

TOWARDS A TRANSPERIPHERAL PARADIGM: AN AGENDA FOR SOCIALLY ENGAGED RESEARCH

POR UM PARADIGMA TRANSPERIFÉRICO: UMA AGENDA PARA PESQUISAS SOCIALMENTE ENGAJADAS

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a research agenda centred on the production of spaces of dialogue and solidarity between peripheral territories. The term ‘transperipheries’ summarises a proposal for research and engagement developed collectively by seven researchers situated in the field of applied linguistics. The transperipheries agenda offers a pathway for breaking with established paradigms that divorce knowledge production about inequality from the subjects and territories engaged in its contestation from marginalised positionalities. In other words, we argue for bridging the distance between production of knowledge *about* peripheries and production of knowledge *from* peripheries, while also projecting spaces of dialogue and reflection *between* regional, national and global peripheries. The paper provides

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examples of epistemic work undertaken by the contributing authors as a way of showing how research on themes such as literacies, translation, racialisation, sociolinguistic registers and violence, can be revisited through a transperipheral lens. We invite readers from all kinds of peripheries and epistemic fields to build on and debate this research agenda.

Keywords: mandinga; gambiarra; transperipheries; anti-racism; literacies of reexistence.

RESUMO

Este texto propõe uma agenda de pesquisa sobre a produção de espaços de diálogo e solidariedade entre territórios periféricos. O termo 'transperiferias' traduz esta proposta de pesquisa e engajamento, elaborada coletivamente por sete pesquisadores/as situados/as no campo aplicado dos estudos da linguagem. A agenda das transperiferias oferece caminhos de ruptura com paradigmas que situam, de um lado, a produção de conhecimento sobre desigualdade e, de outro lado, os sujeitos e territórios que se engajam com a contestação dessa desigualdade a partir de posicionalidades marginais. Propõe-se, em outras palavras, uma aproximação entre a produção de saber "sobre" as periferias com a produção de conhecimento "das" periferias, ao mesmo tempo em que se projetam espaços de diálogo e reflexão "entre" periferias, regionais, nacionais e globais. O texto justapõe os tipos de engajamento e produção epistêmica de cada um/a dos/as pesquisadores/as, de modo a apontar para formas em que objetos de investigação, como letramentos, tradução, processos de racialização, enregistramento sociolinguístico, violência etc., podem ser revisitados numa visão transperiférica. Convidamos sujeitos de diferentes periferias, bem como campos epistêmicos diversos, a ampliarem e tensionarem essa agenda de investigação.

Palavras-chave: mandinga; gambiarra; transperiferias; antirracismo; letramentos de reexistência.

INTRODUCTION

Written collaboratively by a multidisciplinary group of researchers connected to the field of applied linguistics¹⁰, this paper presents the notion of transperipheries, which evokes the construction of spaces of dialogue and solidarity between peripheral territories. The term arose from the First Transperipheries Seminar, a meeting of critical scholars and activists from around Brazil, particularly Rio de Janeiro, held in the city of Niterói, in May 2019, and organised by the Centre for Critical Studies in Language, Education and Society, at the Fluminense Federal University. The title of the seminar, *The Periphery at the Centre of Transnational Encounters: Re-existence and Democracy*, points to a desire to decentre, disrupt and contest logics

10. The researchers calling for a transperipheries paradigm adopt the view of applied linguistics as a transdisciplinary, pragmatic, critical and interdisciplinary field, as advocated by Cavalcanti (1986) and Moita Lopes (2006), and discussed more recently by Silva (2015) and Signorini (2015). The participants in the development of the concept come from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, including sociology, anthropology, social communication, cultural studies and literary studies.

of unequal power relations and the devaluing of knowledge that is constructed in relations between peripheries and the so-called centre.

