

**“Gee, you don’t seem like an Indian from the reservation” (CAMERON, 1981):
The Subaltern (re)construction of Literary Archetypes**

**“Gee, you don’t seem like an Indian from the reservation” (CAMERON, 1981):
A (re)construção subalterna de arquétipos literários**

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Abstract: This research is situated within the lives and experiences of American natives marginalised for providing “deviations” from racial, ideological, and sexual epistemological normativity – race and sex as both hindrances and assets. Setting forth the literary analysis of “Gee, you don’t seem like an Indian from the Reservation” (CAMERON, 1981), I problematise hegemonic methods for ideological reiteration and for the universalising of central conceptions of race and gender. My reading of Cameron’s (1981) text aims at identifying if and – if so – how her experience as a Lakota native and a lesbian articulates a deep critique regarding American history, the romanticising of nature, and narrow views towards race and gender. As she herself demonstrates in the (re)historicising of her own life, difference is feared because it destabilises the norm; the need to silence the subaltern is justified by the need to prevent the self from being altered by the experience of the other. Nevertheless, the other is getting closer and closer to the self – and, as time goes by, there will be nowhere else to hide.

Keywords: Barbara Cameron; Postcolonialism; Subalternity.

Resumo: Essa pesquisa se situa nas vidas e experiências de nativos americanos marginalizados por proporem “desvios” da normatividade epistemológica racial, ideológica e sexual – raça e sexualidade vistas ambas como obstáculo e vantagem. Através da análise literária de “Gee, you don’t seem like an Indian from the Reservation” (CAMERON, 1981), problematizo os métodos hegemônicos para a reiteração ideológica e para a universalização de conceitos centrais acerca de raça e gênero. A minha leitura do texto de Cameron (1981) busca identificar se e de que forma a sua experiência como uma índia Lakota e como lésbica articula uma crítica profunda sobre a história da América, a romantização da natureza e às visões limitadas naquilo que tange raça e gênero. Como a própria demonstra na (re)historicização que faz de sua vida, a diferença é temida por desestabilizar a norma; a necessidade de silenciar o subalterno se justifica pela necessidade de prevenir o eu de ser alterado pelas experiências do outro. Ainda assim, o outro a cada dia se aproxima mais do eu, e logo já não haverá mais lugar onde o segundo possa se esconder do primeiro.

Palavras-chave: Barbara Cameron; Pós-colonialismo; Subalternidade.

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There is, in fact, no need to drag politics into literary theory: it has been there from the beginning.

(Eagleton, 2002, p. 169)

Introduction: “Away from Fixity”

In contemporaneity, some might mistakenly consider the advent of postmodernity as a token of temporal and spatial disregard – as if the fluidity entailed by the concept would naturally result in the supposed lack of necessity to think and reflect historically about the world that surrounds us. Nevertheless, as Jameson (1990, p. 7) puts it, “it is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place”. Such advice can no longer be set aside, inasmuch as assuming the role of history in our social and political configurations provides us with the very means for (re)claiming and (re)positioning our epistemes vis-à-vis present and future demands. Concerning such demands, it is second nature to many of us that, throughout the development of Western tradition, subaltern subjects have been successively (mis)represented by hegemonic discourses and historiography. Taken for granted given their (supposedly) compliant nature in what regards the needs of hegemony, subalternity has been overtly assimilated by discursive channels that have never given them an opportunity to speak. Regardless of how pertinent their positionings might be for reconsidering economic, social, sexual, and racial maxims of mainstream epistemes, their role within history has been veiled by oblivion. Finally, nonetheless, these subjects “are now allowed chinks in the colonial armour through which they can speak or be seen. Power positions do not remain well-defined any longer, but are rendered ambivalent within the colonial encounter” (WOLF, 2008, p. 238). It is precisely such ambivalence – which is now available – that this study aims at analysing, contributing for enhancing these chinks in the colonial armour of hegemonic tradition.

