

Rita Terezinha Schmidt

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul

Brazil

“I think where I am”: decolonizing gender, race and ethnicity at the periphery of the West

We live in times of fear and violence, real and symbolic, as the tentacles of covid 19 took by assault the world we live making all the more visible the inequalities among nations, the fragility of democratic political systems and, in some latitudes more than in others, the precariousness of human lives. Precariousness has been a hallmark of peoples in Latin American history since the so called “discovery” by European conquerors during the sixteen century. Specifically in Brazil, under the rule of the Portuguese imperial state, colonial governments consolidated their power by establishing laws of forced labor for indigenous peoples and by deploying slave traffic policies that lasted for almost four centuries. The numbers are staggering: in the first century of contact 90% of the aboriginal peoples was exterminated and during the last four centuries 700 of the 1.200 nations were wiped out of existence. As of today, there are only 305 ethnic groups, some running the risk of extinction. As to the black people, 4.8 million of Africans were brought to the country and sold as slaves from 1550 to 1888, the official date of the abolition which in fact, did not end the suffering of the black population. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geographical Statistics, besides the population living in shanty towns around big cities, there are 100.000 communities of “quilombolas” in the country rural areas, with a total of 2 million persons who keep their ancestral traditions and have become guardians of the forests, a role that has placed them in constant danger given death threats by encroaching white landowners. As to women in general, according to data from the ONU, of the 25 countries with the highest rates of femicide in the world, 14 are in Latin America and in the Caribbean. And in Brazil 3 out of 5 women murdered are black women whereas white women suffer mostly from physical abuse and rape. The patriarchal colonial legacy of violence, prejudice and hierarchies of gender, race and ethnicity outlasts to this day, perpetuating a cycle of subalternization, suffering and loss of human lives. This means that the concepts of european modernity such as democracy, progress, rationality and universal citizenship were and still are tokens of a privileged class of white men. As educators and comparatists I believe that the challenges of the present demand an expansion of our ways of thinking in order to perceive and embrace new angles to approach questions related to otherness, oppression and belongingness alongside questions of gender. The present proposal was inspired by Mary Louise Pratt’s essay “Comparative literature and global citizenship”(1995) where she affirms that besides being an academic endeavor, comparative literature is also a form of cultural citizenship in the so called globalized world and that is the reason it has become a powerful instrument of intellectual renewal in the studies of literature and culture, and also of politics, I would add.

I intend to develop the topic in two parts. First, I will address the genealogy of decolonial thought in Latin America, with comments on Anibal Quijano’s seminal essay of 1998 “Colonialidad del poder, cultura y conocimiento em America Latina” (Coloniality of power: culture and knowledge in Latin America) where he discusses the idea that the relation modernity/coloniality/decoloniality is not just the naming of an event but a complex relational structure of power. In this context I will raise issues in relation to Brazilian literary histories, all written in the XX century, by arguing that their content derives from a patriarchal, ethnocentric and racist hegemonic structure and as such they function as a form of cultural colonialism and its embedded epistemic violence. As a counterpoint, I will comment on the mappings of the research project “Brazilian women writers of the XIX century”, carried out by a group of women scholars across the country over a decade. In the second part,

I will address decolonial feminism to highlight the rising of subaltern voices, women writers of color and of different ethnicities whose production, philosophical and literary, engender symbolical mappings of cultural identities and traditional knowledges. They do not only challenge the old/new colonialism of minds and bodies that has become a trademark of the present government. They are decolonizing Brazilian literature and deconstructing the myth – making of the patriarchal white national imaginary rooted in the image of the people as “one”.