

Exu for Whom “Queer”

Juliana NASCIMENTO¹

¹Private practice. São Paulo/SP, Brazil.

Abstract

This article draws a connection between the Afro-Brazilian divinity known as Exu and *queer* theory. The connection is developed through the mythic themes this divinity embodies within the Yoruba/Nagô and Bantu traditions, mythological foundations that underwrite the imaginary of religions developed on Brazilian soil, Umbanda and Candomblé, and through the writings of the U.S. post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler on *queer* theory. The points of contact lie in irreverence, transgression, marginality, and in calling out the prejudices that the prevailing social order directs at excluded minorities. Both this theory and this divinity carry these traits and aims at their core.

Descriptors

Mythology, imaginary, transgression, minority groups, societies, gender.

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The author states no professional or personal interest that may create a conflict of interests regarding this manuscript.



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Exu para quem “*queer*”

Resumo

O presente trabalho fez uma aproximação entre a divindade afro-brasileira denominada Exu e a teoria *queer*. A correlação se dá por meio de temas míticos que essa divindade protagoniza dentro das tradições yorubá/nagô e banto, bases mitológicas que servem de palco para o imaginário de religiões desenvolvidas em solo brasileiro, a umbanda e o candomblé, e os escritos da filósofa pós-estruturalista estadunidense Judith Butler sobre a teoria *queer*. As aproximações acontecem pela irreverência, transgressão, pelo caráter marginal e de denúncia aos preconceitos que a ordem social vigente deposita em minorias excluídas. Tanto essa teoria quanto essa divindade carregam esses traços e esses propósitos em suas bases.

Descritores

Mitologia, imaginário, transgressão, grupos minoritários, sociedades, gênero.

Exu para quien “*queer*”

Resumen

Este trabajo realizó una aproximación entre la divinidad afrobrasileña denominada Exu y la teoría *queer*. La correlación se desarrolla por medio de temas míticos que esta divinidad protagoniza dentro de las tradiciones yorubá/nagô y banto, bases mitológicas que sirven de escenario para el imaginario de religiones practicadas en suelo brasileño, la umbanda y el candomblé, y los textos de la filósofa posestructuralista estadounidense Judith Butler sobre la teoría *queer*. Las aproximaciones se dan por medio de la irreverencia, la transgresión, por el carácter marginal y de denuncia de los prejuicios que el orden social vigente atribuye a las minorías excluidas. Tanto esta teoría como esta divinidad llevan estos trazos y estos propósitos en sus bases.

Descriptor

Mitología, imaginario, transgresión, grupos minoritarios, sociedades, género.

Introduction

Were I not to speak of Exu and queer theory, I ought to begin by apologizing for such audacity; but insofar as my research has advanced, it seems that one of the basic premises, both of this divinity and of the line of thought that bears the name “queer theory”, is precisely audacity. Thus, I gird myself with enough courage and *ginga* to say that this work sets out to bring the Afro-Brazilian divinity known as Exu into conversation with queer theory. To baste these worlds together, I will draw on the theoretical foundations of analytical psychology.

In his studies of mythology and religion, Jung found the supporting material with which to develop and deepen the discovery of the collective unconscious, his greatest contribution, according to the man himself. For Jung, the collective unconscious is inhabited by archetypes, archaic forms of living contents that express themselves autonomously and cannot be manipulated at the whim of conscious will; on the contrary, they are “living entities that exert their attractive force upon consciousness” (Jung, 1928/1987, p. 20). The highest expression of these entities would be the mythical figures of gods and goddesses. Analytical psychology holds that religion and psychology share one and the same source: the psyche. In a sense, when we seek to understand the archetypal basis of a thought, idea, or behavior, we are seeking a god or a goddess. The wager advanced in this text is that Exu provides an archetypal grounding for queer thought.

Relying on that understanding, I intend to stitch Exu to queer, to wed them, or at least to bring them into encounter, introducing one to the other, on the wager that they would make a beautiful and intriguing couple. Beautiful, of course, to the eye of the beholder. May the psychology of living images serve as needle and thread, and aid in this stitching.

