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DECOLONIAL SEXUALITIES: PAOLA BACCHETTA IN CONVERSATION WITH SUHRAIYA JIVRAJ AND SANDEEP BAKSHI

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Decolonizing sexualities

queer activism

queer of colour

theories of power

In this roundtable forum, decolonial dyke-queer theorist Paola Bacchetta begins with a discussion of the span of decolonial queer theorization as it gained momentum in several fields of critical inquiry. Connecting it to contemporary mobilizations – anti-imperial, decolonial, anti-racism, feminist, queer – appears in this scenario as one of its key constituent features. Understanding, critiquing and transforming relations of power emerges as a necessary dimension of decolonizing queer/sexualities. For Bacchetta, decolonial queer/sexualities emanates from and brings into focus disparate geopolitical sites, analytics, expressions and activisms. Bacchetta proposes the concept-term "situated planetarities" to think about how power operates, and about subjects, in any specific context in relation to the planet. She elaborates the notions "co-formations" and "co-productions" to consider different kinds of relations of power (coloniality, racism, capitalism, class, misogynarchies, including sexism, queerphobia, transphobia) that are co-constitutive of each other and that structure all of

life. She provides transnational examples. It is, in this regard, a compelling observation for both academic scholarship of activism and grassroots political mobilization.

SJ, SB 1: How does decolonial queerness/sexualities speak to strands of decolonial theorizing which range today from decolonizing university initiatives to incisive critiques of Eurocentrism? To which contemporary issues is it most relevant in terms of political praxis? We are thinking of transformative politics.

PB: Certainly, today decolonial queerness/sexualities is in conversation with many strands of non-queer and non-feminist decolonial theorizing. These polylogues are unfolding around questions and practices of decolonizing the university and of ongoing critiques of eurocentrism but also of US-centrism. Several of us within and outside the Decolonizing Sexualities Network have written collectively about our work as queers of colour to decolonize the university (Bacchetta 2017, 2018). Decolonial queerness/sexualities as an area of critical analysis and political practice informs many other issues, theorizations, and both oppositional and non-oppositional resistance against the colonialism and coloniality that currently characterize the planet: settler, administrative, military, commercial, internal, external, and combinations of all of these. Decolonial queerness/sexualities, despite the different names in disparate sites across the planet, is a necessary dimension to transformative politics.

I think of decolonial queerness/sexualities as a large rubric that can include many disparate *situated* theoretical–interpretative sites from which liberation-oriented subjects can critique relations of power and their operations, reimagine the world otherwise, and act. Decolonial queerness/sexualities is a dynamic assemblage that connects disparate fruitful analytics and practices. It has room for global northern revolutionary queer of colour analytics and for revolutionary queer *epistemologies of the global South(s)*. It includes strands such as radical decolonial anti-capitalist queer-of-colour critiques from the global North(s), as well as the *communitarian feminism* as articulated by indigenous collectivities, about which Julieta Paredes, the out lesbian of the Aymara people of Bolivia in Abya Yala (or what colonizers called Latin America), and others, write. It also includes the decolonial thought of queer intellectuals and activists in anticolonial-occupation liberation struggles of our times.

Decolonial queerness/sexualities has thoroughly transformative potentiality when it implicates *all* relations of power, and is tied up with every dimension of the most subaltern of queer and non-queer life, of humans, all *beings-becoming* and the planet. It needs to be concerned with all registers: the

epistemological, economic, social, cultural, affective, corporeal, subjective, symbolic, energetic–spiritual, or other. For instance, in the realm of epistemology, decolonial queerness/sexualities can offer a place from which to perform a subaltern, and possibly a *subalternative*, critique of dominant analytics and modes and tools of knowledge production. It can reveal dominant presuppositions, categories, concept-terms, logics, and conclusions that otherwise might be taken for granted, that saturate our contexts and that become automatisms. In doing this work of disclosure, of laying bare, it can open the way for thinking, feeling, acting politically and living otherwise, in a spirit of *liberation-orientation*.

