

Trans* Sexuality: reflections on the commodification of sex from a transgender perspective

viviane v.¹

The purpose of this paper is to examine some aspects of the commodification of sex from a transgender perspective. By using references in trans*-related literature (especially that produced by transgender authors, such as Susan Stryker and Julia Serano) and drawing from my own personal experiences, I intend to analyze how the commodification of sex is associated with exoticized perceptions of human bodies, which in turn are influenced by cis-, male-, and straight-centered ideologies.

Understanding that the critical examination of the ‘double consciousness’ – a term coined by W. E. B. Du Bois in the context of racial analysis – which affects marginalized subjects has the potential to broaden our comprehension of certain asymmetric relations of power, this paper is founded upon the idea that a transgender perspective might provide valuable insight about processes of body sexualization and abjection, as well as about sex markets. For instance, I intend to reflect on how my body (of a transgender woman) is being socially read as it undergoes ‘transition’, on how those physical changes and different social perceptions affect my views about myself, as well as to consider what sort of sexual relationships are socially available to transgender individuals.

This paper suggests that, as my body is presently read as a (trans)feminine one, processes of fetishization and exoticization – strongly correlated to cis- and male-centric ideologies – become more intense. In terms of sexuality for transgender individuals, and more specifically transgender women, literature and lived experiences provide insights about people whose bodies are in the boundaries between sexy and bizarre, and about how the sex market is such a prevalent economic destination for transgender individuals. A critical assessment of these issues of body and sex, including the analysis of oppressive and resisting forces in such social relationships, is the objective of this paper.

Introduction

“They want all those nonbelievers to conform
They are asking all those nonbelievers to conform”
(Groundation - Nonbeliever)

1 Master's Degree Candidate in Culture and Society (Federal University of Bahia – UFBA), BAH in Economics (State University of Campinas – Unicamp) and a member of CUS (research group on Culture and Sexuality - UFBA). E-mail: msviviane@gmail.com .

When, last year, an aunt of mine knew, through information available online, of my transgender² gender identity – that is, of my identification as a transgender woman named viviane –, she decided to write me.

Seeing in me a mentally confused, 'idiot', 'naughty', and 'promiscuous' person, and in my existence as 'viviane' a 'lie'³, she did not hesitate in establishing relationships between my gender identity – going through a delicate process of self-empowerment – and my parents, at times taking my transgender identity as final proof against the supposed happiness and harmony which, according to her, my close family insisted in displaying arrogantly – a whole make-believe that the mere existence of a transgender person in the family would bring to a collapse –, at times exempting them from all 'guilt' regarding this gender inconformity, attributing to a mental disorder⁴ or to some 'late rebellion' the 'insanity' of 'a man' proclaiming 'himself' as 'viviane'.

From my perspectives, it is evident that the sentiments of guilt and shame which intermittently affect me have intense dialogues with these discourses that relate my transgender perceptions about myself to mental disorders, to the unhappiness on my parents' lives, and to lifestyles that are considered execrable. In these exchanges with my aunt, one episode particularly interested me, and also inspired this article to some extent: a brief telephone conversation which occurred in the same period as the text messages partially described above.

In such call, she was able to better express her hatred and contempt for one of the dimensions of what I consider myself to be. She directed, in particular, a harsh attack against the possible sexual relationships and practices that I could be undertaking in Salvador, Bahia, the city in which I currently live and that is approximately 2,000km far from my home city in Southeastern Brazil. My femininity, so close to the city's blackness, a statistical fact and a source for countless racist stereotypes, seemed to cause some sort of anxiety on my aunt: in an inference of strong racist and heterosexist assumptions, which also took some of my sexual

2 I use the terms 'transgender', 'trans' and 'trans*' in a somewhat interchangeable way – the former being the most used one, and the others used for matters of style, mostly –, as representations of an “imagined political alliance of all possible forms of gender antinormativity” (STRYKER, 2008:146). The quote refers to the term 'transgender'.

3 Quoted excerpts are from text messages and blog comments sent to me by this aunt of mine.

4 Mental disorder which, interestingly, was not only associated with dominant perceptions about transgender identities, in its forms of pathology or immorality, but also related, by her, to 'genetic conditions' in our family that would bring mental sufferings which should be treated as prescribed by the dominant psychiatric views – that is, by taking pharmaceutically-legitimated drugs.

practices for granted, she asked me, bluntly, whether I was fucking my ass frequently in Salvador.

