Language, gender and sexuality in 2021: hopeful futures amidst sound and fury

Branca Falabella Fabrício

Abstract

This year-in-review addresses the way violence and civil unrest manifested intensely in 2021, at the two-year mark of the Covid-19 pandemic, by inspecting the local dramas various authors re-narrate through the lenses of gender, sexuality and their semiotic performances. Three focal points organise the literature recontextualised here. First is the study of the lingering effects of cisheteropatriarchy in different contexts. Second, while forging a diagnosis of the present, the texts reviewed here address ongoing practices that defy the persistent colonial gaze. Third, they propose future paths that follow the decolonial route now at the centre of language, gender and sexuality research. Overall, the works resonate with the sound of the past, the fury of the present and the hope for the future. While transitioning forward with actions set forth today, they reimagine colonial yesterdays. As such, they indicate the chronotopic mobility of power-resistance performances.

Este texto é um trabalho retrospectivo que discute as formas intensas de violência e de protesto ocorridas no marco dos dois anos da pandemia de Covid-19. Nessa direção, inspeciona os dramas locais que diferentes autorxs re-narraram em 2021 pelas lentes das práticas semióticas de gênero e sexualidade. Três pontos focais organizam a literatura recontextualizada aqui. O primeiro diz...
respeito aos efeitos persistentes da cis-heteronormatividade em uma diversidade de contextos. O segundo forja um diagnóstico do presente, a partir de práticas desafiadoras do olhar colonial persistente. O terceiro examina propos tas de caminhos futuros que seguem a rota descolonial atualmente no centro das pesquisas sobre linguagem, gênero e sexualidade. Em geral, as obras aqui reunidas ressoam o som do passado, a fúria do presente e a esperança do futuro. Ao mesmo tempo em que elas agem no agora em direção ao futuro, reimaginam o passado colonial. Como tal, elas indicam a mobilidade cronotópica das performances de poder-resistência.

KEYWORDS: NORMATIVITIES, TRANSGRESSIONS, CHRONOTOP, POWER, RESISTANCE, AGENCY, ALLIANCES

Exu killed a bird yesterday with a rock he threw today

There is a famous Yoruba saying which goes Exu matou um pássaro ontem com uma pedra que arremessou hoje (‘Exu killed a bird yesterday with a rock he threw today’), referring to Exu, an African deity, and his abilities to reinvent memory, reinterpret the past and subvert time. This proverb is recontextualised in a recent documentary by Brazilian rapper Emicida, in which he revisits Brazilian conflictual history. Considering both the open wounds of the colonial period and the potent cultural expression of marginalised groups, he incites the meeting between past, ongoing alternatives and future doings, as indicated in the lyrics1 framing the film: ‘I can’t keep suffering for what has happened. Enough bleeding, enough crying. Last year I died, not this year […] Tomorrow cannot be the same old yesterday with a new name […] Fight back.’2 It is in this spirit that I embark upon this review quest. As a narrative whole, the set of texts I have selected tell a story of sound, fury and hope.

2021 was a strident period in many ways. At the two-year mark of the Covid-19 pandemic, we faced the continual health crisis and economic devastation; we witnessed the escalation of political rallies; and we were forced to deal with a sense of imminent catastrophe. Ordinary practices became strikingly different as quarantined societies continued to experience isolation. People who are most vulnerable were hit the hardest. In the current times, as other highly contagious variants reach all continents, this instability is likely to increase.

Much research in 2021 highlighted the complex intersections of different social axes and economic hardships. They indicated how oppressions were exacerbated along the dimensions of race-ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, age, ability and geography (Sousa Santos 2021). Concerning gender, procedures to curb the expansion of the virus magnified the already high levels of domestic and sexual abuse perpetrated against women. Many
women were exposed to physical and sexual violence at home, the aggressors being their own partners (Frisancho and Vera-Cossío 2020). In the case of single-parent households, the majority of which are headed by mothers, heavier loads of domestic work added extra layers of distress. As to sexuality, issues have included increasing stigma against LGBTQIA+ people deepened by conspiracy theories like ‘God sent coronavirus to destroy LGBTQ people’ (Ring 2020; see also Eisner and Nivette 2020).

This is definitely a tumultuous moment in history. As a Latin American middle-class white scholar living in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, I am faced with overwhelming figures. Brazil and Mexico together accounted for 70% of deaths in Latin America due to Covid-19, and combined with Peru, Colombia and Chile, they totalled nearly 5 million cases and nearly 700 thousand deaths (Gomes and Silva 2021). Likewise, the data concerning sexual abuse and femicide during lockdowns in these regions is startling, as are the rate of assaults and homicides against LGBTQIA+ populations. Despite their local manifestations, these phenomena affected the world translocally, indicating how health and politics coalesced in the pandemic era.

The profusion of antidemocratic episodes in recent years has been alarming. The invasion of the Capitol in the US shook democratic principles. Reports of civil rights violations abounded in Hungary, Poland and Belarus, among others. In Latin America, repression and attacks on institutions thrived. In Africa, different countries faced military coups that left a trail of destruction. Armed conflicts and protests in India and the Arab world kept up with their autocratic dominance. Signs of authoritarianism also sparked in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. What these events indicate is the ongoing erosion of democracy and, moreover, the trivialisation of barbarism (see Krzyżanowski 2020; Corrêa 2022). Therefore, in this year-in-review, I would like to address the way violence and civil unrest (Lane 2021) manifested intensely during the pandemic. I do this by inspecting the local dramas recontextualised by various authors through the lenses of gender, sexuality and their semiotic performances. The question I ask is how colonial yesterdays and futures were reimagined with the stones thrown at the current gloomy timespace. Said otherwise, I am interested in the chronotopic mobility of the power-resistance games played out in the terrain of language, gender and sexuality. This course of action required self-discipline not to lose focus amidst the abundance of specialised literature that came out in 2021; although I did find guidance for my reflections, I am aware that my choices have neglected a lot of other excellent work.

