

Affecting Knowledges

Decolonial Brown Queer and Trans Imaginaries

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One of my projects has been to queer decolonial imaginaries and through that queering apply a decolonial method that is both libratory and transformative. This move has led me to locate brown queer imaginaries within a decolonial affective mode. I have argued elsewhere that to decolonize history, a deconstructive method that I named “the decolonial imaginary” may be taken up (Pérez 1999). In my early monograph, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, is an interstitial space in which political and social dilemmas are negotiated and deconstructed; it is a space in which one is not merely oppressed or victimized, nor is one only oppressor or victimizer. Rather, one negotiates between and among one’s identities in favor of the identity that is most viable for that specific political, coalitional, historical moment. There is a way in which these multiple self-identities, constructed around and by an imaginary, are in and of themselves coalitional and beyond notions of the individualist self. As a deconstructive tool, the decolonial, to which I ascribe, needs the creativity of the imaginary to open up affective knowledges, elicited through and from first person experience, too often negated when the collective experiences are brown, queer, and transgender. Yet, perhaps if we venture inside decolonial queer/trans imaginaries we will find the brown imaginaries of femme, of butch, of trans, of gender-non-conforming selves, of gender-fluidity, and of sexual desire’s fluidity because desire, after all, is fluid and always already changing, transforming us toward unexpected twists and turns in which surface effects can dictate the body/mind/psyche.¹ In order to approach these imaginaries, this chapter will first turn to Gloria Anzaldúa’s phenomenology of self, then, I will explore the will to feel as a concept/methodology/practice to promote brown queer/trans imaginaries as a method of critique.

1 In *The Extractive Zone*, Macarena Gómez-Barris (2017), illuminates the hidden, the unseen and that which is often neglected in submerged ecological terrains. The theorist offers up feminist perspectives for anyone intent upon decolonial theory that definitively prods the “coloniality of power.” Her work is one of the first to queer a decoloniality that exposes more than cis-male-centered studies; her research also fosters decolonial queer “cuir” femme analytics.

For brown queer/trans imaginaries, the phenomenology of first-person experience draws from the collective practices developed through Gloria Anzaldúa's methodologies of autohistoria and autohistoria teoría (Anzaldúa 2016: 241-142). These are phenomenological turns that glean from an individual's personal life story, a life story inextricably linked to collective transformation. The political and cultural links to the collective are essential for life stories to matter. Moreover, Anzaldúa's autohistorias are also a phenomenological method, or autohistoria teoría, that, to phrase it with Sarah Ahmed, "emphasizes the importance of lived experience." (2006: 2) Both theorists underscore how lived experiences integrate the mind, body, and psyche to cultivate new ways of knowing and being. These epistemologies and ontologies are born deep inside the body, beyond skin surfaces, beyond the superficial outer layers that are visible and easy to touch, and beyond what is seen but not grasped because something is always hidden. The knowing is only a fragment of what lies beneath; the being is only a particle of what has been and what will be. These are the submerged terrains of the body/mind/psyche triad that Anzaldúa guided us toward and that Macarena Gómez-Barris expanded upon as she discussed extraction and the submerged with a decolonial 'cuir' femme analytics. In this chapter, I want to propose the phenomenological method of brown queer/trans imaginaries, which also emerge from unseen and unheard life stories.

Let's take a look at Anzaldúa again. In her celebrated *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa offered up affective methods long before affect was being theorized in larger academic venues. When she asked us to feel the intuitive guise of *la facultad*, or to sink into the abyss of the Coatlicue state or to embrace the shadow beast lurking inside our psyche seeking freedom from self-abnegation, Anzaldúa asked us to feel our lives intimately.² She not only asked us to feel our lives deeply, she also summoned us to respect the affective methods that lead to our transformation. *Nepantla*, that in-between state that we inhabit, became the method for traversing an affective life filled with cultural emotion. And when she asked us to acknowledge our writing as a sensuous, feeling act that could satisfy the psychic unrest in which writers dwell (Anzaldúa 1985: 71-73), we realized again the libratory and transformative methods she recommended through the very act of writing. But she also reminded us that writing was a privilege not to be taken for granted, given where we come from and how our brown, poor communities must struggle to have access to writing.