Simply by drawing near to this theme, I feel confused, disoriented, disordered. Antagonisms and idiosyncrasies in my reflections overtake me as I try to organize my thinking to write about the proposed themes. Becomings are replete with *contra sensu*. As I dare and allow these sensations to pass through me, I begin to perceive that perhaps it is precisely this that brings me into proximity with these territories, the territory of Exu and the queer territory.

In English, the term “queer” literally means strange, ridiculous, odd, or even extraordinary. At first it became a synonym used to pejoratively designate the gay community, a kind of slur. However, in a turn in attitude toward the term, and even taking the opportunity to criticize the gay milieu of the time, which, in its attempt to take part in heteronormative society, ended up

adopting a certain “asepsis” that sanitized so-called “effeminate” traits in male homosexuals and “masculine” traits in female homosexuals (producing a kind of identity hygiene), there emerged a new way to lay claim to and mark one’s marginal position, deploying behaviors that sought both to confuse and to expose the incoherences of the prevailing social order. In this way, that group reclaimed the term “queer” for itself and made transgression its hallmark.

The context in which queer theory began to take shape dates to the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the period of the most severe outbreak of the epidemic caused by the HIV virus, with AIDS being labeled by many as the “gay plague.” The queer movement thus arose as a response to the violent and prejudiced reactions of defenders of straight culture. There was an urgent and searing need to question sexual normality and the legitimacy attributed to heterosexuality (Salih, 2015).

To question normality... Well, here we begin our approach to Exu. But first, we need to delineate this divinity more clearly. Exu makes his appearances in Brazil in the *terreiros* (temples) of Umbanda and Candomblé. Although these two religions, born on Brazilian soil, share the same ancestry rooted in African soil, in Umbanda, owing to the greater influence, in its formation, of Christianity and Kardecist Spiritism, Exu is seen as the soul of disincarnate individuals who, during embodied life, committed many excesses, transgressed, and even did evil, but who, after death, repent and, aiming to develop and evolve on the spiritual plane, decide to work and serve a higher plane, thus taking on obligations of assistance and protection toward the living in need who seek them out for consultations and magical workings. In Umbanda, Exu is a *phalange* spirit who assumes many names or epithets, individuating and particularizing the energy he emanates. Candomblé, in turn, differs from Umbanda in that it works with divinities called *orixás*, gods and goddesses who are pure manifestations of the energies of nature, personifying and expressing those forces. The *orixás* of Candomblé hew more closely to African-origin cults and suffer less influence from other religions. In that context, Exu is seen as an *orixá* with his own characteristics: the divinity of beginnings, of movement, the pulse of life. All that lives owes reverence to this *orixá*. Exu is *majubá*.

Exu wields his power and governs the “people of the street”, people and *personae* whom the prevailing order sees and keeps at the margins of society. His children are drunks, *malandros*, prostitutes, and people experiencing homelessness. They are deemed amoral, dangerous, wicked, and deceitful. Exu bears ambivalent traits, for he can receive attributes as destructive and offensive as they are protective and defensive. His worship is carried out preferably at crossroads or at the entrance to homes and *terreiros*. In fact, Exu

reigns over open spaces and dwells “from the door outward,” refusing a roof or walls: “his house has no wall, no window, no nothing—where does he live? Exu lives at the crossroads,” sings one of his *pontos* (ritual songs).

Metaphorically, this divinity may be understood as one without margins or edges. Exu stands outside, at points of intersection, in the spaces between worlds, as Silva puts it:

the names of Exu make reference to points of passage, or to liminal places (crossroads, gate, street), to spaces or states of intercession between the world of the living and the dead (cemetery, catacomb, skull), to intermediate states of the incidence of light (shadow, daybreak), to hybrid beings (half-human, half-animal), to duplicity and alternation of things (. . .) (Silva, 2015, p. 66).

Beings of shadow, beings who live far from the light, not seen with sharpness. Lucidity and clarity are not among the attributes of Exu, nor of the people he protects and represents.

An interesting parallel with queer thought. As has already been noted, queer is that which does not “fit,” which stays at the margins, sustains and claims that position. It is part of queer thought to maintain incoherence vis-à-vis prevailing paradigms, stances marked by the abnormality of their posture. It is, above all, a social and political movement that seeks to give voice to minorities. It is identified by irreverence, shock, transgression, as if to expose the abnormality within the norm. Drag’s irreverence is one example.

