

**“Queer Subaltern Citizens:  
Agency through Decolonial Queer Theory**

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**DRAFT**

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Queer of color theorists are usually confined to paradigms that omit issues of race and culture and therefore must reinscribe queer theory. I contend that queers of color in the United States, as well as globally, must challenge colonialist assumptions and become decolonial critics in order to devise theories that make sense for our multiple communities. I want to argue that the erasure and/or marginalization of race enforce a subaltern subject position for queers of color who rarely show up in prominent queer theories. I ask, will decolonial queer theory center this subaltern citizen?

The texts on Queer Theory increased quantitatively in the 1990s and many cite Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Teresa de Lauretis’s essay, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities” (1991) as the springboards for the burgeoning field. De Lauretis followed with a noteworthy psychoanalytic study, *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*

(1994) while Michael Warner theorized *Fear of A Queer Planet* (1993). David Halperin's *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (1995) furthered the discussion on Michel Foucault's contributions. Annamarie Jagose's *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (1996) and Tamsin Spargo's *Foucault and Queer Theory* (1999) offered brief, functional syntheses of more recognized theories and their authors. At the start of a new decade and century, William Turner's *A Genealogy of Queer Theory* (2000) synthesized major works while making little or no reference to queers of color and their interventions.

Before any of those studies, Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga had already published *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). After perusing the essays in *Bridge*, most of us figured out quite quickly that the radical women of color were for the most part, lesbians of color. Moreover, the essays in the anthology spoke from a queer/lesbian of color position that melded race, sex and class. The authors were some of the first who published testimonials about the effects of living in a majority white, heteronormative world. More than any other text from the last few decades, *This Bridge Called My Back*, articulated what I refer to as a decolonial critical stance, meaning it was oppositional at the same time that it was negotiating between what had been inherited—a history of racism, homophobia, coloniality—and what was being contested and decolonized—racism, homophobia, coloniality—and what was hoped for—the end of racism, homophobia, coloniality, hence the move toward postcoloniality. When Anzaldúa published *Borderlands/La Frontera* in 1987, she referred to herself as *jota*, or queer. As she theorized what it meant to be *la nueva mestiza*, she argued that as a Chicana *jota* from the border and from an earlier generation, she had never felt comfortable with the self-identifying term, lesbian, but instead had grown up with

“queer” and all its negative connotations yet still embraced it because it was and is what made sense to her. My point in offering this information is to show that Chicanas and other queers of color were also theorizing queerness along with the theorists we usually turn to when thinking of queer theory and studies. I raise this issue because I want to present a queer decolonial theory that repositions the queer subaltern in a principal space within queer theory.

Queers of color have been forced to construct paradigms while reinscribing queer theory with race and culture. Moreover, Latina/o queers whether in the United States or in Latin America, must challenge colonialist assumptions and become decolonial critics in order to devise theories that make sense for our multiple communities.

What do I mean by queer and what do I mean by decolonial critic? Let me begin with a fragment from Gayatri Spivak’s *The Postcolonial Critic*. The book of interviews offers one of the most lucid understandings of the postcolonial, but also, how a critic takes that position—the postcolonial one—to interpret and reinscribe the world. In one of the interviews, the interviewer identifies Spivak as someone who perceives herself in the following way: “The postcolonial diasporic Indian who seeks to decolonize the mind (67).”

In 1990, when the book was published, Chicanos, Puerto Riquenos and American Indians had been speculating about their peculiar relationship to a country that colonized their land. It was going to be difficult at best to employ the postcolonial when discussing historical conditions for those who had once been indigenous, like Chicanas/os, or for those who still identified as such, like American Indians. The postcolonial, in many ways, assumes freedom from coloniality. In the United States, the U.S.-Mexico War of

1846-48, assured colonization in Mexico's far northern territory while the indigenous in North America were already being massacred or pushed off their lands. (Unfortunately, Mexican laws were as culpable toward natives. The Apache laws, for example, offered bounties to those who brought to Mexico, Indian scalps). After reading Spivak's use of decolonial I became aware that this was precisely where we could, or should position ourselves, that neither Chicana/os, nor American Indians nor Latinas/os in the U.S., had experienced anything close to resembling the postcolonial, the after effects of coloniality.

Since publishing *The Decolonial Imaginary*, I have been more conscious of critics who are themselves interested in a decolonial project. From Chicana historians Antonia Castañeda and Deena González to cultural critics Jose Saldivar, Angie Chabran and Puerto Rican scholars like Frances Aparicio as well as American Indian scholars like Paula Gunn Allen—all have been conceptualizing about the decolonial.