Decolonial queerness/sexualities ventures beyond *colonialism-and-race-amnesiac* feminist and queer theory, i.e. the *white* queer theory that dominates in the global North(s). I define *white* queer theory, of course, not in essentialist, morphological terms according to the racial positionality or body-representation of the person creating it, but instead in epistemological terms according to its approach, presuppositions, categories, logic and conclusions. *White* theory can be characterized primarily by what it neglects. It is *colonial-and-race-amnesiac*. It "forgets" to address colonialism, racism, Islamophobia, capitalism, class relations and other relations of power, and thereby reproduces them inside the theory itself. Here the term *white* signals a kind of blank space. It is not an empty space but rather a space of the direct reproduction of relations of power.

Unfortunately, *white* theory, *colonialism-and-race-amnesiac* feminist and queer theory, from the US also circulates in the global South(s) among some elite sectors of queers. There is a uni-directionality and unevenness of ideological flows from the global North(s) to the global South(s). These theories often make sense to a certain relatively dominant sector of feminists and queers in the global South(s) because like their relatively dominant global northern counterparts they do not necessarily consider the most subaltern conditions and subjects, or subaltern and *subalternative* theories and practices, in their own contexts. There, too, *white* feminist and queer theory sustains and reinforces the dominant order by default, as it consolidates and inadvertently reproduces the bulk of the contextual relations of power in both the sending and receiving sites.

In contrast, an example of decolonial queerness/sexualities epistemological work is that of the queer working-class Chicana writer and academic Gloria Anzaldúa. Her writing has informed the work of Walter Mignolo, among other decolonial theorists who make no claims to queerness and he/they also cite her. Anzaldúa rewrote the genealogy of present-day Chicanas (and Chicanos and Chicanx) in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Anzaldúa [1987] 2007, 2009). She proposed the notion of *Borderland/borderlands* to open up and resignify the notion of the border to mean both the geographical space and the cultural, symbolic, internal and spiritual space. She reimagined

the subject beyond the neoliberal idea of the *bounded-individual-with-choice*, via the (indigenous) Nahuatl notion of the subject in fusionality with other subjects in community.

Another example of insights that decolonial queerness/sexualities provides concerns the economic and social organization of societies. If we can consider the planet's various systematic arrangements of sexism and queerphobia as *co-productions* that are co-constituted in and by multiplicities of relations of power (colonialism and coloniality, race, capitalism, etc.), we can better understand their commonalities and differences (Bacchetta 2015, forthcoming). For instance, not all systems of sexism, obligatory heterosexuality and queerphobia are organized as *patriarchy* or the rule of the father. Instead, some are organized as *fraternarchy* (rule of the brothers, as in racial-democratic sexist regimes from the Greek States to the United States), or *filiarchy* (rule of the sons, as the Hindu Right that is currently in power in India that self-designates its membership as "sons of the Bharatmata"), or other. And within and beyond each of these overarching arrangements there are different modalities, such as matriliny, patriliny, matrilocality, patrilocality, etc. Hence, it is imperative to note that any globalizing notion of *patriarchy* has severe limitations.

To think about different kinds of sexist, heterosexist and queerphobic orders together, to put into relief some of their differences and similarities, I proposed the notion of *misogynarchies* as a large rubric. I think of *misogynarchies* as *co-productions*, that is, as co-constituted not with gender and sexuality alone but rather as composed with gender and sexuality and all other contextual relations of power even if articulated primarily as relations of gender and sexuality. Thus, for example, in the United States *fraternarchy* is white supremacist even when some people of colour as individuals hold a dominant positionality therein. White supremacy is structural and self-perpetuating. Undoing it implies a radical dismantling of the entire system, including the position of the President, and life needs to be reorganized otherwise. In India, *filiarchy* is supremacist along religion and caste lines, even when Hindu nationalists recruit some Muslims, Dalits or Adivasis into their leadership. Every *misogynarchy* formation is at the same time economic, social, epistemic, cultural, symbolic, everything. And it is always only one of the *co-productions* of power among others in any context. Each of these relations of power is a co-component in the co-constitution of other relations of power.