Given my silence – my only possible reaction at the time, considering such daring statement of hers – , she insisted with greater emphasis on the initial assumptions. 'Your ass is probably all screwed up, huh? You must be fucking all big black dudes⁵ over there. That is why you moved to that city, to have you ass pounded. You're probably loving it, aren't you?'

Beyond the problematic assumptions that I, as a transgender woman, would be straight and would enjoy having my ass fucked, and the racist stereotypes about some black bodies (those considered 'masculine' by dominant gender normativities), I got interested in reflecting about which normativities were permeating the correlations my aunt established between my gender identity and sexuality.

This paper intends, therefore, to reflect upon how my transgender gender identity, and, more specifically, how my subjective position as a transgender woman can contribute to an understanding of the commodification of sex as a social process, through insights originating from my lived experiences (such as the 'pleasant' exchanges with my aunt). The central argument is that the commodification of sex, strongly tied to colonizatory, capitalistic and antierotic⁶ projects, is associated with supremacist, utilitarian and exotifying perceptions of human bodies. Collecting ideas that draw on a precarious and incipient 'construction of the erotic' in my personal life as a transgender woman, I intend to critically analyze some aspects of the commodification of sex, and possibilities of resistance to this, in various forms and degrees, dehumanizing social process.

Transgender bodies

“Now maybe their ships have gone
But mental scares do remain
To divide and confuse Jah people
Fighting against this reality”
(Groundation – Long, long ago)

5 I'm quoting what was approximately said to me by her (in Portuguese). I fully reject its approximation with racist discourses, and choose to maintain the offensive character of the quote as a strategy for emphasis on the general racist tone in that conversation with her.

6 Understanding the 'erotic' as “a resource within each of us [...], firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.” (LORDE, 1984:53) The commodification of sex, it will be argued, is no different from other oppressive systems which, “in order to perpetuate [themselves], [...] must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change.” (ibid.)

The personal and social processes which transgender people face in different social contexts – some conflictuous and saddening, some empowering and delightful – are, in a general sense in contemporary times, related to cisgender normativities⁷ which inferiorize and exotify such existences, and, particularly, such bodies. Critical reflections on the mediatic representations of transgender people could exemplify some of these forms of inferiorization and exotification: transgender lives are, according to dominant perspectives represented in different media, within the realm of the 'curious'⁸, 'perverse', 'abject', 'disordered', 'non-human'⁹. Because of these and other social valuations, transgender people are more exposed to exclusions and discriminations in the economic, legal, health and familial spheres¹⁰.

Given the intensity of gender as a definer of differences (both in its 'classical' man-woman dimension and in its cis-trans one), normativities of gender end up significantly influencing the affective and sexual possibilities of those people whose genders are nonconforming. Cisgender normativities, by promoting supremacist discourses about bodies and about their expected gender performativities, position transgender existences onto complicated places in the affective and sexual relationships. These positions are also permeated by heterosexual normativity¹¹.

7 I reflect upon the idea of cisgender normativity in 'For the decolonization of trans* identities' (V., 2012:05): "to utilize the analytical concept of cisgender-ness [and of cisgender normativity as well] has the objective of, ultimately, deauthorizing discourses and practices that naturalize the cisgender norm, therefore understanding transgender and non-cisgender individualities as marginal and resistant positions in relation to the cisgender colonial domination."

We can also think of cisgender normativity being similar to the concept of 'homonormativity', as Susan Stryker (2008:145) terms it: "Homonormativity [...] was an attempt to articulate the double sense of marginalization and displacement experienced within transgender political and cultural activism" – including, in this statement, marginalization experienced within LGB communities.

8 Julia Serano (2007:57) attributes such 'curiosity' about transgender people to the crossing of 'impenetrable' boundaries of gender, in an interesting connection with other normativities (of beauty and body size): "the major reason that plastic surgeries, gastric bypasses, and sex reassignments are all given similar sensationalistic treatments is because the subjects cross what is normally considered an impenetrable class boundary: from unattractive to beautiful, from fat to thin, and in the case of transsexuals, from male to female, or from female to male."