What, then, is a decolonial critic, especially a decolonial critic of queer theory? To begin, the decolonial is a deconstructive project. In that way, it is a tool, a deconstructive tool. Elsewhere, I have defined decolonial as the time lag, or space between the colonial and postcolonial. The decolonial then, must be understood through a historical lens and I'll say more about that later in my talk. For now, let me say something about the many ways of defining and using "queer."

If "queer" refers to any and all non-heteronormative sexualities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, transsexual, and two-spirit, then, we can assume that it has become the umbrella for all of these alleged perversities. Of course, I need to note that queer theorists have also been critical of the manner in which the umbrella term "queer" elides lesbian or gay or transsexual, etc. While I agree that the elision occurs, for

the purpose of this paper, I'm focusing on the usefulness of queer in our theories and studies. For example, I find queer utilitarian because queer is noun, verb and adjective. To be queer, to queer and to exhibit queer ways are all projects for the queer theorist. To be queer is simple enough, however "queering" that which is perceived as heteronormative takes a bit more work. For example, as an historian and decolonial critic, I find myself "queering" documents as I conduct archival research to uncover multi-faceted queer histories. I'll provide an archival example at the end of my paper but before that, I must answer my own question, what is a decolonial critic of queer theory? To answer my question, I must take us through a journey that summarizes the contributions of a few queer scholars whom I would name decolonial queer theorists. Since this is preliminary work, I ask for your patience. I'm currently thinking through these arguments about decolonial queer theorists and how decolonial methods may reframe an understanding of the queer subaltern.

Before I discuss the theoretical contributions by Latino/a queer theorists, José Muñoz, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and José Quiroga, I must begin with Michel Foucault to point out how Foucault's work coincides with that of the decolonial critic of queer theory.

### **Desire and Pleasure for the Decolonial Critic**

Upon reading the first few pages of David Halperin's little book, *Saint Foucault*, I was pleased to see that I had gone through a similar experience as Halperin when he first read Foucault. Halperin says that he was initially dubious about the French philosopher and was surprised when a he was accused of worshipping Foucault. Halperin writes: "I

may not have worshipped Foucault at the time I wrote *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality*, but I do worship him now. As far as I'm concerned, the guy is a fucking saint" (5), hence the title, *Saint Foucault*. In the same way, when I first wrote a little essay titled "Sexuality and Discourse: Notes from A Chicana Lesbian Survivor," I appeared to be a Foucault worshipper, but I'm embarrassed to say that I was being far too critical of that which I barely understood—his method as a historian/activist/theorist. It took some time before I could comprehend his methodology, a methodology that challenges a historical process that produces specific discursive fields as "things said" come into existence. I finally understood that his archaeology of discursive fields of knowledge would help me write Chicanas into history. When I read again *The History of Sexuality*, I realized how the critique would benefit my work on racialized sexualities.

For example, Halperin notes that when Foucault was asked about the "predisposition of the body to sexuality or sex, whether sex and sexuality were inherently biological or social conditioning, Foucault responded quite simply with, "no comment." <sup>1</sup> In fact, he was far more interested in examining the *production* of sexuality rather than its *origins*. As I read Halperin, I became conscious that this was why I continue to find Foucault valuable. Not only because I've yet to find other theorists of sexuality quite as engaging, that is other than de Anzaldua, LaRetis, Munoz or Butler, but also because embedded in his style of investigation, is his concern for other kinds of oppressive, restricting conditioning, like racism. If one turns to his lectures presented at the College of France from 1975-1976 and published posthumously, 1997 in France and 2003 in the U.S., one sees Foucault pursuing once again, the production of history, but also, he is

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<sup>1</sup> Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 4.

paying attention to that which he has been accused of ignoring—race, racism and the discourse of racism. Moreover, because Foucault is a historian/activist/theorist, he studies history to make sense of the present. When he argues that history produces processes, whether the process is the language of sex and how sex is “put into language” or whether the process is war and how racism became the discourse of war (Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 65), he is concerned with power, the power that creates that knowledge, and the relations of power and knowledge that have come to be in the present. As I read these lectures from the mid-70s, I found that I could make similar assessments regarding race and racism and its links to sexuality. The origins of race and racism are not the issue so much as the persistent production of race/racism. As a historian, I am interested in tracking race/racism over time; however, the mere tracking does not imply that I’m seeking origins. At the same time, when one is examining racialized sexualities, then one must look closely at the persistent production of colonial relations and how colonial relations are often raced and sexed. When Foucault points out that “history is an operation of power, an intensifier of power,” Foucault acknowledges that the manner in which history is remembered or erased creates those who will be considered the lasting ideologues of an era (Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 70). He is, in fact, referring to the dominant, hegemonic and often colonial stories that will be imparted through the decades and then through the centuries to construct a common understanding of the past. These are arguments that he also made in *The Archaeology of Knowledge, Discipline and Punish* and other works, however, he rarely if ever named coloniality or race/racism in the same way that he does in those early lectures.

