"I Think Where I Live". Decolonizing Gender and Race/ethnicity at the Periphery of the West

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"Fight like a forest"
Letter of Xapuri, a collective drafted manifesto that reaffirms the commitment to stand up for the Amazon and its peoples.
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Abstract:

We have been living through challenging times, of fear and violence, real and symbolic, as the tentacles of COVID-19 took by assault the world we live in and made even more visible the inequalities among nations, the fragility of democratic political systems and, particularly in some latitudes, the precariousness of human lives under political systems blind to questions related to human rights. In fact, precariousness has been a hallmark in the history of Latin American countries since the so-called "discovery" by European conquerors. Specifically in Brazil, under the rule of the Portuguese imperial state, the colonial government consolidated its power by establishing laws of forced labor for indigenous peoples and by the deployment of slave traffic policies that lasted for four centuries. The western colonial legacy in terms of hierarchies of gender, race, and ethnicity outlasts to this day, perpetuating marginalizations, prejudices, violence, and death. This means that the universals of European modernity such as the concept of state, democracy, progress, rationality, and universal citizenship have become tokens of a privileged parcel of the white population. To some extent, the colonization process in Brazil is still going on, producing brutality and destruction in ways unknown to modern Europe. As a comparatist, I believe that the challenges of the present allow us to rethink our intellectual work in terms of discovering new angles to approach questions related to belongingness as well as to examine differences and raise the issue of who has no

right to live a livable life, in political and symbolical terms. Such a question demands rethinking our relation to the other as other so then we can meet the other. This move is aligned with a comparatist *ethos,* that is, a dialogical reasoning oriented towards the other, with respect to differences and with recognition of diversity.

Keywords: Colonization, Original Peoples, Dewesternization, Liminal Space, Women's Writing

Since I intend to approach two Brazilian women writers whose ethnicities belong to distinct indigenous nations, it is important to provide some data that allows one to understand the historical context of original peoples in Brazil. In the first two centuries following the discovery of Brazil, more than half of the original peoples were exterminated mainly because of contact with white men's diseases such as cold and smallpox. In the centuries that followed, many became slaves in sugar cane plantations, in the mining business, or in the extraction of rubber in the Amazon area. In this period, 700 of the 1,200 nations were wiped out of existence. Moreover, according to the research by a major Brazilian anthropologist, Darcy Ribeiro, in his *Os índios e a civilização,* 87 groups disappeared in the first half of the 20th century. As to the 1,300 spoken languages that existed, there are only 165 in use today, and only half of them have been described by ethnologists and linguists. The majority of the Brazilian indigenous nations are located in the Amazon area, in reservations that are invaded now and then by white farmers. Today, there are only 305 ethnic groups, some running the risk of extinction. In fact, the genocide of indigenous peoples and the ecocide of original forests by white trespassers with the avowal of local and central governments have been going on since the sixteenth century and it was intensified since 1900. It is important to add that the Amazon River basin contains the largest rainforest on earth, roughly the size of 48 contiguous US territories. It covers 40% of the South American continent and its river system is the lifeline of the forest peoples. Unfortunately, Brazilian governments, particularly the latest one, have failed in their approach to the

destruction of the forest by closing their eyes to the crimes committed by illegal mining and by white landowners who expand their activities into indigenous territories. And worst, there is leniency on the part of authorities towards the invasion of demarcated indigenous territories by miners who, in their search for gold and precious materials, contaminate rivers with heavy metals causing widespread lethal diseases. The existing 305 ethnic groups are divided into two major branches: *Macro-Jê* which includes the groups called Boróro, Guató, Jê, Karajá, Krenák, Maxakali, Ofayé, Rikbaktsa e Yatê. And *Tupi* with the groups Arikém, Awetí, Jurúna, Mawé, Mondé, Mundurukú, Puroborá, Ramaráma, Tuparí e Tupi-Guarani.

