Counter fictions from the margins

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2020

Abstract

In 2019, I embarked in an art and game world tour in order to decentralize myself and my curatorial and artistic practice to promote voices and creations that have been placed on the margins of the hegemonic west and have been invisibilized thanks to cultural imperialism. By choosing to travel, meet and interview artists and game developers with a queer, feminist and decolonial focus, I wanted to go to the edge of the margins, that is to say, to hear and make heard the voices of those who are on the margins of their society in souths countries. If marginalized populations are not looking for representations in the media according to Adrienne Shaw, it is often because when these representations are present, they are only caricatures and it is up to the content producers to take in charge the representation issue by offering more diversity. If for bell hooks non-white women speak out and become part of the theory and feminism becomes a matter for everyone to rethink the structure of society as a whole and thus break down the hegemony of patriarchy and capitalism, then feminism will make sense and allow for a society without oppression of gender, class, race, or sexual orientation. My tour of the world on the margins plans to focus on content producers who offer counter-fictions to elaborate a "counter-hegemony" in the face of the dominant powers.

Keywords: margins, counter fictions, hybrid identities, intersectionality, Locus of speech, people of color, queer, feminism, decolonial, african feminism, african futurism

At the edge of the margins

Only the study of the "margins" leads to an understanding of what is occurring at the "center". These precepts, drawn from the teaching of Bruno Etienne[i], sociologist of the margins of modern society, speaking to us of the anthropological vision that

observes what is at stake in distant societies in order to better understand our own (Levi-Strauss, 1995, 1961), resonate with the reading of *Feminist Theory from the margins to the center* by bell hooks[ii]. The notion that the center cannot think of itself, nor be aware of its own privileges, runs through bell hooks' thinking when she reminds feminists that the feeling of fighting all together, against one common enemy, the male, is actually pure fiction. First because black men are as oppressive as they are oppressed by white supremacy, and white women can simultaneously experience sexist oppression and be oppressive when they dominate other human beings in a racial and/or class domination.

> « White women and black men have it both ways. They can act as oppressor or be oppressed. Black men may be victimized by racism, but sexism allows them to act as exploiters and oppressors of women. White women may be victimized by sexism, but racism enables them to act as exploiters and oppressors of black people. » (hooks, 1984, p 16)

She demonstrates that black women feel more solidarity with black men in their struggle to overcome racist and classist oppression than with feminists who have women of color at their service and do not take into account their specific struggles to end racism and classism. And in this struggle, black men are "our comrades". (hooks, 1984, p. 82) Moreover, when black women try to criticize liberal feminism, they are perceived as aggressive and as challenging the whole system, even though they are just trying to get their particular position recognized.

Therefore, bell hooks states that the feminist struggle is not the struggle of all women, but that feminists defend first and foremost their own interests, those of white middle and upper-class women, in a neo-liberal logic of protecting their own privileges by imposing "dominant values" (Foulque quoted in hooks, 1984, p. 8). She advocates for less competition between women and more solidarity in order to change the conditions of work of all men and women. In the America of the 80s, women of color are still poorly integrated into the feminist movement and almost absent from the elaboration of a feminist theory. When bell hooks studies Women Studies at Stanford University, people of color are virtually non-existent. More than 30 years later, people of color are still underrepresented in the most prestigious Universities, in Europe, (Gay, 2015, p. 18) in the United States, but also in Brazil where the afro Brazilian population represents more than 50% of the entire population. (Ribeiro, 2017) Moreover, when women fight for equal rights with men by

asking to work and get out of their leisure lives, it is clear that they do not take into account the lives nor conditions of working-class women nor women of color who do work hard and whose work is not liberating them at all.

bell hooks then invite women of color to think from this particular perspective, which is that of the margin, at the edge of the "center," the "system," "society" or dominant ideologies. On the margin of the norm, which by default is white. Because women of color do not only suffer a sexist oppression, but also a racist and classist domination, they are doubly the "Other" in the words of the Portuguese artist and philosopher Grada Kilomba, referring to the Other theorized by Simone de Beauvoir in *Le Deuxième Sexe*: the other of the black man and the other of the white woman. According to Ribeiro,

> "Black women have been placed in various discourses that alter our reality: a debate on racism where the subject is the black man; a gendered discourse where the subject is the white woman; and a class discourse where the notion of "race" has no place. We occupy a very critical place, in theory. And it is because of this ideological lack, argues Heidi Safia Mirza, that black women inhabit an empty space, a space that crosses the margins of "race" and gender, what can be called a "third space" (Ribeiro, 2017, p. 38).