### **Decolonial Queer Theorists**

So then, how do we look closely at the production of racialized sexualities and the manner in which queers of color have engaged this very topic? As I became more of a Foucauldian, I began to see how I could use his methods to unravel colonialist ideology. I came up with my notion of decolonizing history and a theoretical construct that I name the decolonial imaginary. This new category can help us rethink history in a way that makes agency for those on the margins transformative. Colonial, for my purposes here, can be defined simply as the rulers versus the ruled without forgetting that those colonized may also become like the rulers, hence assimilate into a colonial mind-set. I realized that it is the colonial mind-set that produced the language of coloniality, race and racialized sexualities. This colonial mind-set accepts a normative language, race, culture, gender, class, and sexuality. The colonial imaginary, then, is a way of thinking about national histories and identities that must be disputed if contradictions are ever to be understood, much less resolved. The colonial-mind set establishes the naming of things, which is already going to leave something out, leave something unsaid, and leave silences and gaps that must be uncovered. The history of the United States has been circumscribed by an imagination steeped in unchallenged notions about how things are named. This means that even the most radical of histories are influenced by the very colonial imaginary against which they rebel.<sup>2</sup> If we are dividing the stories from our past into categories such a colonial relations, postcolonial relations and so on—then I propose a decolonial imaginary as a rupturing space, the alternative to that which is written in

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<sup>2</sup> Emma Perez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*, 5-7.

history.<sup>3</sup> How do we contest the past to revise it in a manner that tells more of our stories? In other words, how do we decolonize our history? To decolonize our history and our historical imaginations, we must uncover the voices from the past to honor multiple experiences instead of falling prey to that which is easy—allowing the white colonial heteronormative gaze to reconstruct and interpret our past.

Now, I'm asking, how is the decolonial imaginary useful for the history and study of queers of color? If we have inherited a white colonial heteronormative way of seeing and knowing, then we must retrain ourselves to confront and rearrange a mindset that privileges certain relationships. A colonial heteronormative gaze, for example, will interpret widows only as heterosexual women mourning husbands, which they may well be but they could also be quite happy about their lives without men but given social/cultural constraints must show their society that they are grieving for a respectable amount of time. Of course, it is difficult to make such an assessment but my point is that different interpretations come to the forefront when employing a non-heteronormative perspective.

While de Laetis, Sedgwick, and Butler ask, how do we adopt our genders and sexualities, Jose Quiroga, Jose Munoz, and Alicia Gaspar de Alba ask, how do we adopt our racialized genders and sexualities. Chicana Queer theorist Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano declares a specific kind of Chicana queer gaze from the artistry of Cherrie Morraga, Sandy Soto has also theorized Cherrie Moraga's racialized sexuality while Catriona Esquibel questions the manner in which Chicana/o politics have been represented in queer Chicana writings and in doing so, focuses on Cherrie Moraga's plays as well as

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<sup>3</sup> Perez, 6.

literary works by other Chicana lesbians. There are many more Chicana/Latina/o and American Indian theorists to draw from, however, for the purpose of this paper, I'd like to restrict myself to three cultural critics/queer theorists: Jose Munoz, Alicia Gaspar de Alba and Jose Quiroga.<sup>4</sup> I'd also like to reiterate that as I continue this work, I'll include many more decolonial queer theorists, including two-spirit American Indian theorists like Gabriel Estrada and others whom are often overlooked.

### **Jose Munoz's Disidentification**

In his book, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, Jose Munoz argues that queers of color are left out of representation in a space "colonized by the logics of white normativity and heteronormativity."<sup>5</sup> For Munoz, disidentification is a way of responding to dominant ideology; it's a strategy that neither assimilates nor opposes but instead looks for ways to negotiate power.<sup>6</sup> He says, "We thus disidentify with the white ideal. We desire it but desire it with a difference. The negotiations between desire, identification, and ideology are a part of the important work of disidentification." Munoz's text and theory have already begun to make lasting impressions upon queer of color theorists. Although he is focusing upon performativity for queers of color, meaning the performance of politics for queers of color, what he has done is outline a theoretical scheme that is imperative for queer scholars and theoreticians. By putting forth his notion of disidentifying, he is answering the question asked by de Lauretis, Sedgwick and Butler when he racializes the question. In other

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<sup>4</sup> Works by Carla Trujillo, Judith Halberstam, Yolanda Leyva, Sandra Soto, Luz Calvo, Cationa Esquibel, Chela Sandoval, Lourdes Torres, Agnes Ortiz-Lugo, Juana Maria Rodriguez, Juanita Ramos, Yolanda Retter, Mariana Romo-Carmona and others are also pertinent to queer theory.

