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UM TRANSFORMISMO LATINO: BARTOLINA XIXA E A INSURREIÇÃO MICROPOLÍTICA
A LATIN TRANSFORMISM: BARTOLINA XIXA AND THE MICROPOLITICAL INSURRECTION
DOUGLAS OSTRUCA

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Douglas Henrique Ostruca dos Santos holds a degree in Film and Audiovisual, a Master's degree in Communication and Information, and is a Ph.D. candidate in Communication. She is currently a member of the Semiotics and Communication Cultures research group, at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil. She has experience in the field of Communication, in the following themes: gender micropolitics, queer micropolitics, cartography, body assembly processes, drag movements, cinema, and audiovisual. douglas.ostruca.pmf@gmail.com
<http://lattes.cnpq.br/6593645121001870>

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Abstract

Interested in Latin America's drag art with the emphasis on the tension concerning the colonial dynamics expressed in these cultural contexts, we seek to investigate the work of Argentinian Maximiliano Mamani, who embodies the *cholita* drag queen Bartolina Xixa. We focus on the artist's use of the term "transformism" and its relation to his assemblages as a drag artist. Further, we deal with the process of subjectivity, taking into consideration the link between gender, sexuality, and race. Maximiliano's experiences with transformism also involve the affirmation of native people's fight for the lands they inhabit. To develop these aspects, we work with the notions of micropolitical insurrection (Rolnik, 2018), drag as self-fiction (Preciado, 2013), and cartography (Rosário, 2013, 2016) as an "undisciplined submethodology" (Mombaça, 2016). Among our conclusions, we consider that, in his experiences and performance *Ramita Seca* (Eli, 2019), Maximiliano reveals a reconfiguration of transformism as a communication device for confronting colonization processes in the cultural sphere.

Keywords: Transformism, Drag queen, Self-fiction, Micropolitics, Subjectivity

1 Introduction: towards a Latin American transformism

According to Lucas Bragança (2017), and Mayka Castellano and Heitor Machado (2017), the reality show RuPaul's Drag Race (RPDR) is one of the factors involved in the revival of drag culture around the world. This characteristic is also present in the speeches of Brazilian queens in videos published on YouTube (Tiffany, 2018; Vogue, 2018) that place RPDR as one of the elements responsible for encouraging themselves to assemble, that is, to express through drag art.

However, Bragança (2017), Lang, et al. (2015), as well as a group of Brazilian drag queens (Alma Negrot, Gloria Groove, Duda Dello Russo, and Penelopy Jean) highlight that, besides recognizing the relevance of RPDR to the drag scene, it is also necessary to take the difference of contexts into account (Põe..., 2015). Therefore, while the reality show RPDR gathers fans worldwide, local scenes do not always receive the same attention. Another factor underlined by the four queens is the risk of centralizing the drag phenomenon under the programs and models presented in RPDR — as if every existing drag artist's assemblage¹ necessarily took the signs placed in the reality show as reference.

In other words, the lights of a time also produce invisibility effects. They generate shadows on practices that do not fit into current programs. In his study on "pop music and air war", Fabrício Silveira (2016) compares global divas and internationalist divas. The first ones work as ambassadors of North American culture and are responsible for taking it to the world. In contrast, the second ones start from the "creative integration of peripheral, plural, and decentralized musical traditions" (Silveira, 2016, p. 2, our translation), involving behaviors, cultures, and heterogeneous conflicts. It appears that RPDR reality show promotes the drag scene around the world and, at the same time, involves an exportation movement of North American culture, resembling global divas. Therefore, we foresee an apparent update of colonial dynamics in this specific cultural sphere.

As a product of our previous Master's research (Santos, 2020), we found on YouTube a set of video performances starring Latin American drag artists like Alma Negrot, Bartolina Xixa, Cassie, Martin Shankar, Potyguara Bardo, and Uyrá Sodoma. In these drag art assemblages, the artists incorporate traces of their local experiences showing singularization processes.