It is from this space on the margins, from this particular place, that bell hooks insists that black women thought can and must unfold to propose a true feminist revolution aimed at eradicating all forms of oppression: of gender, sex or race. She recognizes however in the forward to the 2000 edition that feminism hasn't eradicated patriarchy nor capitalism and for that reason its gains are still very precarious, and I would argue especially in souths countries.

This is what I realized when I went to meet feminists in more than 13 countries of the souths. I decided to embark on a [world tour](#) "outside the American and European beaten paths", (Acker, 2019) to meet digital artists and independent developers and to come back with a more nuanced overview of the different ways gaming communities across the world are exploring the issue of diversity, with an emphasis on female, queer and decolonial practices. If Western countries have recently realized the need to promote gender, sexuality, and race diversity in video games and in the contemporary artworld, with the organization of events such as GaymerX

or Rainbow Arcade, to name a few, I wanted to better understand the situation of marginalized populations in souths countries. The condition of women, their experiences of the colonization in their country and the much higher rate of poverty relativize the picture of the progression of feminist ideas and the eradication of systems of oppression. It also shows that we can hardly speak for all women of color as if we speak from our experiences, the set of realities differ from continent to an other and from country to the other.

There are countries where expressing your feminist views are still at risk. Just to give one exemple, starting my research in South Korea, I interviewed a group of feminist gamers called the Famerz who asked me to remain anonymous to preserve their safety in the society and in their company. They told me about the t-shirt gate affair (Arvers, 2019) that shows how in the 21st century it is still possible to be excluded from a company for having feminist statements and how women and men who defend the feminist cause had to make a public apology to the players. This very unique example shows how feminist ideas and realities differ from one side of the world to the other.

From the "Locus of speech" to situated knowledge

By invoking the locus of speech, to deconstruct female or feminist identity, in their essentialist biases bell hooks articulates what is later theorized by Situated Knowledges. Speaking from a specific situation as a feminist critic to scientific objectivity:

> "in scientific and technological, late-industrial, militarized, racist, and male-dominant societies... in the belly of the monster, in the United States in the late 1980s" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581).

A thought situated in time, space but also according to social and historical conditions and the perspective from which a person speaks and from which they form their knowledge. A thought influenced by class, gender, race, and sexual orientation but also by the environment, the social and historical context, education and interrelations with oneself and the others. A thinking that is formed from lived experiences and realities interconnected with social, cultural, and political conditions.

If bell hooks, as an African American woman, experienced segregation, racism, and life on the margins of society in her childhood, when she evoked the frontier that separated her neighborhood from that of white people, by becoming a researcher

and a theorist, she later becomes part of an elite who nevertheless wished to speak for all black women. However, she cannot base herself on her experiences to express words and realities that are not her own.

And the first criticism that can be made here is that there is a certain condescension at bell hooks when she talks about the invisible people, those who do not speak for them. What is disturbing is that her plea to adopt a language that is accessible to all is stated in a very academic way and therefore cannot reach the greatest number of people nor those in whose name she speaks.

> "For many black and Latin American feminists, thinking about how dominant language can be used as a way to maintain power is fundamental, since it excludes individuals who have been alienated from the opportunities of a just education system. Language, depending on the way it is used, can be a barrier to understanding, and can create more spaces for power than for sharing, in addition to being one of the obstacles to transgressive education". (Ribeiro, 2017, p. 25)

Moreover, the place from which bell hooks speaks represents another hegemonic center, since she writes from the United States, that is, in the West, putting the rest of the world on its periphery, under its cultural imperialism. But also speaks from a context that does not embrace the experiences of colonized or migrant people in most of the souths countries. For if nearly 40 years have passed since her writings and feminism has known almost four waves, Afro-feminist theory has developed, but it is above all the voices of American Afro-feminists who have made themselves heard, those of bell hooks, Angela Davis, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrisson to name just a few. We must wait for post-colonial and decolonial feminism for the voices of the souths to be taken into account.

