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The One-Sided Tale of Poor Latin America

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ABSTRACT

The experience of participating in a mobility program is both enriching and shocking. While facing different identities and asymmetrical relations of power, the international student from the Global South is forced to reanalyze his or her identity in the world. The politics of racialization and the dichotomy between the politics of belonging and of bordering make those who study abroad realize the stereotypes of the country they are nationals of and the prejudice their co-citizens may suffer. As such, this text is my narrative as a Brazilian student in the Middle East living in a community predominantly constituted by Europeans, describing the process of realization of my identity as a Global South and Latin American citizen.

Keywords: bordering politics, decolonial perspectives, internationalization in Higher Education, Latin America, Middle East

“You are the first Brazilian I know that speaks English well”, this was one of the first conversations I had with my European roommates when I got to my study abroad semester. I was the only Brazilian among more than 70 new international students that semester at Ben Gurion University, in Israel (although there were other students from Latin America enrolled full-course at BGU - most of which had gone through the naturalization process, also called Alia -, I was the only Latin American undergraduate student in the study abroad group). At first, as is commonly expected, I thought that by going to the Middle East, more precisely to Israel, to study Politics, I would learn about the other peoples, and how to live in cultures that are quite different from mine. But in that conversation, I realized that I was most likely to learn more about my understood place in the world while abroad than about the world itself. Far from being a negative experience, I learn a lot from the exchange of cultures and information I was surprised with.

Nevertheless, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie points out very acutely, I was hit by the shock of realizing that many of my colleagues from Europe and Israel saw only a single story of Brazil and Brazilians.

Therefore, in an effort to make sense of the experiences I have been through while in my academic mobility, I will try - in brevity - to point out some of the situations I have faced as a Brazilian while in my study abroad semester. This effort has been based on previous reflections done by Aimé Césaire (1955) in his writing on “Discourse on Colonialism”, in which he writes about his experiences while he was a student in France from Martinique - a French colony - in the 1960s, and by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), in the TED Talk “The Danger of a Single Story”, in which she tells her experience as an undergraduate student from Nigeria enrolled in a US university. The latter, in special, gives us a glimpse of the current situations faced by Global South international students when trying to bond with Global North colleagues, understanding the pre-concepts (and prejudices) that are intrinsic to Western culture, but also about the power relations international students participate in when they go back to their home country. Thus, this essay will be constituted of three parts: the realization of the bordering politics and processes; the speechless land of Latin America - and its voiceless people; and, finally, our space of agency as Latin Americans and as citizens of the Global South.

THE REALIZATION OF THE BORDERING POLITICS AND PROCESSES

The bordering politics, as described by Yuval-Davis et al. (2019), can be understood as a permanent process of creating socio-cultural and political barriers for defining who belongs to a group and who does not. In a sense, it can be explained as a negative form of the politics of belonging. As such, these processes overcome the usual imaginary barriers as checkpoints or frontiers and expand the definition to comprehend also daily forms of exclusion of people, even those who are born in the country but are seen as foreigners - as are the children of migrants in many places.

Moreover, the processes of bordering also affect the processes of identity and affect the building. This is especially true for international students, the blurring of the qualities that comprise what is the so-called “diversity” international students bring is common in the interaction of the normative “White” - the Global North citizens - and the “other” cultures, creating impaired social relations (Hernandez, 2021; Buckner et al., 2021).

For me, this adaptation was quite strange at first. I come from a middle-class family, highly engaged in academia in Brazil, especially since my mother is a professor in Education. Since I can remember, my family has always given me all the educational opportunities they could afford, and as such, I was able to enter an online high school program in the US - where I could improve my English skills. Moreover, in Brazil, I identify as a white person, and as such, I cannot say I have directly suffered from any of the pains that structural racism imposes on our society. Nevertheless, once in my academic mobility program, I was faced

with my classmates' affirmations that I was not "white", as I was not European or North American, but "brown", because I am Latina.

Facing this process of racialization was at first a shock, because I know I have never suffered prejudice in Brazil. Nevertheless, it started making sense in that new social space I was in and, although I was never the target of the critics, I had to listen to how Brazil was violent, that my co-citizens did not know how to speak English well, how I was a golden exception in my reality - sometimes being treated with pity. Before that, I wasn't able to understand how you never leave your nationality behind even though you are a world citizen - there is always a place where you belong, a national society you will always be part of: every immigrant is a representative of his or her nation.

This process of conscientization of the psychological and cultural frontiers is also very well described by Anzaldúa (1987), in the book "Borderlands/La Frontera", which is the milestone of the Borderlands Theory. The shock of the realization on how you and your culture are perceived also mirrors the new vision that is created of one's own role in his or hers home society, in Anzaldúa's words "The ambivalence from the dash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. [...] The mestiza's dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness (p. 78)". This comprehension, according to her, is the beginning of a "new mestiza consciousness", that can be understood as a new view of oneself and one's role in the world from the evidencing of the prejudices and violences seen in different contexts, but also as a creative force that allows adaptation and tolerance to what's different.