<sup>5</sup> Munoz, Jose, *Disidentifications*, xii.

<sup>6</sup> Munoz, Jose, 11.

words, he answers that queers of color adopt racialized genders and sexualities quite simply (it's not that simple when tracking and studying the process, however) by disidentifying with the hegemonic culture. By resisting and negotiating dominant white heteronormative ideologies, queers of color recreate the queer of color body and thought. Moreover, when Munoz points out that disidentification is a strategy that "works on and against" dominant ideology "to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local and everyday struggles of resistance," he is, in effect, arguing for that strategy of survival that happens within a decolonial queer imaginary. In other words, the queer of color gaze is a gaze that sees, acts, reinterprets and mocks all at once to survive and reconstitute a world where s/he is seen and not seen by the white colonial heteronormative mind.

Like every good queer theorist, he too cites Foucault's decisive work, *The History of Sexuality*, volume one. Munoz looks to Foucault's theory of discourse to argue that the "polyvalence of discourse informs the theory of disidentification being put forth here inasmuch as disidentification is a strategy that resists a conception of power as being a fixed discourse" (19). For Munoz, "the politicized agent must have the ability to adapt and shift as quickly as power does within discourse" (19).

Munoz cites a number of other key queer theorists and like me, he too is concerned with what Chela Sandoval refers to as, the apartheid of theoretical domains. In other words, for too long, theorists have operated in separate but unequal academic discussions. Hegemonic or first world theorists read each other's work, cite each other's work are transformed by each other's work, while U.S. third world theorists read

hegemonic first world theorists, cite first world theorists at the same time that we read, keep up with and are transformed by U.S. third world theorists. Unfortunately, there is not enough exchange between and among cultural critics and theorists and the same dynamic has begun among queer theorists. If indeed, as queer theorists we are all, for the most part, concerned with what Foucault refers to in the *History of Sexuality* as power and it's relation to the constructions of knowledge, then perhaps as queer theorists it's time we listen to each other a bit more. Finally, Munoz's disidentification may very well be the decolonial queer theory that permits more cross-talk among queer theorists.

### **Gaspar de Alba's Alter-Nativity Scheme**

**Alicia Gaspar de Alba** has theorized a very intriguing house of alter-natives that is a comfortable and comforting house for queers of color. In theorizing alter-Nativity, she has offered a disidentifying queer of color space that is also a decolonizing space for queers of color, I think. Although her theory is more inclusive, that is, she is speaking about a house or casa of Chicano/a cultures, I believe that what is occurring within that space is a decolonial queering. Let me back up a moment. What does Gaspar de Alba mean by alter-Nativity? In her book, *Chicano Art: Inside/Outside the Master's House, Cultural Politics and the CARA Exhibition* (1998) Gaspar de Alba took it upon herself to write the first, thorough study on the Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation exhibition that toured a few cities in the nation from 1990 to 1993. As she examined these cultural creations, Gaspar de Alba realized, as almost all cultural critics of color do, that in order to make sense of the CARA exhibit, she could not use hegemonic theories, but rather, she had to reinscribe as well as create a language and theory that made sense to the Chicano/a

academic community. She says: “I argue that CARA can be deconstructed as a text about life-practices of an “Other” American culture which is both indigenous and alien to the United States, an *alter-Native culture*, whose identity has been carved out of a history of colonization and struggle” (15). Additionally, Gaspar de Alba refutes the notion that a “minority” or “Other” group can be relegated to that of a “subculture.” In fact, she argues that the status of subculture presupposes that a specific minority group is “subsumed by and subjected to an ethnocentric methodology of cultural studies” (16). Like Jose Munoz, she too, points out that academic segregation is created and in this instance, created by the very notion of “subcultures.” Gaspar de Alba proposes instead an alter-native culture, using “alter” instead of “sub,” meaning under or below, while alter is defined in Latin as “to change, to make or become different, as in altering of consciousness.” For Gaspar de Alba, “Chicano culture is not only an alter-culture that simultaneously differs from, is changed by, and changes the dominant culture, but is also an alter-Native culture—an Other culture native to specific geography, once called an outpost of New Spain, then the Mexican North, then the American Southwest, and mostly contemporarily the Chicano/a homeland of Aztlan” (17). Ultimately, Gaspar de Alba cannot help but be a decolonial theorist as she makes meaning of an alter-Native culture that has survived and thrived through conquest and colonization. So I didn’t have to go very far when I wanted to answer the question, how is her work the work of a decolonial theorist? It’s obvious from her analysis of the alter-Native thriving against and among coloniality with a decolonial perspective. The question then is, how is this useful to decolonial queer theorists. I read her book on CARA when it was first published so I was aware of these theories on the alter-Native and the solar, or house of Chicano/a popular

