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Theoretical Essay

Exhausted, But Standing! Reflections on the **Immunological Dispositive Challenging Transvestites** and Transgender Women in the Educational System



Exaustas, Porém em Pé! Reflexões a Respeito do Dispositivo Imunológico Contra Travestis e Mulheres Transexuais no Sistema Educacional

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ABSTRACT

In this article I discuss the exhaustion experienced by transvestites and/or transsexual women, black and white, in the Brazilian educational system. I also discuss the concept of Immune Device developed by the Chinese philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2015) trying to understand to what extent it impacts or not the school routine of transvestites and/or transsexual women, black and white. To carry out this discussion, I resort to the (auto) biographical method developed by the white cis gay researcher Marcio Caetano (2016) for agreeing that personal and professional experiences, even if produced in specific and individualized contexts, are relational and can be connected/compared with the narrations of other life stories. Thus, adopting a life trajectory combined with a cultural, post-structuralist perspective, with feminist, transfeminist and ethnic-racial and gender relations studies, as well as with the intersectionality concept proposed by the black American jurist Kimberlé Krenshaw (2002. No category discussed here is treated as something static, fixed, crystallized, in explicit opposition to the essentialist views that generalize existences and disregard the multiple processes that involve them.

Keywords: exhaustion; crossdresser; school; immunological device; resistance.

RESUMO

Neste artigo discuto a exaustão vivida por travestis e/ou mulheres transexuais, negras e brancas, no sistema educacional brasileiro. Discuto também o conceito de Dispositivo Imunológico desenvolvido pelo filósofo chinês Byung-Chul Han (2015) procurando entender em que medida ele impacta ou não o cotidiano escolar de travestis e/ou mulheres transexuais, negras e brancas. Para fazer essa discussão recorro ao método (auto)biográfico desenvolvido pelo pesquisador cis gay branco Marcio Caetano (2016) por concordar que experiências, pessoais e profissionais, ainda que produzidas em contextos específicos e individualizadas, são relacionais e podem ser conectadas/comparadas com as narrações de outras histórias de vida. Assim, adotar a trajetória de vida aliada à perspectiva cultural, pós-estruturalista, com os estudos feministas, transfeministas e das relações étnico-raciais e de gênero, bem como com o conceito de interseccionalidade proposto pela jurista negra estadunidense Kimberlé Krenshaw (2002). Nenhuma categoria aqui debatida é tratada como algo estático, fixo, cristalizado, numa oposição explicita às visões essencialistas que generalizam existências e desconsideram os múltiplos processos que as envolvem.

Palavras-chave: exaustão; travesti; escola; dispositivo imunológico; resistência.

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INTRODUCTION

My name is Megg Rayara Gomes de Oliveira. I am a Black transvestite, born and raised in the interior of the Brazilian state of Paraná, in a city called Cianorte, in a neighborhood inhabited by people who migrated from various regions of the country, the vast majority of whom came from rural areas – real farming land!

I say raised in the sense of a child, a daughter, someone who was – somehow –cared for, formed, taught, educated, instructed, prepared, and armed.

I was raised as a lackey, a servant who performs domestic services, serves, and submits, almost always, especially in childhood and adolescence.

Without understanding what was happening and why I was denied protection, affection, care, and acceptance, I started to claim them in any way I could, trying to convince the people around me that I was useful.

I mean 'useful' along the lines of the power dispositive proposed by Michel Foucault (1999), who explains that power seeks to attribute some utility to the body and integrate it into economic systems.

Even though I was a child, just over six years old, I deciphered with certain precision the adult-centered discourses that decided which childhoods had the right to exist and which childhoods needed to undergo realignment.

Since I was a child, I had attitudes and speeches that seemed effective to me in gaining people's attention and, by some miracle, some affection. Love was unattainable for a child who didn't fit race and gender norms because "affection and kindness are essentially binaristic" (Megg Rayara Gomes de Oliveira, 2017, p. 143), affection and kindness set the standards.