9 "Most people have great difficulty recognizing the humanity of another person if they cannot recognize that person's gender, the gender-changing person can evoke in others a primordial fear of monstrosity, or loss of humanness" (STRYKER, 2008:6)

10 "Transgender people often face high levels of stigma and discrimination, [...] preventing them from accessing opportunities that others can." Additionally, "many countries do not legally recognise the gender of transgender people, meaning that they often lack official identification, passports and travel rights, welfare entitlements and the right to marry." (AVERT)

In that sense, even though we struggle for the idea that “transgender rights are human rights” – a line of reasoning that is analyzed in its potentials and limitations by Kendall Thomas¹² –, and some legal advancements for transgender people have been attained in recent history (as, for example, specific legislations and affirmed principles regarding gender identities¹³), “the legal recognition of trans people is meaningful only when it is part of a larger cultural transformation” (CURRAH, JUANG, MINTER, 2006:XXIII). Such change will necessarily involve a complexification of social perceptions about transgender peoples beyond mere “curiosity or a perversion of nature” (ibid.), process that includes, among many other aspects, the insertion of these peoples as affective and sexual subjects.

Without such transformations, the maintenance of the dominant position of cisgender-supremacist normativities constitutes (and, in turn, is constituted by) a hierarchy of human beings, intertwined with other normativities (of, for instance, racial-ethnic identification, class, social origins, and (dis)ability¹⁴). Therefore, the transgender body which goes through modifications, frequently associated to the bizarre and non-human, is ressignified within an inferiorizing context: in my experience, 'transition'¹⁵ has been a process in which moments of joy and interesting challenges brought about by my desired physical changes (in my case, the broader recognition of my feminine gender and the bodily ressignification derived from

11 Normativity that could be illustrated by the popular idea that transgender women, for instance, identify themselves as women in order to 'seduce' men, delegitimizing various trans narratives. Such 'confusion' could be related to the historical invisibilization of transgender people within the LGBTQI movements, which Shannon Price Minter (2006:142) analyses within the North American context: “[...] how did a movement launched by bull daggers, drag queens, and transsexuals [...] end up viewing transgender people as outsiders?”

12 If, on one side, aligning transgender rights to human rights is powerful for the “attractive simplicity of its logic and in the moral and political intuition that subtends it”, there are also significant difficulties involved in such alignment, as “we live at an historical moment when the concepts of the 'human' and of 'rights' have become the object of 'the most radical questioning possible’”, and also need to “contend with a social order [...] under which transgendered people are viewed as 'non-persons[...]’.” (THOMAS, 2006:311).

13 Such as the Argentinean 'Gender Identity Law' ('Ley de Identidad de Género'), enacted in 2012 (INFOLEG, 2012), and the Yogyakarta Principles, “a set of international principles relating to sexual orientation and gender identity.” (ICJ, 2007)

14 I quote Qwo-Li Driskill (2004:63) about the use of (dis)ability as an alternative to disability: “it draws attention to “disability” as a social and political construct rather than an inherent “condition” blamed on our bodies and minds.”

15 'Transition' is a commonly used term to describe bodily and social changes which are related to the perceived gender(s) of various transgender peoples. It can be problematized because of its association with ideas of 'before and after' and of gender as binary ('a man who turned into a woman'), approximations that are not necessarily seen as valid by transgender peoples themselves.

modifications such as the formation of breasts, among other elements) interact with strong discourses which delegitimize it, as, for instance, the ideas that I would never be a (cisgender) woman¹⁶ (no matter how aligned I am to cisgender normativities) and that a body in which breasts and penis coexist is undesirable, bizarre and-or exotic.

My body – the body of a transgender woman – is differentiated in relation to (cisgender) 'normalities' for the fact that it changes itself in accordance to aesthetical standards which are not expected for 'bodies like mine': if hormone therapy, aesthetical procedures to remove body hair and changes in hairstyle – the most significant procedures that I have undertaken so far – are 'ordinary'¹⁷ bodily changes according to dominant ideologies, much more restrictive social perceptions are in place when such changes take an 'antinatural' (transgender) route, to such an extent that, not rarely, transgender people ask ourselves whether we have any agency over our existences when they are not aligned with certain gender normativities.

