

Gender in the City: Reading Judith Butler in Havana

In 2010, while I was conducting ethnographic interviews at the Cuban Book Institute in Havana, Cuba, fiction writer and essayist Alberto Garrandés handed me Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and insisted that he had one of the only copies of Butler's book on the island. Garrandés, whose fiction explores themes of queer identity, eroticism, and sexuality in Havana, cited Butler as a key influence in his work. The intersection of Butler and Garrandés prompts larger questions about the cultural currents that exist between Havana's authors of queer fiction and scholarship and United States gender theorists. Through tracing the connections between *Habanero* authors of queer and feminist literature and U.S. gender theorists, I historicize the emergence of U.S. queer theory in Havana and theorize about how queer theory concepts, such as Judith Butler's theory of performativity, adequately reflect the contours of everyday life in Havana.

Judith Butler may well be the first North American queer theorist to be formally published in Cuba. In 2004, the Cuban Book Institute, which is Cuba's largest literary publisher, published a chapter called "Sovereign Performatives" from her *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* along with a critique by British writer Sheila Jeffreys called "Return to Gender: Postmodernism and Lesbian and Gay Theory." For the last ten years, these two texts have remained the only English language texts related to queer theory that the Institute has published. The existence of only two such texts in the Cuban Book Institute's literary archive suggests that the consumption of British and United States queer theory in Havana is marked by scarcity.

Yet that scarcity of United States queer theory texts in Havana has not rendered it invisible in Cuban scholarship and literature. In fact, many Cuban authors who write about gender and sexuality in Havana have readily adopted Butler's concepts in their work. In my survey of the Cuban Book Institute's literary archive, I found numerous references to Butlerian concepts as Cuban authors discussed topics such as queerness and post-structuralism, the emergence of queer studies as a discipline, and, above all, gender performativity. Jeffrey's critique of postmodern feminism, on the other hand, has not been referenced by one Cuban scholar in the Cuban Book Institute's database. Given the limited access to Anglophone queer theory that Cuban authors have, the use of Butler over Jeffreys suggests that performativity is a more localizable, flexible concept that is adaptable to Cuban contexts. Havana, in particular, is a layered site of black markets, tourist economies, and state surveillance, where the contradictions of global capitalism and the policies of a long-standing Marxist revolutionary regime meet. *Habaneros* perform multiple roles in their everyday lives and speak of the need to have a "*doble cara*," or two faces, to navigate the city. I argue that the performative nature of life in Havana, and Butler's participation in a European post-structuralist discourse that has freely flowed into Cuba without the intervention of the U.S. embargo, has prompted queer Cuban authors to localize and adapt Butlerian notions of gender performativity into their own work. I also contend that Cuban's authors localized adaptation of Butler occurs in a hybrid space, or a contact zone, that is neither completely defined by cultural imperialism nor is simply a product of Cuban agency.

Before expanding upon what I found in the archive, I would like to outline the key terms I use in this study and my approach to the data. I am not aiming to reveal what Cuban authors in Havana who write about gender, feminism, and homosexuality are saying in general. Instead, I seek to understand how a very particular set of foreign theories, which are

centered in the third wave feminist movement of the United States, have come to be understood and appropriated in Cuba. In the United States, the term queer has many meanings. It is both an umbrella term for people whose gender and sexual identities fall outside of heteronormative sexual and gender practices and it also represents a mode of non-binary thinking that rejects the gay/straight/man/woman binaries that are characteristic of second wave feminist thought. In Cuba, the use of the word queer is strictly associated with a particular school of post-structuralist critical theory, which Judith Butler is part of. “Queer,” in the Cuban sense is a term directly that is directly related to foreign queer theory rather than a term that is used as an identity marker. My aim is to see how Cuban authors who study alternative sexualities or write fiction that center gay and lesbian protagonists have engaged with poststructuralist theories of gender and sexuality. I conceptualize queer theory as a Western product that is consumed globally. Therefore, my study centers on how this product is consumed in Havana.

In my survey of the twenty-eight archive entries that mentioned queer theory in the Cuba Literaria database, a digital archive sponsored by the Cuban Book Institute that includes essays, news articles, opinion columns, interviews, book reviews, and conference pamphlets, I found that queer theory has been a topic of discussion for the last decade. According to my survey, the very first queer theory articles that the Cuban Book Institute published in 2004 were by Butler and Jeffreys. In contrast, Cuban authors authored all the documents published in later years. The most recent documents are conference pamphlets for queer studies conferences in Havana featuring Cuban panelists and speakers. The shift in the archive from translated foreign documents to pamphlets on local queer studies conferences reveals that a localization of queer theory has recently happened in Cuba.

In this process of localization, the dominant themes that Cuban authors most frequently adopted are “performativity,” “poststructuralism,” and “queer studies as a mode of inquiry.”

The concept of performativity features prominently in a review of Cuban scholar Abel Sierra Madero’s *Del Otro Lado del Espejo* by author Rufo Caballero. Caballero quotes one of Madero’s informants who says “al final todos somos maquillaje” (in the end, we are all makeup) positing gender as a game of mirrors, masks, and gestures. Both Madero and Caballero use the word “performatividad” to indicate the constructed and fluid nature of gender identities. Linguistically, the construction of the word “performatividad” is a notable one. “Performativity” comes from critical theory emerging from the deconstructivist and postmodern traditions. Judith Butler, though not the first theorist to use the term, is responsible for popularizing it in her work *Gender Trouble*. In *Gender Trouble*, she argues that gender is not something that simply “is,” but something that one “does.” The willingness of both Madero and Caballero to translate this term into Spanish and use it as part of their theoretical framework shows that Butler, in this context, provides a theory that is both useful and palpable for Cuban scholars doing work in Cuba.