Paul Preciado (2014) explains that the norm shapes all types of bodies with no distinction. However, it is more aggressive on 'the delicate bodies' (Preciado, 2014), the bodies of children violently labeled 'queer,' 'fagots,' 'dykes,' 'transvestites,' 'trans.' The norm forces them to be cisgender heterosexuals.

According to Foucault (1999), everything that I was, in the end, did not escape sexuality. It was always present, underlying all my behaviors, as the insidious and infinitely active principle. Shamelessly inscribed on my face and body, it was a secret that was always betrayed, despite all my efforts to control "the way I walked and ran, the way I gestured with my hands and arms, and the way I swayed my head and messed with my hair. I also tried to control my way of speaking and the tone of my voice in the hope of being the least visible" (Oliveira, 2017, p. 23).

In the society where I was inserted, initially in my family and neighborhood, I was restricted to the dirt street where my house was. Later, at school, I was presented with everyday situations that informed me that I could not escape the power dispositive.

This incessant quest to be, or perhaps appear, useful made me adopt 'yes' as an answer without questioning the requests or tasks assigned to me.

I truly believed that by being useful, I would be following a path that would lead me, to some extent, to acceptance.

Faced with this impossibility, even as a teenager, I began to settle for respect, and it was in search of this that I directed my efforts, just like most transvestites and transsexual women, Black and White, who spend a large part of their lives fighting for the minimum, such as the right to a name, an appropriate pronoun, and the right to use a public bathroom in peace.

My journey for respect is ongoing. Sometimes alone, sometimes in a group.

Fighting the same fight every day is exhausting, but it is far from taking my energy.

As tired as I feel, exhausted at times, giving up is not an option.

Even though my fight concerns society as a whole, my focus lies on the educational system, as I believe in the transformative power of education. It is precisely in this space that I have been fighting the most intense struggles, initially as a student and now as a professor, because, as Simone Santos (2006) states, the

"people who make up the institution [school] – teachers, directors, and pedagogical coordinators – bring their values and moral attributes, aesthetic attitudes, and different languages that reflect the world outside the school environment, which they teach within it. These practices often allow the institutionalization of prejudice and racial discrimination" (Santos, 2006, pp. 3-4),

and also gender, gender and sexuality diversity, among others.

Thus, to discuss the exhaustion of transvestites and transsexual women, especially Black women, in education, I use the (auto)biographical method developed by the Brazilian, cisgender, gay, White researcher Marcio Caetano, considering it "appropriate to articulate the individual dimensions to broader phenomena" (Caetano, 2016, p. 33).

This method allows me to use facts from my childhood, adolescence, and youth, crossed by racism and

homo-transphobia, and resistance strategies, which are close to situations observed in the present time and with the experiences lived by other people. In this dynamic, the life trajectory goes beyond the person who leads the (auto) biographical narrative.

Caetano (2016) explains that by focusing on the person who is narrated, this person is considered not only as an individual but as part of a broader context.

I agree with the author when he states that the "constitution of identity is relational and people's biographies can be connected/compared with the narrations of other life stories, in a dynamic that goes beyond individual chronological succession or the constitution of a life trajectory" (Caetano, 2016, p. 33).

Thus, my contribution here combines life trajectory and a cultural and post-structuralist perspective, informed by studies on feminism, transfeminism, ethnic-racial and gender relations, and grounded in the concept of intersectionality proposed by the Black American jurist Kimberlé Crenshaw (2002). This framework allows me to "understand narratives as a result of everyday practices which [...] can be seen as historical and denounce the rules that governed and produced them" (Caetano, 2016, p. 33). In my view, it is possible to find in the past narratives more than just the justifications and meanings that people attribute to the current configurations.

EXHAUSTED, BUT STANDING!