Such differentiation of bodies, of inferiorizing and marginalizing order, and a part of problems experienced by many transgender people – such as low self-esteem, dependence on chemical substances, suicidal thoughts, among others – might, potentially, be seen as an aspect of the colonization of transgender identities. More specifically for the purposes of this article, we could consider that transgender sexualities are colonized, as defined by Qwo-Li Driskill¹⁸:

“A colonized sexuality is one in which we have internalized the sexual values of dominant culture. The invaders continue to enforce the idea that sexuality and non-dichotomous genders are a sin, recreating sexuality as illicit, shocking, shameful, and removed from any positive spiritual context. Queer sexualities and genders are degraded, ignored, condemned, and destroyed.” (DRISKILL, 2004:54)

In this colonizatory process, therefore, people whose genders are not in conformity with cisgender standards have their affective and sexual lives traumatized and inferiorized. Depending on the extent our gender identities are nonconforming, and also on the multiple ways they interact with other normative vectors, affective or sexual relationships can be a

16 I am empathetic with Julia Serano's quote (2007:35): “As a transsexual woman, I am often confronted by people who insist that I am not, nor can I ever be, a 'real woman'.”

17 Considering that access to such procedures is quite restricted from an economic standpoint.

18 My first contact with Qwo-Li Driskill was related to an unfortunate event: in a consultation to the 'Remembering Our Dead' website, made in remembrance of transgender people who were murdered, I found a poem written by Driskill in memory of F.C. Martinez, a Two-Spirit person assassinated in 2001. It is available at: <http://www.gender.org/remember/people/fredmartinez.html>.

delicate matter for transgender people. For instance, Willy Wilkinson (2006:193) cites some studies regarding San Francisco's (CA, USA) transgender community, including findings about its sexual relationships and practices: "transgender people struggle with issues of disclosure of transgender status, negotiation of sexual parameters, and rejection. Potential sexual partners [...] often do not accept trans bodies". This illustration provides, I believe, a good picture of the inferiorized position transgender people might face in their sexual and-or affective lives.

In this sense, it is from the colonized position of a transgender woman seen as white or Asian, bisexual, who has had (and has) decent access to financial, educational and health resources, and who is aligned with certain cisgender bodily standards, that I intend to analyze the process of commodification of sex. It is a dehumanized body, in some aspects (and privileged, in many others), that tries to interpose its precarious and incipient views on its own erotic against a world that sees transgender people through cisgender-supremacist lenses – lenses which are also influenced, no doubt, by other normativities. Such complex and inferiorized positions in the sexual and affective economy can, perhaps, contribute to a critical understanding of the process of commodification of sex, seeking to channel critical knowledge from what W. E. B. Du Bois characterizes as 'double consciousness':

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity." (DU BOIS, 1903)

It is from such outlook, from this 'peculiar sensation', that reflections on some processes seen as associated to the commodification of sex are intended to be made: the technical specification of the human body, the sex market 'stricto sensu', and the commodification of sex in relation to the erotic.

The commodification of sex from a transgender perspective

"Sexual objectification unavoidably sets the stage for the commodification of sex. Commodification is the process of recreating or portraying someone or something as a commodity– a good, an object for consumption." (JOHNK, 2012)

I intend to analyze, in this section, some aspects of the commodification of sex, situating this social process not only in relation to capitalist dynamics – particularly in its

neoliberal phase – but also in relation to other normative spheres – especially the one related to gender identities. I would also like to emphasize my understanding that a critical analysis of such process as a contemporary one must be sensitive to the fact that sex (as a set of practices and desires with or without reproductive intentions) was a significant variable in the pricing of human beings in numerous pre-capitalist historical processes – as, for instance, the slavery of black and indigenous peoples.

Whether in dehumanizing places in which black peoples were evaluated according to 'technical' criteria¹⁹, or in air-conditioned plastic surgery clinics in which new bodily possibilities are analyzed, gender has configured an interesting lens through which some specificities of the commodification of sex (and pre-capitalistic forms of sexual objectification as well²⁰) can be interpreted:

“Women, specifically, have long been commodified as sexual objects [...]. We aren't just used to sell things, but we are things; we are figuratively “on sale” for consumption all the time. Although women are hypersexualized in this process of commodification, as individuals they are stripped of their own sexuality. If an object has a perspective on its own sexuality, its sexual identity or desires, it is in danger of becoming real, a subject.” (JOHNK, 2012)

The commodification of sex, therefore, refers to the transformation of human bodies in sexual commodities that are priced according to social normativities, and to the development, in capitalist economic systems, of an economy of sex which is based in the – material or discursive – production of goods, services and discourses used in alterations, evaluations, pricings, regulations and interventions on human bodies and sexual practices. This economy defines, in accordance with complex normative intersections, different economic insertions for people and social groups.