Decolonial queerness/sexualities as a set of analytics and practices is only transformative if it includes a critique of all relations of power, concerns with all conditions of subalterneity, and an accounting for all positionalities and relationalities within a social context including dominant and subaltern subjects. For example, in contexts of *misogynarchy* wherein obligatory heterosexuality is organized into serial monogamous heterosexual familial units, we will want to understand the operability of both the subject positions

therein and the stigmatized inside–outsider variants, such as mistresshood, the more or less organized institution of sex work, and the racialized–sexualized others who provide a backdrop to the construction of proper subjects. These positions (which have greater or lesser moral acceptability here or there) are not aberrations of the *misogynarchy* in question; rather, they are absolutely necessary and integral to keeping the system in place. Without the stigmatized inside–outsider sexual positions the system could collapse, as they perform the function of catharsis.

I also want to mention that sex work *is work* and that nearly everything, every other kind of job, is also organized in the context of relations of power to keep the prevailing relations of power intact. For example, I work in the Academy and thus inside the academic industrial complex whose function it is to reproduce dominant ideology that its subjects – students and faculty – are supposed to internalize. Certainly, those of us with radically critical stances try to resist this ideological reproduction from within. Concurrently, however, insofar as we are within the system, we are objectively in a position of participating in bolstering the institution and thus enabling (even if unwillingly) its dominant ideological work. We are caught in it. We need to work together to get free together. To do so we need totally to transform the University, to start over anew, even as we work to transform all of life, everything about the current order, including ourselves as subjects and as *subjects-in-relationality*.

This work of collective liberation and the reinvention of life is particularly difficult given the intensity of relations of power in which we are co-constituted as subjects and live. Foucault helps us understand how we are "formed" as subjects within the relations of power that saturate our contexts, and how these relations of power are part of our very composition as subjects (Foucault [1977] 2001, [1982] 2001). However, with decolonial queerness/sexualities in mind, we can more accurately speak about subjects not as "formed" in ostensibly monolithic power in the abstract, but instead as co-constituted in *multiplicities* of relations of power *in-context*. Foucault, though he brings us much to think with, ignored colonialism and many kinds, dimensions and registers of racism, and thus the necessity for us of this theoretical re-envisioning. Anyhow, to contest and transform the relations of power that are co-components of our subjectivity, that saturate our contexts, we need to take apart, destroy, recompose, parts of ourselves.

These relations of power that extend across the social realm and into our most intimate lives are more complex than they initially might seem. Colonialism, coloniality, racism, capitalism, *misygynarchies*, specism – all carry forms of genealogical accumulation that are fully operative in the present. This means that every contemporary context is an amalgamation of past and present manifestations of power that interact and enact in the present. For instance, we cannot think of queerphobia on the planet today without

recalling immense historical forms of violence such as this: the British colonizers outlawed homosexuality in fifty-six countries that they colonized. They imposed their own binary gender models – and accompanying gender ideology – into the colonized spaces, and denigrated and displaced pre-existing models, thereby destroying or worsening the status of women and queers *in-context*. These actions affected different segments of the colonized population variably. The British constructed Brahmin men as effeminate, incapable children, and Dalits and Adivasi (original peoples whom the British called "tribals") as hypersexed and out of control (Nandy 1983). They mobilized these controlling images simultaneously to undermine Brahminical authority, block Dalit-led anti-caste movements, and instrumentalize deadly caste oppression, all in the service of ever-more murderous colonial divide-and-rule strategies. They thereby severely delayed Indian societal transformation, with deep consequences for today.

SJ, SB 2: Given the disparate genealogies of decolonial queer critique, do you see a coherent field that has emerged in the recent decade in the field of activism and academic scholarship?

PB: Multiple sites of knowledge production and activism within and outside the University have emerged in recent times. I do not see coherency at this time, but rather *convergences* of what I call *co-motion* or multiple kinds of coming together, including solidarity, networks, unions, coalitions, etc. (Bacchetta forthcoming). In brief, *co-motion* is a large rubric to enable a discussion about many kinds and ways of coming together.