Therefore, the overall context of my article consists in the ground breaking critical perspectives set forth by subaltern subjects. More specifically, I focus on the

condition of American natives living in the borderlands, whose personal histories tend to impinge upon hegemonic all-encompassing romanticised and boastful discourses concerning society and the role of literature and nature within it. I rely on the fact that “this post-national state of the world marked by migration, exile, and diaspora – constructions of imagined communities beyond common origins, local traditions, geographical and linguistic borders – creates new forms of belonging” (WALTER, 2005, p. 117). In my analysis, I shall scrutinise such new forms of belonging, as the object of my research seems to fit within this post-national state of the world. My specific context, in this sense, is situated within the lives and experiences of American natives marginalised for providing “deviations” from racial, ideological, and sexual epistemological normativity – race and sex as both hindrances and assets (why they are seen as threats) as brought forward in “Gee, you don’t seem like an Indian from the Reservation” (CAMERON, 1981). In the words of Bhabha (1994, p. 175), “through literature culture becomes as much an uncomfortable, disturbing practice of survival and supplementarity”. As an uncomfortable and disturbing practice, Cameron’s (1981) autobiographical text might disrupt normative epistemes as innovative ontologies are articulated. The overall goal of my analysis is theretofore to problematise hegemonic methods for ideological reiteration and for the universalising of central conceptions of race and gender. As for such goal to be achieved, putting into question objective and subjective endeavours to establish cultural modulations and (re)adaptation in terms of Western taken for granted religious, social, and profit-oriented (lack of) ethics is of paramount importance during the process.

Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that prescribing meanings to Cameron’s (1981) text would not be a wise move, inasmuch as her story is not “more genuine” than historical documents. She is not telling what should be taken as the truth, but simply as another version, one that walks in the opposite direction of hegemonic and normative ones. “The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that image” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 45). There is no prophecy to be fulfilled; the process could be better described as an interchange of images: the interactive activity of transforming and allowing to be

transformed. Having set forth the overall purpose of my study, I shift now to the specific one: to analyse the experiences of Cameron as described in “Gee, you don’t seem like an Indian from the Reservation” (1981). Such analysis is proposed as to identify if and – if so – how Cameron’s (1981) experience as a Lakota native and a lesbian articulates a critique regarding American history, the romanticising of nature, and narrow views towards race and gender. Conscious that the notion of “post-identity has emerged with the aim not to deny or cancel out historical identities, but to rearticulate them away from fixity” (ÁVILA, 2005, p. 9), my reading does not envisage to cancel the historical identities of Amerindians. After all, there are historical identities – the thing is that they might be less concrete and fixed than it is generally assumed. Hence my first hypothesis to be tested during the analysis: Postcolonial perspectives and queer perspectives are a possibility for the re-representation of marginalised subjects. Allowing such subjects to speak puts us therefore on the threshold of repositioning our conceptions of institutions such as nature, race, and gender – supposedly established and universal.

A branching hypothesis that one could articulate before the onset of my reading is that Cameron’s (1981) historical revision through her literary development as a character is per se symbolic of subaltern resistance. This is so, as her text demystifies the interests hidden behind the innocuous attempt of hegemony to assimilate and institutionalise the “other” through historical, economical, sexual, and – especially – religious rather questionable maxims. Apropos, knowledgeable of the feeble nature of such maxims, a queer critique upon identity, race, and gender is what provides the baseline of my project. It is essential in this sense to approach Cameron’s (1981) text raising awareness to the fact that “futurity has never been given to queers of colour, children of colour, or other marginalized communities that live under the violence of state and social erasure” (RODRÍGUEZ, 2010, p. 331). As this violence of state and social erasure tends to be blatantly omitted, my analysis is constructed alongside the scaffold of a rather interdisciplinary theoretical framework. Hall’s (1996) elaborations upon postcolonial and transcultural movements, Anzaldúa’s (1987) reflection upon borderlands’ identities, and Rich’s (1972) view on the possibility of historical revisionism are some of the concepts that I rely on. Moreover, as to study the specific