When I turn to brown queer/trans imaginaries, I am also consulting transgender scholar, Francisco Galarte, who argues: "to trans our approach is to invite change and transformation." (Galarte 2014: 118) It is a method that answers

2 Anzaldúa defines her concept, *la facultad*, as "the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface." (Anzaldúa 1987: 38)

Anzaldúa's call for a decolonial reality that is willing "to change or reinvent reality" with an imagination that encourages transformation (Anzaldúa 2016: 44). The method pays heed to Anzaldúa's call to "listen to what your *jotería* is saying." (Anzaldúa 1987: 85)³ I would add that we must also discern what queer/trans folks are feeling, gesturing, and experiencing. A brown queer/trans imaginary is grounded in decolonial disruption of white, colonialist, hegemonic, necropolitical heterosexuality and capitalism. And by acknowledging brown queer/trans imaginaries, decolonial defies heteronormativity, patriarchal relationships, and gender norms.

At this point, I would also argue that one cannot examine race/class/gender/sexuality if queer and trans imaginaries are absent. In other words, if we neglect brown queer and trans imaginaries, we are defying a core definition of decolonial, which is to strip away at colonialist hierarchies. Without queer/trans imaginaries, the decolonial is not decolonial at all but instead another colonizing, occluding methodology without inclusive practices. At the same time, it is important that just as we contest gender as a social, colonial, raced construct, we must contest 'sex' as a social, colonial, raced construct. We have been much too invested in gender and ignored the way in which 'sex' is ordained as biological and unchangeable and as a result have discarded sex from a tangible critique. In the same way, it is relevant to interrogate desire as a colonial, sexed matrix. But how? Perhaps decolonial brown queer/trans imaginaries will allow us to contest 'sex' and to contest our notions of 'desire' as we challenge the symbolic order of patriarchy, of coloniality, of sex-gender systems that still split into false binaries in which sex is natural and gender is a social construct (Butler 1993: 16). Is desire dictated by a coloniality of feelings – that which holds us back, repeats itself in old, familiar habits and patterns of racialized and gendered hierarchies? Our desires are so often rooted in our past, ingrained in our bodies/minds/psyches, and fixed in our present that we become stultified perhaps only reacting to the present, which is imprinted by our past and perhaps equally imprinted with historical trauma.

Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* shows us the way in which bodies feel and experience how they are gendered, sexualized, and raced by *how* they "extend into space." (Ahmed 2006: 2) In other words, she asks that we pay attention to the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds. Moreover, queer orientation, how we as queer/gender-non-conforming People of Color orient ourselves toward the something that appeals to us, attracts us, makes us whole, is not an easy task in a straight world in which straightening devices are all around us (Ahmed 2006: 72). Heterosexual, cis-gender, then, is not concerned with being 'oriented' because they are already deemed 'natural' in their desires, their feelings. Institutions are always already straight and act as straightening devices in the same

3 Historically a pejorative term, "jotería," can be translated to "queer" and has been reclaimed by Chicana/Latina queers in the same way that "queer" was reclaimed.

way that hegemonic institutions are always already white, heteronormative, and colonialist, imposing a universality of a white world that denies queer and trans People of Color their/our right to be. To just be.