Transgender existences are located in particular points in that commodified economy of sex, given their marginalized social status. These are points, however, that are related to the

19 “My [...] African ancestors stood on auctioning blocks in this country where their bodies were offered for sale. They were subjected to the white 'gaze' quite literally; their genitalia were touched and inspected in a very public way. The bodies of my First Nations (Tsalagi/Cherokee) ancestors were forcibly removed, infected, massacred, locked up. They were so effectively removed and locked up that they do not even enter into the erotic fictions of the dominating culture.” (KAY et al., 2000:328)

20 “Sexual abuse must be seen with an understanding of the history of colonization, which uses sexuality as a tool to gain power over others and to control women's bodies. [...] European invasion of the Americas required a masculinity that murders, rapes, and enslaves Native and African peoples.” (DRISKILL, 2004:53)

general dynamics of sex commodification: in this sense, transgender identities might be seen, in this paper, as particularly situated points from which a critical analysis of general patterns in the commodification of sex is made possible. We intend to analyze, particularly, 3 aspects of this social process: the technical specification of bodies, the sex market 'stricto sensu', and the commodification of sex in relation to the concept of erotic.

The contemporary processes of 'transition' for transgender people, (relatively) popularized over the last century²¹, consist fundamentally in 'social' aesthetical procedures (hairstyles, removal or maintenance of body hair, clothing), hormone therapy and surgical procedures. Beyond the usual curiosity involved in the consideration of such processes, through them we can verify how human bodies have been crescently subjected to a technical specification: from head to toe, there are acceptable or idealized dimension ranges which, as a whole, define the social value that is given to these bodies. Depending on the degrees of nonconformity to these ranges, one might reach a point in which the person's very humanity starts to be questioned.

The technical specification of human bodies can be observed more clearly for those 'parts' which refer to so-called 'sexual' characteristics in these bodies: penises, breasts, vaginas, assholes, and other bodily parts that, culturally, stimulate desires, are evaluated according to their dimensions, textures, opening and expanding capacities, among other features. The process of commodification of sex is not only a part of such crescent technical specification, but also utilizes it for the development of products and services associated with the construction of normatized bodies (from penis pumps to reconstructed vaginas – for cis and transgender people, that is). Taking transgender 'transitions' into account, we can also verify that the legitimated bodily changes are those which attempt to conform transgender bodies (duly diagnosed as 'disordered' by medical institutions) to normativities associated with cisgender bodies: our aspirations as transgender people, therefore, necessarily presuppose – according with dominant narratives – an idealization of cisgender bodies.

This process of technical specification is particularly intense in what we could consider the sex market 'stricto sensu' (a differentiation that is probably useful, given the discussion presented in this paper), perhaps the sphere in which the commodification of sex takes its most brutal and explicit forms. And this is the market in which many transgender people, especially women, have one of their few possibilities of income and survival: estimates indicate that 44% of transgender people throughout the world are involved in sex work (UNAIDS,

21 "In the last century, advances in medicine have offered trans people the opportunity to physically transition (via hormones and surgery) in addition to socially transitioning." (SERANO, 2007:117)

2012:76). This often precarious economic insertion exposes transgender people to situations of health risk and abuse, such as HIV infection and gender-based violence (ibid.).

Attempting to move beyond mere indignation with the reported data, it is possible to think about the commodification of sex in the transgender sex market: transgender women are mostly sold as 'chicks with dicks' or 'shemales'²² whose marketed appeal is in their embodiment of 'the best of both worlds' – which, I guess, refers to the coexistence, in some transgender women's bodies, of penises and breasts. This imaginary within the pornographic industry dialogues with the dynamics of sex work for transgender people, developed as a 'niche' in comparison with the cisgender sex market. Transgender women's escort ads, in addition to the technical specification of women's bodies in the sex market, frequently include information on the person's 'transition' (for example, the use of hormones) and size of genitalia: specification is as detailed and objective as deemed necessary for the transaction to occur.