At the level of ideas, the norm of prevailing thought accrues the status of truth, determines behaviors, dictates how the individual ought to conduct themselves and perform their social role. The reigning norm comes to be understood as normal; it dictates normality. That which exposes incoherence within the absolute truth represented by such norms of conduct does so by presenting other ways of imagining and behaving. These “deviants” almost always bear the mark of marginality and, invariably, are seen in “half-light,” scarcely illuminated by consciousness. Normative standards lay down the rules and the best conduct, govern the laws and hold power, stand in the spotlight, illuminated in collective social consciousness, they are in sharp focus, and thus hold a monopoly on reason. Reason is what shines in consciousness; it is what lights the intellect. In the ego, collective social consciousness stands with those who wield the norm; those who wield the norm wield power; those who wield power see clearly only what their own reason illuminates. The soul is confined when certainties take hold.

To occupy a queer position is to think, write, and behave while seeking incoherence and ambivalence, exposing the ridiculous

within the norm, since it is a “transgression produced by a political gesture of affirming differences and inscribing strange bodies into contemporary scenes; a gesture that confers visibility upon the invisible, foregrounding the ‘strangers internal to society’ (Butler, 1990, 1991; Louro, 2001, 2004; Miskolci, 2009). But not only that” (Pereira, 2012, p. 385).

Exu likewise does not abide the supposed harmony produced by the unanimity of the mindset that holds the norm; for him, all unanimity is foolish. At this point he helps us by bringing a legend that illustrates the ridiculousness, violence, intransigence, and smallness of the personality that lays claim to absolute truth, that is certain. The legend says that one day Exu saw two friends who agreed on everything, became very bothered, and wanted to sow discord. He put on a two-colored cap, red on one side and white on the other. He walked between the two friends, who were working on either side of the road. He smiled cheerfully and greeted them with a broad grin. As soon as he had passed, the men began to talk and one remarked, “Did you see how pleasant that fellow was who went by wearing a red cap?” The other replied, “I did! Very pleasant, but his cap was white!” The first grew furious: “The cap was RED!” The other, even more enraged: “WHITE!!!” And so they kept working themselves up until they killed each other, unable to bear disagreement and to reach an accord to coexist in difference (Verger, 2011).

This legend, or *itàn*, reminds us of the importance of considering the “angle” from which an assertion is made. It speaks strongly to considering the standpoint each one inhabits; it speaks of diverse gazes and paths; it reveals that point of view is the point of the matter.

This passage also tells us about the place Exu governs and inhabits: the crossroads. The very place of discord. A point of intersection and linkage among all paths, but also a site of confusion, mess, and disorder. In the popular imagination, and even in plain fact, crossroads function as repositories for attributes Western society deems deviant or in some way disapproved: it is at crossroads that you find prostitution spots and drug dealing; it is where storm drains clog and traffic tends to snarl. By contrast, psychologically, it is at the “crossroads of life” that we are seized by anguish and come face to face with aspects within us that the ego does not regard as noble or worthy; it is at the crossroads that our shadow awaits us, for the recognition of what has been repressed, without deceiving ourselves by means of rationalizations (Hillman, 1984). These are moments when we need to choose new meanings and confront our abnormalities, moments of crisis in which we risk being corrupted and losing ourselves or becoming what we truly are. When the ego meets Exu, it can only be at the crossroads.

Like this divinity, queer thought works to expose the abnormalities harbored by each person who calls themselves normal. In practical terms of thinking and writing, it pushes to the maxim of refusing closure in concepts, keeping thought unresolved, open, bearing and passing through the anguish of living without edges. Of remaining at the crossroads of ideas. According to Sara Salih, the queer thinker Judith Butler

(. . .) sees resolution (of thought) as dangerously antidemocratic, since ideas and theories that present themselves as self-evident “truths” are often vehicles for ideological presuppositions that oppress certain social groups, particularly minorities or marginalized groups (Salih, 2015, p. 13).