Decolonizing feminism

French afro feminists are asking for a better consideration of the colonialist and slavery heritage to apprehend women of color conditions and experiences. Decolonial feminism also demonstrates the importance of reading theoreticians and authors from the souths, to read and be influenced by black authors, African writers, Asian, afro Latin American theoreticians. Djamila Ribeiro recalls that while being a student at the Sao Paulo University, there was no black professor nor black authors in the program, knowing that more than half of the population is afro Brazilian, it is a

huge under representation. (Ribeiro, 2017). French decolonial feminism, also reminds us that at the very moment when American and European feminists are fighting to defend the right to abortion, a massive campaign of sterilization is taking place in souths countries to avoid overpopulation. From 1960 to 1980, women, in Reunion Island, who are targeted by this ban on having children are "poor women, black or otherwise, are 6,000 to 8,000 to be aborted each year. Without consent, as well as for their sterilization"[iii]. (Vergès, 2017, online?) Djamila Ribeiro also mentions a study by Jurema Werneck[iv] on the forced sterilization of black women in Brazil during the 80' and how a movement for the emancipation of black women rise to denounce it and allowed the opening of a commission of inquiry on sterilization. (Ribeiro, 2017, p. 42)

bell hooks therefore does not speak for all women of color because the colonized also suffer another kind of oppression, that of a cultural imperialism that imposes values, language and culture on human beings who then have to think and speak with the words and through the representations of the world of others. A thought that cannot be articulated in one's own language is a colonized thought. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, a Kenyan novel and theater author decided one day not to write in English anymore and declared "This book is my farewell to English" and started to write only in kikuyu, his own tongue. Colonization by imposing a language and a culture has alienated from themselves people who had to learn to hate themselves, their culture, their appearance, their clothing, and who learned about the world through Western representations. "To control the culture of a people is to control the representation that it makes of itself and its relationship with others." (Thiongo, 1986, p. 38)

By being forced to think of them through western representations, they became the "Other of Europe", unable to be thought as subjects, only as objects of studies. Suggests Spivak,

> « For the 'true' subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and speak itself; the intellectual's solution is not to abstain from representation. The problem is that the subject's itinerary has not been traced so as to offer an object of seduction to the representing intellectual. »[v] (Spivak, 2010, pp. 271–313)

While separating them of their cultures, literature, tales and poems, learning becomes a "cerebral matter" and not a sensitive experience. Their imagination started to be built with Eurocentric ways of perceiving the world, European history, European geography, and European culture.   As such, my research intends to

highlight the process of decolonization of ideas, works and video game productions in formerly colonized countries. To present other visions of the world, other representations, other histories, aesthetics, languages, environments.

Talking about feminism in China with Jang Ying, an art and game curator based in Hong Kong, who I interviewed in Korea also showed me how feminism has an other meaning for women in a communist society where men and women are supposedly equal and made me realize how feminism is fundamentally first seen through a western lens.

How, from her position as an African American theorist, can bell hooks speak for all women of color? Her theory is mostly linked to the condition of black American women and fails to cover the situation and the condition of all women of colors. As Hazel T. Biana puts it:

> The question, however, is whether hooks' theory include all the other "colors" aside from black? While she is concerned with the welfare of black people, how does her concern come into play within the global politics of oppression? Speaking of first world blackness may necessarily be problematic if presented to a third world brown woman who may have never experienced the first world contrast of black and white. Racism could also be experienced from other vantage points, not only the black vantage point.[vi]