We take centre and periphery as relational, situated and multidimensional concepts. This understanding has been widely discussed in work focusing on the cultural and urbanistic production of peripheries, such as that of Milton Santos (2000), Éder Sader (2001 [1988]), Érica Peçanha do Nascimento (2009), Tiaraju D'Ándrea (2013), Mariana Santos de Assis (2018) and Teresa Calteira (2017). Arguing for the centrality of the notion of territory, Jorge Augusto, a thinker from the Brazilian state of Bahia, proposes that:

what needs to be intensified in the peripheries are their multiple movements in relation to the centre and to various other peripheries. A periphery is another centre. And it is also that which is not the centre, and not being so is in dispute with the city. It is simply in this sense that the adjective [peripheral] is used here, in that contemporaneity can and must be increasingly adjectified by diverse groups and their ethical-aesthetic expressions. This cycle of disputing and renaming the current world is a radical gesture that impedes conceptual coloniality, and forces back the most wretched workings of the machine of epistemicide: the production of homogeneity. (AUGUSTO, 2019, p. 62).

From this perspective, our argument here is that transperipheries, amidst the constant tension between differences and contiguities, are constituted by dialogues between peripheries, in their inescapable relationship to centres of all kinds. The concept of transperipheries, therefore, constitutes an epistemologically and politically productive space for the construction of a critical agenda for research and agency. This agenda offers a pathway for breaking with established paradigms that divorce knowledge production about inequality from the subjects and territories engaged in its contestation from marginalised positionalities.

The Transperipheries Seminar was a collaboration between researchers and political and cultural activists from favelas in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro. The event was held a year after the assassination of Marielle Franco - an activist born in the Maré favela complex and town-councillor representing the Socialism and Freedom Party -, an outrageous act that provoked the mobilisation of a range of agents involved in translocal and transnational networks. The intersections of some of these networks fed into the proposal for the seminar, which can be considered an example of transperipheral solidarity. Amongst those involved were Monica Francisco, from the *Morro do Borel* favela, a former advisor to Marielle Franco and state parliamentarian for the Socialism and Freedom Party, and Anielle Franco, Marielle's sister, a school teacher, who was represented on the day by Pamella Passos, also a teacher, godmother to Marielle's daughter and advisor on educational issues to Marielle's office. In addition, *artists* (DELGADO, 2013; RAPOSO, 2015;

MAIA, 2017) from peripheral regions of metropolitan Rio de Janeiro participated in the event, including M.C. Carol de Niterói, the rapper Dudu de Morro Agudo and the visual artist Mariluce Mariá Souza.

The inspiration for the event came from backyard conversations between Silvia Lorenso, a Brazilian scholar and community leader working for a US university, and Joel Windle, an Australian scholar working on language education projects in schools located in Brazilian urban peripheries. These discussions also resulted in the research project "Transnationalisms in the periphery: building meaning in the context of global flows", which provided an umbrella for a series of meetings and collaborations. The blurb advertising the 2019 Transperipheries Seminar read as follows:

The Transperipheries Seminar Seeks to debate transnational networks and contacts that involve peripheral territories, or bring support and solidarity to those who are in peripheral contexts. The speakers are leaders in the study of peripheral cultural and social movements, from the fields of linguistics and anthropology, as well as artists known for breaking boundaries and for their social engagement. The objective of the event is to strengthen marginalised cultural and social forms of expression, as well as reflecting about the insertion of knowledge developed in these contexts into classrooms, where oftentimes a restricted and elitist vision of internationalisation, language and culture prevail.

As such, the event contributes to demands for the democratisation of culture and citizen participation beyond the "centre", providing visibility to new forms of communication and community organisation, and trajectories across national and international boundaries, whether social or geographical. The debates place the periphery at the centre of reflections about "another globalisation", from below (SANTOS, 2000), thinking of translocal, transnational and transperipheral articulations in the construction of identities and experiences involving questions of race, social class, gender, and sexuality.

Here the periphery is theorised not merely as a dimension of the divide between a global south and a global north, but as part of a racialized system of unequal exchange and dehumanising exploitation. As such, we contribute to critiques of colonialism and colonality within the historical emergence of the capitalist world system (QUIJANO, 2000; GROSFUGUEL, 2002).