Minorities and marginalized groups, the people of the street, Exu’s people

For this capacity to communicate and bring to the surface that which has no voice, knowing the language of those who are marginal, Exu is also, *par excellence*, the *orixá* of communication and speech. He is the one who promotes dialogues and must always be the first to be “called,” the first *orixá* to receive offerings and to be invoked. Without his presence and consent, nothing will be communicated. The astute knows that discord should be the first guest; let us not forget the nuptials of Cadmus and Harmonia¹. Violence and war are always consequences of spaces where the possibility of disagreement is not admitted. Fascism is the place where Exu is not welcome.

Other rulerships derive from Exu's association with speech and communication. By governing exchanges and commerce, this divinity is patron of merchants and also of *malandros*. Many *itàn* (myths) underscore these traits; one of the most didactic tells of the endowment of knowing all languages. This myth comes from the Fon–Ewe tradition and recounts that, at the origin of the world, the primordial pair of creation, Mawu–Lisa, had five births, from which were born: the twins Dada Zodzi and Ananu; Sogbo; the twins Agbe and Naéte; Aguê and Gu. Next, they had another birth, the sixth, in which only the air of the atmosphere was born, making it possible to give life to humans. When the domains were distributed among their children, the first couple received dominion and command of the earth. The second son, Sogbo, received the sky as his realm. The

¹Reference to the myth of Cadmus and Harmonia who, upon marrying, forget to invite the goddess Eris (Discord). Because of this omission, a dispute breaks out among the goddesses Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite over the golden apple. That dispute leads to the Trojan War.

next twins received the sea and control over the waters. The son named Ague was given the forests and thus became a hunter. Gu, who had a sword in place of a head, received the charge of producing tools and weapons. Along with the domains, each also received a language of their own, corresponding to the realms they inherited. But the couple had yet another gestation, the seventh, and from it Legbá/Exu came into the world. Since there were no more realms to distribute, Exu was left without dominion; in compensation, he was allowed to act upon all realms and to know all languages. Thus, he became messenger and translator, intermediary between the gods and human beings; and that is why all who wish to be heard, understood, and attended to by the gods must first, and above all, address Exu (Silva, 2015).

Regarding the “*malandro*” trait, Verger writes:

Exu is the most cunning of all the *orixás*.
He takes advantage of his qualities to provoke misunderstandings and arguments among people or to set traps for them.
He can do extraordinary things, such as, for instance, carrying in a sieve the oil he bought at the market—without that oil spilling from this strange container!
(Verger, 2011, p. 13).

The *malandro* is a recurring figure in literature and mythologies around the world. We call this category the trickster. Trickster gods are those who stand between good and evil; they are usually agents of transformation and questioning, installing a new order by way of disorder. Many times, they also bear the attribute of messenger gods who govern the roads and are responsible, literally or metaphorically, for the transport and flow of ideas, people, and living beings.

Within the Greco-Roman pantheon, the god who carries these attributes is Hermes. Many episodes in his myth speak to his trickster features. Hermes was already up to mischief from birth, curiously, with his half-brother Apollo. Apollo is the god of moderation, law, and justice. He conducts the Sun, lord of light, clarity, lucidity, reason. Consequently, bearing all these attributes, Apollo always suffers at the hands of Hermes, Eros, and Dionysus, each with their own ways of challenging the order. Well then: when Hermes was born, still in swaddling clothes, he stole, or “misappropriated”, Apollo's cattle. At the moment of the heist, he made the whole herd walk backward to throw his brother off the scent. Being also lord of oracles, it was not hard for Apollo to find out who had stolen the cattle; he knew it had been his younger brother, and he went to their father. When Zeus learned of such mischief, he immediately summoned the newborn. Hermes presented himself in swaddling clothes and even tried to persuade his father by saying he was

merely a baby. Zeus would not budge, for he knew Hermes was the thief. Pressed, Hermes ended up confessing the crime. His father then demanded the following oath: "Hermes, my son, promise me that you will never lie again." And so the son promised. He promised never again to lie, but as he slipped away, he murmured softly so his father would not hear: "but I also do not commit myself to always telling the truth." At that moment there arises in consciousness the "in-between," a middle place right there, between truth and falsehood. The place of negotiations, of markets, the crossroads and the roads: all of this is also Hermes' domain.