Anzaldúa understood this. She repeatedly reminds us in her writings that she is/was a brown queer lesbian working-class Chicana/Tejana from the U.S.-Mexico border, born in the mid-twentieth century when segregation, poverty, and homophobia were the norm. When she called herself *jota*, *marimacha*, *tortillera*, she embraced brown queerness, recognizing that the queer, trans, lesbian, butch, femme, brown body is worn down and worn out by spatial temporal limits of whiteness and of a heterosexual regime. The state of Texas (Texas) in the mid-twentieth century was not a fun place to be a brown queer/trans body oriented toward other brown queer/trans bodies. But Anzaldúa instructed us to pay attention to what it feels like to inhabit the world as a brown queer/trans body. What does it mean to have to be in certain spaces, when those spaces are overwhelmingly white or heteronormative? For Ahmed, disorientation is overwhelming for the queer body that is oriented elsewhere, but an elsewhere that is often hidden from sight, occupying interstitial glances and gazes as we try to discern who is or who is not really queer.⁴

I can say that the queer butch brown body, which I myself inhabit as a gender non-conforming brown butch, is in constant battle with spaces that are normalized for cisgender, heterosexual folks. And it is not simply an issue of not being comfortable or disoriented in heteronormative spaces since, after all, that is the world for the most part. Instead, what is important is the way in which those spaces are so normalized that a specific kind of universalism grounded in a colonialist, white, heteronormative regime is privileged over and over again. Only through collective action and collective voices of brown queer/trans folks can those privileges be exposed and, once exposed, the changes and transformations are possible. But again, that spatial temporal universalizing that is invisible for so many, whether white or heteronormative or both, takes a harsh toll on queer/trans, butch, femme, gender-fluid, brown, and black bodies.

The Will to Feel

In this brief chapter I have been hinting at how decolonial Anzaldúan methods inform what I am developing as 'the will to feel'. By turning to the will to feel, I want to propose this other facet that resides within the imaginary and that has the potential to decolonize, dismiss or eradicate oppressive regimes. For now, I'm calling this mechanism 'the will to feel'.

4 Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). Refer to pages 157-165 of the conclusion, "Disorientation and Queer Objects."

Let me begin with a personal story, my own phenomenology of spirit and mind that compelled me to linger upon will and willingness. In September 2017, I witnessed my daughter drop twenty-two pounds in the span of four weeks. In a way, she eluded her will to live, choosing instead to control calories, defy hunger, and entertain suicide. She had lost her appetite. No hunger, no craving, no life. No will. She fluctuated between depression and anger and the only will she had, was her willfulness to defy the very thing that would keep her alive – food. Her heart rate dropped so drastically that she had to be monitored nightly in the hospital for over a week. Only eleven years old, she had become a statistic, part of an epidemic that overwhelms the First World nations filled with hypocrisy and contradictions. “Eat, but don’t get fat.” “Consume food, drugs, alcohol, bright shiny things – but don’t gain weight, don’t be an addict, don’t be greedy.” “Be sexy, but don’t be sexual.” Or in other words: abide by patriarchal double-standards that still press down upon you in the twenty-first century despite the decades of the 1960s and 1970s that attempted to advance rights for women, for girls, for LGBT folks, for People of Color, for those on the margins. We made some headway but regressed after the 2016 election of Trump, a problematic, bigoted President of the United States.

Eating disorders continue to rise and have not been tackled or resolved since they received national attention in the 1970s. The media has given minimal regard to the disorder and only places at its center young, white, middle-class teenage girls. I discovered after seven weeks in the Children’s Hospital of Denver that although most of the patients were girls from nine to eighteen years old, and many were white and middle-class, there were also Latinas, teenaged boys, including one from Mexico, girls from working-class backgrounds with single mothers, and a teen girl from Africa. The teen boys presented somewhat queer but clearly had no permission to present in anything other than the white, cisgender heteronormative, far-right Christianity of intolerance seemingly practiced by their families. I have no intention of speaking at length on anorexia or about my daughter. I will say that therapy – both family and individual – gave us the tools to be willing to heal and she has demonstrated a willingness to face the monsters in her head.