However, I do not wish to put forth a pessimistic projection. I follow Makoni’s diagnosis that our troubled times ‘provided space for reflection on humanity and the fragility of life’ (Makoni 2021a:48). Such a perspective
has helped me delineate three focal points to engage with the wealth of publications released in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis. First, these works have examined the lingering effects of cis-heteropatriarchy in different contexts. Secondly, while forging a diagnosis of the present, these publications signal ongoing practices that defy the persistent colonial gaze. Thirdly, they propose future paths by treading the decolonial route now at the centre of language, gender and sexuality research.

Examining the specialised body of literature in 2021 through such a chronotopic angle stimulates attention to review, evaluation and planning ahead. Moreover, it seems particularly apt in light of the approaches of two significant periodicals. *Gender and Language* published a four-issue theme series (see Hall, Borba and Hiramoto 2021) whose purpose was to celebrate in advance the thirtieth anniversary of the 1992 Berkeley Women and Language Conference. Its numerous essays provided a broad retrospective of language, gender and sexuality research. In a similar fashion, the *Journal of Language and Sexuality* put out two special issues honouring the tenth anniversary of the journal (Bharat, Mano and Phillips 2021; Leap 2021). Both publications mobilised multiple chronotopes, moving backward and forward in timespace. In tune with the trend of spatiotemporal mobility, the website of the International Gender and Language Association (IGALA) made all the proceedings of the Berkeley Women and Language conferences publicly available in 2021. The material of the four biennial events held in the 1990s brings forth a unique opportunity for historicising the field of language, gender and sexuality. It also allows for engaging in creative recollection, by establishing ‘intergenerational and interdisciplinary connections’ (IGALA 2022).

On top of this, two comprehensive handbooks furnished an excellent overview of how the area has developed: *The Routledge Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality* (Angouri and Baxter 2021) and a new set of online chapters associated with *The Oxford Handbook of Language and Sexuality*3 (Hall and Barrett forthcoming). Together with a trove of articles and edited volumes, important venues gave us notice of current discussions in the field. Among them, the 11th Biennial Conference of the International Gender and Language Association (IGALA 11), the 27th Lavender Languages and Linguistics Conference and the 23rd Sociolinguistics Symposium stood out for the epistemological critiques they generated.

All in all, 2021 made for the perfect occasion for thinking about precarious presents, insidious pasts and hopeful futures.
Last year I died, not this year

I begin my narrative by reflecting on the tensions caused by the persistence, and even the radicalisation, of regulatory schemes around gender and sexuality. These schemes developed around binary typifications (e.g. women and men, cisgender and transgender, Black and white) that reiterated gender, sexuality and racial norms. Normativities forge narrow ways of perceiving, experiencing and (de)valueing the world. Moreover, they generate oppressive orders and perform colonial scripts. Inquiry into confining labels and their ideological presuppositions was the underlying feature of various works.

Freed (2021), for instance, recontextualised the stereotypical ‘Mars and Venus’ perspective and its reliance on the belief in homogeneous domains and the faith in gender groupings based on natural essences. These practices reproduce ‘a storehouse of crystallized linguistic experiences that emphasize how women and men are different’ (5). Their recurrence in legal and popular domains creates regulatory categories and social rules that become naturalised. Potts and Formato (2021), using the methods of corpus linguistics, found these regulatory categories even in journalistic descriptions of the ‘women victims of men who murder’. Generalising constructions are not limited to heteronormative actors. Observing collocation patterns in digital dating profiles of Serbian gay men, Bogetić (2021) spotted normalising discourses concerning ideas of manhood, sexuality and national identity, a mechanism she terms ‘recursive normalisation’. Perturbing the alleged naturalness of these assumptions may be seen as a threat. This phenomenon was central in Siddiqi’s (2021) paper on the gendered life of mobile phones. She observed the operation of a patriarchal bias when a South Indian woman expressed herself on Facebook. The comments posted on her page depicted reactions against female agency toward the democratisation of the virtual domain, which is still seen as a masculine space in India. The same logic underlies the rise of cybercrimes against women in Indian media (Banerjee and Singh 2021).

A group of authors addressed the intersectionality of language, gender and sexuality with race, highlighting the ideologies that underlie the (de)valueation of identity performances. Pérez (2021) analysed Facebook reactions to two news articles about police reports on gender violence published in a Peruvian newspaper. One of the reports was filed by an actress of indigenous origin, whereas the other was submitted by a journalist from Lima. The analysis detected a higher incidence of negative comments addressed to the indigenous complainant, exposing their sexist and racist content. The performativity of race as it intersects with gender and sexuality was also the concern of Melo’s (2021) paper, which scrutinised a conversation
on the Messenger app involving a group of Black women. Her analytical remarks pinpointed how the participants produced metapragmatic reflexivity on the perduring discourses that associate hypersexuality and Black women. In a similar vein, Jesus and Oliveira’s (2021) investigation of homoerotic short stories published on a website indicated that the imaginary construction of the Black male body as a symbol of virility and sensuality is still an identity obsession that reinforces structural racism.

In the context of Korean popular culture, Garza (2021) explored the appropriation and embodiment of signs indexical of US Black and Chicano identities in the performance of a K-pop idol. On the one hand, this idol defies Korean gendered norms. On the other, she reproduces narrow images of racialised femininities, reifying longstanding hierarchies of gender and race – a practice analysed by the author as building ‘chronotopic capital’. Chun and Walters (2021) explored similar processes in interactions among Korean American girls who discuss the sociocultural value of racialised body parts.