In Bartolina Xixa's case, a drag queen embodied by the Argentinian Maximiliano Mamani, the artist nominates himself as a "transformist"², a term that coexists in his narratives as drag. This aspect is verifiable in the excerpt between 1'43" e 1'52" of the documentary Bartolina Xixa (Caleidoscopio, 2019). The artist affirms: "(...) there is nothing more beautiful than being able to stop and construct my drag queen perspective in a moment which now I call a transformist" (Caleidoscopio, n.p., our translation³). In the description of that same video, it says:

Bartolina Xixa is an Andean drag artist. Thinking on her own story, inspired by a *Paceña chola* and constantly searching to give the transformist art a more indigenous perspective, Bartolina [the historical character] is reconstructed. With the transformism art, she allowed herself to feel and call out what is often denied or made invisible (Caleidoscopio, 2019, n.p., our translation).⁴

Here, the association between the terms "drag queen – Andean drag – *cholita* drag – transformist" is remarkable. It highlights a process of singularization in this drag art montage linked to the territories inhabited by the artist. The connection between these terms is also present in the video's title *Cholita Fiestera Arte Drag Queen Folk, Andean Transformist Art* (Maximiliano, 2018), published by Maximiliano Mamani on his YouTube channel. This title adds the expression "folk drag queen".

We start from the experiences of the artist Maximiliano Mamani to identify how he uses the term 'transformism' and its relation to his drag art assemblage practices, and examine the affirmation of the subjective characteristics that articulate him. We work with questions that intertwine gender identities, sexuality, race, and aspects of the original people's fight for their own territories. To that end, this work considers minority cultural practices, emphasizing the expression processes of the Andean drag queen Bartolina Xixa.

2 Cartography as an undisciplinary submethodology

As a methodological path, we work with an association between cartography (Rosário, 2013, 2016) and Jota Mombaça's (2016) proposals related to the formulation of an "undisciplined submethodology". Both perspectives share the understanding of research as a procedural and open nature that requires creative movements according to each case. There is also a convergence regarding the understanding that a study requires field involvement. Therefore, research's investigator and participant figures are crossed and moulded by each other, including the tensions capable of emerging along the way.

From cartography, we embody the clue left by Virgínia Kastrup (2015), who suggests ways to disassemble the usual attention focused on recognizing the world based on current codifications, whose attachment to pre-made categories erases what is not recognized by defined parameters. On the other hand, Kastrup proposes ways to exercise an attentiveness that is at the same time floating, concentrated, and open, tolerant to strangeness, to noise, to elements that escape the things already known. Along with Mombaça (2016), we can say that this attentive posture requires indiscipline, assuming the precariousness that constitutes the production of knowledge. It is not a question of traversing a territory with well-defined categories but of working only with fragments, without reducing them to a presupposed unit.

Kastrup (2015) suggests exercising four variations (tracking, touching, landing, and attentive recognition) to go beyond the selective and automatic attentional mode. Although these movements coexist and operate simultaneously, at each moment, one can predominate over the other. This study unfolds a previous tracking movement on audiovisuals made by drag queens and published on YouTube. As a continuation, we tracked new videos and have included them in this investigation.

As a non-binary queer racialized as white, we sense some affections arising from the encounter with the experiences of Maximiliano-Bartolina. From the differences involved, some touches show up and generate strangeness capable of opening spaces for creation. We express such crossings through attentive recognition materialized in the writing process. There is no truth to be unveiled but the production of a look at the transformist art from connections with Maximiliano's work and the theoretical perspectives we work with.

3 Bartolina Xixa: transformist art as self-fiction

Bartolina Xixa introduces herself as *cholita* drag⁶, a drag folk (Aj+, 2019) who arises through the folk dance teacher Maximiliano Mamani — born in Abra Pampa, a city in the province of Jujuy, northwestern Argentina. By asserting himself as a "sissy, black and indigenous" (Caleidoscopio, 2019), the artist highlights his process of disidentification from the homosexual identity category. According to the artist, this category insists on ethnic and racial erasure. For Maximiliano, the logic of whiteness⁷ that permeates the demarcations of sexuality is also present in Argentine nationality's formation. Moved by these questions, he finds in drag art the possibility of producing detachments and assembling other realities. This process involves a search to affirm the ways of life associated with folk cultures and to play an active role in the dispute for an existing form denied by colonial dynamics.

