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HEMISPHERIC TRANSLATIONS

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Translating the Queer: Body Politics and Transnational Conversations

Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba

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It is, by now, axiomatic that *queer*—a once pejorative and injurious signifier—was recuperated by activists and theorists alike in the early 1990s. The possibility of linguistic and affective resignification is, in part, what continues to load queer with the promise of radical destabilizing force. But as Latin American studies scholars, among others, have repeatedly attested, the same cannot be said when queer moves into other languages. Some Latin Americanists like Brad Epps (2007: 227) note that, as an English-language signifier, queer loses its potent affective charge in translation: rather than resignify harm, queer enacts it through academic imperialism, dressed as metropolitan theory. Indeed, queer sheds its thick verbal and corporeal history through travel; it becomes a concept without affective memory or place (ibid.: 234). Scholars such as Juan Pablo Sutherland and María Amelia Viteri are similarly critical of queer’s conceptual limitations, yet they find promise in a contestatory queer politics. Such a politics would attend to the singularity of “the popular, the mestizo, critical activisms, and crises of representations of the masculine and feminine” while interrogating the fixity of categories such as Latino or queer, as these terms get “relocated, reappropriated, and translated” throughout the Américas (Sutherland 2009: 29; Viteri 2014: xxvii). Acknowledging the potential for imperialist injury and spectacular failure, Héctor Domínguez Ruvalcaba’s *Translating the Queer: Body Politics and Transnational Conversations* joins this latter group of scholars, inciting Latin American studies to recuperate queer as a site of possibility.

Translation is central to Domínguez Ruvalcaba’s project. Rather than semiotic practice, translation signals processes of mediation between bodily and cultural systems of meaning. *Translating the Queer* thus capitalizes on the natural affinity between translation and queering: as processes, both disrupt meaning and place “identity” into crisis. Domínguez Ruvalcaba’s monograph is directly informed by the groundbreaking edited collection *Translocalities/Translocalidades*:

Feminist Politics of Translation in the Latin/a Américas, in which editors Sonia E. Alvarez et al. (2014: 2) develop “translocalities/*translocalidades*” as a conceptual framework. Translocation expands US Third World feminist “politics of location” to suggest a particular mediation of the subject that “link[s] geographies of power at various scales (local, regional, national, global) with the subject positions (gender/sexual, ethno-racial, class, etc.) that constitute the self” (Laó Montes 2007: 122). Simultaneously, translocation indexes circuits of multidirectional and continuous border crossings that mediate subject positions and ideas as both travel throughout the hemisphere. This dual sense of translocation informs Domínguez Ruvalcaba’s work.

Divided into four chapters, *Translating the Queer* surveys an extensive corpus of contemporary scholarship on canonical Latin American literature, social movements, and cultural production, moving chronologically from the colonial period to the present. The conversations highlighted will be familiar to Latin Americanists, and, as such, this text will be most useful to nonspecialist readers or undergraduates as an introductory volume. Each chapter examines relationships between translation, queerness, and major areas of inquiry such as coloniality, modernity, and neoliberalism. Chapter 1 surveys Latin Americanist colonial studies scholarship centering the bond between queerness and coloniality. Drawing on Aníbal Quijano’s formulation of “coloniality” as the arrangement of material and sociocultural relations that structure power in the Américas, Domínguez Ruvalcaba extends “coloniality” to “sex.” This move allows him to consider how the “coloniality of sex” produces and regulates sexual perversity, translating indigenous sexual and gender practices as deviant by punishing “difference as a way of correcting gender expressions and sexual practices” (21).

In other chapters, Domínguez Ruvalcaba highlights incompatibilities between US-based and Latin American systems of sex and gender political organizing. Chapter 3, for example, focuses on Latin American LGBT social movement activism from the 1960s onward, stressing that these rights movements aimed, in part, to protect “Latin American identity from North American domination” (111). Domínguez Ruvalcaba underscores that Marxism and socialism have deeply influenced social movement organizing; class struggle—rather than identity politics—was a cornerstone of much early LGBT activism such as Argentina’s Frente de Liberación Homosexual. The Left, however, largely did not recognize sexual diversity as a revolutionary identity, and gay and lesbian activism of the 1960s and 1970s can be characterized by a “tension between the revolutionary left and the politics of homosexuality” (102).

Translating the Queer's final turn to trans politics is perhaps its least convincing move. Here Domínguez Ruvalcaba claims that "trans identity is one of the most dynamic stages from which to 'queer' the hegemonic culture" (133). By figuring trans identity as a "stage from which to 'queer,'" *Translating the Queer* risks reinstalling founding tensions between US-based queer and trans theory in which queer theory at times mobilized trans identity as evidence for gender's instability. Rather than transpose these frictions onto Latin Americanist scholarly and cultural production, a queer politics of translation might instead provincialize not only "queer" and "trans" but also any presumed relationships between them. Such a tactic would generate alternate readings of the ties that structure theories of bodies and desires in the Américas. Despite these lapses, *Translating the Queer* will serve readers who wish to familiarize themselves with existing scholarly conversations in Latin American queer studies.

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