In their editorial presenting the theme series of *Gender and Language*, Hall, Borba and Hiramoto (2021) also focused on contradictory tendencies regarding the performance of gender practices – that is, how enduring heteropatriarchy and ways of confronting it can sit side by side. They contended that although the intersections of continuities and transformation are not a new phenomenon, their state of friction has been heightening. By contrasting progressive legislation on gender identity in Argentina and backward policies towards women, queer and trans people in Poland, the authors delineated the convoluted scenario surrounding contemporary meaning-making. In the field of language, gender and sexuality, the challenges are immense. Besides dealing with the upsurge of reactionary values (Di Sabato and Hughes 2021), they include addressing the emergence of radical anti-gender and antifeminist discourse (Barát 2021; Borba 2022); campaigns against women’s reproductive rights; dissatisfaction at laws on same-sex marriage; and fiery struggles to preserve heteronormativity.

Intensified performances of hate speech promoting misogynistic, racist and LGBTQIA+-phobic sensibilities have focused on what has been named variously as ‘gender ideology’ or ‘genderism’. These terms index the autocratic politics and power conjuncture being played out across borders in Latin America, Africa, Europe and East Asia. In Judith Butler’s view (2021), such behaviour may be read as a reaction to the progressive agenda and legislation implemented in the last decades by LGBTQIA+ and feminist movements. It also derives from the concurrence of disparate ideas such as the destruction of the traditional family and the indoctrination of children to become homosexuals. In 2021, such confluence dominated many debates, such as the ones promoted by Sexuality and Policy Watch (SPW).
A host of books and essays interrogated how anti-gender offensives interacted in complex ways with the escalation of de-democratisation episodes, authoritarianism and gender- and sexuality-based brutality (see, for example, Corrêa 2021, 2022; Sousa Santos 2021).

In the specific field of language, gender and sexuality, this focus was less prominent. This may be due to the fact that the semiotic, discursive and multimodal facets of these processes are still underinvestigated (Balirano and Borba 2021; Hall, Borba and Hiramoto 2021). Nevertheless, a few discussions attempted to make intelligible the local effects of these transnational processes, submitting them to sociolinguistic investigation (Katsiveli and Coimbra-Gomes 2020, Barât 2021 and Santonocito 2021 are handy examples). They painted an initial portrait of the linguistic and discursive strategies used by anti-gender mobilisations. For example, as part of a range of reflections at the 2021 IGALA conference, panellists debated the political intersections between ‘gender ideology’, neoliberalism and religious fundamentalism (see also Hoover 2021). In Gal’s (2021) view, attacks on feminist and LGBTQIA+ goals by rightist political figures and organisations in many parts of the world are part of a ‘discourse register’ that needs to be probed urgently. She asks: how is this register recognised? How does it gain authority? How does it become persuasive for some audiences? Exploring these questions with respect to discussions around gender in the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, Persson (2021) identifies how conservative parliamentarians attribute negative meanings to the linguistic sign gender as a strategy to gain political power. In a related context, Sanque (2021) focuses on how rightwing extremists’ rejection of gender equality in Brazil played a central role in the impeachment of President Dilma Rousseff in 2016.

Some papers set these questions against neoliberal imperatives. They reflect on market demands, the ideology of individual responsibility and the vanishing of social services. These forces put pressure on parental practices in the traditional family. Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik (2021), for example, discussed neoliberal motherhood and childrearing, marked by self-making orientations. Under neoliberalism, progressive changes regarding the performance of ‘an ordinary mother’ slip back into patriarchal habitus. On the other hand, Mackenzie and Zhao (2021) studied online motherhood, discussing how digital activities enacted by mothers resignify maternal identity according to do-it-yourself parameters. These mothers navigated mothering issues in a range of online contexts that constitute communities of practice where knowledge, experiences and difficulties are shared. In a related study that analyses the constructions of motherhood in the Mumsnet Talk discussion forum, Mackenzie (2021) discussed how users’ online interactions and wider social discourses intersect as these women
negotiate discourses of gender, parenthood and the struggle between child-centric devotion and individuality.

An adjacent path was pursued by a set of texts associating war, extremism and maleness. Some analysed phallocentric nationalism and politics (Cheng 2021; Fabrício and Moita Lopes 2021). Others inspected militarism, despotic dispositions and masculinities (Ferguson 2021; Gutmann, Nelson and Fuentes 2021; Maringira 2021). In spite of their multiple foci, they made clear that manhood and the indexical order it integrates are not natural but rather the product of hard training and socialisation: ‘men have to learn to be men, and they have to be taught to kill’ (Ruthford 2021:2; see also McIntosh 2021). The same applies to machismo, misogyny and toxic masculinity, as Navera (2021) observed in an analysis of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s speeches. Hunt’s (2021) study delineated further contours of the male identity regime by exploring Covid-related speeches delivered by the president of South Africa Cyril Ramaphosa. Her analysis identified metaphorical constructions of the nation as family and the president as a protective father figure, which portray a more intimate relationship of governor and governed, reframing power and control as concern and responsibility. Such a dynamic, present in the patriotic rhetoric of many current heads of state, invokes an indexical order in which ideas of the tough leader, the father, the provider and the protector of the heterosexual family are tangled in the defence of civilisational ideals (cf. Stanley 2018).

Finally, it is important to mention that this anti-gender crusade has ramifications for the discussion around gender-inclusive language. In 2021, several academic conversations considered gender-neutral and nonbinary pronouns in Catalan (Monzó-Nebot 2021), Spanish (López 2021), Russian (Thornton 2021), German (Steriopolo and Aussoleil 2021) and Danish (Miltersen 2021). Moreover, Zimman’s (2021) plenary talk on ‘trans pronominal epistemologies’ at the IGALA conference provided a fresh look on the use of gendered pronouns and its ideological complications. Focusing on three different contexts involving the use of trans language, the plenary shone light on ‘the hyper-politicized nature of pronominal forms’ and ‘the need to delve into the full complexity of the way pronouns function in the (re)imagination and (re)construction of gendered realities’. This is also the point of Chen’s (2021) article on the relevance of animacy to language, gender and sexuality studies, which provides a reflection on the sociocultural and linguistic complexities of using ‘it’ as a nonbinary pronoun.