We live in a very exciting historical moment with much potentiality. Across the planet, autonomous feminist and queer movements are arising. We are creating convergent critiques, activisms and artivisms across some same and disparate relations to colonialism, coloniality, and all other relations of power. For example, there are common threads in the decolonial queer perspectives of Palestinian queers in Al Qaws, and Ugandan and African queers and allies who denounced the British proposition to boycott Uganda because of a law (financed largely by US evangelists) in Uganda calling for the death penalty for homosex. Al Qaws insists that the liberation of Palestinian queers cannot happen without the liberation of Palestine and thus all Palestinians from colonial occupation by the Israeli entity (Maikey 2012, 2014). Ugandan queers and allies maintain their oneness with the Ugandan people as a whole, and on that basis oppose British imperial intervention (Ekine and Abbas 2013). Both positions are *decolonial* and queer at the same time. They bring into relief the complexities of subjects co-constituted in and caught in multiplicities of relations of power.

During this period, we should not miss the opportunity for polylogues and building solidarities across similar and disparate conditions. For example, in

Paris in 2018 – during the Queer of Colour Day that we created as part of Queer Week – we organized a first polylogue among queers under occupation: from Palestine, Kurdistan and Kashmir. Queers have always been leaders, intellectuals and activists in these broad decolonial struggles. But, today, they are increasingly openly so. Whether "out" or not (and "outness" is yet another discussion, one that I will not address here), today they often bring with them the resolve to engage every relation of power, for the liberation of all subjects, especially the most subaltern of subjects, including queers. Our existence in the world and in social movements can operate as a productive provocation, a useful incitement for total freedom. This bodes well for queer futurity and for the future of the world!

An example of coming together in polylogue across some very different conditions is the work of the Transnational Decolonial QTPOC Facebook group. It has queer of colour and global southern queer membership from sites dispersed across the planet and its membership is constantly expanding. It can exist only because of the prior and ongoing work of groups such as the Decolonizing Sexualities Network in bringing many of us together. These are spaces for sharing knowledge, developing analyses, and coordinating transnational action.

Until now, our most radical decolonial queer/sexualities analyses, activisms and artivisms, and the subjects who produce them, have been kept out of the universities. The University and the entire academic industrial complex is a contradictory formation. It is both an apparatus of the state designed to reproduce the dominant order, and a site of the potential upheaval of that order. If we can bring radically critical subjects inside to constitute a critical mass, we could implode the university and recreate it differently. My thinking on this is deeply indebted to collective conversations (Bacchetta 2017, 2018). I have with others considered how we might create spaces of freedom inside the University, as sites of *convergence* to resist co-optation, to de-alienate ourselves, to invent a sociality and politics of transformation. Unfortunately, today, the University offers some people of colour the option of *becoming-functionally-white*, and some queers the option of *becoming-functionally-straight* (and some accept). Together, we can better resist the University's "diversity management" strategies that otherwise control us, deactivate us, render us ineffective.

SJ, SB 3: You have actively contributed to queer-of-colour activism both in the United States and France, where you have enabled, among other contributions, productive dialogues between queer and trans mainstream movements and decolonial and people-of-colour political mobilization. We can, for instance, cite your role in Dyketactics (1970s in the United States) and more recent involvement with the various groups in France in the last decades, especially the Lesbiennes of Color (LOCs) and Queer et Trans

Révolutionnaires (QTR). In what ways has this experience been notable in establishing a decolonial critique of power hierarchies for you? In other words, do you reckon that decolonial queerness steps beyond gender and sexuality frameworks to posit, perhaps daringly imagine even, a critique of all formations of power imbalances in a transnational bind?

PB: I think that the critique of all relations of power – of what I call *co-formations* and *co-productions* of power – is absolutely essential for a truly *transformative* decolonial queerness/sexualities politics. Wherever we are located, we are part of the planet, not as some isolated unit somewhere. All relations of power across the planet are interconnected, as are all subjects and *beings-becoming*.

