tita (Letizia Patriarca)

Multilingual as Decolonial Practice

Ethnographic Experiments of an Anthropologist between Brazil and Italy



(...) looking in, looking from more than one direction at the same time. La lengua is a symbol for speech, for breaking silence by talking, communicating, and writing. The split forked tongue of a serpent is my signal for communicating bilingually. (Anzaldúa, 2009: 211-212)

I am *tita*, which is difficult to pronounce for Italian speakers. On the contrary, my mother gave me, among many other things, the name *Letizia*. She gave me also an Italian citizenship, and an Italian family environment in our home, even though we lived in São Paulo, a Brazilian city.

This is important for situating myself and locating what I am going to address in this brief contribution. What I analyze is inseparable from the social markers of difference (Brah, 1996; McClintock, 1995) that enable my ethnographic work, as well

as delineate bodies, mine and those who collaborate with my research. When I speak of bodies, I am referring to Brazilian *travestis* that engage in sex work in Italy, but I am also referring to bodies of knowledge and epistemologies.

Since my arrival in Italy, I have begun to revisit issues that did not arise in my research and work in Brazil – which for over 10 years has consisted on interacting and collaborating with Brazilian sex workers, cisgender, *travestis* and trans and women, organized in political collectives or otherwise. For the three years that I lived, worked and studied in Italy I began to understand that some words were not easily translatable and not fully understood, because they referred to Brazilian specific social movements, that also led to political achieved rights. So I started to understand the (im)possibilities to communicate and translate, beginning with the self-referred words used by part of sex workers and trans Brazilian movements, respectively *puta* and *travesti*.

I have also faced countless daily issues due to my untranslatable experience as *sapatão* – which could maybe be something near as "dyke". But for some time now, I have been presenting myself as *sapatão*, as a gendered experience (not in terms of sexuality) that departs from binary and biologizing logics and that is not limited to affective-sexual relationships between cis women's bodies. In addition, I started to use this word that was initially – and still is – seen as an ugly and offensive word, to transform insults in political struggle and proud identities. Similar as what "queer" represented, but specifically because of my alliance with Brazilian sex workers and trans people that have done the same with the words *puta* and *travesti*. And it was exactly because of my anthropological work with (not about) sex workers and trans people in Brazil that I also gained courage and self-consciousness of my lived experiences of gender, sexuality, that are inseparable from class and race markers of difference. For that, *sapatão* also points to an articulation with other social markers of difference, which necessarily shape the ways of experiencing gender and sexuality – differently named in each cultural context.

In that sense, for this contribution I explore the (im)possibilities of anthropological writing in multiple languages, while simultaneously attempting to communicate with cultural contexts, diverse and unequally marked in global geopolitics. It is through multilingual writing (Anzaldúa, 1987; Lugones, 2003; Mignolo, 2000, Heil, 2020) that I highlight the pluriepistemic dimension, focusing on the affirmation of a transnational dialogue for policies related to the global transit of sex workers. In this way, I continue the principle that guided my PHD thesis (Patriarca, 2023), written both in Italian and Brazilian Portuguese, understanding that the return to the Italian public working in local NGOs would not be disseminated if the text was only in Portuguese or even in English.

My commitment to multilingual writing also reflects a decolonial practice, in the sense of enabling, at least textually, connections and encounters. From these encounters between languages, I seek to demonstrate forms of coloniality of knowledge/power (Quijano, 1992), for example, pointing to the need for translation policies funded by European knowledge production centers to encourage the reading of Brazilian works. In that sense, all the bibliographical references were very thought in terms that can be read in English and in Brazilian Portuguese.

In a certain Brazilian context, the word *puta* no longer frightens people. Since the 1980s, sex workers like Gabriela Leite have fought to ressignify the word *puta*. It has come to be claimed and proudly presented in new and creative ways—in book titles, events, artistic productions, academic works, and discursive formulations. Transposing all this to the Italian context was extremely difficult, as there is no single corresponding word. It is not only the lack of the terminology, but also the absence of representing, at the same time, the labor demands of sex workers and feminist reinterpretations of the insult for “whore”.

Sex work is treated similarly in the Italian and Brazilian legal contexts, in that it is permitted for those who engage in it, but various related activities are classified as crimes and therefore penalized. These activities consist of providing sexual services

in establishments, in the creation of networks, involving mobility and migration. Depending on how they are interpreted, these relationships, places, and people can be categorized as crimes of promoting and facilitating prostitution, human trafficking, and sexual exploitation.