In summary, the works grouped in this section show how gender, sexual and racial apparatuses intrude upon meaning-making practices. Intricate memories of whiteness, heterosexuality and patriarchy entwine with a neoliberal ethos, triggering chronotopic tension. They sneak into everyday
talk, justifying social norms, hierarchies and all sorts of phobias (see Fabrício 2021 on the circulation of intense animosity in digital encounters). The sound they make is intoxicating; the musical notes they play are hard to rearrange. They ring noisily and insidiously according to ‘the class, sexual, gender, spiritual, linguistic, geographical, and racial hierarchies’ (Grosfoguel 2011:5).

In spite of its far-reaching consequences, this story is recalcitrant. For whatever reason, it is reclaimed thoughtlessly. Like a haunting bias, it operates with hypnotic effects; however, these may be interrupted by the ‘disruptive potential of transgression, disorder, and struggles for voice’ (Leap 2021:2). The lyrics with which I have framed my review illustrate this kind of counterpower performance: *tenho sangrado demais, tenho chorado pra cachorro* (‘I’ve been bleeding too much; I’ve been crying like hell. Enough of that!’). Nuanced ways of saying ‘I can’t take it anymore!’ constitute the complicating action of this narrative venture.

**Enough bleeding, enough crying**

Suffering can lead to fury. It can cause the reorganisation of symphonies. After a pause or between movements, improvisations may perform shifts, whether subtle or flamboyant. Much of the research rang with dissonant narrative chords in 2021. Favouring intersectionality, researchers looked at ongoing practices that are reimagining the statuses of gender and sexuality in language and thought. Some sing out loudly, while others hum quietly. Nonetheless, both perturb the rumination of colonial scores.

Let us consider boisterous chants first. Makoni (2021b) advocates ‘radical rudeness’ as a resistance strategy against racialised forms of patriarchy in the authoritarian Uganda regime. As such, she shakes the tradition according to which loudness and rage are low, ‘uncivilized’ feelings that demand social control (Elias 1978[1939]). In line with the position held by other authors such as Milani and Richardson (2021), she claims that it is impossible to understand the politics of refusal without addressing its affective loading and agentive character. Borba (2021) ratifies this position by dissecting the incident in the Brazilian Parliament when an openly gay congressman spat at Jair Bolsonaro in reaction to his homophobic behaviour.

Acknowledging the deep-seated effects of colonial power in academia, another group of scholars vehemently condemn the underrepresentation of African production in the field. Sadiqi (2021) criticises the absence of North African feminists’ reflections on gender and language in prestigious journals. Likewise, Makoni (2021a:54) questions the epistemological racism and sexism underlying publication and citational practices. As
she draws attention to the persistence of racial and gender injustice in the process of knowledge production, she encourages the construction of an inclusive canon that seriously addresses ‘the complex colonial matrices of power’. Lane (2021:59), in turn, compellingly interpellates the editors and readers of the *Journal of Language and Sexuality*, inviting them to ‘reflect on the Journal’s relationship to studies of language and Black sexuality, and consider new ways to reach scholars of Black life, culture, and language’. She reminds readers that Black female scholars are abundant in different parts of the world. It is high time, she asserts, that their expertise circulated widely in their own voices, so that the geopolitics of knowledge can be redesigned according to a multidirectional compass.

This movement towards ‘decentring the Anglosphere’ (cf. Heller et al. 2021) is taken up by other researchers who problematise the academy through feminist critique. They claim that the changes that have occurred are superficial and still conform to normativity (Subías 2021). Rojo (2021:173), for example, is alert to persistent processes of marginalisation in view of ‘the underrepresentation of Latinx Faculty, Black women Professors, and Asian women scholars’. In order to affect the structuring logics still operating in university settings, Ramírez and Bisbal (2021) demand that cooperation and solidarity should occupy centre stage in the fight against patriarchy (see also Mestre 2021). Likewise, in her explorations of the Cameroonian academic context, Atanga (2021) sheds light on how women cope with gendered practices that challenge them in higher education. Contributing to this line of argumentation, Agyepong’s (2021) study on gender norms and practices in the Ghanaian National Science and Math Quiz demonstrates how women’s success in male-dominated academic fields may be (re)interpreted as women’s power amidst mainstream stereotypes.

Foster (2021) summarises the indexicality of these pleas: she appeals to the academic community to stop ignoring and dismissing Black women’s knowledge. Bucholtz and miles-hercules (2021) put it differently, but also vigorously. In their defence of an intersectional approach to the study of language, gender and sexuality, they assert that the history of gender studies has been the history of white supremacy and *misogynoir*. In a different direction, Milani’s (2021) discussion affirms the subversive potential of enraged manifestations. Specifically, he examines how queer anger may work pragmatically toward social change, arguing for a ‘politics of discomfort’ and ‘angry coalitions’ in scholarship and activism that would boost the fight against discrimination by contesting ‘interlocked systems of oppression’ (442). Favouring emotion over rationality, Milani suggests that crying ‘Fuck off!’ may function as an awakening call from lethargy. On the same wavelength, Deumert (2021) concentrates on how the dialectics
of anger-hope may articulate a desire for change. She argues that protests involving the cathartic unleashing of rage may lead to hope for social transformation.

In spite of the value of emphatic indignation, dissent may be performed in more low-key tones. Eberhardt’s (2021) essay probes the emergent enactments of unruly womanhood, which she terms ‘raucous femininity’. By analysing the strident unfeminine behaviours of two Jewish white women in *Broad City*, a popular US television show, she argues that the neoliberal values and ideas dominating mainstream media (e.g. choice-driven actions, self-improvement and consumerist passivity) may go out of tune and be ridiculed. Her analysis draws attention to the disruptive value of rebellion and the liberatory potential of intersectional feminism. Milani and Burnett (2021) also illuminate the meanders of resistance and the canny subversion of norms in their analysis of a South African reality show. They seek to counter simplistic discourses of powerless victimhood related to gender nonnormative individuals in South Africa by examining how queer performances have to come to terms with the normative pressures that constrain, but do not ban, agentive possibilities. They assert that practices toward social change are always a dilemmatic field because they necessarily have to ‘accommodate’ societal expectations.