According to Salomão Ayroza Ribeiro (n.d.), exhaustion is caused by excessive effort, not only the effort related to work but also that made in order to cope with everyday interpersonal conflicts, responsibility overload, and cognitive or emotional stimuli.

Exhaustion arises from an accumulative process, which can ultimately cause a person to collapse when their limits are exceeded.

Carol Castro (2017) states that reports of exhaustion have appeared in medical literature for centuries, alongside mentions of depression. The author analyzes the work of British researcher Anna Katharina Schaffner (2016) and reminds us that the concept of a lack of energy as an imbalance in the body dates back to Ancient Rome, where it was described by the physician Aelius Galenus. Citing Schaffner's work, Castro discusses science's historical efforts to explain exhaustion, including some curious associations such as attributing exhaustion to spiritual problems or planetary movements. The most recent explanation links exhaustion to the characteristics of modern society.

Castro (2017) explains that the arrival of industrialization changed the world drastically. Unlike in times when life followed a much calmer rhythm, following the comings and goings of the sun, work was directly associated with climatic conditions. With factories, an increasingly frantic pace in the production process, and the incessant search for money, life began to revolve around working hours.

Although we, transvestites and transsexual women, Black and White, are generally despised by the formal job market, therefore by the production processes – which helps to explain the fact that approximately 90% of us are constrained into prostitution – we are also affected by modernity and the demands that emerge from it.

As part of a consumer society, the search for money intensely affects our daily lives, given that we face challenging obstacles.

Professional training is an additional challenge in our lives since the transphobia present in the educational space makes it difficult and, at times, prevents us from entering and/or remaining in courses and training programs.

The experiences of ridicule and humiliation, the various forms of oppression, and the processes of exclusion, segregation, and ghettoization drag us into a network of exclusion that is becoming stronger in the absence of actions to combat stigma and prejudice (Rogério Diniz Junqueira, 2009).

According to the dossier Assassinatos e violências contra travestis e transexuais brasileiras em 2021 [Murders and violence against Brazilian transvestites and transsexuals in 2021] from the National Association of Transvestites and Transsexuals (ANTRA), "many schools do not guarantee the right to use one's chosen name and/or respect for gender identity" (Bruna Benevides, 2022, p. 43), or the use of bathrooms, "widening the reasons that lead to exclusion from the school environment, disturbing the right to education of a considerable portion of the population" (Benevides, 2022, p. 43).

Furthermore, transvestites and transsexual women, Black and White, report difficulties in participating in pedagogical activities and in preserving their physical integrity (Junqueira, 2009).

As a result, 72% of transvestites and transgender women do not have secondary education and 56% have primary education. In higher education, the situation is even more serious, with only 0.02% of the country's university population made up of transvestites and transsexuals (Benevides, 2022).

More than statistical data, these numbers reveal that the strategies we develop to remain in the school space do not always work. Involuntary expulsion, as reported by Luma Nogueira de Andrade (2012), materializes, pushing transvestites and transsexual women, especially Black women, not just outside the school space but to the informal job market, considering that "only 4% of the trans female population is in formal jobs, with the potential to promotion and career progression" (Benevides, 2022, p. 47).

Unlike White heterosexual cisgender people, treated as a universal model of humanity, the educational trajectory of transvestites and transsexual women, from a very early age, puts them, even if they do not want to, necessarily in the condition of educators, forcibly responsible for the process of deconstruction of people around them (Ayra Cristina Sousa Dias, 2022).

Like any educational process, this deconstruction is effective only when the involved parties are aligned. Otherwise, the efforts will be in vain.

Founded amid and by cis heteronormativity, the school, according to Fernando Altair Pocahy and Priscila Dornelles (2014), is fertile ground for the dissemination and reproduction of hegemonic standards and, consequently, a violent space for sexual and gender diversity.

