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***THERE IS NO EDGE:*
UNVEILING THE COLONIALITY OF POWER IN NTOZAKE
SHANGE'S POETRY**

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Abstract: This paper proposes an analysis of Ntozake Shange's "Bocas: A Daughter's Geography" centered on the uses of place in the poem. It looks closely into the processes by means of which the poem suggests a construction of the self based on an articulation between geopolitics and ancestry. It also tries to articulate sociologist Aníbal Quijano's concept of coloniality of power to the geopolitics of affects the poem builds on.

Introduction

This paper offers a tentative reading of the roles of place in Ntozake Shange's poem "Bocas: A Daughter's Geography" (1983).¹ Shange is a US African-American poet, essayist, novelist and playwright, best known for her 1975 award-winning choreopoem/play *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975). Her name itself signals a critical location which is important to read her poetry because it recovers and signals her ancestry: it comes from a Zulu language and holds a meaning: "She Who Comes With Her Own Things" (Ntozake) and "Walks Like a Lion" (Shange). A speaking name indeed, for Shange has since early on used writing as a vehicle to agency, to denounce and reconstruct the narratives of power, elaborating instead what critic José David Saldívar calls "a radical ethnopoetics" (1991: 17).

Shange's work to the moment was extremely important especially in the field of ethnicity studies, but I would like to propose a reading of her critical stance within a framework of new critiques of the Americas, in particular Peruvian critic Aníbal Quijano's concept of 'coloniality of power'. In effect, I see Shange's work as departing from an acute awareness of the enduring legacy of the old empires in the Americas, following Quijano's definition of coloniality of power as "a *spatial* articulation of power" (2008: 238) [my emphasis], or "a principle and strategy of control and domination" (2008: 249) starting roughly in the fifteenth century, with the foundations of modern capitalism in the enterprise

¹ The poem is annexed to this document (p.12-13).

of the 'discoveries', leading to the "emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit" which endures in the present (2008: 238). The concept has been reworked by another Latin American critic, Walter D. Mignolo, as coloniality *of knowledge* to stress how the establishment of such power relations implied the disauthorization of subordinate knowledges, on the one hand; while attempting, on the other hand, to incorporate the possibility for an alternative location from within the colonial difference: one that allows a decolonization of the mind and the invention of new epistemic, rhetorical and political forms of agency.

So, in line also with Chicano critic José David Saldívar, I take Shange as part of a series of American artists who put forth "critical and creative processes that aim to articulate a new, transgeographical conception of American culture – one more responsive to the hemisphere's geographical ties and political crosscurrents than to narrow national ideologies" (1991: i).

The emphasis of this paper will be on the roles of place in that articulation and the techniques Shange deploys, particularly the way she intertwines the awareness of geopolitics and the motif of ancestry. My final – if tentative – argument being that the poem eventually proposes alternative positions of enunciation in the way Mignolo suggests. As I expect to be able to demonstrate towards the end of the paper, it is my belief that Shange eventually attains a new collective subject, which geography still sustains but does not by itself determine.

Senses of place

We tend to think that movement defies place. That dislocations such as that of diasporas, exiles, and immigration necessarily disconnect people from a location. For a while, critical theory reflected this belief and hopeful theories envisaged a post-national future inhabited by loose cosmopolitans, freed from sentimental nationalisms bred by old-fashioned notions of space.

This seemed to be the right direction, well over ten years ago when I was researching nationalism for my Masters' dissertation, and, again, a couple of years later, when I finished my PhD thesis, also on issues connected with the national formation. The growing interest in issues such as internationalism, globalization and cosmopolitanism suggested that place as a category might become obsolete. Yet, it endured. It is undeniable that, more or less strategically, territory, for instance, in different forms than just that of the nation, still fuels identitarian struggles and legitimates diverse kinds of claims in our very day. Increasing

movement, be it physical, imaginary, metaphorical, or virtual, has not managed to dissolve place, which remains a fundamental cultural category and, as such, a productive lens of analysis also in literary and cultural studies. I think it is so because place remains a fundamental repository of history and memory. In post-colonial studies, and the critique of coloniality of power, for instance, place is still a significant and productive category.