Along similar lines, the papers constituting the special issue of the *Journal of Language and Sexuality* on the Pink Dot movement in Singapore (Bharat, Mano and Phillips 2021; Pak and Hiramoto 2021) explores the tactical nonconfrontational manoeuvres social actors undertake when negotiating with social norms or Christian faith. As Phillips (2014) pointed out, in an environment that still embraces normative heterosexual values and where the heterosexual family lies at the core of society, government policies toward same-sex desire are ambivalent. While they ensure equal rights to all, they forbid same-sex unions. Termed illiberalism, this political ideology influences the ‘soft’ kind of activism queer Singaporeans practise online, which connects diverse intersectional encounters through the discourses of nationalism and citizenship.

The avoidance of polarisation is frequently criticised as depoliticised compliance with homonormative/nationalist discourse (see Liu 2021 for a similar discussion in the Hong Kong context). Nevertheless, this nonadversarial mode of communication may be seen as a strategy to speak back to power. As such, it may be legitimised as ‘pragmatic resistance’ (Mano 2021; Rowlett and Go 2021) or a ‘politics of prudence’ (Lazar 2021a), which demand the skilful management of multiple layers of semiosis, identity and conflict. In Konnelly’s (2021) understanding, these performances are safety strategies that encompass tactful negotiation with normativities; they invoke normativity as part of doing nonnormativity.
Lastly, the melody of protest may be produced in an alternative timbre. Camargo and Martins (2021), for instance, favour an interesting site from which to think about dissenting actions. They interact with Djankaw, a Black trans resident of a quilombo – a ‘settlement founded by descendants of formerly enslaved Afro-Brazilians’ (66). The settlement Djankaw inhabits is being disputed by different landowners. Amidst this conflict, Camargo and Martins observe Djankaw’s online-offline activism, focusing on how the activist uses the body to question the meaning of territory in performances of fluid she/he/they personae. Her/his/their de-re-territorialisation practices disturb geographical, epistemological and identity boundaries. They perform resistance on a playful key by engaging in complex semiosis. They dance, sing, create new words and blend discourse genres. They also wear clothes and accessories that invoke mixed ethnic and gendered references. The fluidity of these enactments decentres views of territorial belonging. By juggling private and public ways of governance, Djankaw earnestly defies notions of border, place and ownership, though in a playful register.

According to Morgan (2021), ‘playing’ in such a context is not an inconsequential game: it is a potent counterpower. In particular, she recognises Black feminists’ linguistic labour as an opportunity to resist ‘police brutality and white supremacy’ (291) and work toward possible futures. From an analogous position, Lanehart (2021) underlines the importance of bringing African American Women’s Language to the fore in the confrontation of injustice. Moving in a related direction, but considering multiple signs (both linguistic and nonlinguistic), Telep (2021) observes how power relations are contested in YouTube videos. Dealing with urban Cameroonian-French elites living in Paris, her study dissects how the enregisterment of racial otherness operates as a subtle, but meaningful, counterdiscourse. While attending to hegemonic whiteness, participants perform Afropolitan, ‘an elite, socially mobile, and transnational type of Blackness’ (234).

In the Brazilian context, Silva and Lee (2021) emphasise the agentive role certain ways of speaking play in the fight against deep-rooted racial and gender stratification. Focusing on the speeches of Marielle Franco, a Black Brazilian lesbian feminist activist and Rio de Janeiro city councilmember, they identify a specific political register, termed papo reto ‘straight talk’. As a resource to counter the often verbose phraseology of bureaucratic talk, papo reto functions as a kind of counterlanguage practice towards more inclusive politics. Although Marielle was assassinated in 2018, widespread mourning has been keeping her alive by chanting ceaselessly ‘Marielle Presente!’ (‘Marielle is here!’). This kind of chronotopic twist shows that crying ‘No more!’ in the fight against structural violence is not a hollow
quest; it is a way to transition forward in trying times (Van de Wiele and Papacharissi 2021).

Another group of authors contend that the struggle against normalising discourses requires intersectional coalitions whose aim is to promote solidarity and strong bonds within and across varied communities – queer, trans, feminist, as well as between LGBTQIA+ and non-LGBTQIA+ (Lazar 2021a, 2021b). They call for allyship in activism, queer linguistics, Black queer feminists (Lane 2021) and trans analytical perspectives (Leap 2021; Zimman 2021). Although invoking these expert areas may be taken as a trend toward demarcating boundaries within the field, I read these various domains of expertise as part of a conjoint effort in the enactment of an anticolonial narrative whose resolution has no final stop. In Bonnin’s (2021) view, the present, however dreary, always entails uncertain futures. But uncertainty constitutes an opportunity for renewal and for the design of new research agendas. Such agendas may transform negative affects into collective agency explicitly oriented toward hope.

**Tomorrow cannot be the same old yesterday with a new name**

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. We hope more incisively for better futures in a time of crisis, as Hiramoto, Borba and Hall pointed out back in 2020. Characterising hope as ‘the warp and weft of agency’ (352), they drew attention to hope’s potential to respond to perceived threats. According to this conception, hope is not related to passive expectations for utopian states. It lies in practices that dwell in an undetermined time-space. It has to do with performances in the here-and-now that, aiming at uncertain developments, may transform perceptions of the past and the future. In this sense, there is only hope on a tightrope (West 2008:6).

In 2021, many scholarly conversations turned to hope while reflecting on social injustice and political conflict. The 23rd Sociolinguistics Symposium hosted a couple of panels on hope. Other discussions set their sights on hope as a way of reimagining social logics and engaging with decoloniality. Viteri (2021) characterised hope as a pivotal dimension of decolonial practice. But what does it mean when addressing the intersections of gender, language and sexuality? The answer involves the serious reconsideration of epistemological and ontological pillars. Much is at stake.