It is important to note that such critique, as some of us propose today, is not new. It has many genealogical strands in our own lives and far beyond. In my own little life, my decolonial queer critique began when I was quite young, in the collective Dyketactics! (Bacchetta 2019a). I was a co-founder of Dyketactics! in the mid-1970s in Philadelphia in Turtle Island or the territory that the colonizers named the United States. Philadelphia is located on the land of the Lenape people. Dyketactics! included lesbians of colour of many heritages and positionalities, and a few white women. Today, Dyketactics! is known as the first queer collective in the United States – and possibly the world – to take the police to court for their brutality targeting queers. I am one of the Dyketactics! Six in that lawsuit. However, we did much more. To my mind, some of our most significant work was epistemological. We began nearly every statement by denouncing US (settler) colonialism, genocide, the colonial theft of land, the system of enslavement, racism, capitalism, exploitation of workers, and all relations of power. We published the statements in many feminist and dyke media of the day.

Importantly, different Dyketactics! members were simultaneously part of many movements: for Native American land and sovereignty, for Puerto Rican independence, for Black liberation, etc. (Bacchetta 2019a). And as a collective we supported all these movements and worked in solidarity with them. We were an *autonomous* group of dykes, but we were implicated in many non-dyke movements at once. I want to put into relief the fact that Dyketactics! is an *example*, and not an exception, of a radically critical and constructive queer collective that produced a *revolution-oriented* analytic and practice pertaining to all relations of power. This analytic, these practices, were formulated by dykes of colour and some white allies together. Today, the early existence of such subjects and politics has been erased, such that current generations imagine that they are alone, or the first, or the only ever. We need to archive better our most radically critical queer-of-colour and global southern queer historiography so that present and future generations do not need to waste time reinventing the wheel and can instead take everything to the next level.

Shortly thereafter, in France, where I ended up in political exile, I was of course involved in activism on multiple fronts, too. From the 1980s I was part of the feminist, lesbian and anti-racism movements at once. In the early 1980s I was a member of the advisory board of the *Maison des femmes de Paris* (Paris Women's Centre), which at the time housed about fifteen groups, more than half of which were groups of women of colour. They included the *MODEFEN* (Movement of Black women), the *Nanas Beurs* (second generation Arab-French women), the *Groupe femmes Tunisiennes* (Tunisian Women's Group), *Groupe femmes Latino-américaines* (Latin American Women's Group) and many other groups. In 1984 I co-founded the coalitional group called *Collectif féministe contre le racisme et l'anti-semitisme* (Feminist Collective against Racism and Anti-semitism) and in 1985 the *Collectif lesbian contre le fascisme et le racisme* (Lesbian Collective against Fascism and Racism). In France, we have had *autonomous* lesbian-of-colour groups only since 1999 with the founding of the *Groupe du 6 Novembre: Lesbiennes Issues du Colonialisme, de l'Esclavage et de l'Immigration* (6 November Group: Lesbians Born in/Out of Colonialism, Slavery and Immigration) (Bacchetta 2019b). Today in France I am a part of a broad decolonial queer-of-colour movement that includes many groups.

My experiences in the United States, France, India, Italy and, more recently, Brazil, are all formational to my thinking on decolonial queerness/sexualities and all *co-formations* and *co-productions* of power. Despite the varied contexts, each with its own relation to colonialism, coloniality, slavery, racism, capitalism, *misogynarchy* and other relations of power, my experiences are formed in some same and different relations of power. To think with them together, and to recognize the limits of thinking with them together (for they are only a few of the many sites across the globe) has been formational. To give just one example, considering these contexts together led me to what I call *situated planetarity*, or the necessity of analysing any specific context not as a bounded entity but rather as a temporally-spatially scaled site of many simultaneous relations of power, located within a larger context of *planetary co-productions* and *co-formations* of power (Bacchetta forthcoming). This is to take account of both the particularities of any site and its interconnections with other sites and the entire planet.

Radically critical queers of colour and queers in the global South(s), with our different kinds of subalterneities, with our experiences and perspectives, are particularly well positioned to develop analytics of *all* relations of power at once. But because our very composition induces in us (as in all people) forms of alienation, there is no guarantee that we will do that. We are co-constituted in subalterneity at the nexus of so many relations of power. If we can de-alienate, understand how power composes us and operates within us and in our contexts, then we can open up a space for

configuring interesting analytics and practices that are oriented towards total liberation, transformation and the invention of new ways of life.