When Cuban scholars and writers are not directly engaging with the notion of performativity, they still discuss queerness as it relates to queer theory rather than as an identity marker. Cuban scholar Julio César González Pajés, in “Masculinidades en conflicto: una mujer vestida de hombre,” uses queer theory to analyze the case of a nineteenth-century surgeon who was born as Enriqueta Favez but practiced medicine and served in the military as Enrique. Queer theory, which, for Pajés ruptures categories of gender and sexuality, is useful to him in his biography of this historical character. Though Pajés references queer theory as a way to understand Enrique Favez’s story, he makes sure to explain that queer is a

re-appropriated derogatory term for “rare” or “strange” that is imported from elsewhere. Pajés then articulates his own Cuban version of the term as “*entendido o entendida*” or “*el es así o ella es así*.” Pajés use of ambiguous terms to translate queer reflects his understanding of the term as somehow different from fixed identity categories such as “*gay*” or “*lesbiana*.” Pajés is clear about the foreign origins of queer theory but is also not hesitant to use the idea of non-binary gender to explain why Enriqueta Favez lived and worked as Enrique.¹

Beyond performativity and discussing post-structuralist notions of queerness, Cuban scholars have most recently discussed the concept of queer studies. In 2008, in an interview with Danae C. Diéguez, Cuban scholar and poet Norge Espinosa reflected on Cuba’s lack of resources at the university level to formally study queer theory. He portrays queer studies as a “first world” academic focus and discusses how the absence of the field in Cuba makes the gay community more invisible. Without queer studies, Espinosa laments, it is hard to have an interactive dialogue with other scholars about queer texts in Cuba. To Espinosa, queer studies is a foreign field with no academic home in Cuba.

While Espinosa sees queer studies as a non-existent field in Cuba, Alberto Garrandés is convinced that queer studies is what laid the theoretical groundwork for him to compile his first queer anthology *Instrucciones para cruzar el espejo*. In an interview with Jesús Dueñas Becerra, Garrandés observes that the anthology exists because queer studies exists. He also says that “everything falls apart” with this mode of inquiry. When Garrandés says “everything falls apart” in relation to queer studies in reference to his critique of the impulse to categorize human sexuality at all. Garrandés is skeptical of the category of queer and its ability to separate some people from other people. He asks: who gets to decide what is queer and what is not? If queer studies and queer theory is about disrupting categories, then how

do writers determine what is inside and outside of the “queer” category? For Garrandés queer studies as a mode of inquiry that “is (or wishes to be) socially and culturally hegemonic.” After recognizing the problems with a queer studies approach, he says that he is still going to “yield to temptation” and use the term to frame his anthology. The ability of Garrandés to recognize that he is part of a hegemonic cultural process, have a philosophical conversation about that process, and still use the term shows that he is negotiating both cultural imperialism and his own desire to use a framework he deems useful. Garrandés could simply call his collection of stories a collection of “*cuentos homoeróticos*” as other Cubans do, yet his use of the term “queer” to organize his anthology suggests that something Garrandés is seeking to produce a new cultural form. The term “queer” evokes a certain type of story that “*cuentos homoeróticos*” cannot. The appropriation of this term in Garrandés’ anthology marks his anthology as a new cultural product that has been produced by the reading of North American queer theory in Havana. The space in which this text was produced was a contact zone where foreign ideas about gender and sexuality collided with local ones to create something entirely new.

The last document in the archive I would like to mention is a 2014 conference program called “What is Queer Studies?” The conference was part of the bicentennial celebration of nineteenth-century Cuban author Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda, a renowned author who challenged gender norms and critiqued the institution of slavery in Cuba. The “What is Queer Studies” panel features various Cuban scholars and is labeled a “tribute to Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda.” Queer theory is described on the panel pamphlet as a new “polemic” theory that serves as a “cultural anchor.” The existence of a queer studies panel at a cultural event in Havana that is meant to commemorate the work of a well-known Cuban writer shows that queer studies is a highly visible and emerging mode

of inquiry in contemporary Havana. The number of *Habanero* authors and scholars are adopting this framework seems to be growing. If this movement continues, queer studies may become a more visible field that could eventually have a home at institutions like the University of Havana.

In summarizing my findings about the emergence of North American queer theory, and more specifically the emergence of Judith Butler, in contemporary Havana, three key findings emerge: 1) the term *queer* is primarily understood in Havana as a post-structuralist theoretical concept and has been used in Cuban literature as such; 2) performativity is an adaptable and localizable concept to everyday expressions of gender and sexuality in Havana; and, 3) queer studies is a very small but growing field in Havana. Through examining formal conversations between Cuban authors and North American queer theorists, I have come to two conclusions about the reading of queer theory in Havana. The space in which queer theory, which I view as a North American product, and Havana's intellectual and literary cultural producers meet is a contact zone that is mediated both by cultural imperialism and individual agency. My second conclusion is that the particular queer theory concept that seems most localizable, and thus most chosen by Cuban authors, is performativity. I theorize that the adoption and appropriation of this particular concept is due to the performative nature of life in Havana, a place that has a long history of state surveillance and multiple underground marketplaces. Since this study is a preliminary study, it leaves many questions unanswered. In future research, I hope to use of ethnographic methods to gather more specific information from Cuban authors about how they read foreign queer theory and where they get their books. The larger project, that extends beyond the Cuba Literaria archive, invites larger questions about American queer hegemony, processes of cultural

exchange in non-capitalist nations, and how new ideas about gender and sexuality get transmitted via globalization.