On the linguistic level, decolonisation implies disinventing languages as natural cognitive artefacts deployed to describe the world and questioning the fabrication of borders that ‘hermetically seal’ regions, communities and languages in bounded identities with essential properties (Makoni and Pennycook 2007:xii). Disentangling these confining parameters is what decolonial thinking hopes for, by envisaging more diversified
geo-body-linguistic politics in knowledge production. Angouri (2021:10), for example, condemns the ‘language penalty’ that punishes ‘those who sound and behave linguistically different’ from monomodal and monolingual academic norms. In a related critical vein, Pierce et al. (2021) and Viteri (2021) argue for the rethinking of the privilege still attributed to English in international publication policies. In a proactive position, they concentrate efforts on the project developed by the Feminist and Cuir/Queer Américas Working Group assembling intellectuals, activists and artists. Besides publishing work across three journals in the US, Brazil and Argentina, the group engages in unsettling las fronteras between languages and opposing the hegemony of English and the market-based logics regarding the production and circulation of knowledge. Such desbordes (undoing borders) shake the present politics of translation and citation.

Cashman (2021) asserts that we should thicken our understanding of language issues, seriously considering them intersectionally. She proposes a ‘jotería (socio)linguistics’ which would include ‘the heterogenous lived experiences of queer Mexican and Latinx individuals and communities’ (see also Ferrada 2021). Thinking about a more inclusive future, she envisages a critical methodology of hope, one that takes into account the connections between linguistic, ethnic, age, gender and sexual privileges. The same applies to Leap’s (2021) remarks on disabled, Indigenous and African peoples, and their unprivileged position in the academic realm.

In alignment with this position, Makoni proposes that the area of language studies has been overlooking types of knowledge and ways of communicating that were not affected by the colonial, or were affected in very singular ways (see Severo and Makoni 2021). One example is Carison, Kennedy and Farrell’s (2021) study on Indigenous peoples’ gender experiences tied to the colonial project in Australia. Approaching Indigenous peoples as sovereign agents, this research challenges Western perceptions by decolonising Indigenous bodies and actions. It shows that people think, hope and use signs in countless forms depending on where one is situated.

Concerning the expectation for more inclusivity, Jones (2021) advocates a research focus on diverse sexual identities. In her view, categories such as bisexual, pansexual and asexual, among others, remain underexplored and should be integrated into the debates ahead. She also mentions her interest in seeing the growth of scholarship on the intersection between religion and queerness. Other scholars foreground geographical discrimination. Hiramoto (2021), for instance, while acknowledging a limited set of studies based in the Global South (South Africa and Zimbabwe) and Asia (Japan and Singapore), highlights the scholarly lack of interest in the discourse practices of non-Western communities. A’ali’s (2021) research on the linguistic practices of senior women leading businesses in Bahrain
reinforces the need for broader research horizons that examine Middle Eastern women in varied regions across the globe. In line with this critique, Garg (2021) draws attention to marginalised groups in India by shedding light on the use of mobile phones by rural illiterate women who blur the boundaries of age, place of residence, gender and literacy levels. By the same token, Rajendra and Sarin (2021) analyse intersections between caste and gender in government-run educational programmes for disadvantaged girls. Hall (2021), focusing on the ‘Hinglish’ of queer middle-class youth in Delhi, reminds us of the importance of considering class relations as powerful elements in the demarcation of social boundaries.

In their projections for the future, all these works lay their eyes on how different social markers may operate (meta)pragmatically with gender and sexuality toward dismantling coloniality. Such an intersectional phenomenon must be tackled on different levels. At the geographical level, decolonial academic scholarship must go Southward, seeking ‘people, places, and ideas that have been left out of the grand narrative of modernity’ (Rudwick and Makoni 2021:267). The southernisation of thought, however, involves profound epistemological shifts. Besides the expansion of research sites, it calls for a methodological posture that is sensitive to unheard voices, disorderly bodies and turbulent landscapes. In this respect, the field of language, gender and sexuality encompasses multifaceted phenomena whose understanding cannot be limited to specific theories or methods, as demonstrated by chapters in *The Routledge Handbook of Language, Gender, and Sexuality* (Angouri and Baxter 2021). Advocating antiorthodoxy, the volume challenges purist research ideologies and provides a broad repertoire of investigative resources.

Different authors, in the handbook and elsewhere, defend the idea that ethnographic qualitative research is a powerful way to observe *in-situ* lived practices and the operations of gender ideologies in diverse social and linguistic contexts (Chun and Walters 2021; Clark 2021; Nagar 2021; Philips 2021; Shaw 2021). Besides enabling the analysis of semiosis at large, ethnographic orientations make it possible to situate investigations in macro and micro spacetime (for further discussion see Hall and Davis 2021). Attention to timespace mobility seems particularly fit to unpack daily meaning-making practices and their indexical relations in digital spaces. With the emergence of mass forms of communication on the internet and the fast dissemination of texts on the web, new modes of investigating assemblages of resources and actions are necessary. Digital ethnography and text trajectory analysis are lines of inquiry that address performances of gender, sexuality and desire in different online and offline contexts. Scrutinising ideologies in contexts such as YouTube videos (Varis 2021) or legal and media settings (Ehrlich and Romaniuk 2021), these research approaches
concentrate on textual chains instead of bounded texts. As such, they shed light on how signs and meanings are transformed as they move across different communication environments.

The processes of resemiotisation occurring in textual travels can be detected through a multimodal analytical angle (see Leppänen and Tapionkaski 2021). Mondada (2021:254) advocates ethnomethodology and conversation analysis as ways to highlight ‘how gender creeps into the smaller details of talk’ (see also Ericsson 2021). Going a step further in this methodological line, Greco (2021) combines ethnography, queer linguistics, performance studies and multimodal perspectives to critically approach conversation analysis. There are in fact assorted ways of critically engaging with the dialogue between unfolding interactions and social structuring. Traditions like interactional sociolinguistics (Gordon and Tannen 2021; Seals 2021) and corpus analysis (Baker and Brookes 2021) can be connected with other analytic frameworks. Although this body of work indicates myriad methodological possibilities, these approaches share a common goal, which is to emphasise agency within the confines of social structures.