Moreover, this also made me have a different feeling about the connection I had with my home country and co-citizens. I understood for the first time how it was to be in the position of someone who was racialized, which I had never been before, and, from that, I also understood the privileged position I was in Brazil - not only for identifying as "White" in Brazil but also for having access to education and a study-abroad opportunity. This made me realized the violence of the racialization and made visible how the structural racism in Brazil still silences Black and Indigenous people. Furthermore, I had never felt a real tie between my identity as a Brazilian and as Latin American - especially since Spanish was not my mother tongue- which changed when I saw that I shared most of the unrecognized prejudice with other colleagues from my region. By all means, it was while in my study-abroad semester that I started identifying as a Latin American citizen and not only as Brazilian.

THE SPEECHLESS LAND OF LATIN AMERICA - AND ITS VOICELESS PEOPLE

The affirmations my classmates made about my country led my reflections back to the danger of a single story - if Brazil is the land of those attributes my colleagues constantly point out to me, where was the Brazil I lived in? And among all that, I could only think about what my mother told me about her participation in international congresses, "We are the forgotten continent: people see Europe and North America as places of respectful science production; Asia is seen as a

rising continent, but Africa and Latin America, we are forgotten.” Here, more than forgotten, we were voiceless: unseen and unheard, in a land that could only import theories and knowledge.

During my time in Israel, I discovered that for most Europeans and Israelis, Latin America was a place for volunteering - as the white men’s burden keeps on living out of its lies - or for purpose finding. A territorial space where the youth from the Global North could spend their free time while feeling good for bringing good things to the “poor Latin people” or a six-month backpacking rite of passage after the long years of the military - where you could enjoy the beaches, the nature, and the parties: a place for enjoyment of foreigners. It was never a place of academic production; never a place of knowledge; never a place of real-life connection: a place where the colonizers could meet the poor-underdeveloped-colonized peoples. As Spivak (2010) brightly affirms in her book, the subalterns will never have a voice, because they will never be listened to. We will never share the same space and the same legitimacy as the white man from the Global North.

Moreover, in this specific sense, Yuval-Davis et al. (2021) affirm that the maximum expansion of the bordering processes goes to the color of your skin. It is not only the real color of skin but if you are a Person of Color or not. The limits given to the voice of the scholars are in their skin color, the place from where they write, and the place where they studied. As such, Latin Americans are only able to be seen and heard when they present themselves as European descendants or when they enroll in international universities.

This is unavoidable, especially, because, as Eco (2020) states in his essay on migration, “[t]he most dangerous type of intolerance is exactly that one that arises in the absence of any doctrine, enacted by elementary pulses and, because of that, cannot be criticized or stopped by rational arguments. (p. 46)”.

AGENCY AS LATIN AMERICANS AND AS CITIZENS OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

On the other hand, as much as I feel a little disappointed myself for the fatalistic conclusions we may assume, I can also take a glimpse at a brighter future. One of the most remarkable moments in which I met my identity as a Global South citizen was in an anthropology class, where one of my most polite and well-informed colleagues just busted out his opinions on why he couldn’t understand why people would care to create post-colonial theories if they could not be universalized. As he said that, all I could think was the joy I had while reading Aníbal Quijano (2005) that same year and seeing Latin America as the center of the explanation of our world for the first time. With this realization, I answered him “it is not supposed to be universal, and it probably won’t fit the European history and theories because it was not meant for Europe, and more, Europeans are not the interlocutors of the texts”. His shock to realize that something wasn’t meant mainly for the Global North academia was tangible, and as for me, I could finally see how empowering creating our own narratives and interpretations of the world could be.

Thus, in creating our own peripheric debate and bringing up our co-citizens of the Global South, we create our own theoretical space - in which we can finally explain our world through our own lens. As is argued by Anzaldúa (1987), one the main authors of Borderlands Theory, it is by decolonizing one inner self and seeing the same spaces where the borders are imposed as places of resistance and empowerment, even the mother tongue and the color of our skin, that we find strength. In promoting our indigenous cultural mechanisms, we improve our perception of the world and create new solutions to problems. Moreover, as this text itself is, exposing our views and affirming our identity - me as a Brazilian woman, with the common Latin American stereotype, not coming from the financial center of my country - and meeting the Global North authors in their journals, in their language (English), in their place, we perform the most revolutionary act there is (Césaire, 1955). This is where we can definitely push back the borders that are constantly created before us. This is how we thrive.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, nationality, language, race and gender play an intrinsic role in critically analyzing the reality we live in and how the culture we are embedded in interplays with different social contexts, also making much more evident some forms of invisible inequalities and violences both in our home country and in foreign places. Hence, more than anything else, it is important that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) take critical steps to address diversity: it is necessary to openly speak about racial, financial, and national diversity - using the proper terms and keeping an open-minded perspective on what the students report (i.e.: promoting conversational spaces for the integration of minorities). It is also crucial to understand that, as a privileged space with diverse students and where critical thinking should be encouraged, all HEIs should aim at bringing these reflections on the value of diversity and of decolonizing one inner-self to both international and domestic students, so that they also can create new narratives on their own – and now plural – story. In bringing to light the diversity, the impaired social relations are much more easily identified by both parties, which enables a way for real bonding and equality - also generating a more inclusive academia. Finally, supporting the agency of the Global South students and creating a supporting system - be it in terms of financial aid or psychological support services - will help the students act more self-assuredly in front of the harnesses they find on the way.

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