My point in raising this brief, personal narrative is to introduce the notion of will in its various forms as I make an argument for the will to feel within the brown queer/trans imaginary: will, willfulness, willful subjects, willingness, will to power, will to know, will to truth, will to live.⁵

5 What of the “life unworthy of being lived” for those who “have neither the will to live nor the will to die.” In his chapter, “Life That Does Not Deserve to Live,” from the book, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Giorgio Agamben (1995) cites Karl Binding’s *Pamphlet in Favor of Euthanasia* published in Germany in 1920. See pages 136-143. Agamben posits that the pamphlet urged the question of sovereignty over one’s will to live or die vis-à-vis the “value or non-value” of life.

Friedrich Nietzsche articulated the will to power, “an ideal that simultaneously brings with it its own form of universalization: war and conquest.” (Moten 2018: 3)⁶ Michel Foucault compelled us to consider the will to know and the will to truth, or we could say, the will to know the truth (Foucault 2013). We were challenged to become truth-seekers of knowledges and to question how assorted disciplinary knowledges came to be. The will to live can be attributed to Arthur Schopenhauer, a philosopher I have not read closely and have only thought of him in reference to a brief scene in the film *Frida* (Taylor 2002). There is a clever moment on the part of the scriptwriter who invokes the will to live for Frida after an accident that challenged her into yet more difference in an ableist world.⁷ I ruminated about my own daughter’s loss of a will to live and her resilient willfulness to individuate in ways harmful to her as she willfully toyed with death.

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Muñoz cites Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch who remind us, “[w]hat is really important here is the will that is different.” (Muñoz 2009: 39) What if the will to feel is the will to be different as ‘feelings’ compel us to express differently in a world that anticipates ‘logic’, the ‘rational mind’, and unfeeling to explain our lives, even when there is no logic, no rationale, no real explanation that can fulfill expectations grounded in that which is not part of one’s experience or phenomenological way of being. The fact is, however, that there is no hard and fast methodology, practice, or theory that can avoid misuse, misinterpretation, and misrepresentation.

The will to feel, I am proposing, is its own hermeneutics, its own method and theory. At least, that is what I am attempting in this brief meditation that borrows from phenomenology to make my point. The phenomenology of the first-person experience has a long history with various intellectuals, writers, and philosophers, particularly as I have shown above in the works of Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, as well as Sara Ahmed. What happens when we use those feelings, the woundedness and painful hurt to drive critique and analysis consciously, with an

6 Moten questions the phenomenology of “individuating” that emerges from the usual suspects, Friedrich Nietzsche, Edmund Husserl, etc. (Moten 2018: 4) I am fascinated by Moten’s phenomenology because he is pointing us toward the communal aspects of a concept that has relied too much on the soloist as alone instead of always already part of a collective.

7 In the film *Frida*, with Salma Hayak, we see the tragic accident that debilitated her body and how she coped with disability for the rest of her life. When she is initially recuperating at home and struggling with extreme physical pain, her college boyfriend, played by Diego Luna, brings her a stack of books to read while she is bedridden. One of the books is a philosophy tract and as he hands her the book he says: “Schopenhauer because it’s good for you.” For decades that comment riddled me until finally, after thinking about ‘will’ in its many forms and my own impulse to theorize and actualize our understanding of the will to feel, it hit me: Her boyfriend wanted Frida to begin to feel a will to live again.

astute awareness? That is to say, what happens when we implement affective emotions that move us to act or react in the first place? Are we only writing subjectivities, not rational, not Lockian or Western European Cartesian, but instead, an argument and thesis guided by emotional affective intelligence grounded in willingness to feel what has shaped the mind/body/psyche. In *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Foucault posits, that we must “start from the decision that universals do not exist, asking what kind of history can we do,” instead of “using history as the critical method” that questions universals (Foucault 2008: 1-3).

In a sense, I am arguing that we turn to the will to feel as an antidote that strips away at false notions of universal objective science to promote brown queer/trans imaginaries as a method of critique. The rational mind can lie to itself and rely on objectivity as if one is not influenced by regionalism, history, culture, gender, sexualities, race, and class background. However, when we take brown queer/trans imaginaries into account, the will to feel as a deconstructive hermeneutic may open new avenues as we attempt to decolonize affective knowledges.

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