Overall, the idea of diversity underlies the claim for multifaceted theories and methodologies. Webster (2021), for example, advocates ideological pluralism and diverse perspectives in the field of language, gender and sexuality. By favouring ‘alternative conceptualisations of sexed, gendered, and sexual experiences,’ she proposes that ‘all academically sound viewpoints are considered valid, despite opposition’ (67–68). For instance, in her view, the field should also consider the idea voiced within some strands of current feminist politics that anatomical sex ‘underpins – and pre-exists – gender and sexuality’ (64). However, different perspectives are not simply epistemological disputes: they comprise political contentions about existence. In the case of the biological status of sex, one must resort to the dichotomous idea that nature is in contrast with culture, which is the domain of constructed versions of reality (Zimman 2014; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017).

In an opposite direction, physiological sex could be interpreted as a social meaning rather than a biological generalisable fact (Rinaldi 2021). In this view, human beings become sexual in choreographed interactional performances and discourse articulations produced, organised and negotiated in complex sense-making practices. The central issue is not deciding which position is right but rather examining the underlying politics of knowledge and how it affects social subjects.

Therefore, a southernising epistemological enterprise should be simultaneously a de-ontologising affair, as considering different perspectives entails acknowledging alternative ontologies. Rudwick and Makoni (2021) put this issue at the centre of the decolonial debate. They suggest that
increasing attention to the ontologies and theories generated in the global South is necessary. Through this geographical shift, they picture the emergence of different types of theory that might shake ‘Northern universalist thought’ (267). A similar position is found in Ndhlolvu (2021:198), who states that scholars must bring together diverse cultures and traditions of knowing as a means of overstepping ‘mono-epistemic ways of seeing’. Such a move is meaningful in many ways. It instigates the consideration of multiple forms of semiosis in the process of making and communicating knowledge. Additionally, it defies the book as the main organising principle of scholarship. In a recent interview, Makoni states that ‘decoloniality is not likely to be effective as long as the notion of what constitutes a book remains unchallenged’ (see Severo and Makoni 2021). If decolonial epistemology falls prey to circulating solely in book or journal formats, it remains confined to a chronotope remounting to 15th-century printing presses.

Online academic publications tend to escape timespace bounds and accessibility constraints, especially when they are open access. However, although they can circulate more widely and free of charge, they are still tied to the ideology of the printed word. Multimodal performances have been rich loci for the production and dissemination of knowledge, especially as restrictions on face-to-face contact favoured interactions on the internet and social media. In 2021, livestreams, YouTube videos, podcasts, online talks, photographic work and art all contributed to the decolonisation of the book. Other production modes have also been gaining momentum in the past few years. Paul Preciado, for instance, participated in a couple of online conversations about his work on gender, sexual politics and anti-identity thinking. On one occasion, he participated in a debate with Bolivian feminist visual artist María Galindo, published on YouTube, about the production and distribution of emerging forms of knowledge in rapidly-changing times. Galindo radicalises the critique of coloniality in both content and form. In addition to publishing research articles and books, she simultaneously engages in other forms of conjoint reflective action. Besides co-running Radio Deseo, a radio broadcast reaching different regions around La Paz, she participates in street interventions as a member of Mujeres Creando (Women Creating), a feminist collective. Working together with non-academic women, she employs multiple semioses and registers that expand the possibility of constructing and communicating theoretical thinking beyond the academic environment.

Such a move concerns the democratisation of knowledge. In this direction, Cameron (2021) examines how the digital era provides scholars with new opportunities for engagement with audiences outside academe via proliferating social platforms. Discussing a long tradition of making expert knowledge available to wider publics in the field of language and gender
studies, and drawing on her own blog *Language: a feminist guide*, Cameron (2021:391) discusses the benefits and precautions involved in addressing mass audiences.

Lastly, the educational realm is pivotal when we think about the impact of scholarly research upon society. As Foucault (1995[1977]) demonstrated, schools are normalising institutions that discipline and regulate social life. As a power technique, discipline makes ‘normal’ students by introducing them to ‘the universal reign of the normative’ (304), a reign of surveillance that combines normalisation, hierarchisation and accurate examination. The tribunal of normality is everywhere, according to the philosopher, but at school it inspects bodies, gestures, interactions, aptitudes and achievements.

Nonetheless, ‘where there is power, there is resistance’ (Foucault 1978:95), which means that social subjects speak back to it, though to different degrees. The scrutiny of activities, hence, encompasses subjection and punishment of disruptive behaviours. The order-disorder dynamic is observable in the different literacy practices schools promote. Most often, schools uncritically socialise students into continual classification and judgement rituals designed to establish ‘the truth.’ The gender, racial and sexuality orders we are familiar with are fabricated and policed within such a regulatory system, which keeps an ethos of discrimination in place. The displays of homophobia, sexism and racial bullying that abound in many school settings are indicative of how marginalisation is produced and tolerated at the institutional level. For this reason, queer perspectives and their critique of identity regimes are much needed in schools. Proposals to queer educational spaces are not new (see Moita-Lopes and Fabricio 2019 for a review). However, the fight for transformative and inclusive education now confronts a trying scenario in face of extremely reactionary sociopolitical circumstances. The transnational circulation of anti-gender, anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-feminist discourses poses greater challenges to the explicit incorporation of language, gender and sexuality issues in the educational domain.