Through harm reduction activities with which I was able to collaborate in both contexts, I outline local frameworks for sex work and prostitution, paying attention to the forms of regulation and criminalization of these practices. The discussion of terminology is central to thinking about how issues take shape and are disputed at the local level, in order to also contrast them, aiming at greater communication between policies. I suggest that in the Brazilian context there is a greater proliferation of activism and political organizations of sex workers, also reflected in vibrant ethnographies and socio-anthropological productions carried out jointly by sex workers and academics. In the Italian context, on the other hand, there is greater institutional discussion and proposals for policies and projects aimed at managing sex work, which takes place mainly indoor and is mostly discussed in terms of migration. In the Brazilian context, however, sex work on the streets highlights its criminalized nature through racial inequalities, police violence, and necropolitics (Santos et al., 2021). The forms of activism, as a consequence of and in dialogue with various developments in each context, also present different aesthetics and actions. Between the Italian “sex worker” movement and the Brazilian “putafeminism” there are also common goals, such as discussions towards the decriminalization of sex work, to allow for safer working conditions, and therefore they share a rejection of the neo-abolitionist model of criminalization of clients.

Disputing locally chosen terminology is a fundamental demand for anti-racist, feminist, and sex worker activism, as well as for the self-determination of people who experience gender and sexuality outside of imposed norms. In this sense, reflecting on the word *travesti* – which does not exist and does not communicate in the Italian context became the focus of one chapter of my thesis. I focused on the

practices and politics of people who self-identify as *travesti* suggesting that this entire movement in the Brazilian context – although still in its early stages, not homogeneous and receiving transphobic reactions– is unthinkable and inconceivable in the Italian context. Beyond the non-existence of the term *travesti* in Italian and the impossibility of translation, I argue that the possibilities – or lack thereof – for visibility and legitimation for *travesti* (and trans) bodies and politics are reflections of diverse and local forms of articulation of social markers of difference.

I have then explored the misunderstanding of the term *travesti* in the Italian—and perhaps European—context to affirm that it is an absence of experiences not only of gender but also of other social markers of difference. An intersectional misunderstanding, which occurs due to the diverse configuration of these markers and their articulation, that is, the local forms of markings that hierarchize differences. In this sense, I argue that the intersectional configuration in each local context results in a completely different understanding and mobilization of intersectionality.

More than bringing up how this identity is experienced, which refers to infinite and plural ways of experience, I am interested in thinking about how to introduce the term, taking into account precisely these infinite and powerful possibilities. Increasingly, all this multiplicity can be accessed by reading, listening, seeing, watching, and directly following *travestis* who have gained visibility and legitimacy in various public spaces in the Brazilian context.

For that, I mobilized elements (legislations, third sector actions, and activisms) and place them in dialogue with the bibliography discussed and disseminated in their local context – both in Italian and Brazilian Portugues. The goal is not to cover the entire scenario (for example, describing the entire history of rights won by trans and *travesti* people), but to go through elements from different areas to compose the local framework that enables certain experiences or not. Even the few works that could be or are translated into English communicate little transculturally about the

effervescence of *travesti* and trans policies between and within the two local contexts. Furthermore, since these elements stem from diverse local intersectional processes, they also result in unique and difficult-to-translate terminological appropriations and (re)creations. To support this argument, I point to the growing of *travesti* epistemologies (Passos & Simakawa, 2022), produced in Brazilian free and public universities.

From all this elements, my contribution points to the difficulties on writing and presenting a bilingual thesis, starting from and discussing the effects of my lived experience in academic and working contexts, while also officially holding Italian and Brazilian citizenship. Since my lived experience allows me to start from a multiple circulation, I reflect on the possibilities of academic writings and dialogues that are also multiple and simultaneous. Inspired in Gloria Alnzadúa's work, I situate my production as a form of knowledge that is intended to be between, as a bridge that allows for multiple and simultaneous communications and dialogues with different audiences. In addition to placing myself between knowledges and cultural contexts, arises a decolonial and counter perspective in the attempt to write in Italian (and also in English) with a Brazilian bibliography that is not translated – highlighting coloniality of knowledge and epistemic violence. Therefore, through my knowledge located between, I connect with methodological discussions about textual fabrication and the formal presentation of a work that intends to communicate, at the same time, with different cultural contexts, without losing their disputes and specificities, which often require a different contextualization. I also discuss the possibilities of elaborations and fabrications in formats plastered by a necessarily written academic tradition and in the face of tacit or implicit norms that limit the (textual) presentation of knowledge.

In an attempt to communicate with the two cultural contexts, diverse and unequally marked in global geopolitics, I question the (im)possibilities of anthropological writing in two languages. It is not a question of comparing contexts, but rather of

thinking ethnographically about this translation process, in order to build bridges, communicate, and enable greater dialogue between transnational policies.

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