their lives fall apart; lesbian pastors who are expelled from community coexistence; painful treatments that form part of “gay cures”; trans* men and women who are kept away once they begin their physical transitions. The most common term used to describe these situations is “aberration”. As the pastor from *Cidade Refúgio* told me: “From one minute to the next, you transform from a pure, honorable woman of the *Word* and become an aberration to be cured or eliminated. This causes a lot of pain, a lot of suffering”. There is a biblical framework of actions and forms of treatment for people considered to be “aberrations.” Evangelical churches have to deal with the difference at the heart of their communities, and this multiplicity generates conflicts. Even in the most conservative churches, dissident bodies and subjectivities present themselves, showing a world that exists far beyond compulsory heterosexuality.

Third, there is a search for and against interpretations of biblical texts. Continuing the investigation of abominations, many evangelicals allude to biblical passages by pointing to “the homosexual act and other depravations”. But there are other possible readings that *inclusive churches* aim to put into action, and these readings bear dissident bodies in mind. Intense debates arise regarding these passages that build other possible interpretations. The questions and answers that these discussions provoke show the limits of readings that refuse dissident bodies; or, at the very least, they point toward other, more inclusive possibilities. It is through this process of putting the *Word* into dispute that theological possibilities for dissident bodies arise.

Fourth, as I have already mentioned, the places of worship of African diasporic religions in Brazil are increasingly suffering violence at the hands of evangelical and Catholic groups. For example, on June 26, 2014, a Candomblé *terreiro* in Duque de Caxias, a city in Rio de Janeiro state, was set on fire in an arson attack. In the aftermath, a Lutheran pastor spearheaded a fundraising campaign to rebuild the temple. The process was mediated by Babalorixá⁷ Ivanir dos Santos. During a day of ecumenical worship at the *terreiro*, Kleber Lucas – one of Brazil’s most prominent gospel singers, and pastor of a Baptist church – was present. Asked about his presence in a *terreiro*, Lucas responded: “The vast majority of theology that arrived in Brazil is racist and based on segregation”.⁸ Kleber Lucas’s formulation is similar to the observations of Flor do Nascimento (2017), who points to the insufficiency of the legal category of religious intolerance in understanding the context of violence committed

⁷ A Babalorixá or “father-of-a-saint” is the central authority figure within a *terreiro*, responsible for leading both religious events and other activities.

⁸ This story circulated in a variety of newspapers and blogs. The sentence cited above appeared in the *Curta mais* site: <http://www.curtamais.com.br/goiania/exclusivo-pastor-kleber-lucas-rompe-o-silencio-e-fala-pela-primeira-vez-sobre-polemica-visita-a-terreiro-de-candomble>. I learned about the story from Otávio Velho.

against territories and people linked to traditional African diasporic communities. Nascimento shows that, in Brazil, violence against African diasporic religions is based on exoticization and demonization as well as racism. These religions are primarily made up of Black people and consist of African and indigenous elements; everything that is racially marked continues to be persecuted from multiple angles, including by the state. But actions like those of the Lutheran pastor, and of the gospel singer and Baptist pastor Kleber Lucas, signal and construct new ways of growing closer that – even though they are limited, circumscribed, and partial – are encouraging in the difficult times through which we are living.

Fifth, these interpretations and counter-interpretations mobilize concepts such as redemption, captivity, refuge, and revelation. These are concepts that ought not be looked down on because, as Otávio Velho shows (Velho, 2016), when Brazilian peasants speak of being in “captivity,” there is a richness of meanings that this term evokes and brings into action, inasmuch as it refers simultaneously to biblical servitude, historical slavery in Brazil, and current labor situations (Velho, 1991). The construction of *Cidade Refúgio*, for example, is based on these concepts.

The points that I have emphasized here lead us to view “religion” as a field in dispute, or as a field that consists of disputing perspectives. There are no signs that the current wave of conservatism will dry up, or that these movements of *inclusive churches* might modify the conservative framework. However, new possibilities are certainly insinuating themselves, building new openings and possibilities of mediations. These lead us to think that, in order to grow closer – as Butler teaches us to do – theoretical movements must escape the petrifying viewpoints that remove social subjects from their historicity, diversity, and complexity. This will lead to the thawing of differences between “us” and “them;” after all, as we have seen, all sides are capable of moving (Amaral, 2006; Velho, 1998).

Poetics

I began this article by asking whether what persists in Butler's work might be her opening toward the Other, inasmuch as she creates theoretical movements that attempt to grow closer to the creative possibilities of their interlocutors. When we read her books, we perceive how profoundly certain people, performances, films, and social movements affect her, to the point where I would risk saying that her writings are almost responses (in the sense of returns, reactions, and affects) to these interpolations. Butler's works insist on affirming that to reify the Other in fixed identities is to reproduce the same epistemological and ontological violence that excludes dissident bodies. In other words, this reification – even when it uses terms like “subversion” – operates within the limits of a machine that we ought to abandon. At least that is how Butler affects me, here in the tropics.

Perhaps the path forward is to enchant ourselves with the multiplicity of agents and their inaudible forms of agency, with the creativity of their poetics: tearing apart this reifying machine; avoiding the emulation of movements that wind up imprisoning us all; experiencing other concepts; and experiencing ourselves through other concepts. It means bending our way of thinking, including *bending* Butler's theory when it cannot be applied. Bending has various meanings, including the twisting of spiraling movements, but it can also mean changing the direction of a given force. It implies winding ourselves up (or twisting ourselves) in Butler's theory so as to give it new direction.

In thinking about what provokes this bending, we could ask – even if only in order to stimulate our poetic imagination and the North-South orientation of the affectations of theories – what would Butler's thinking be like if she could experience African diasporic religions in Brazil? Imagine if, along with Foucault and

Levinas, she also entered into dialogue with *Iansã*⁹ and the *Pomba-gira*.¹⁰ Imagine if, while she was in São Paulo, she had gone to a *terreiro*, a space that articulates a complex mode of life by taking in spiritualities inherited from African peoples and reconstituting them here in Brazil (Nascimento, 2017). Imagine if Butler incorporated a *Pomba-gira* or received a saint¹¹, or if she heard a Baptist pastor singing with Candomblé *ogans*.¹² She would certainly speak of embodiments and corporeities in a different way and in different forms, because the bodies and materialities that most mattered would be other. By growing closer to other forms of knowledge and other subjectivities, being affected by these other-theories and by other practices, Butler would *bend* philosophies of the Global North and add another poetics to the world of the possible.

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⁹ Iansã is a female warrior *orixá* (divinity) in Afro-Brazilian religions. She is associated with the Wind, storms, sorcery, and lightning. (T.N.)

¹⁰ *Pomba-giras* are corporifications of transgressive femininity; they have the power to avenge and to offer care.

¹¹ Marcelo Niel, a psychiatrist and Candomblé practitioner in – Abassá de Babá Okê, a *terreiro* of the Angola lineage – reminded me of the story of Giselle Cossard Binon, better known as Ominarewa. Binon, of French origin, came to Brazil and visited the saint’s house maintained by Joãozinho da Goméia. While there, she began to feel dizzy and wound up fainting, a phenomenon known in Candomblé as “receiving the saint” (“bolar no santo”). That was the beginning of her life in Candomblé. Eventually, she became a respected “mother-of-a-saint” in the Ile Axé Atara Magba saint’s house located in Rio de Janeiro’s Santa Cruz neighborhood. Her story is examined in further detail in Clarice Peixoto’s documentary (Peixoto, 2009).

¹² Ritual percussionists in Candomblé and other African diasporic religions (T.N.)

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