Such 'oddity' or 'exoticness' might be the reason behind two seemingly contradictory positions transgender women hold in the sex market: on one side, some transgender bodies (usually the ones that are in line with other normative vectors, especially the ones regarding dominant beauty standards and cisgender passability) receive higher pricings in relation to, for example, cisgender masculine and feminine bodies within that market; on another, other transgender bodies (usually the ones that are marginalized in other aspects, such as socioeconomic status and race) not only receive lower pricings, but are also seen as disposable and are often killed in outrageous forms. In any case, economic insertion for transgender people is restricted to (historically located) precarious occupations, especially one that is particularly related to degrading practices and relationships, the sex market 'stricto sensu', which ends up, through stereotypes and stigma, furthering transgender people's social marginalization.

Therefore, the commodification of sex, social process that is intrinsically associated to colonial, imperialist, racist, classist and cis+sexist²³ projects – among others –, through the intensification and creation of new forms of normatization and hierarchization of human

22 I would like to emphasize the potentially offensive character of such terms, as well as of externally-imposed denomination for transgender people's bodily elements. The objective in utilizing such terms is to evidence to which extent the sex market is influenced by cissexist discourses: throughout them, the use of derogatory terms against nonconforming gender identities to promote a niche market of fetishistic tones is legitimized.

23 The term 'cis+sexism' is an attempt to characterize the complex intertwinement between the sexist gender normativity (which culturally produces men-women differences) and the cissexist gender normativity (which culturally produces cis-trans differences).

beings (frequently in an attempt to create or improve structures of capital reproduction and expansion), can be characterized, therefore, as procyclical in relation to dominant normativities. In other words, the commodification of sex promotes discourses which reaffirm certain normativities, rather than substantially questioning them – such critical stance does not seem to be economically favourable, or is not even considered in feasibility studies. In this sense, this process disproportionately affects people whose positionings are closer to the margins of normativities: in the margins of whiteness, european-ness and northamerican-ness, in the margins of 'respectable' circles of consumption and investment (in various senses of 'respectability'), in the margins of masculinities, of dominant body standards and in the margins of cisgender-ness.

Perhaps, then, we could raise the hypothesis that sexual and affective economies immersed in the process of commodification of sex are characterized, through various normatizations contextually applied, as excluding and marginalizing – the more so as deeper and more acritical that insertion is. Frequently, given the predominance of such economies in contemporary times, we are under the impression that the only possible path is to maximize our conformity to prevailing normativities. However, Audre Lorde advises us about the inherent risks in this path:

“The principal horror of any system which defines the good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, or which defines human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need - the principal horror of such a system is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment.” (LORDE, 1984:55)

In this sense, we must critically question ourselves about the conditions and consequences in longing for victory in the game of commodified sex, a game which frequently changes its rules according with the ambitions of dominant social groups, which reinforces historical social discriminations – creating others as well –, and offers little in comparison to what it charges in terms of normative alignment. Such critical questioning might perhaps benefit from a gender-centered perspective about the sexual objetification of (cis and transgender) women, an important element in the commodification of sex:

“The results are a preoccupation with unattainable “beauty” standards, self-loathing of our own persons, and jealousy and contempt for other women whom we perceive as surpassing our own efforts. If you fail, all you get is some really low self-esteem; if you succeed, you get to be a sexually-consumable object for male-centered pleasure, which really only holds if you are available for consumption 24/7.” (JOHNK, 2012)

Thusly, the fundamental question that arises is about the (in)compatibility between the social process of commodification of sex and decolonizatory projects regarding various identities and identifications – deemed as desirable projects, for desired is the end of sentiments of inferiority and marginalization which such identities and identifications confront²⁴. A preliminary conclusion in this paper could be summarized by the idea that anticolonialisms that are not critically against the commodification of sex are (more) vulnerable to limitations and systemic reappropriations (both in personal and social spheres), also suggesting that a quite interesting path for the construction of such oppositional sentiment towards the commodification of sex might be in articulating the potencies of the erotic:

“When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms [...]. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to our selves in the deepest sense.” (LORDE, 1984:58)

Reflections upon the possibilities for antinormative resistances brought forward by the erotic constitute the next section of this paper.