Quijano and other Latin American critics prefer however the term 'coloniality' to 'colonialism' because the latter is misleading: it signals a system that is supposed to have ended, as the designation 'post-colonial critique' suggests. 'Coloniality of knowledge' aims at moving beyond the limitations of postcolonial studies, while also conceiving, I venture adding, of the specificity of the colonial experience in the Americas. Assuming colonialism as a constitutive part of modernity itself, that is, of the same project that, side by side with economic dependency, deauthorized the knowledges produced in the territories subjugated to the imperial European powers, the critique of coloniality stresses the contemporaneity of the power relations established with colonialism/modernity: "we are still living under the same regime. Today coloniality could be seen as the hidden side of postmodernity and, in this respect, postcoloniality would designate the transformation of coloniality into the global coloniality" that takes several strategies within the framework of globalization (Mignolo, 2008: 249). Against the coloniality of power there must be a decolonisation of thought first, a project towards thinking an alternative epistemology that comes from what Mignolo also calls a different place of enunciation, "the colonial difference" (2008: 239). To link it back to José Saldívar again, place will bear its importance as long as "oppositional versions of history" (1991: xv) are written from the colonial difference – those bearing the memory of dispossessed communities or oppressed groups, who feel that they still have a word to say in the (re)construction of the world and in the imagination of new forms of society. Ntozake Shange's poem I propose to discuss here is precisely one of such instances.

Besides these contributions to a geopolitical understanding of space, further scholarship on place as analytical categories came from both cultural studies and postcolonial studies, which have insisted on an analysis of place as a cultural condition, a notion I would like to articulate here with that of coloniality of power to analyze Shange's poetry. Conceiving of place as a cultural condition entails the idea of a sense of place, that is, a dynamic relationship between subject and space, a lived experience of space, that is, space remaining as a more abstract and philosophical category. Place as the lived experience of space in turn

produces two different movements. On the one hand, the experience of space produces knowledge and thereby establishes specific power relations (Crang *et al.*, 2000: 3): the imposition of the name 'New World' to America is an obvious instance of this process, as 'newness' reinforced the idea of the continent as a crude mass of land on display, a pure empty space – a design that (conveniently) left it prey to all sorts of exploitation. On the other hand, a lived experience of space can also lead to creative responses which reinvent meaning and uncover counter-memories.

Place as a cultural construct can thus be summed up as follows: space becomes place by being named – and by the meanings entailed in those names (Carter, 1993: xii). It is therefore meaning that explains how places provide identitarian fodder *par excellence*: the body – the home – the region – the nation... can be given as powerful organizers of human experience that rely on a spatial framework.

Maps of kinship, language and memory

In "Bocas: A Daughter's Geography", we easily recognize the Black Atlantic as the primary setting of the poem and we are reminded about how the slave traffic produced the Caribbean region. Slavery is certainly an important motif, triggering memory, providing the historical connections between places. But Bocas (which is also translated and taken by some critics simply as 'Mouths') is more likely to read, to my mind, as a specific geographical place: Bocas del Toro, in Isla Colon, which lies in the isthmus of Panama, bordering Costa Rica. It is originally part of the archipelago used by Christopher Columbus to repair his ship and obtain provisions, when he arrived there in 1502 on his fourth and last voyage to the Americas. Colonization issued and the region soon became a hive of pirates, due to the precious materials coming from Peru on route to Spain; later, the traffic of slaves maintained its vitality and, nowadays, if you happen to google it – that is, if you don't simply stumble onto it in your travel agency's flyers –, you will find out that Bocas del Toro also goes by elegant and appealing names such as 'the Eden of the Caribbean'.

This is the imprint of the coloniality of power, to which I will come back; but for now I would like to set Shange's poem, *or Shange's Bocas del Toro*, in the second process I mentioned above as deriving from lived space: a creative response that produces other versions of place and thereby proposes alternative knowledges as well.

As I hinted at earlier, geography, albeit central to the poem, can not be read by itself. I would actually venture suggesting that if there is a place in the poem, it is family, because the imbrications between ancestry and geography are so tight that you can not separate them clearly. For one, spelling and syntax refuse geography as such: place names are not written in capitals and no commas signal their separation; free enumeration follows the attempt to connect instead of separating, America and Africa, Asia and the Middle East – place names come alongside, siblings all. A concurring effect of the decapitalization of place names is the defamiliarization of identities as national, reinforcing instead the idea of the same places as sons and daughters, a sort of prosopopeia, literarily speaking. Paul Gilroy's elaboration of the Black Atlantic as a "rhizomorphic, fractal structure" (1993: 4) might be fitting here in helping us conceive of this horizontal 'landscape' the poem invents, but lets bear in mind that Shange stretches the Black Atlantic to other seas as well (the Pacific – the Philippines and the Vietnamese postcolonial leader Ho Chi Min are referred to, as well as the Mediterranean, via Palestine). What is put forth is another world map.

You think of families as blood ties and affinities, and affects. The poem draws a different story, however: family ties are the result of violence and hazard; certainly not of choice or desire. The tortuous map the poem draws confuses not just places but also family ties and so rehearses anew the mock-family of slavery times, in which mothers and fathers lost control over and touch with their children, families scattered throughout, both in their origins and all over the world in the colonies, while oppression was passed on with the blood – oppression, before love. Hence the confusion of personal and possessive pronouns

I have a daughter/ la habana
I have a son / Guyana
our twins // Santiago and Brixton . . . [my emphasis]

suggests a grotesque family tree, an image that is intensified by the zigzagging of the family ties and also by the unexpected gender of some of the place names.