Given that the colonial matrix of power is the very foundation of Western Civilization, I take the decolonial approach as a gesture of disobedience to the dictates of such a matrix by bringing up the works of some intellectuals who shared the need to build up a critique of the historical colonizer project. One of the pioneers of the decolonial is the scholar Mary Louise Pratt, who denounced the colonial genocide that took place in Latin American and Caribbean countries in her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, published in 1992. For Pratt, the discourse of colonialism is the history of vigilance, the evaluation of resources, and the political control of the population. Her book was the first one to discuss European colonialism in South America, particularly from the Enlightenment period onwards, a time when the discourse of western history naturalized the middle class as a global presence of power and authority. Another important scholar is Anibal Quijano, who developed the concept of the coloniality of power in the essay "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality" published in the collection of essays entitled *Globalization and the decolonial turn* (2010). For Quijano, the relation modernity/coloniality/decoloniality is not just the naming of an event but a complex relational structure of power. According to Walter Mignolo in his book *The darker side of western modernity: global futures, decolonial options* (2011), the modern/colonial period launched the process of westernization of the Americas what has meant that the racial/ethnic hierarchy based on the distinction of the human and the non-human constitutes the foundational colonial difference. For Mignolo, this distinction was institutionalized allowing native peoples and African slaves to be defined and treated as animals. From the point of view of a decolonial approach, the question of time is also important since time is heterogeneous as it encompasses layers of experiences of

distinct social groups, an unequal simultaneity of experiences in a historical, political, and cultural context of differences, conflicts, and violence. Therefore, the decolonial is not just one more theory but a new mode to approach history that runs counter to the modern project of social wellbeing that, as we know, reduced differences to inferior otherness, particularly in the so-called New World. As an analytical tool, the decolonial paves the way for the recognition and comparison of standpoints or *loci* of speech not recognized as legitimate, as well as of aesthetic forms situated in geographical, cultural, and political areas not located in spaces legitimized by the traditional academic world. Along these lines, I would add that a comparative feminist decolonial perspective plays an important critical-ethical function in the processes of resistance and emancipation of gender/ ethnic identities, as well as in the development of competencies of living together as human species. Today, this competence is vital for the survival of humans on the planet and in harmony with the life of the planet of which humans are only a part. So, to think of a planetary re-existence means to hear and respect peoples whose ways of being, languages, thoughts, and stories are valuable tools to teach us about the relationship of humans with the natural world. Along these lines is all the more important to understand that, for original peoples, nature is sacred so much so that they call it *Mother Earth.*

The visibility of literature by indigenous women started in the 1990s with the rise of small imprints, a move followed up by major publishing houses. Their writings are acts of survival and resilience as they delve into ancestral memories as well as create new angles to approach questions of gender, otherness, and belongingness. On reading works by Julie Dorrico and Eliane Potiguara, I had an encounter with alterity that led me to read otherness as a location outside myself. This means I had to let go regimes of signification and evaluation embedded in the traditional concept of "literature" particularly in terms of its historical alliance with hegemonic structures such as ethnocentrism, patriarchalism, and racism in a geography where processes of colonization are still going on. On the other hand, I realized that the comparatist concept of liminal space is of particular relevance here because it allows erasing hierarchical distinctions of western thought transplanted to South America by opening the possibility of identifying intercultural intraductibilities that are resistant to assimilation. Actually, the concept makes it possible to address the issue of intra-national borders to make visible texts, discourses and imaginaries silenced in the history of

white hegemony and its monopoly of writing. In this context, I focus on two women writers, Eliane Potiguara (Potiguara is her ethnic belonging) and Julie Dorrico (of the Macuxi branch).

Eliane Potiguara was the first Brazilian indigenous woman writer to publish in Brazil and the only one to receive the title of Doctor "Honoris Causa". Her first book, published in 1989 and entitled *A terra é mãe do índio* (*The earth is the Indian's mother*) is considered today a classical piece. Her personal history is unique. As an indigenous woman, she made a petition in the 47th Congress of the North American Indians, in New Mexico (USA), which was sent to the United Nations. After this event, she spent six years traveling to Switzerland where she participated in the draft of the Universal Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, in Geneva. Today she is a Peace Ambassadress of the French Writers Circle. The hybridity of her writings can be exemplified in the way she mentions sometimes God, sometimes Tupã as if she is moving into two cultural universes. Her third book, *Metade cara, metade máscara* (*Half face, half mask*) published in 2004 is an assortment of narratives: it encompasses a historical account of the rising of indigenous literature in Brazil, some autobiographical essays, an attempt to describe the form of indigenous writing in terms of an oral-aural tradition, and fictional narratives that combine letter and pictorial drawing. It is as if the whole text is transfigured into a woman's song, an eulogy permeated by nostalgia and consciousness of ancestrality but at the same a celebration of a collective identity in songs and rituals where nature and culture do not constitute a duality. In this sense, her writing is a space of multi-signification woven in the light of ancestral traditions that unveil the close relation of myth and poetry, history and memory, geography and nation, identity and alterity. By all means, it is possible to affirm that Potiguara's writing is a poetic form that liberates the pain to rescue indigenous spirituality and to pass on the knowledge her grandmother had passed on to her. Yet, she also approaches a contemporary theme very dear to women in general. Her poem "Woman" is a sample of her activism:

> Come on sister,
> drink of this fountain que awaits for you
> my words are sweet and tender
> scream to the world your story
> go ahead and do not despair.