In arguing that the social and symbolic boundaries that constitute peripheries are open to contestation through emerging transperipheries, our proposal resonates with ideas such as vernacular and subaltern cosmopolitanism (BHABHA, 2013 [1994]; PRAKASH, 2017) as well as the very notion of borderlands (ANZALDÚA, 2007 [1987]). We are further inspired by a strong Brazilian tradition of intersectional theorising of subaltern activist spaces and identities, such as Lélia Gonzalez's (1988a, 1988b) work on Afrolatinamerican feminism and amefricanity. Gonzalez, and other Brazilian activist-scholars embedded in the Black rights movement have pointed

to the revolutionary history and potential of the *quilombos*, settlements established by escaped slaves during the colonial period. The Quilombo of Palmares, for example, was a multilingual, multicultural and collectivist society that successfully fought off Portuguese and Dutch colonists over a period of close to a hundred years, and in size rivalled the colonial capital. The quilombo is a transperipheral space historically, but also plays a central role in transperipheral imaginaries for system-wide transformation that upturn systems of capitalism and racial supremacy (NASCIMENTO, 2020 [1980]).

At this point, it may be helpful to provide some concrete examples of how the transperiphery may be constituted as a space of debate and locus of research and activism. The remainder of the paper therefore presents brief outlines of concepts that relate to the notion of transperiphery and help to give it some theoretical consistency as a basis for a new paradigm.

1. TRANSPERIPHERAL LITERACIES

Social practices involving the production and circulation of texts in Brazilian urban peripheries have been the focus of much research from the transperipheries group. Ana Lúcia Silva Sousa's (2011) pioneering work in applied linguistics reflects on the way in which urban hip-hop communities act as agencies of literacy and socialization into locally and transnational-integrated Black identities.

In the world of hip hop culture, literacy practices of *reexistence* are built on the materiality of participants' lives, connections to racial, social and political issues in Brazil and beyond. As such, rappers, MCs, grafite artists and DJs broaden pathways for insertion, contestation, subversion and use of peripheral and academic intellectual spaces. As subjects with rights and producers of knowledge, they find ways through barriers and perform inside and beyond the communities in which they live, protesting against socioeconomic inequalities, racism - particularly the genocide of the Black population -, and sexism, amongst other inequalities that everyday destroy peripheral lives in Brazil and in many other countries around the world.

Focusing on the powerful and transformative way that hip-hop production builds identities and collectivities, Souza (2011) introduced the term literacies of reexistence (*letramentos de reexistência*). These literacies are linguistic and existential reworkings that refer back to African and Afro-diasporic socio-historical roots, even as they appropriate other apparently "legitimate" linguistic usages, problematising and destabilising them. Such reworkings generate ethical-aesthetic changes in the

discourses and wider social practices through which subjects and groups position their identities and political commitments. Hence, literacies of reexistence go beyond colonised modes of language usage to recreate and strengthen spaces of belonging internally and externally. It is no surprise that *reexistence* is a concept taken up by other minoritised bodies and subjects who similarly inscribe themselves in a complex network of transperipheral social relations as a means of struggling for social participation, of asserting their rights, and fighting for spaces of power.

Along similar lines, the notion of literacies of survival (*letramentos de sobrevivência*) (LOPES; SILVA; FACINA; CALAZANS; TAVARES, 2017; MAIA, 2017) emerges from collaborative ethnographic work undertaken by researchers - of whom two are authors of the present paper, Daniel do Nascimento e Silva e Junot de Oliveira Maia - together with residents of the peripheries of the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro who are active in various forms of struggle, particularly through art (funk, samba, slam, painting, photography, crafts, grafite, etc.). Contact between these agents produced reflections about how the literacies of residents in such areas are shaped by the daily struggle for survival in the periphery. 'Survival' is here understood as a trope of liminality between life and death.