culture. It did not become apparent to me that she was in fact queering the solar where alter-Natives resided until I re-read the essay in a different form in *Velvet Barrios*. Gaspar de Alba's recently published anthology highlights essays on racialized sexualities by Chicano/a cultural critics, many of whom, like Gaspar de Alba are as queer as you can get. When discussing the introduction by Gaspar de Alba as well as some of the essays in the book with my students, I became aware that as a queer of color, Gaspar de Alba was in fact, putting forth a queer solar of the text and while it appeared she was being clandestine about that queering, it was full-blown for those who wanted to see it. In other words, she managed to queer alter-Natives by exposing the significance of racialized queer sexualities. Her alter-Natives are carved out of a history of resistance to colonization. As a result, alter-Natives have created and are creating that decolonial space, or solar, that is as comfortable for Chicano/a queers as it is for non-queers or perhaps it is more welcoming to Chicano queers because the sexed and raced critique is so fundamental to the construction of that house of Chicano/a popular culture. Finally, Gaspar de Alba sees Chicano/a queers adopting and producing their racialized sexualities and gender inside her solar of Chicano/a popular culture where both resistance and affirmation are occurring at once. (Like Munoz's disidentification).

### **Jose Quiroga's Mask As Tactic**

In *Tropics of Desire: Interventions from Queer Latino America*, Jose Quiroga invokes the trope of the mask and the significance of "masking" one's queer self as it's own form of resistance. When I first read Quiroga's book, I was still teaching at the University of Texas in El Paso, a university that is on the border between Mexico and the

U.S. This makes for very intriguing students since many have grown up in the border city of El Paso and many have family across the river in Juarez. What this means is that El Paso is its own border culture that crosses somewhere between chicanismo and fronterismo, and mexicanismo. I bring this up because I have an anecdote. In a class of mostly Chicano/a and Mexicano/o queers, some of whom were from El Paso and Juarez, others from L.A., I found the discussion among students fascinating because without having read Quiroga, they were in effect, coming to similar conclusions. The students were discussing why gay pride marches in El Paso had not successfully been organized until July of 2000. Those who were from the border region said that they believed since many of the queers who would be marching were at home, that is, this was their home, they often feared repercussions from being as out as they would like. While many have families who know they are queer, flaunting in front of T.V. cameras is certainly not culturally condoned. (One's abuelita might be watching in the presence of her catholic priest). Many said they feared losing jobs. When the Chicana queer student from Los Angeles asked, well, then, if we want to march in solidarity, but we still want to respect families and those who fear losing their jobs, how can we still march? A Chicana queer student from El Paso responded, "I don't know, maybe we could wear masks." I had just read Quiroga's introduction about a Gay Pride March held in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1993. Those who participated in the march wore masks so they would not be recognized and yet still take a queer political stance. To queers in the United States who have been marching since Stonewall in 1969, this masking may seem like yet another outward manifestation of being closeted. Quiroga, however, calls this "open masking a brilliant tactical move, in ways that had nothing to do with the standard epistemologies of the

closet” (1). While the closet may have been part of the tactic, it was not the only part. Many of those marching that day held an “open secret” with families and even employers, however, as Quiroga points out, homosexuality as “identity” on the family table could lead to exile from the family. He also reasons that Argentina had and has one of the most vicious military dictatorships in Latin America. Is it fair to expect a queer population to parade openly on the streets when so many in the country’s recent history had been disappeared? But here is the crux of his argument and the part of the argument that makes Quiroga not only a decolonial queer critic, but also, he’s responding to the manner in which queers of color adopt racialized sexuality. He says: “The mask at the lesbian and gay march was over-determined by circumstance, social context, even culture. What was interesting to me, as one of those whose sense of privilege (as a foreigner) allowed open and “unmasked” participation, was the way taxonomies seemed to be created and recreated precisely from the space created by the mask. (I’m thinking here again of Gaspar’s space, the solar where the alter-Native creates and recreates her/him, or the more gender-neutral ze-self). Back to Quiroga: “If the march parodically (paradoxically) reconfigured society, the option of the mask ruptured the borders of the stage. Those masked bodies reached out to observers on the sidelines: they “homosexualized” all those who merely watched, they turned them all “queer.” The act of *not* wearing the mask turned you into a homosexual, while *wearing* it absolved you of responsibility. How many of those masked participants were homosexual? How many were not? From the moment the mask was deployed, those on the sidelines became the ones whose sense of shame did not allow them to join” (2). By pointing this out, he is claiming the political significance of visibility and invisibility, that queers of color, or