Come on sister,
drink from the true fountain
that I make your head rise
because your pain is not the first
and a new day is to start
Come on, sister wash your pain in the river
call the birds
and sing with them, even alone,
and see your strong body flourish
Come on, sister
take off your dirty clothes
stay naked in the woods
vomit your silence
and run as a child made a heron.
Come on, sister
free your tormented soul
free your loving heart
Search for yourself and scream:
I am a woman warrior
I am a conscious Woman!
(Potiguara, 2018, p. 43, my translation)

The book entitled *Eu sou macuxi e outras histórias* (*I am macuxi and other stories*) by Julie Dorrico was published in 2019. It is a collection of ten short narratives that not only break down the difference between prose and poetry but intermingles writing and handmade figures drawn with a black pencil. Memory is the major theme, the key to the discovery of the self, for remembering origins and for dreaming of other landscapes that inhabit the spirit in its journey to recover its ancestry. The title of the first story is an affirmation of her ethnic origin: "I am macuxi, daughter of Makunaima." Makunaima is a hero of the oral tradition in the region that covers countries such as Brazil, Guiana, and Venezuela. The poem goes on: "I am daughter of Makunaima who created my grandmother: first in wax, but she melted. Then in clay: resisting to the sun she began to exist forever" (page 17, my translation). For Dorrico, to remember is to search for the beginnings as a means to engender her sense of self and of her belongingness, a myth-making operation that reveals its secret through the synergy of the natural world and of the social world where she lives and breaths. The imagetic structure of the poems embedded in words-assemblage, assonance and

onomatopoeia that carries the sound of the forest evokes an ancestral poetics being re-engendered. In the second poem-story entitled "Damurida", the name of a traditional spicy meal of her people, Dorrico affirms its magical effect in terms of opening a window to her ancestors. As she mentions the green, yellow and red peppers that "dance in the river of my memory, invoking the old song of ancestors that calls me back home" (page 27, my translation) the poet affirms that her struggles are to honor every day the struggle of her grandmother against the captors of their souls, which made them hard and incapable of being transformed every day. In her stories embedded in the sacred knowledge of her people, Dorrico weaves an imaginary that affirms the relation of myth and poetry, memory and history, identity and resistance. The Portuguese language is handled in such a novel way in terms of accent, rhythm, syntax, and vestiges of oral tradition, projecting an image-tic fabric loaded with a subjectivity that passes on resilience and empowerment.

> One day my mother decided to create myself as a woman.
> And created, in the decade of 1990, all right.
> But decided that my language would not be macuxi, like the one of my ancestors,
> And not the language of the englisman,
> But the portuguese language.
> I did not want to, no.
> So I decided to create my own.
> But as I cannot ran away from the verb that formed me,
> I put together two languages to tell a story:
> The inglexi and the macuxês
> Because it is for sure that my world – the world – must be created every day.
> And it is transforming my words that I present my voice.
>
> (Dorrico, 2019, p.21, my translation)

> My fight is to honour the struggle of my grandmother: everyday, tirelessly, forever.
> To fight against the captor spirits of our Spirits
> Against of what harden us and made us incapable of transformation everyday
> I'kareme kîiiiiiii waitíiiii
> I am telling you (ri-uí-li)

Greens, yellows and reds
Dance in my dreams
Rocking the rhythm of my encounter with Anikê and Insikiran
Greens, yellows and reds
Greens greens greens
Reds reds reads
Yellows, yellows yellows to infinite.
(Dorrico,2019, p. 29, my translation)

On these terms, Dorrico´s writing constitutes a literary object that cannot adjust to the categories traditionally defined by the reference system of western literature. As a reader, I find it impossible not to be affected by it and recognize that it moved me, altering perception of oneself, of the natural world and of the present time, as the forest and its peoples are under attack.

Both Eliane Potiguara and Julie Dorrico not only challenge the old/new colonialism of minds and bodies but they also reaffirm the bonds between humans and the natural world, bonds that the ongoing present colonialism seeks to erase. The strength of their texts lies on the affects they mobilize. 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".

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