Residents of peripheries and others in conditions of precarity survive violence and the absence of basic public services by producing collective solutions for living on. The notion of survival here is partly adapted from Derrida (1979, 2004) who, in his deconstruction of the metaphysics and the modern nation, denounces vitalism - the notion of life as organic matter directed towards an abiding future that overcomes the inorganic past of violence and pre-modernity. Survival, according to Derrida, defies both the vitalism of life as prefigured in a modern discourse that excludes entire populations, *and* death itself, because peripheral subjects persist and survive. Ethnographically, the notion of survival is further based on dialogue with Rafael Calazans, a Funk MC and resident of the Complexo do Alemão, a group of favelas in Rio de Janeiro. In his epistemic collaborations with Adriana Facina, Adriana Lopes and Daniel do Nascimento e Silva, Calazans developed the position that culture in the favelas may be understood through the logic of survival, emerging solidarity amongst descendants of enslaved people and other historically subaltern groups (see FACINA, 2014). Brazilian favelas arose from the absence of adequate housing at the end of the nineteenth century, being built as informal urban spaces and communities by freed slaves and internal migrants fleeing poverty of the country's northeastern region.

An excellent example of the inventiveness predicated in literacies of survival is the way in which artist and activist Mariluce Mariá Souza uses Facebook messages

as a warning system for shoot-outs in the Complexo do Alemão (MAIA, 2017; MACHADO DA SILVA; MENEZES, 2019). Termed *digital fire* by Mariluce herself (MAIA, 2017), these messages not only alert residents which alleys and stairways to take to avoid armed conflict, but serve to denounce police violence, thereby weakening the control of the mainstream Brazilian media to define what is worthy of reporting about daily life in favelas. Once posted on Facebook, the *digital fire* reaches international media correspondents who follow Mariluce's social networks. When an incident is picked up in international reports, based on Mariluce's *digital fire*, it reverberates back into local media, which cannot ignore transnationally circulating news stories about local issues.

2. TRANSPERIPHERAL PROJECTIONS

Another dimension of transperipheries involves the flow and institutionalisation of knowledge production. In this regard, and related to literacies for reexistence and survival, we draw attention to the theorisation of ideologies of language and learning through the lens of race. Kassandra Muniz (2020), also an author of the present paper, analyses, based on the strategies of *capoeira* and the ancestral knowledge of Africo-Brazilian religions, the ways in which Black people resist structural racism epistemically and interactionally. *Capoeira*, it should be noted, is a ritual dance developed by enslaved Afro-Brazilians, and a martial art that was central to the constitution of Black cultures of resistance and *reexistence* in Brazil. From this emerges the primary metaphor developed by Muniz, *mandinga*, a Black-epistemological concept that refers to the ability to surprise and trick an opponent; when practiced, *mandinga* destabilises and subverts the whiteness constructed by enunciations that support unequal power relations. As an example, Muniz (2020) analyses the academic trajectories of Black female intellectuals, focusing on their *mandinga*-ring strategies, which enable the agency of these women inside and outside of the university, involving what we call here transperipheral projections.

In her presentation at the First Transperipheries Seminar, the Black scholar and co-author of the present text, Sílvia Lorenso Castro spoke about the challenges and potential an *outsider within* status, which characterises her academic experience, roots in a favela community in Belo Horizonte, and the transperipheral projections of her national and international mobility. The term *outsider within* was coined by Patrícia Hills Collins (1986), a sociologist and theorist of US Black feminism, and refers to an enunciative and epistemological locus experienced by black intellectuals, especially those who confront their marginality in academic contexts.

Despite the obstacles they encounter, *outsiders within* make use of this intersection between belonging and distance to build their ability to identify structures that other loci of enunciation may not provide (COLLINS, 1986).

Lorenzo's research and professional agenda began in the 1990s in the areas of human rights, gender and Black favela-dwelling youth in the Santa Lucia cluster of favelas, better known as *Morro do Papagaio*, in the state capital of Minas Gerais. During this period, she noticed the tensions between academic research themes and practices and the invisibility of knowledge produced by members of the community, practices that have also been problematized in the work of Pâmella Passos (2019) on how to do research *with* favelas, not just *about* them. Moving away from a view that defined the community in terms of absences or violence, themes such as memory, racial identity, culture and exchanges with peripheral youth organizations from other states predominated in the actions and research carried out by the group of university students from the *Morro do Papagaio*, of which Lorenzo was a member (CASTRO, 2010). This *outsider within* status was maintained during her time at the University of São Paulo, a predominantly white institution, where Lorenzo spent more time explaining the relevance of the topic of her masters' thesis - Black literature - than actually developing theoretical insights in her research or engaging in projects with the community beyond the university's walls.