Our liberation and more broadly transformation are entwined with the liberation of all other kinds of subalterns, of all people, across what I call the *subaltern-to-dominant-continuum* in the sense of Antonio Gramsci (Bacchetta forthcoming). Thus, while we create for ourselves as queer people of colour, and global southern queers, autonomous spaces for de-alienation processes, reflection about relations of power, and oppositional and non-oppositional resistance, we can also participate in spaces of polylogue with allies and people *as-yet-to-become-allies* who may be differently positioned from ourselves. As you mention, I have contributed to such spaces. I work in Paris with the queer and broader non-queer decolonial movement, in India with the queer and non-queer feminist movement, in the United States with queer and non-queer movements against racism, Islamophobia and fascism, and in Brazil with queer and non-queer movements against fascism. For freedom we need all of us, everyone.

Though I am deeply engaged in broad movements, I want to issue a word of caution: as queers of colour and queers in the global South(s), in many places building our ongoing *autonomy* is a real necessity. We need to pay attention to where our primary emotional, sexual, political and intellectual energy is going. Communities of colour, communities of queers in the global South (s), are generally positioned in extremely deadly subalterneity. If we can think, feel, re-energize, activate in *autonomy*, we will work more effectively in broader movements without getting engulfed or co-opted by them.

SJ, SB 4: And last, how can decolonial queerness, in all its contradictions and molten formations, partake in the processes of healing in both personal and collective spheres?

PB: Decolonial queerness/sexualities has a central role to play in healing in both personal and collective dimensions. As radically critical queers of colour and queers in the global South(s), our subjectivities are particularly *multiply* subalternized, destroyed and distorted in colonialism, racism, Islamophobia, capitalism and misogynarchies. However, we are particularly resistant and somehow also *other-than-completely-alienated*. We have to be so in order to surpass the conditions in which we are co-constituted and live. We are *out-of-sync* in relation to every register, every temporality, and every human and spatial scale. We are other to the heteronormative familial, community, obligatory institutions such as schools and universities, broader society, and ideologies of docile patriotism upon which *national normativity* depends. The compelling question is: How do we sustain queer-of-colour life, and global southern queer life, under such conditions? There is something beautiful and miraculous in our resilience. It is my hope that together we

can do something to create better conditions for future generations of queers of colour, queers in the global South(s), and our allies, who live with broken and erased genealogies, who often have no idea that others have preexisted them, are still here.

The intensity of our co-constitutions in power and of multidimensional alienation, and the many other kinds of murderous harm, mean that our healing also must be multifaceted, multidimensional. We might begin to conceptualize healing modalities by reimagining ourselves outside the confines of the concept of the subject that is grounded in neoliberalism and coloniality, that we are induced into exclusively thinking with and into embodying. A position of *not-neoliberalism* means that we walk away from the notion of the individualized, bounded, internally coherent subject that capitalism needs. A stance for *not-coloniality* means that we refuse the idea of the submissive, compliant subject who upholds the order of the dominant. Instead, we can begin with a concept of the subject, of ourselves, in collectivity and in fusionality with ancestors, progenitor, peers, all *beings-becoming*, perceptible and imperceptible entities and energies.

With this, our healing could take the form of *de-alienation* and the creation of ourselves anew as subjects with the world. This means recentring ourselves in our (singular and collective) hearts, our affect, our corporeality, our politics. We will need to induce the reordering of every cell in our bodies. This is only possible to do together, not alone. As Audre Lorde helped us to understand, the work of healing is not a luxury and it is political. Healing is also tied up with our invention of spaces of freedom where we create the conditions for expression, loving interrelationality, and polylogues for analysis and political solidarity. One such space is the Decolonial Café that you (Suhraiya and Sandeep) both organized in Paris in May 2019.

In sum, to the extent that we actively work to bring into relief multiple relations of power and strive towards dismantling them, we will be in an excellent position to heal ourselves, to work well with allies, to transform the world, and to invent other modes of life, together.

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