construction of Cameron's (1981) text, Rodríguez (2010) critique on queer sexuality and futurity, Bhabha's (1994) notion of self and other as constitutive and indissoluble, and Spivak's (2010) critique of subalternity and its (lack of) voice are summoned onto the analytical arena. Lastly, before looking at what Cameron (1981) has to say, one must be prepared to the fact that her discourse fits in an embarrassing position – that of the colonised subject, who has always been present, but hidden in the outskirts of history. If the task of historical documents has been to prevent the disclosure of what the “other” has to say, “the task of criticism is to document the ‘embarrassing’ presence of this ‘other’” (MORRISON, 1996, p. 14).

Discussion: “The Wasicu Menace”

Tackling with peripheral narratives requires us to have in mind, prior to that, what their contrary image consists in. As Lyotard (1979, p. 23) reminds us, “the Enlightenment pursuit of ‘grand narratives’ is seen as a manifestation of the will to power”. These grand narratives are nothing but the normative and traditional discourses regarding historical events and subjects’ positions, which are worried less about setting forth fair and coherent images concerning them and more about creating narratives that might become useful for the agenda of hegemony. What has disrupted such tradition is precisely the surfacing of peripheral narratives, such as the object of my research. Cameron's text is inside the collection of texts named *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour* (ANZALDÚA, MORAGA, 1981), which is defined by Wolf (2008, p. 202) as “an outcry against discrimination which also lay the foundation for a vibrant new field of studies”. Coherent with the notion of borderlands (the idea that peripheral subjects live and produce meaning from a split position of timelessness and spacelessness), such collection compiles works that contribute to the de and reconstruction of subaltern epistemes. Theretofore, space is no longer taken as simply “an abstract, metaphysical container for our lives, but an ongoing production that is integral to the construction of identity and agency through the interplay of difference and sameness” (WALTER, 2005, p. 126). In this sense, for the construction of identity and agency through an interplay of difference and sameness, other means for

(re)connecting subjects must be concocted. Thereby, one should be willing not to fit in (pre)given cultural slots, but to provide us with more inventive and unexpected positions. Anzaldúa (1997, p. 204) herself has explained that we should engage “in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other”.

In this new story to explain the world, subaltern narratives often invert and/or replace those occupying the spaces of villains and victims – bringing up other subjects that had not been there in the first place. Within the narrative that consists in the object of my research, the narrator (A Lakota female native living in a reservation) begins by explaining that her grandmother used to refer to white people as the “Wasicu sica” – meaning, in the Lakota language, the “bad white”. Cameron (1981, p. 46) admits that, initially, she has no idea why such words would be used to describe that particular group of people; later, nonetheless, as she begins hearing “stories of Indian ranch hands being ‘accidentally’ shot by white ranchers. I quickly began to understand the wasicu menace my family spoke of”. Notwithstanding the fear that she gradually begins to feel, the world of these white ranchers is, for her, a mystery for much of her life. She would only get more acquainted with their habits during a memorable visit of Lakota Indians to what she calls a white town. Her description of the city is the following: “I was appalled that they thought of themselves as superior to my people. Their manner of living appeared devoid of life and bordered on hostility even for one another” (CAMERON, 1981, p. 46). In a discourse filled with criticism, the protagonist condemns the behaviour of the “whites”, whose hostility and recklessness is paradoxically mixed with a need to romanticise and glamorise what surrounds them. Such analysis occurs when she describes their domesticated gardens, separated from each other by perfectly and politely fenced square plots of green lawn. The only “gardens” she knew were the ones designed by white Christians, as Lakota Indians had no need to build something as artificial as that. It draws her attention how the whites could be so worried about education and etiquette whereas they also seemed to be so loud, obnoxious, and vulgar towards one another (especially when it goes to the punishment of kids). The conclusion of Cameron’s (1981, p.47) observations is simply

that “after spending a day around white people, I was always happy to go back to the reservation”.