In her doctorate, undertaken outside Brazil, it was precisely this enunciative locus of *outsider within* that enabled the resumption of peripheral centrality in comparative research on two literary movements, territorially and symbolically linked to the peripheries of Brazil and the United States (CASTRO, 2013; 2016). From that moment on, Lorenzo found a fertile environment with a group of researchers from different peripheral regions in Brazil and Black academics and activists from the African Diaspora program at the University of Texas. For these researchers, academic activism is defined as the articulation between teaching, research, insurgent knowledge production and the movement from discourse to practice (GORDON, 2007). Thus, Lorenzo concluded her speech at the 2019 Seminar showing how she has strategically connected her status as an *outsider within* that of an academic activist in the management of an international education project and the study of Portuguese as a foreign language. Establishing partnerships with members of her home community, Lorenzo facilitated connections between residents of the *Morro do Papagaio* and US exchange students in Brazil for language immersion and intercultural sharing, promoting contact that goes beyond established stereotypes - whether they be glamourised or demonising - related to life in both countries.

We further argue that transperipheral literacies and projections have the potential to be joined together at a particular nexus, such as the assassination of Marielle Franco, the genocide of Black youth, and the current upsurge in the Black Lives Matter movement since the death of George Floyd, strangled by a White police officer in the streets of Minneapolis, USA. In such scenarios, literacies of reexistence involve transperipheral projections through the purposeful sharing of cultural and social practices that evoke the African diaspora, while literacies of survival create and mobilise unexpected and innovative channels of communication to combat state violence and socioeconomic precarity imposed by government and economic interests.

The response to Marielle Franco's assassination makes this nexus visible. It engaged transperipheral projections of diasporic networks of the Black rights movement through micro-strategies of survival and reexistence. Further, Marielle's death has given rise to new agencies of literacy, including the Wikifavelas project – an encyclopedia of favela life written collaboratively by favela dwellers and researchers, and available internationally for transperipheries, connected through texts whose English translation is led by project member, and author of the present paper, Junia Zaidan.

Translating the Wikifavela entries, in this case, becomes a productive pedagogical practice in that, through this work, teachers and their students may problematise representations of favelas reinforced by the corporate media and oppressive state. Such work, as well as exposing power asymmetries and the violence that comes from them, can produce practices of resistance and intervention situated within the lens of translation. This provides a way to acknowledge power asymmetries, the resulting violence stemming from them, and to forge resistance and intervention practices by building a discourse-based view of language and texts through translation: since language does not mirror reality as it supposedly is, translation (the translated text is not reproduction of the original, but production of a new original) and any other form of discourse production is a political enterprise, an affirmative gesture that has implications of a practical nature. (ZAIDAN, 2015; ZAIDAN & AQUINO, 2016)

CONCLUSION

This paper has drawn on a range of research undertaken in Brazil to propose transperipheries as a powerful paradigm for prioritising connections between peripheral territories in the development of a transgressive and transformative

agenda. The transperipheries group share personal and professional connections to multiple peripheral territories, and the understandings we have developed from moving between these have helped to sharpen a set of ethical and epistemological reflections that support our collective agendas.

The transperipheries agenda is reflected in notions such as literacies of survival and reexistence, as well as in terms that we have not translated into English, such as *mandinga* and *gambiarra*. However, we believe that it has wider relevance and invite others to consider the potential of recentring the periphery as a way of challenging the power structures that produce social and racial oppression. Our argument involves not merely the use of such ideas in peripheral territories or about them, but breaking with the established hegemonies that support what is understood as the centre, the space struggling for control over spaces that align, come together, and reinvent themselves as they exchange technologies for life. Therefore, transperipheries is ultimately not about better describing the margins, but unsettling those margins and revolutionising the centre.

We finish by observing that transperipheries is an idea that is still in its infancy, and that a second symposium was made impossible by the Covid-19 pandemic. As we are seeking to engage others with this concept, we felt it was important to outline the origin of the idea and to draft this short paper as an invitation and provocation to dialogue.

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