latinos/as in this instance are in some blurred, in between space. Quiroga does not want to rely on cultural excuses as the reason for the differences between and among first world, or white, U.S. queers and Latino/a queers. Instead, he wants us to examine a distinction between homosexual *identity and praxis* (4). In other words, to mask oneself is a queer of color praxis that is expressing a specific kind of visibility and invisibility. It is an in-between political space where many queers of color reside day to day given their/our social, political, historical inheritances and negotiations. In his study, he is uncovering the lives of queer latinos/as who lived an ambivalent queer life, but a queer life nonetheless. And, as they lived their queer lives, most of the activists, writers, performers that he is studying refused “to be outmaneuvered by a social imperative that insists they speak only in one register and become spokespersons for one issue to the exclusion of all the other issues of class, race, ethnicity, gender privilege, and homophobia.” In this way, Quiroga is a decolonial queer critic. In other words, the decolonial queer critic is acutely aware that she/he/ze cannot only reduce political identities and praxis to one issue, but rather, is living an historical reality that is almost always opposing and resisting to recreate one’s many identities, realities and fantasies. However, queers remain subaltern in their choice to mask themselves. Quiroga presents a social reality that one way or the other promotes the “closet” through masking and hence reinforces a disempowered subaltern social reality.

What I’ve been attempting here is to show how the decolonial critic theorizes from a queer perspective and how the queer theorist can borrow from decolonial critics to theorize as well. Ultimately, the decolonial queer theorist trains the eye to see with a

decolonial queer gaze. To decolonize as a queer theorist is to look beyond white colonial heteronormativity to interpret a raced, classed, gendered, sexed world with difference.

If we are to probe the history of racialized sexualities, for example, we must begin by deconstructing systems of thought that constructed racialized sexualities. In other words, we begin by asking for whom and by whom has sexuality been defined? Who was having sex with whom when laws began to police the practice of sex? Foucault contends that discourses of sex and sexuality, that is, the history of those discourses in Europe, were transformed from something somewhat more libidinal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to something far more repressive in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Victorian England made a space in which deviant sexualities could be repressed on the one hand and could proliferate on the other.<sup>1</sup> The mixed scheme of moralities spread through the western world, and the borderlands between Mexico and the United States were no exception, particularly after the U.S.-Mexico War of 1846-48 when droves of white, Anglo Saxon Protestants brought with them a white colonial heteronormative ideology to the borderlands. Sexuality, then, cannot be defined without attention to epochs and centuries, each of which imprinted borderland queers in its own way. Racialized sexualities on the geographic border we know as El Paso del Norte has its own underpinning.

An examination of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries on the border of El Paso/Juárez may offer one window into racialized sexualities.<sup>2</sup> The late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries are key for a couple of reasons. For example, the late 19<sup>th</sup> century is encoded with Victorian values of repressive sexuality. Sex acts became policed in ways they had not been. In her book, Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of

Homosexuality in American Culture, Siobhan Somerville argues that “it is not historical coincidence that the classification of bodies as either “homosexual” or “heterosexual” emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively constructing and policing the boundaries between “black” and “white” bodies.”<sup>3</sup> Somerville refers to the 1896 Supreme Court case, Plessy versus Ferguson, which established a “separate but equal clause” that legalized the segregation of blacks from whites. I would further note that in the western United States, in these geographic borderlands, Plessy v. Ferguson sanctioned the segregation of brown from white. Moreover, I would take her premise and argue further that it is not historical coincidence that the classifications of homosexual and heterosexual appeared at the same time that the United States began aggressively policing the borders between the U.S. and Mexico. The move from the Texas Rangers who policed Indian and Mexican territory in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the Border Patrol, created in 1924, who policed the border between the U.S. and Mexico, occurred at the moment when a new form of anti-Mexican sentiment emerged throughout the nation. Subsequently, anti-immigrant laws restricted non-northern-Europeans from entering the U.S. As the borders were pushed against in Texas, California, Arizona, New Mexico, by too many Mexicans crossing the rio Bravo, back and forth, trekking through land they had crossed for centuries without much attention to anything but rising river banks, the borders become more and more closed and only opened up when labor shortages in the U.S. demanded laborers. Yet more and more a brown race was legislated against from fear that it could potentially infect the purportedly pure, white race in the United States. Eugenicists and sexologists, according to Somerville, worked hand in hand. In this case, the border was closed as a result of scientific racism clouded by a white colonial

heteronormative gaze looking across a river to see racial and sexual impurities.