Another Greek god close to Exu and to queer thought is Dionysus: god of carnival, rapture, wine and perverse sexuality, of bacchanals, of ecstasy. His kinship with Exu and queer theory lies precisely in sexuality and in the performance of transgressing gender, as in drag. At carnival, men dress as women and women as men. Transgression, excess, and immoderation are attributes of Dionysus and of his feasts. Dionysus also has androgynous traits; he is surely queer.

Yet, in relation to those two Latin-world gods, Hermes and Dionysus, I would stress what I take to be Exu's most queer attribute by comparison with the gods of the Greco-Roman pantheon: his color. Exu is Black; Hermes and Dionysus are Europeans and, despite questioning the order within their own cultures, their societies colonized the world and thus installed the prevailing order. They are white, cultured, and classical in the eyes of the academy that has written so much about them. Even when they transgress, they participate in the Aryan hegemony of thought in a way far more conciliatory than a divinity coming from Africa and developed in Latin America, the land of the colonized.

To enter more specifically into the question of heteronormative imposition and the "plaster-casting" to which individuals are subjected on the basis of the organs that define their sex, I would like to introduce a theorist of archetypal psychology named Patricia Berry. In an essay titled "The Dogma of Gender," Berry (2014) argues how much we rely on this social construct called gender to shelter ourselves from anguish and to control our desires. To slot a subject within a gender is an attempt to keep them aligned. It is an attempt at protection against that which always seizes us and leaves us perplexed: our sexual drives. Accepting gender limits, admitting and responding in ways consistent with the characteristics attributed to the gender a subject is said to belong to, by virtue of having a vagina or a penis, adds, beyond an identity, contours, protections, and limits for dealing with sexuality. A palliative and frustrated attempt, in the author's view:

But at its deepest level, where sexuality touches the base of being, does it not bring unexpected contradictions, surprising moments, peculiar feelings? Do we not all, at some point, have our confusions with respect to sexuality, where it comes from, what it wants, where it has gone? To line all this up would be to understand nothing. Sexuality is the unexpected. Through it, consciousness dives deeper into the body and into more mysterious grounds. (Berry, 2014, pp. 63–64).

Berry (2014) further underscores in her essay that psychology's fantasy about early childhood is full of sexual “things”, varieties of forms and sensations, anal, oral, genital, pleasures not assigned to any specific gender:

Gender identification occurs only later. Before we fix ourselves as little males and little females, we are polymorphously perverse, perverted, and sexual in everything; every part of the body is involved, at one time or another, in one or another form of eroticism. (Berry, 2014, p. 49).

This is a denunciation and a transgression that Exu shares with Berry and with queer theory. The limitation imposed by gender also fails to contain this divinity, again controversial here, not submitted to the delimitations of sex. Although he is most often represented by a statuette whose head is shaped like a phallus or that holds a huge phallus in one hand, called *ogó*, there are accounts of this god being rendered in female form, also suggesting feminine attributes: “however, as A. B. Ellis (1890, p. 41) reports, Exu may be represented by a female figure, endowed with long pointed breasts and the other necessary accessories” (Silva, 2015, p. 76).

In the Umbanda universe, Exu also takes on a variation in which he presents in female form. These are the so-called *pombogira* or *pomba-gira*, who manifest flamboyantly in Umbanda *terreiros*—dancing, smoking, swearing. They laugh loudly, drink, and bring forth themes of sexuality and sexual provocation. Favors related to the love lives of seekers and clients are their specialty. *Pomba-giras* tend to care for the pains of love.

There is an explicit transgression in how this entity manifests in the *terreiros*, presenting as a “woman of the street,” a “woman of the life,” since her behaviors are reproved by the sexual morality of patriarchy. The reigning norms are “assaulted” when faced with a woman who employs broad, showy, and obscene gestures and whose speech is peppered with profanity and slang.

Gender begins to be imposed in the very first years of life: “girls sit with their legs closed, speak softly, are gentle and demure”; “boys

like blue, like soccer, are aggressive, stronger, and more restless.” Thus gender becomes embedded in the personality as soon as the child begins to develop; we do this by osmosis, without questioning or reflection. Hence Simone de Beauvoir’s famous line: “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1980, vol. 2, p. 9). The same holds for men. Thus, everything that does not fit the rigid discipline of gender becomes queer. It likewise becomes Exu’s people.