In 2021, several publications joined forces with works published the previous year in defiance of this bleak conjuncture (Kjaran and Sauntson 2020; Paiz 2020; Pérez and Trujillo-Barbadillo 2020). Pakula’s (2021) collection brings together scholars from different countries to explore ways of disconcerting the colonial legacy still present in curricula, textbooks, teacher training programmes and educational policies. Its chapters share the contention that language and texts matter since they shape and are shaped by a metaphysics of normality. Some authors explore foreign language textbooks, dictionaries and varied teaching materials, questioning normativities and the prejudices they engender. Other authors defend the
positive educational consequences of making audible the experiences of marginalised students. A third group of authors discuss the implementation of explicitly LGBTQIA+-inclusive awareness-raising strategies and school interventions. As a whole, the chapters in Pakula’s volume show that decolonising educational timespace is not necessarily a utopian undertaking. Efficient inclusive policies are underway, relying on queer-informed pedagogies that attend to performative theories of language and identity.

Likewise, Sauntson and Borba’s (2021) keen observations on the conservative ideologies that curb progressive educational actions enhance understandings of the hardships at play. Drawing on the idea that nonconforming sexualities are restrained in schools, the authors explore the relationship between silence and sexuality in educational spaces in the UK and Brazil. Their study reconstructs the macropolitical junctures in which the censoring of sexuality can be seen as a setback on recent accomplishments toward gender equity and sexual rights.

All in all, these texts on how diverse narratives of genders and sexualities may be cultivated in school spaces reveal scholars’ commitment to sociopolitical change. Moreover, they convincingly pave the way for ‘a pedagogy of hope’, in the sense conceived by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1992), as a continuous praxis that metamorphoses history. Such a transformative phenomenon is dependent on investigations of how society works. It requires naming the agents that foment social imbalance. The works amassed here did so by accurately locating the surveillance apparatuses that have been fuelling multiple systems of injustice. They made visible big and small stories of gender and sexuality, whose recurrence attested to how high they are in tellability, capturing ‘the aesthetic, affective, and subjective aspects’ of narrative experiences (Georgakopoulou 2007:35).

In spite of the mesmerising effects of these tales, they coexist with resistance tactics. Memories of social scripts insinuate themselves in ongoing actions pointing to the deep continuities between past and present. Traditionally, we pay docile tribute to these recollections and cherish them as accurate versions of what has happened. In this sense, we predict the past, since we invest great efforts to keep our recollections ‘intact’. Perhaps such awareness may inspire us to alter our fidelity to them. This possibility opens up a new window for agency. We act in hopeful ways in the present so that modified pasts are possible and uncertain futures imaginable. With such guidelines, we can re-narrate the world and engage in what Haraway (2016) terms ‘radical storytelling’. She issues an important caveat, though: new narratives do not entail getting rid of our colonial legacy and the problems they produce. On the contrary, they mean ‘staying with the trouble’ and sitting at the negotiation table with it.
Predicting the past to transition forward

This review has been written at the crossroads of global health and political crises. As I close my multivoiced narrative, the war in Ukraine revives coloniality in different ways. The old rhetoric of empire and nationalism is mobilised to justify military force, tyranny and violation of human rights. Snyder (2022) does not hesitate to state that ‘the war in Ukraine is a colonial war’. His insight can be extended, though, to wide imperial-colonial forces beyond the Russian-Ukraine conflict. This positioning is reaffirmed when we come across news of genocide, of sexism affecting army women and of racism against non-white people fleeing from the war (UN Human Rights Council 2022). Confronted with devastating death tolls, we can ask with Perley (2021), ‘Dare we “hope”? Under today’s dire circumstances, it makes sense to wonder whether we will ever be able to perform more equitable lives.

The research studies put together in this review projected a promising perspective. By keeping a focal point on the nexus of language, gender and sexuality, they detected a broader rationale which may counter the perception that the civilisation project is crumbling. The fight for democracy and the advancement of a progressive agenda – one that is critical of racism, patriarchy and heteronormativity – is a recent historical phenomenon, emerging at the end of the 19th century and first half of the 20th century (Sousa Santos 2021). This is a very short period to reorganise the power regimes of race, gender and sexuality that crystallised over the long durée of human experience. These regimes integrate an ideological repertoire that invades the here-and-now in suffocating ways and pose difficulties for planning the construction of more fair societies. However, the works considered here showed convincingly that reminiscences come along with agentive responses that indicate the timespace mobility of power-resistance performances. Not only did they move southward, they also unsettled chronos. They listened to unheard voices, established alliances and sought alternatives beyond the traditional circuits of knowledge. They searched for ways of knowing born in local practices that reassembled past events and dealt with them differently. In this way, they managed to block, even if temporarily, the magnetism of repetition. Predictable traumas turned into other plots. They wove a tale full of sound and fury, signifying plenty: they hinted at the key to ‘transition forward’ (Van de Wiele and Papacharissi 2021).

‘The future begins today,’ says Sousa Santos (2021), arguing that we seem to be stuck in an alarming present. Emicida suggests otherwise: é tudo pra ontem ‘everything is due yesterday’. I take his words as a chronotopic coda summarising how a group of academic storytellers hoped in 2021: moving backwards today while going onward into the future.
About the author

Branca Falabella Fabrício is an Associate Professor at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro working in the Interdisciplinary Program of Applied Linguistics. She is interested in identity performances in changing educational contexts, with a special focus on text trajectories. Her present research investigates the circulation of affect in digital spaces.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Brazilian National Research Council (CNPq) and the Research Support Foundation of Rio de Janeiro (FAPERJ) for the research grants [306214/2019-9 e E-26/201.103/2021] that have made the research reported on in this essay possible.

Notes

1 Emicida remixed the lyrics composed by Brazilian singer Belchior.
2 Já não posso sofrer no ano passado. Tenho chorado demais, tenho chorado pra cachorro. Ano passado eu morri, mas esse ano eu não morro [...] Revide. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTDgP3BDPIU
3 Although the handbook is not complete, some of its several chapters were published online in 2021.
4 Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdmT-ZpD6BY

References


Snyder, Thimothy (23 April 2022) The war in Ukraine is a colonial war. The New Yorker. Retrieved from https://www.newyorker.com/news/essay/the-war-in-ukraine-is-a-colonial-war