Throughout the 1880s, 1890s, and even as late as the 1900s, Mexicans crossed from Juárez to El Paso and back again with ease. The Immigration Act of 1891 began the process of excluding immigrants “guilty of crimes of moral turpitude, that is, charges of adultery, bigamy, rape, sodomy,” as well as anyone who exhibited “sexually abnormal behavior or appetites” (Luibheid, 9). Not until 1917 did a law impose requirements on those crossing a political border. A head tax of eight dollars per person and the ability to read restricted the crossings.<sup>4</sup> I would ask, how did the emergent and rigid policing of the border between the U.S. and Mexico in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries reinforce a white colonial heteronormative way of seeing and knowing that fused race with sex? Further investigation will illustrate that the ideologies constructed around race and sex were linked to justify who was undesirable as a citizen in the United States. Moral turpitude included anything that was not a sanctioned heterosexual marriage between a woman and man.

Let me turn to an archival example of racialized resistance to colonial heteronormativity. In an El Paso of 1891, adultery could lead to arrest for both man and woman found guilty. Of course, someone would have to file a complaint to have them arrested, usually an unhappy third party; however, the courts listened and adjudicated on many cases of adultery in which Mexican women and men were thrown into jail because they “did unlawfully have habitual carnal intercourse” outside of marriage.<sup>5</sup> By perusing El Paso County Criminal Cases, I was able to find complaints between and among Mexican men and women. In the case of the “State of Texas versus Guadalupe Vega and Margarita R. Perez , Urbano Perez (no relation) filed a complaint on April 16<sup>th</sup> against his

wife, Margarita Rodriguez Perez and the man Guadalupe Vega for unlawful “habitual carnal intercourse with each other.” As a result of his complaint, a warrant was issued and the following day, both defendants, Rodriguez Perez and Vega were arrested for allegedly committing adultery. Bail was set at \$200 for each and since neither could afford the bail, they were sent to the county jail. When the hearing was brought before Judge John Keith, Urbano Perez testified that Vega was married to another woman named Ignacia Vega, who is also called to testify against her husband and his paramour. In both testimonies, what was being established was that the defendants lived together and while they were both married, they were not married to each other. What is also apparent from the testimonies is that the state of Texas had to prove that the defendants were having unlawful carnal intercourse if either were to be found guilty of adultery. In his testimony, Urbano Perez claimed that two years prior Margarita Rodriguez left their eleven year marriage to join Guadalupe Vega. He says: “I saw them with my own eyes living together. I know there was one room in this jacal. I saw Guadalupe Vega around the jacal. He was married but not living with his wife” (20 April 1891). Vega’s wife reconfirms that her husband Guadalupe had been living with Urbano’s wife, Margarita. She says: “I never saw them in bed together, but know they sleep together because they stay together all the time...Margarita Perez bore a rather bad name before going off with my husband” (20 April 1891). Clearly, what was also being established was that Margarita Perez had a questionable reputation. Yet another witness named Romano Guerra, a fifty-seven year old man from Mexico who lived in El Paso, also testified that the defendants lived together outside of marriage. He said: “They lived together just like man and wife do. They occupied the same bed together. They are not married to

each other. Guadalupe Vega is married to Ignacia, the witness here—I am acquainted with her. I know defendant Guadalupe Vega did live with her and claimed her to be his wife. Defendant Margarita Perez is the wife of Urbano Perez—I have known them since they were children—Urbano for 30 years and Margarita for twenty years or more. They were all country folks of Mexico—all from Aldama” (23 April 1891). Interestingly, it seemed that the couples had all known each other in the small town of Aldama in Chihuahua, Mexico. In his testimony, Urbano Perez claimed that he and Margarita had been married in 1879 before a priest and a judge in Aldama. In her testimony, Ignacia Vega said that she and Guadalupe had been married in Aldama in 1885, moved to El Paso two years later and in 1888, her husband Guadalupe threw her out of the house but first gave her “a good whipping” and “never allowed her to return” (20 April 1891).