This analysis of how the whites relate to nature and to one another is crucial inasmuch as it tells the subject who analyses them much about their own identity. As alleged by John (1996, p. 170) “the individual gets his sense of self and can determine what it is only through his relationships within the community – because the self is continuous with nature, rather than set over against it”. When one looks at how the other deals with the environment that surrounds him/her, one is not forgetting to focus on the matters that really care – on the contrary, it is precisely by understanding the relations established between the other and the other’s space that one might really start to understand issues. This is so because not only self and other are continuous with nature rather than set over against it, but also because the “sense of a community” exerts great influence to the sense of self – what I am depends entirely on how I see the other. It is not easy however to come up with a sense of self that succeeds in dodging romanticisation, as demonstrated by the object of my research. “During my childhood I kept asking my grandmother, ‘Where are the Indians? Are they going to have bows and arrows?’ I was very curious and strangely excited about the prospect of seeing real live Indians even though I myself was one” (CAMERON, 1981, p. 46). The images of Amerindians that are normatively available to us are still considerably romanticised, and what this text evinces is that this is a reality even for the Amerindians themselves who do not identify with this exotic image of the American native. Many sources that put historical documents into question explain the nature and purposes of such exoticisation – one of them being *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee* (BROWN, 1970). Recollecting the names of the Wampanoags of Massasoit, the Chesapeake, the Chickahominy, and the Potomacs of the great Powhatan confederacy, Dee Brown (1970, p. 382) criticises the fact that the only one we remember is Pocahontas (and that is probably simply because of a Disney film, that, apropos, romanticises her and the community wherein she lived). “Their musical names remained forever fixed on the American land, but their bones were forgotten in a thousand burned villages or lost in forests fast disappearing before the axes of twenty million invaders.” Controversially, already the

once sweet-watered streams, most of which bore Indian names, were clouded with silt and the wastes of the whites.

But, back to Cameron's (1981, p. 47) text, as a child, she admits not to be mature enough to look around and realise that Amerindians were actually "open game for the white people, to kill, maim, beat up, insult, rape, cheat, or whatever atrocity. When I look back on reservation life it seems that I spent a great deal of time attending the funerals of my relatives or friends of my family". What starts drawing her attention, as she grows up, is the difference of her experience as an Amerindian and the experiences of the whites. During the period of a whole year, she goes to the funerals of four murder victims, whereas, curiously, most of her non-Indian friends have not seen a dead body or have not been to a funeral. Cameron (1981, p. 47) justifies that she was unaware about such distinction for a very simple reason: death becomes such a common thing in the reservation that "I did not understand the implications of the high death rate until after I moved away. I was surprised to learn that I've seen more dead bodies than my friends will probably ever see in their lifetime". The testimonials of a vast array of people in conditions that are similar to hers informs us about how the female and native are, indeed, in need to be listened. When one thinks of the subaltern female, it is important to bear in mind that, apart from being the target of rape, the native American woman is conspicuously "subjected to forms of torture one would have thought the prerogative of men. As a means for reproduction, she was more a piece of property than a wife or a mother" (JOHN, 1996, p. 21). Subjected to excruciating tortures, and taken as a piece of property, the grand narratives that envelop the native woman and the community wherein she belongs endeavours to alienate and assimilate both within the hegemonic systems of meanings. Cameron (1981, p. 48) does, apropos, claim that "alienation and assimilation are two common words used to describe contemporary Indian people. I've come to despise those two words. I don't like being put under a magnifying glass and having cute liberal terms describe who I am".