Thus, the investment we make to present lines of escape and the possibility of building a less hostile space, most of the time, becomes an inglorious task because

"Historically and socially, the trans and transvestite body is not considered capable of epistemic exercise, nor of configuring an epistemic authority or intelligible power, as its existence as another gender possibility different from cisheteronormativity and the binary model (centered on sexual dimorphism) has always been restricted by socio-moral identity stigmas (exotic, abnormal, monstrosity, aberration, aggressive, hysterical, mentally disturbed, perversive, perverted, pathological, grotesque, dirty, polluted, immoral, abject, etc.), violence, violations, extreme social vulnerability, exclusions, epistemic silencing, symbolic erasures, and exterminations" (Fran Demétrio & Hilan Bensusan, 2019, p. 117).

Whether for legal or social reasons, formal education spaces continue to update forms of stereotypical and reductionist representations of transvestites and transsexual women, Black and White, linked to "a 'pathopsychomoralizing' notion about these existences" (Demétrio & Bensusan, 2019, p. 117), making it difficult, and even preventing them from being seen and treated as epistemic subjects.

Furthermore, we live daily with situations that allow us to be seen and treated with suspicion, described generically without the right to individuality. We are accused of polluting and contaminating the school, justifying immunological attitudes against us, all in the name of preserving cis White and heterosexual gender norms.

Preserving heterosexual cisgenderness entails preserving the power naturally associated with it. Developing immunological strategies aims to prevent transvestites and transsexual women from envisioning the possibility of effecting change, leaving "the margins of the margin" to access the center.

THE IMMUNOLOGICAL DISPOSITIVE CHALLENGING TRANSVESTITES AND TRANSSEXUAL WOMEN

The Chinese philosopher Byung-Chul Han, in his book *Burnout Society*, published in Brazil in 2015, states that the 20th century was an immunological era.

"The epoch sought to distinguish clearly between inside and outside, friend and foe, self and other. [...] Indeed, the immunological paradigm of the last century was commanded by the vocabulary of the Cold War, an altogether military dispositive. Attack and defense determine immunological action" (Han, 2015, p. 7).

This statement, although coherent, ignores the existence and experiences of transvestites and transsexual women since the immunological dispositives associated with us date back to the 16th century, when Europe invaded the American and African continents.

Han (2015) explains that the 'immunological dispositive' went beyond the biological field to enter the social field and the entire social sphere. Thus, in the name of a supposed defense, ward off everything foreign, even if it has no hostile intention or represent any danger. It is eliminated due to its otherness.

Although Han (2015) does not discuss this matter, the immunological dispositive is closely related to Christian morality. It produces violence and violations of rights in the name of God, including in schools, under the justification that "[...] neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with men, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10).

The Brazilian educational system, immunologically organized, "possesses a particular topology. It is marked by barriers, transitions, thresholds, fences, ditches, and walls that prevent universal change and exchange" (Han, 2015, p. 9). This is especially relevant for individuals like us, transvestites and transsexual women, primarily Black, who

are deemed unworthy of exchange as we are perceived to have nothing of value to offer.

Thus, the walls that are erected within the school with the deliberate intention of segregating bodies are supported by hierarchical epistemic structures that defend the idea of "a superior knowledge and an inferior knowledge, which equally defines superior and inferior beings in the world" (Jéssica Santana Bruno, 2019, p. 51).

Both Byung-Chul Han (2015) and Jéssica Santana Bruno (2019) agree that attributing negative meanings to certain people and the knowledge they produce is fundamental for the immunological dispositive to challenge them, even if they exist in minimal quantities and are incapable, numerically and politically, to change the operating logic of any society, such as the formal education system, for example.

We, transvestites and transsexual women, Black and White, would then be enemies against whom the school seeks to defend itself, "building fortifications and walls" (Han, 2015, p. 11), to keep the "boys' souls intact" White, cisgender, heterosexual, thin, "healthy," constantly stimulated, presented with countless possibilities of being in the world" (Oliveira, 2023, p. 158).

