

Committee on the Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer Persons in the Profession

The assignment made immediate sense and yet it proved difficult. Perhaps because there is not a single strategy, or the strategy is one of bringing together approaches that interrogate each other. I was not able to come up with an all-encompassing approach—even though I tried. But I’m getting ahead of myself. I’ll restart.

I became interested in the mutual imbrication of race and gender through postcoloniality. I was studying the discourses of protestant missionaries that went to Puerto Rico at the end of the nineteenth century as part of the US colonial project. I was tracing the connections between theological ideas and colonial views. But I soon realized that colonial representations depended on constructions of gender and sexual difference. It was not simply that missionaries promoted particular ideas about sexuality. It was more profound. The identity of the righteous American Christian was defined partly in terms of gender and sexuality. Or to put it differently, that to specify a nationality (American) was implicitly to name a gender and a race. These were not independent vectors.

The interdependence between nationalisms, racialization, and sexual norms became clearer for me as I continued to explore similar examples in scholarship regarding different geographic regions and historical periods. The specific traits of the identities were different for each example; what was common was the mutual dependence between definitions of race and gender. María Lugones’s essay “Heterosexualism and the Colonial Modern Gender System” is an excellent example of a work that draws from Latin American history to propose that colonialism did not assume a gender system, but two: one for colonizers, another for colonized. I suspect there are multiple gender systems across racial lines.

But how does that general insight inflect the study of theological or philosophical concepts—which is the type of work I do? For that type of conceptual work I need theoretical tools that help me not only describe particular cases of the gendering of a racial identity, but also understand how discourses, identities, and bodies constitute one another. Postcolonial theory has continued to shape my thinking, and so has queer theory. But treating them as if they referred to separate domains is still problematic. So I seek deeper points of connection in two ways. First, by tracing common intellectual paths. Second, by examining the convergence of racialization and sexualization around particular ideas or phenomena. Let me say a bit about each of these.

By tracing common intellectual paths I mean recovering philosophical views that undergird both postcolonial and queer theory. For instance, how Edward Said’s groundbreaking postcolonial work, *Orientalism*, depended upon the work of Michel Foucault. This would imply analyzing the views of power, discourse, and knowledge that are at the heart of the views of these two thinkers. Or exploring the common sources and concerns in Judith Butler’s notion of performativity and Homi Bhabha’s

notions of “mimicry” and “hybridity.” This would imply asking what are the views of subject formation and social norms at play in both, and allow them to question one another. These are just two of many possible examples of broad frameworks that support the rethinking of both sexuality and race.

The second approach is the one I am pursuing most explicitly in my current work—examining the convergence of racialization and sexuality in conceptualizations of corporeality. This choice is not surprising for someone with close connections with the legacies of colonialism in Latin America and the Caribbean. For there it has been clear that colonial-sexual violence against the African and indigenous women indelibly marked the bodies of many of their descendents. Greed, violence, and enslavement *literally* became flesh. This history places racialized sexuality at the very heart of our embodied reality. But this stark example of the convergence of sexuality and racialization at the birth of a people is only a reminder of what continues to be true all around us: racial/sexual ideologies *become flesh*. I said before that definitions of race depend on sexuality—they are joined discursively. What I am pointing to now is that being racialized in a particular way has deep implications for our experiences of sexuality.

The corporeal effects of colonial histories cannot be neatly separated into physical and cognitive elements. Simone de Beauvoir’s celebrated statement: “One is not born a woman, but becomes one” is transformed when these becomings are distinctively historicized, not only in relation to patriarchy or sexual politics but also in relation to broader networks of power. To think embodiment thus entails multidimensional engagements, attending to the ambivalence of bodies that emerge from colonial encounters—bodies that are openly and intensely sexualized, gendered, and racialized, all at once. Any talk of sexual-and-racial identity begins here, in bodies that are simultaneously sites of conflict and promise. To bracket these ambiguities would be to be deluded by fantasies of untainted bodies—either as origin or as goal—fantasies that are part of the very ideologies we seek to unsettle.

So I treat the body as a deeply ambivalent concept marked by multiple and contradictory projects which seek to define, shape, manage, use, and control bodies. I adopt different theoretical perspectives that can question one another—as if looking at the same construct from different angles. I bring a postcolonial optic to complicate a phenomenological analysis, a queer model to trace the sexual anxieties in critiques of racialization, and so on. None of these perspectives would be enough by itself. Each of the elements contributes to my own constructive proposal: the theological, phenomenological, postcolonial, queer, etc.

Through these engagements I am exploring how ideas about sexuality and race have shaped ideas about bodies—in Christianity and beyond. But I am also interested in the material effects of those ideas—how ideologies become flesh: words mark, wound, elevate, or shatter bodies. To understand how social arrangements shape

the quality of the environment—and in so doing, infect bodies, produce illness—and—death.

This requires moving beyond deconstructive approaches to both sexuality and race. I could not agree more with the project of dismantling discourses that taught us how to classify ourselves, what those classifications meant, and what actions are supposed to emerge ‘naturally’ from them. Race and sexuality are social constructions. But saying that these categories are not natural does not mean that they are not embodied. I think we need models that help us see the deeper material effects of social constructions. Judith Butler’s definition of gender as the “materialization of norms,” has been crucial forms my own thinking. But I add that those norms are always racialized. And that perhaps when we truly think about materializations, our theorizations will overflow the categories of race and sexuality. Critical work can only begin from the spaces marked by racial and sexual norms—yet these concepts are never as reliable as they seem, and thinking about embodied existence will always call for more.