Her despise shall not be taken for granted; the magnifying glass and cute liberal terms that describe the subaltern are far from being innocuous. Through the process of alienation and assimilation, "the subject who remains unheard is re-produced as an object of investigation rather than a subject of enunciation, a field of investment rather

than an investor of history” (SPIVAK, 2010, p. 87). Granting one with the status of investors of history would indeed be a threatening step for the hegemonic agenda; especially if such person is a woman, a lesbian, or a Lakota Indian – let alone all of them. This is why acknowledging difference and/or regarding such difference a meaningful stance is, per se, not enough whatsoever. After all, as Ávila (2005, p. 14) poses it, difference has generally “been used to confirm, rather than destabilize, the centrality of received cultural norms”. That is to say, realising the differences of the subaltern tends to serve its marginalisation – i.e. the self only regards the other as distinctive if such distinction is one that empowers the latter’s inferiority. Postcolonialism as a critical tool has fortunately aided us to duck such line of reasoning. After all, liberated from the constraints of a binary chimera, “the post-colonial subject is now seen to occupy a space which is ‘neither the one nor the other’, but a new space of translation which results in the heterogeneous hybrid subject” (BHABHA, 1994, p. 25). This theoretical condition of occupying the space which is neither the one nor the other, but a hybrid and fluid one, is illustrated and articulated by Cameron’s (1981, p. 48) practical experience. “I often read about the dilemmas of contemporary Indians caught between the white and Indian worlds. For most of us, it is an uneasy balance to maintain. Native Americans have a very high suicide rate”. As evinced by her experience, this split position of the heterogeneous and hybrid subject is not necessarily a comfortable place – and, if cultural norms are not ultimately destabilised by the subaltern, it shall actually never be.

Walter (2005, p. 125), sees the idea of difference as if correlated to physical and social attributes as essentially pathological: “as long as race, class, gender, and skin colour act as apparently ineradicable markers of social difference, the mind and body of both colonizers and colonized will continue to be battlefields”. Perhaps it is not necessary to be as assertive, inasmuch as race, class, gender, and skin colour do indeed make us different from one another – not given to qualities that are intrinsic to such features, but to how they interfere in and with our development as subjects within our general and personal histories. What makes us different matters, the problem is how difference emerges – and how it is socially constructed through artificial and exoticising lenses. In what regards such fact, Cameron (1981, p. 49) claims that she knows most of

the images she creates of persons and peoples other than the Lakota Indians (and actually even of them) comes not from palpable experience, but from “television, books, movies, newspapers, and magazines. We are all continually pumped with gross and inaccurate images of everyone else and we all pump it out”. Discursive channels as the ones previously described, precisely as they are amenable to share perspectives and depictions that serve the needs of the master narratives, tend not to be fair to the subaltern. On the contrary, through the delineated pastoral lens, which relies on the Old World regeneration in a “pristine” land, the colonised space becomes meaningless and “outlaw” (MARX, 1964, p. 29); it is only after normativity inserts the subaltern in the capitalised narratives of time and space that their experience might make any sense. The result is simple, and it is an evidence that the master narrative does indeed succeed. “Sometimes I don't want to remember I'm Third World or Native American. I don't want to remember sometimes because it means recognizing that we're outlaws” (CAMERON, 1981, p. 50).

The master narrative that endorse the inferiority of the subaltern applauds such process; the marginalised subject behaves as expected when s/he forgets what space s/he occupies. When an identity is peripheral and marginalised, one does not want to remember such identity: s/he does not want to talk about it, and has no reason to be proud of who s/he is. Then we get to silence: the spectre that haunts the subaltern experience. “What one cannot say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey to silence; because subaltern historiographies might raise many questions, the subaltern cannot speak” (SPIVAK, 2010, p. 286). After growing up and learning that she has nothing to be ashamed of, I finish my enquiry with an excerpt of the final part of the text that describes how such journey to silence does not work for the protagonist any longer. Cameron (1981, p. 50) explains how she has gotten into politics, and criticises those who, even though they might occupy a subaltern position, are not worried about political matters – doing so by posing that the only worry of many marginalised people is to “be themselves”, and that politics has no meaning in their lives. I end up my analysis bringing up her comment regarding such subjects because what she says is an advice pertinent to all of us, especially those who research in the field of subaltern discourses. “In a society that

denies respect and basic rights to people because of their ethnic background, I feel that individuals cannot idly sit by and allow themselves to be co-opted by the dominant society”. Sitting idly and allowing oneself to be co-opted by the master narratives is analogous to endorsing what such narratives have to say; neutrality is a form of countersigning normativity. If narratives, global and personal, tend to be “eventually, more varying and contradictory than it is suggested by its protagonists” (HALL, 1996, p. 273), then it is high time secondary characters, like Cameron (1981) herself, were summoned to set forth their often less predictable versions of events.