On the rigidity with which gender is introduced into identity, Judith Butler writes: “[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler, 2003, p. 33).

Also, according to Butler (2003), making political use of language to break and dismantle the rigidity to which the subject is subjected under the yoke of gender requires knowing the system. Law can only be questioned by the one who recognizes it. As if to say that to transform the “matrix” one must act within the “matrix.” Inside, and at the margins at the same time. Salih (2015) explains Butler’s thought:

And yet, unlike Lacan, Butler insists that the law is generative and plural, and that subversion, parody, and *drag* occur within a law that affords opportunities for the ‘staging’ of subversive identities that it simultaneously represses and produces. (Salih, 2015, p. 86).

Another well-known *itãn* about Exu illustrates this feature. The legend says that Olodumaré summoned all the *orixás*, wishing to know how things were going on earth. Everyone was summoned. The preparations were many, each concerned with making the best impression on the supreme god; they took care with offerings, thought through every detail. The *orixás* busied themselves with garments and ornaments, but none presented themselves with the *ecodidé*; only Exu took that care and did not cover the *orí* (head), he wore no cap, hat, headwrap, or load. The *ecodidé* is a kind of red parrot feather to be placed on the forehead as a sign of submission and reverence. Since no other *orixá* observed the protocol for appearing before Olodumaré, Exu was granted a series of privileges: he became the first to be remembered in all rituals; the first honors and *ebós* are always dedicated to this divinity (Prandi, 2001). By this gesture, he proved that he alone knew the law; and it is precisely because he knows it so well that Exu is able to transgress. Paradoxically, he is the one who destabilizes the very order he helped construct (Silva, 2015).

Here once again we come upon intelligence and cunning, attributes of true *malandragem*. As the composer José Bezerra da

Silva (2000) would say: “*malandro é malandro e Mané é Mané*” [roughly, “a hustler is a hustler, and a chump is a chump”].

Judith Butler (2003) likewise takes care to attribute to language an enormous transgressive potential. She insists that political action must occur within the law, making use of the terms that constitute the power structures in which the subject is implicated. According to Butler, it is part of the shock and astonishment that a radical social and political movement like queer seeks to produce to appropriate both stereotypes and the prevailing language. Hence:

(. . .) parody and *drag* are modes of *queer* performance that subversively “allegorize” (to use one of Butler’s terms) heterosexual melancholy, thereby revealing the allegorical nature of all sexual identities. (. . .) the term “queer,” an interpellative performative that, from being an insult, has become a linguistic sign of affirmation and resistance. (Salih, 2015, p. 135).

It is curious and revealing that Exu, or his feminine version, the *pomba-gira*, also uses this strategy in Brazilian *terreiros* south of the Equator. As researcher Vagner G. da Silva (2015) emphasizes, when looking more closely at this entity’s behavior:

However, I want to stress that, beyond these stereotypes, the free expression of these bodies also concerns the possibility of opposing domination by initially accepting the stereotypes and then using them to criticize the social order that generated them. The woman made into a prostitute “accepts” prostitution in order then to laugh at, and scandalize, the society that produced her. (Silva, 2015, p. 81).

One is left with the sense that analogies are inexhaustible. Movement and instability mark both this theoretical field and this divinity. They speak, too, of the inaccessible, insatiable, inexhaustible place they claim and represent. To conclude, I will use a quotation by Guacira Lopes Louro on the back cover of the book about Butler (Salih, 2015), which she translated. It is striking that her intention was to draw an analogy with Judith Butler’s thought and queer theory, and yet it serves just as well to describe Exu’s attributes. Butler must surely have felt flattered:

Butler is indeed *queer*. Movement and restlessness are her marks. She does not promise calm, stability, or immobility. She challenges herself and us. She doubts, stands against common sense, counter-argues. As we continue reading, we are prompted to share in this movement. Queer irreverence can be contagious. (Salih, 2015).

Laroyê, Exu!

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Mini-curriculum: Juliana Nascimento – Jungian-oriented clinical psychologist, scholar and researcher of mythologies, religious sciences and gender. São Paulo/SP. E-mail: juliana.nasto76@gmail.com