1. Despite the apparent randomness, the order in the poem follows ancestry, not place – memory traces the lines. In this new map that is the legacy of slavery, mother, father, daughter, son, oppressor, and liberator turn into the new and meaningful cardinal points, suggesting a replacement of the old power relations with those of family ties, which in turn

allow for imagining new routes as well. It seems to further imply that these reinvented references make up for the diaspora and compensate the need for belonging and origins. The emergent concepts of 'emotional' and 'affective geography' as they acknowledge that geography also results from relationships between people, would certainly be productive in examining the spatial dimension of kinship the poem builds on.² Although I will not go deep into this field, I would like to bear that relationship in mind, because it is the emotions and affects that modify stable geographical notions that might help the reader 'navigate' the routes the poem traces.

While suggesting that there are affinities and deep links created by history between the geographical entities we recognize in the poem, the poem rejects, notwithstanding, a Eurocentric geography that cut off Africa from Europe from America from Asia from the Middle East and so on and so forth, and built for each of these geographical entities an independent identity made of incommunicable differences: North and South being the ultimate evidence of that logics of dichotomy, each producing an exclusive constellation of meanings (rich/poor, developed/undeveloped, modern/primitive, and so on and so forth).

Such rejection is evinced in the way the difference of languages is conveyed. Different languages are often seen as the final representation of incommunicability. Yet, this common badge of difference emerges in the poem as ordinary and unthreatening at all. In fact, linguistic difference needs not bring apart the sons and daughters, like geographical distance also doesn't:

our twins
Salvador & Johannesburg / cannot speak
The same language
But we fight the same old men / in the new world

Understanding surmounts linguistic difference because it finds other deeper sources. The presence of the interlocutor, the "same old men", provides the link, emphasized by repetition. Despite their abstraction – in a clear contrast with the naming of places and the family relations –, the "same old men" easily hint at both old and new forms of power in the Americas – the presence of coloniality of power. The United States easily resonates, for its

² These interdisciplinary fields developed within cultural geography from the intersection of socially constructed categories of identity (race, gender, sexuality, age, spirituality...) with spatial categories.

hegemonic role in the Americas, born of its eager replacement of the European empires and ensuing extension of the old bondage, after the newly won independences. The lines:

the ones who think helicopters rhyme with hunger
who think patrol boats can confiscate a people
and ones whose dreams are full of none of our
children

clearly bring to mind images of the routine exercise of power by the rich Americas, patrolling its borders to prevent access from the periphery – the poor Americas. As in the past, these “same old men” remain deliberately oblivious to the ‘children’ inside, or at, its margins, “unaware of the rest of us in Chicago”. In Chicago and elsewhere, in all the margins of the world: “all the dark urchins / rounding out the globe”.

The “same old men” is, hence, the link to memory. And memory is clearly the vehicle for translation and commonality. It flows through the lines and binds. The map the poem redraws conveys a trans-national network of connections, in which a common memory of oppression becomes the blood that binds, as it were. Against “the same old men”, there are *common* references, namely the evocation of historical figures of colonial liberators:

‘don’t worry bout lumumba/ don’t even think bout
ho chi minh / the dead can’t procreate’³

Despite dislocation and diaspora, the dispersal of the family out in the world, memory passed on other histories, counterhistories: against the “same old men”, who thought “the dead [could] not procreate”... As such, memory endures also as a form to bear witness, at the same time that it sustains other forms of kinship and the affects – which to my mind stay for alternative forms to family ties proper. Oppression is the family surname, the ultimate affinity that brings parents, sons, and daughters together in a different form of union: solidarity.

Other forms of emotions reinforce the new connectedness the poem suggests: the search for the morning and the sun as symbols of emancipation – light as spiritual nourishment, as liberation – links with hope and together they tone down the imperfections of history, while projecting a better map for the future. For the children are still young and blossoming:

³ Lumumba was an anti-colonial leader and the first elected President in Congo, in 1960. Ho Chi Minh was the leader of the Communist revolution for independence in Vietnam, in 1941.

We are so hungry for the morning
We're trying to feed our children the sun

And that is why I say that the map the poem draws is less a map of the past than one of the future.

Hence the reminder, “the earth is not flat old men” – there is not one truth, one mapping of the world, one location-as-imprisonment. Space is lived through and if infused with memory it bears witness and “procreates”: awareness is born and prevails, dispersed, ever moving, and unstoppable. Hence the possibility of new meanings: the ‘new world’ that witnessed the arrival of the slave ships, long ago, is the edgeless new world of today; newness, here, redefining the world as a borderless place that allows the family to come together.