Final Remarks: “A Struggle to Assert Difference”

“Gee, you don’t seem like an Indian from the Reservation” (CAMERON, 1981) attests the author’s ability to reclaim her condition as a signifying subaltern – as someone who is conscious of speaking from periphery, and learns to be proud of such situation. Nevertheless, if “no speech is speech if it is not heard” (SPIVAK, 2010, p. 23), one would be mistaken to assume that the responsibility of providing the globe with less normative discourses resides only in the subject who speaks. Interlocutors are also liable for discursive negligence; in the end, communication exists only when both speakers and listeners are willing to undertake it. Readers, in this sense, learn throughout the development of the object analysed hitherto that Rhys (1966, p. 82) is right when she asserts that, even though the masters narratives of hegemony might try to convince us of the contrary, “there is always the other side”. The conclusion whereto we might get is that there is indeed always the other side; and that it is high time it was taken into account by our contemporary epistemological practices. If “questioning the ostensibly unquestionable premises of our way of life is arguably the most urgent of services we owe our fellow humans and ourselves” (BAUMAN, 2007, p. 71), providing Cameron’s (1981) text with the political and social status it deserves is undebatably a required move for the premises of our way of life to be questioned and ultimately rewritten. Would not that be, after all, the biggest role of literature? Derrida (1992, p. 63), when discussing the literary realm and its foundational aspects, poses that “the structure of a text both puts down roots in the unity of a context and immediately opens

this non-saturable context onto a recontextualization”. Texts surface from contexts, and, through such surfacing, contexts are recontextualised – i.e. there is a reciprocal interference: the world conceives and transforms literature, which, on its turn, also conceives and transforms the world to the very same level. Having that in mind, the reading and analysing of “Gee, you don’t seem like an Indian from the Reservation” (CAMERON, 1981) might also serve as a reminder that we are no longer set in an arena where villains and victims simply need to change position.

On the contrary, the very idea of villains and victims per se must be put into question, as it no longer fits in the needs of our postcolonial essentials. Hall (1996, p. 254) endorses such line of reasoning when he suggests that “because the relations which characterised the colonial are no longer in the same place and relative position that we are able not simply to oppose them but to critique, to deconstruct and try to go beyond them”. That is, the postcolonial has not only provided us with a reflection upon the colonial institution, but has also given us the opportunity to subvert its supposed tenability, reasoning and, consequently, its credibility. While hegemony materialises as a symbolic protagonist of progress, the margin is the peripheral character of some sort of counter-progress emerging from the postcolonial. That is precisely where Cameron’s (1981) narrative fits in – and that is precisely what makes it so distinctive. Bearing in mind that “feminism’s struggle can perhaps best be understood not simply as a struggle to assert identity but as a struggle to assert difference” (BUTLER, 1993, p. 209), the object that my study sheds light upon can be said to touch many issues of paramount importance for contemporary cultural critique. Approaching aspects of identity construction that are in many occasions within the cornerstones of feminist thinking, “Gee, you don’t seem like an Indian from the Reservation” (CAMERON, 1981) reminds us that even though difference has been traditionally used to endorse the marginalisation of silencing of the subaltern, it might also be deployed as to produce contrary effects. As she herself demonstrates in the (re)historicising of her own life as a Lakota – lesbian – Indian, difference is feared because it destabilises the norm; the need to silence the subaltern is justified by the need to prevent the self from being altered by the experience of the other. Nevertheless, “the ground is crumbling especially in places where it seemed most familiar, most solid, and closest to us, to our bodies, to our

everyday gestures” (FOUCAULT, 1976, p. 30). The other is getting closer and closer to the self – and, as time goes by, there will be nowhere else to hide.

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