For Maximiliano, even though Bartolina is a character, there is a constant flow between the subjectivity's processes that cross them, with no well-defined borders (Aj+, 2019). Its distancing to the current understanding about drag queens is notable. In the Portuguese-BR Houaiss (2009) electronic dictionary, the term appears as "a man who dresses in extravagant women's clothes and imitates typically female voice and gestures, usually performing as an artist for entertainment" (n.p., our translation). By proposing a constant flow in the space between Bartolina and Maximiliano, the artist goes beyond the notion of imitating codes socially marked as feminine. He invents a space where the body is composed in transit through different montages/assemblages of himself.

In this sense, having the "drag king's device" concept (or "the drag king plan of action") in mind, Paul B. Preciado suggests:

Drag king knowledge isn't the awareness of being an imitator of masculinity surrounded by anonymous male and female bodies, [...] rather, it resides in the fact of perceiving others—all others, including oneself—for the first time, as more or less realistic biofictions of performative gender and sexual norms that are decodable as male or female. (Preciado, 2013, p. 373).

The author demonstrates the permeability between fictional and supposedly natural gender performances, arguing that nature constitutes itself as an assemblage. In this way, drag art montages are not imitations but a way of being in the world from other compositions. This process comprises the displacement of oneself that risks reconfiguring the existential territories in which one is involved. Notably, Preciado (2013) places his experience as a drag king not as the impersonating of a theatrical character but as a self-fiction exercise from his own life experience.

This perspective seems to relate to the way Maximiliano-Bartolina operates with the body's montages. By refusing the homosexual identity and calling it out as an overly whitened space, the artist reveals a disidentification with the current socio-cultural codes. At the same time, there is an active investment in *marica's* collective existential territory, which, according to the artist, creates space to bring visibility to race intersectionality (Aj+, 2019; Caleidoscopio, 2019).

Furthermore, Maximiliano's practices show a process of hacking the body's biocodes of gender-sexuality-race-ethnicity (Preciado, 2013). From this perspective, Preciado argues that, in addition to becoming aware of how such devices work, it is necessary to generate collective appropriations, producing mutations and deviations capable of proliferating other biofictions. In this regard, Mamani criticizes the Western beauty standards predominant in makeup tutorials aimed at drag queens. By favoring features such as a thin nose, oval face, large eyes, these audiovisuals support Eurocentric beauty as a universal standard of measure (Aj+, 2019), which represents a colonial dynamic.

To compose Bartolina Xixa, Maximiliano starts from "the femininities of the Andean world" (Caleidoscopio, 2019) implied in the territories where he sets up. The name Bartolina Xixa comes from Bartolina Sisa (1750-1782), an Aymara indigenous woman who was among the leaders in the fight against Spanish colonization. She died fighting for the land and her people's lives (Navarro, 2019). Therefore, through the crossings that

constitute the territories inhabited by the artist, he gives vent to a singularization's process. As previously stated, the drag art assemblage carried out in this case leads direct criticisms of contemporary colonial dynamics.

Maximiliano-Bartolina even suggests, as aforementioned, a self-identification as transformist, a term that in his speech coexists with drag folk and *cholita* drag. In these uses, the artist searches for differentiation from the global drag queen art scene. In this sense, the possibility of a *Latino* transformism reconfiguration with an internationalist posture is opened up (Silveira, 2016). In Maximiliano-Bartolina's assemblages, this aspect is linked to disidentification acts related to current codifications and, at the same time, to self-fictional investments in differentiation processes and the creation of new territories.

According to Suely Rolnik (2018), these disidentification practices and the body's knowledge on activation/affectation set up the conditions for the manifestation of creation processes. Rolnik situates this operationalization of desire as an active micropolitics, which drives the "virtual world's germs" through bodies. This process takes place from the effects of otherness on oneself, requesting reinventions. In this sense, desire operates through an ethical compass that displaces existing cartographies and the existential territories articulated by them (processes of singularization in action).

Working with local folklore, Maximiliano-Bartolina maintains an active posture in the displacement of binary gender relations permeated in these practices. The artist makes explicit the heterosexual, sexist, and patriarchal logics that, according to him, cross the folklore and the construction of national identity (Caleidoscopio, 2019; Navarro, 2019). Therefore, it is not about just refusing a set of codes and replacing them with others but transforming, deviating, giving vent to processes of singularization in which the creative work is permanent.