2. Shange's poem therefore traces old-new symbolic political geographies that are not individual but collective – the ‘family’ – and whose ultimate goal is freedom. As Saldívar writes, Shange “envisions a new sort of geographical space altogether in which new kinds of social and sexual relations, denied by the older classical American literatures, might flourish. Her geography is thus always sociopoetic, and in her discourse places act as ‘ciphers’ for alternative visions of social existence in the Americas” (1991: 19).

Conclusion

We need representations such as Shange's in this poem to counterbalance other, recurring, representations which overlap and tend to dominate our views of geography and the meanings attached to place. I am referring to coloniality of power in the Caribbean region. Not only does the colonial history of Bocas del Toro remain unknown to the modern traffic of people who circulate in the islands – the tourists – as the entertainment services and facilities the archipelago in general provides are designed to bury that history deep, a condition for its very existence in the current design. The paradise poster (magnificent palm trees, the bluest sea, the softest sand...), a delightful image, is the one that prevails, concealing the other history and memory of the Caribbean. Like in the poem, it makes of us all ‘Mae Wests’ and ‘Jean Harlows,

in whittled white cafes
near Managua
listening to primitive rhythms in
jungles near pétionville
with bejewelled benign nativess,⁴

or yet,

ice skating in Abidjan
unaware of the rest. . .

In opposition to the movement that transforms space into place – that appropriation by the people that subjectifies, historicizes, and politicizes it, making it meaningful –, common images of the Caribbean as touristic paradise show us the regulating push of the coloniality of power. The drive behind them is to produce a static space again, a modern version of the ‘new world’ of the time of the ‘discoveries’ – ready for the taking. When we consume the view card version, we engage the Caribbean-America as a commodity there for consumption. It bears a plain message that deprives it of any complexity – it invites identification, not questions.

Only accidentally are we reminded of the other meanings of history concealed by images such as these; when the inverted version of the view card invades the news, in brutal sights of chaos and horror: like Haiti’s earthquake, uncannily reminding the world of the coloniality of power...⁵

“*There is no edge*”, Shange’s poem repeats, “no end to the new world”, suggesting that there is no limit, no lines of separation to the emergent wider family it invents, nor to the present-day history of our world.

⁴ The line ‘whittled white cafes’ in Managua probably refers to the so-called ‘white cities’/‘pueblos blancos’, adobe houses painted white probably after colonial influence, near the capital of Nicaragua and a very touristic site (in the picturesque style). Pétionville is a wealthy region in Haiti.

⁵ See Shange’s poem in the same collection (*A Daughter’s Geography*, 33-36), “A Black Night in Haiti, Palais National, Port-Au-Prince”, which long before any earthquake, in 1983, sings of a Haiti almost as chaotic and pain ridden as the one that pierced through our television screens recently.

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Bocas: A Daughter's Geography

i have a daughter/ mozambique
i have a son/ angola
our twins
salvador & johannesburg/ cannot speak
the same language
but we fight the same old men/ in the new world

we are so hungry for the morning
we're trying to feed our children the sun
but a long time ago/ we boarded ships/ locked in
depths of seas our spirits/ kiss the earth
on the atlantic side of nicaragua costa rica
our lips traced the edges of cuba puerto rico
charleston & savannah/ in haiti
we embraced &
made children of the new world
but old men spit on us/ shackled our limbs
but for a minute
our cries are the panama canal/ the yucatan
we poured thru more sea/ more ships/ to manila
ah ha we're back again
everybody in manila already speaks spanish

the old men sent for the archbishop of canterbury
"can whole continents be excommunicated?"
"what wd happen to the children?"
"wd their allegiance slip over the edge?"
"don't worry bout lumumba/ don't even think bout
ho chi minh/ the dead cant procreate"
so say the old men
but I have a daughter/ la habana
I have a son/ guyana
our twins
santiago & brixton/ cannot speak
the same language
yet we fight the same old men

the ones who think helicopters rhyme with hunger
who think patrol boats can confiscate a people
the ones whose dreams are full of none of our
children
the see mae west & harlow in whittled white cafes
near managua/ listening to primitive rhythms in
jungles near pétionville
with bejeweled benign nativess
ice skating in abidjan

unaware of the rest of us in chicago
all the dark urchins
rounding out the globe/ primitively whispering
the earth is not flat old men

there is no edge
no end to the new world
cuz I have a daughter/ trinidad
I have a son/ san juan
our twins
capetown & palestine/ cannot speak the same
language/ but we fight the same old men
the same men who thought the earth waz flat
go on over the edge/ go on over the edge old men
you'll see us in luanda, or the rest of us
in chicago
rounding out the morning/
we are feeding our children the sun