Han (2015) says that 21st-century society, including schools, will no longer be a disciplinary society, as proposed by Michel Foucault in the 1970s. It will be a performance society. Its inhabitants – students also – would no longer be subjects of obedience but subjects of performance, and "the walls of disciplinary institutions, which separate the normal from the abnormal, have come to seem archaic" (Han, 2015, p. 14).

Once again, the Chinese philosopher ignores how we, transvestites and transsexual women, Black and White, relate to this performance society, where the opportunities accessed by heterosexual cisgender White men are constantly denied to us. Thus, to a certain extent, we would be relegated to a disciplinary, archaic society marked "by the negativity of prohibition" (Han, 2015, p. 15).

I say "to a certain extent" because we remain inscribed in the field of abnormality, prohibited from accessing specific spaces and rights, which would justify maintaining and updating the immunological dispositive. However, as part of a capitalist society (consumerist, productivist, reproductiveist, etc.), which requires updated survival strategies, we are pressured to behave as subjects of performance, even in a specific way.

Therefore, the efforts made to carry out minimal activities, such as using a public bathroom, for example, are too exhausting, resulting in restlessness, exhaustion, and suffocation.

Given the reflections proposed by Han (2015), I affirm that we, transvestites and transsexual women, Black and White, can be anything but passive, having to renew our energies and thus adapt our artillery to the war we face daily, especially in spaces of formal education.

CONCLUSIONS

I chose the (auto)biographical method proposed by cisgender, gay, White researcher Marcio Caetano (2016) to reflect on the tiredness, fatigue, weariness, and exhaustion that affect us, both transvestites and transsexual women, regardless of our racial backgrounds. I found this method "suitable for articulating individual dimensions with broader phenomena" (Caetano, 2016, p. 33), and it helped me explore situations in this work that relate to my individual experience while shedding light on the experiences of other transvestites and transsexual women. It allowed me to uncover in past narratives numerous justifications for the configurations of the present.

Thus, certain experiences, even if individualized, can be treated in the plural to understand how the 'power dispositive' (Foucault, 1999) operates, producing uncomfortable situations and requiring strategies to be in the world.

Being and existing, in the case of transvestites and transsexual women, Black and White, require daily strategies to face the norm established by White male heterosexual cisgenderness that organizes spaces and attributes meanings, positive or negative, to identities, affecting how we are seen and treated.

The school, theoretically a space where people are introduced to possibilities of sociability, represents for us transvestites and transsexual women an arena where many struggles are fought in a solitary and unequal way.

In this space, our experiences are marked by abandonment, neglect, ridicule, and disbelief...

The fight for the right to a name, a feminine pronoun, and the use of the bathroom puts us, from a very early age, as Ayra Cristina Souza Dias (2022) explains, in the condition of educators.

In addition to students, transvestites and transsexual women, both Black and White, act as teachers. They inform how we educate, socialize, and affirm ourselves, as well as how we constitute ourselves as social, cultural, cognitive, ethical, and political subjects¹.

The school, a contested territory with its contradictions, is an important space that can contribute to the construction and dissemination of practices of freedom

and the restoration of humanity stolen (Miguel Arroyo, 2012) from transvestites and transsexual women.

As painful and tiring as the role of educator may be (Dias, 2022), inside and outside the educational system, it is necessary to consider the possibility that this situation is temporary and that as transvestite pedagogy is implemented, we can get on with our lives as human beings everywhere, including at school.

While this does not happen, we continue fighting, demanding, educating, re-educating, informing, training, questioning, correcting, resisting, building, and changing, without the right to rest.

The exhaustion that hits us, even if it hurts or makes us sick, cannot stop our journey.

Giving up has never been, is not, and will never be an option for transvestites and transsexual women.

NOTE

1. Such reflections are proposed by Miguel Arroyo (2012), who discussed the arrival of 'other subjects' in the school space, although he does not specifically address issues related to the experiences of transvestites and transsexual women, Black and White.

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