As seen so far, Maximiliano and his transformism art as self-fiction display a critical posture towards the homosexual category and the beauty standards that prevail among drag queens. The artist proposes the re-articulation of signs and affections that compose the territories where he lives, showing an active creation practice. Therefore, there are some differences between Latin American transformism and the global drag scene — a work to be expanded in other investigations. For now, we choose to work on the affectations produced in the encounter with Bartolina Xixa's work, highlighting the first minute of the video *Ramita Seca, la colonialidad permanente* (Eli, 2019).

4 Micropolitical insurrection: *Ramita Seca, la colonialidad permanente*

Among the touches resulting from the encounter with the video *Ramita seca, la colonialidad permanente* (Eli, 2019) we observe the ruptures related to the characteristics of how capitalism works and the use of performance along with audiovisual language as a revolutionary machine.

The first frame of the video shows a mountainous terrain in the background, some pieces of wood, and garbage on the floor. White smoke is visible, giving the scene a hazy character. A straight montage cut reveals a take with a body lying on the ground in front of a trash pile — made up with remains of broken things, plastic bags, all accumulated to the top of the frame (between 10 and 17 seconds).

Our sight remains trapped between the mass of garbage and the body, dressed in a pink skirt (*pollera*) and a blue blanket, on the floor. The perspective makes the pile of garbage look to weigh on the body, which resembles another disposable element thrown among the debris. There is no movement, reinforcing the death already presented in the previous shot through the environment in destruction. The sound remains filled with silence, intensifying the feeling of discomfort.

At 14", a song in Spanish suddenly breaks the silence. The body on the ground pulses its torso in synchrony with the beat of the drum and the high-pitched voice. Although exposed to the environment's precariousness, this person lives and moves with *Ramita Seca's* song⁸. This change between the body's immobility and movement is noticeable. These markings vary from exhaustion (which at its extreme is the silencing by death) to the expression of lifeness (which passes through the visible body in the frame, affecting those who watch).

It is indeed unsettling that Maximiliano-Bartolina chooses an open-air dumping ground⁹ as the setting for the *Ramita Seca* performance. It is a territory previously occupied by indigenous populations and declared a cultural and natural heritage of humanity in 2003 by the United Nations for Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The fact that this place has been transformed into a landfill is meaningful as it highlights necropolitics (Mbembe, 2018) as an extermination strategy in practice. Here, we find a specific manifestation of the colonial process in the contemporary context of Latin America.

Bartolina Xixa's presence in the space turned into landfills marks a persistent posture in the occupation of this territory. Through performance, her body expresses the region's folk culture. The clothes¹⁰ and the music, gestures, and dance revive a collective ritual, putting traditional memories into action. Only one body is visible on the scene but a micropolitical view shows the composition with the lifeness still present despite the

devastated territory. Fragments of Bartolina Sisa and all her people's fight against Spanish colonization pass through this transformist art assemblage.

Here, transformism works as a communicational operator that connects different temporalities without erasing their differences. Traces of a specific and localized folk culture rearticulate in the present as new ones. There is a clash with still existing colonial dynamics that lead to the destruction of original peoples. By updating itself amid different space-times, this specific performance highlights the fights and genocides involved in Latin America's formation process.

Bartolina Xixa's transformism shows a folk culture revival, the fight against colonization, and the economic regime that sustains it. In this revolutionary machine, bodies feed on ancestral lifeness, which returns in the fight for territory and forms of life that are not compatible with the colonial-racializing-capitalistic regime's accumulation logic (Rolnik, 2018). The artist assembles with the dead, giving them body in other forms through the singularization process. There is no imitation or representation but a reinvention practice that expresses a way of life as a micropolitical insurrection.

Besides breaking with the body's aesthetic pattern in the current regime, this performance clashes with the glamour and perfection established as the ideal of success by the same system that produces garbage and dumps it in the peripheries. Instead of adapting local folklore to global consumption, *Ramita Seca's* performance shows the putrefaction on which the colonial-racializing-capitalistic regime is based (Rolnik, 2018). It is not only the open-air pile of garbage that contaminates the land but also the extermination of the bodies that live there, all for the capital's expansion and accumulation sake. This aspect highlights a necropolitical strategy that operates through the demarcation of those who can live and those who should be left to die (Mbembe, 2018), which presents itself as a facet of the colonial dynamics involved in Latin America.