The words of all who testified were translated from Spanish to English in these documents. I’m not sure if the translation occurred as the testimony was given or if it was done after the testimonies. What I do know is that the defendants are found guilty of adultery and Margarita is imprisoned for her crime. It didn’t seem that Guadalupe was imprisoned, however. A month after the hearing, Margarita complained and “said she was illegally restrained of her liberty” (13 May 1891). How can we cull racialized resistance to white colonial heteronormative sexuality in this specific case? To begin, the defendants, Margarita Perez and Guadalupe Vega, defied the laws of marriage in both Mexico and the U.S. Or perhaps because they had been married in Mexico, they believed they had certain freedoms from that arrangement in the U.S. It’s an interesting scenario for border crossers such as these who move between the U.S. and Mexico, often back and forth, and perhaps unaware in the 1890s that they would be held accountable to U.S.

laws. In the three years that they had co-habitated, Margarita and Guadalupe moved to Mexico for a year then returned to live in El Paso. It's not as if they were being restricted from crossing borders as often as they liked in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. In many ways, they are using border crossing to subvert both nations' heteronormative ideologies and clamping down on the border clamps down on the freedom to transgress in both nations. What was beginning to transform, perhaps as a result of the Immigration Act of 1891, which had provisions about sexual behavior, was that Mexican immigrants living in El Paso became susceptible to surveillance if someone from their own community filed a complaint against them. Urbano Perez is using the laws of white colonial heteronormative behavior for his own purposes. He wants his wife to suffer for having left him for another man. The man is found guilty, although seems to go unpunished, and according to his own wife's testimony, he had battered her and thrown her out of the house shortly before inviting another man's wife to come and live with him. In her book, Entry Denied, Eithne Lubhéid argues that "sexuality, racialization and so on are larger social processes whose premise is made evident by the classification of bodies into hierarchical schemes. Such classification schemes, which are rooted in histories of imperialism and modern state formation, ensured that those granted admission were incorporated into relations of surveillance and discipline in the United States" (xiii). More and more, Mexican immigrants living in El Paso, would find that they were not free to live outside of white colonial heteronormative marriage. Of course, it's interesting that only the wife of the man who filed the complaint was punished for the crime of adultery, but then again, that too is consistent with the patriarchal privileges and double standards of heteronormative sexuality. White colonial heteronormative sexuality is being

reinforced in this case since the Mexican defendants are found guilty of adultery. What is also fascinating is the manner in which the testimonies are given. It's obvious that the language imposed is the language that the law endorses and by doing so creates the very criminal act that one is held for.

As I said in the early part of my talk, to queer the documents is a way to track non-heteronormative sexuality. Queer history that includes non-heteronormative and racialized sexualities is a new, growing field precisely because it is not easy to do this kind of recovery work. Part of the problem has been that the queer gaze has only recently become sanctioned. Despite the practice of queering our daily lives, academic institutions and disciplines have discouraged that "oh so disturbing" queer gaze. An epistemological shift, however, has already begun to challenge rhetoric and ideologies about racialized sexualities.

But what about the gaps and silences, the places where we know we've been but we can't find us? I know that 19<sup>th</sup> century tejano lived and roamed the "wild west" and probably knew how to handle a six-shooter and ride a horse and I'm sure there were those who passed as men and those who loved women. As much as I would love to stumble upon diaries, journals and letters written by queer vaqueras in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, I must challenge my own desire for the usual archival material and the usual way of seeing as well as honor that which scholars of ethnic and gender studies before me have uncovered. While I'll not always find the voices of the subaltern, of people of color and queers of color in exactly the types of documents that are legitimate historical documents, I will have access to a world of documents rich with ideologies that enforce white, colonial heteronormativity. And if I am persistent, I'll find within those colonial ideologies the

subjugated knowledges of people who created ways to survive, resist, oppose and reconstruct those ideologies.<sup>6</sup>

To uncover decolonial voices, it is important to decolonize research methods and theories to see beyond the colonial heteronormative models and paradigms. What that means is that those who are conceptualizing as decolonial queer theorists must deconstruct coloniality before excavating the lives of queer subaltern citizens. I hope this framework has opened up avenues for debate.

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<sup>1</sup> Foucault, The History of Sexuality. See chapter one.

<sup>2</sup> I use terms of identity like queer and lesbian cautiously given that each identity is charged with its own politics and history. While “queer” has for many, become the over-arching identity for all who are non-heteronormative, “lesbian” is sustained as the self-identity for women who choose to be with other women—physically, psychically, politically and so on.

<sup>3</sup> Siobhan B. Somerville, Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>4</sup> For fundamental background to the history of the Southwest, the making of the U.S.-Mexico border and subsequent immigration laws, refer to Rodolfo Acuna, Occupied America: A History of Chicanos, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1988); Juan Gómez-Quinones, Roots of Chicano Politics, 1600-1940 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994); David Gutiérrez, Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); and Vicki L. Ruiz, From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> El Paso County Court Records, 1881-1920, University of Texas, El Paso Special Collections.

<sup>6</sup> A colonial heteronormative imaginary has restricted how researchers and historians as well as cultural critics have chosen to ignore or negate the populations that are on the margins, outside of normative behavior, outside of 20th century nuclear white heterosexual family systems.