Erotic resistances

“We were stolen from our bodies
We were stolen from our homes
And we are fighters in this long war
To bring us all back home” (DRISKILL, 2004:50)

This section is derived from a hypothesis that was previously raised in this paper: that anticolonizations are, to different extents, incompatible with the social process of commodification of sex. Thusly, and taking the decolonization of transgender identities as an – to my consideration – indispensable and urgent resistance, it becomes fundamental to think

24 Such as the bruises left on Native American existences: “Our sexualities harbor bruises left by a white supremacist culture.” (DRISKILL, 2004:54)

about anticolonial strategies which resist the commodification of sex. These resistance paths could be inspired by the concept of erotic developed by Audre Lorde (1984:59):

“Recognizing the power of the erotic within our lives can give us the energy to pursue genuine change within our world, rather than merely settling for a shift of characters in the same weary drama.”

One of these paths relies on the idea of constructing a 'Sovereign Erotic', a proposition made by Qwo-Li Driskill in an article that takes the erotic in Lorde as a tool in the healing of queer sexualities and non-binary genders of First Nations origins, healing that constitutes a fundamental piece in decolonizatory processes: “healing our sexualities as First Nations people is braided with [...] the ongoing process of decolonization.” (DRISKILL, 2004:51). Driskill, a Two-Spirit person²⁵, relates the erasure of the erotic self to the colonization of Native homelands: “I have not only been removed from my homelands, I have also been removed from my erotic self and continue a journey back to my first homeland: the body.” (ibid.:53). That journey is described as follows:

“To decolonize our sexualities and move towards a Sovereign Erotic, we must unmask the specters of conquistadors, priests, and politicians that have invaded our spirits and psyches, insist they vacate, and begin tending the open wounds colonization leaves in our flesh.” (DRISKILL, 2004:54)

The decolonizing of sexualities might be a very complicated and painful task, requiring deeply critical thought and the strength and solidarity from within communities – which characterizes it, fundamentally, as a process that necessarily goes beyond the realm of the personal, becoming part of the political as well. Qwo-Li Driskill analyzes the ties that bond individuals and communities within the Sovereign Erotic:

“When I speak of a Sovereign Erotic, I'm speaking of an erotic wholeness healed and/or healing from the historical trauma that First Nations people continue to survive, rooted within the histories, traditions, and resistance struggles of our nations. [...] I do not see the erotic as a realm of personal consequence only. Our relationships with the erotic impact our larger communities, just as our communities impact our senses of the erotic.” (DRISKILL, 2004:52)

²⁵ “The term “Two-Spirit” is a word that resists colonial definitions [...]. It is an expression of our sexual and gender identities as sovereign from those of white GLBT movements.” (DRISKILL, 2004:52)

In that sense, if we take a broader concept of transgender identities – in which I carefully include Two-Spirit people, to the extent the reasoning might apply to them –, we could conceptualize various Transgender Sovereign Erotics (differently composed by the various intersections with other normative vectors: race, class, spirituality, sexuality, etc.) which could constitute healing and empowering processes against historical traumas related to the criminalization, pathologization and cultural inferiorization of transgender lives. This includes “speaking ourselves out loud – for our people, for ourselves” (DRISKILL, 2004:55), reframing our lives, identities and stories outside (or else, in autonomous dialogue with) inferiorizing discourses.

The development of a Sovereign Erotic is made more difficult because “[w]e have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society.” (LORDE, 1984, thinking of the erotic applied to women). It is not a linear path, surrounded by pretty gardens and supportive social environments: frequently, to affirm sovereignty means risking your life, and feeling your sense of self and belonging to the world constantly under attack. Transgender people, in particular, face retaliations throughout the world for daring to affirm their gender identity in spite of diverse sociopolitical spheres that go against it (such as the medical, religious, and familial ones). The erotic constitutes a line of defense against normativities that attempt on our lives, more or less subtly, more or less literally:

“Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning in our lives.”
(LORDE, 1984:57)

The erotic, therefore, constitutes an important element in the struggle against the commodification of sex, and consequently in favor of decolonized sexualities and genders. A Transgender Sovereign Erotic, in turn, requires reclaiming our identities, our stories, our struggles, our beauties and complexities from each and every dismissive, ridiculing, subjugating, inferiorizing and simplifying instance that cisgender normativity constructed for us. It is only through the erotic that emanates from within our multiple life experiences that we can decolonize our selves from cisgender supremacism – it will not happen as long as we are, as quoted before from Audre Lorde, living outside ourselves, on external directives only.

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