5 Final considerations

This work follows drag art assemblages divergent from the global scene that presents an internationalist diva's posture. We studied the Latin American transformism's reconfiguration focusing on the *cholita* drag artist Bartolina Xixa, embodied by Maximiliano Mamani. The transformism expression in this artist's experiences clashes with the makeup configurations guided by Eurocentric beauty ideals. Moreover, by situating his experience as a transit between Bartolina and Maximiliano, the transformism has also led him to critique the homosexual and Argentinian nationality categories (signaled by him as whitened). Through these movements, the artist provokes displacements in a colonial dynamic updated in the cultural sphere.

In contrast, Maximiliano asserts himself as sissy, black and indigenous, seeking the references for his montage as Bartolina in the existential territories in which he is composed. Such aspects align with what Preciado (2013) puts as disidentification and self-fiction — some procedures for Latin American transformism guided by active micropolitics. In this regard, transformist art emerges as a space-between, a zone of liminality, an instance of destabilization and detachment from well-defined categories. Based on this, estrangements and anomalies are capable of breaking out in unforeseen ways — a characteristic that is close to what Rolnik (2018) defines as micropolitical insurrection.

Finally, analyzing the first minute of the video *Ramita Seca, la colonialidad permanente* (Eli, 2019), it is noticeable that Bartolina's assemblage criticizes capitalism and its contemporary forms of colonization. In the artist's processes, transformism presents itself as a communication device putting different space-times in contact. In this sense, the artist gives way to ancestral forces that express themselves in the performance as a life potency. In addition to reviving the local folk culture, Maximiliano-Bartolina is part of a revolutionary machine, which updates the native people's fight against colonization to the contemporary context of Latin America.

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1 In drag artists' practices, we understand "assemblage" or "montage" as a set of heterogeneous elements – clothing, makeup, accessories, gestures, postures, and so on – involved in the expression of their personas.

2 Remom Bortolozzi (2015) indicated that the term 'transformism' was commonly used in Brazil in the 1970's and 1980's by artists who moved between gender codifications in their performances. It is not prudent to assume a necessary connection between the Brazilian transformism mentioned by Bortolozzi and the way Maximiliano Mamani uses the term. This position requires a separate investigation.

3 From the original in Spanish: "(...) *que nada más bello, que nada más lindo que poder desde así pararme y construir mi perspectiva drag queen en su momento que ahora lo digo transformista*".

4 From the original in Spanish: "*Bartolina Xixa es una artista drag andina. Pensando en su propia historia, inspirada en una chola paceña y en una búsqueda constante de darle al transformismo una perspectiva más indigenista es que reconstruye a Bartolina. Con el transformismo, se permitió sentir y denunciar lo que muchas veces se niega o invisibiliza*".

5 The term '*cholata*' refers to the Bolivian *cholitas*, which are the inspiration for Maximiliano to assemble Bartolina Xixa. The Spanish crown imposed the different elements that makeup *chola*'s clothing with a system structured by regional and caste differences. The term *chola* itself emerges as a category to demarcate a racial difference between mestizo and indigenous women (Sologuren, 2006; Fes, 2014). However, even compulsorily determined in the colonization process, such components start to be hacked/pirated by the local culture in a movement to affirm a way of life.

6 According to Camila de Jesus (2012), one use of the term 'whiteness' demarcates the ideals that support white supremacy and its privileges. However, to Jesus, authors such as Edith Piza propose to differentiate two variations of whiteness posture (*branquitude* and *branquidade*): the first would be a stage in recognizing white privileges in an anti-racist fight. While the second would assume the meaning previously given to whiteness, which denies white privileges arising from imposed racial distinctions.

7 It is a *vidala riojana*, a traditional musical piece, composed by Aldana Bello, who sings it with Susy Shock and Mariana Baraj.

8 Located in Hornillos, in the Quebrada de Humahuaca, Argentina.

9 Among the aspects included in this assemblage are: a pink skirt with ruffles (*polleras*), a white blouse with long sleeves, a pink and blue blanket with printed embroidery. In addition to the black hat, sneakers, and two braids in the hair made with fabrics and an adornment (*tullmas*) in red fringes.