The experience of blackness is different for women in Africa than it is in the United States or in Brazil. As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recounts in her novel *Americanah*, she discovered she was black when she arrived in America. Before, in Nigeria, she was Nigerian and in Nigeria and in many countries from the souths, poverty makes a huge difference in the way women are oppressed. (Adichie, 2013) The emergence of an African feminism also shows that there is a need to separate from Western conceptions and from the imposition of Western norms and concepts and to move closer to African culture, even if the expression of African culture is problematic, because it essentializes Africa, whereas each country, each region and each ethnic represents extremely different realities. The notion of gender or nuclear family, for example, and the related systems of oppression that depend on patriarchy do not exist under the same conditions in Africa and are Western feminist constructions. (Calheiro, Oliveira, 2018) Gender as it is thought in western societies is a social construction that was imposed by colonizers to African populations. In Yoruba culture, the notions of gender are more fluid and there are no words to differentiate a

son and a daughter or a wife and a husband. (Oyewùmí, 1997)

> "In the classic work "The Invention of Women: An African Perspective on Western Discourses of the Gender", Oyewùmí (1997) is inclined to discuss gender in African studies by situating the issue of women as a problem, which in the Western view, when oppressed they would be for patriarchy and in any society, however, she points out that in Yoruba society (West Africa) the social category "woman" anatomically identified and assumed as a socially disadvantaged victim - does not exist. Their study shows the absence of gender in the old Oyó, noting that the time of the genus in this society arrived in the colonial period."

Figure 1 21-Arvers-VaBene.jpeg

The transgender activist and performer Va Bene, who funded Piarts, an art residency in Kumasi in Ghana also confirmed to me during an interview that in Ewe, which is an ethnicity present in Ghana and in Togo) the education isn't gendered in terms of domestic tasks. Young girls and boys learn how to cook indifferently. While in Togo, I also discovered some differences in terms of gender consideration of women

conditions in the society during an interview of Sename Koffi, architect and anthropologist and the curator of Lome +, an exhibition dedicated to the past, the present and the future of the town. It is interesting to note that Sename Koffi just declared himself candidate for the next Togolese presidential elections in 5 years. Sename told me about the power of women in Togo and how women "made economically and politically"[vii] their country. Telling me the story of the "nana benz", these women who made their fortune by selling and exporting wax fabrics. Their support to put in place independence in the country has been recognized. (Arvers, 2020) I also interviewed Haya Haden who is currently directing a documentary about her grandmother "Sur les pas de ma grand-mère"[viii]. A woman who was very poor and couldn't speak in French but who was one of the most proeminent opposant to the political regime and one of the last alived woman to have been part of the independancy struggle. Patrícia Gomes (2015, 2017) and Ângela Sofia Coutinho (2017) also emphasize the importance of the participation of women in the independence struggle in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde.

African feminism

African feminism differs from Western thought in that it is based on women's experiences in the everyday life, their collective way of living and collaborating within the community. By getting closer to the culture and traditions, it allows to have a vision of feminism different than the "underdogs for Western ideologies" (Kolawole, 1997, p. 7)

> "African feminism must be located in the teaching of African spirituality, that is, African Indigenous ways of knowing and, in particular, on the issue of creation where Africans are taught that man and woman were created simultaneously; none came before the other … Also, the importance of complementary roles both female and male play in both domestic and public spheres–I am not sure where this superiority of men came from, it does not exist in my culture "…. (PW, 2007).1

African feminism is based on indigenous ways of knowing that rely on ancestral knowledge as a method of learning, knowledge that is passed on from grand mother to mother and from mother to daughter. The art of child molding that is transmitted by the community, which takes place during the first week after the birth of the child is an exemple. African feminism is based on indigenous ways of knowing and learning, through the observation of the elders, the collective, the community, but also in a

symbiotic relationship with nature, the elements and the spiritual worlds. (Waine 2011)

> Capp and Jorgensen (1997) note that "Indigenous knowledge is generally transmitted orally, experientially, and is not written, but is learned through handson experience and not taught in an abstract context. Its parameters are holistic, nonlinear and reflect a qualitative and intuitive mode of thinking. Rather than rely on explicit hypotheses, theories and laws, Indigenous knowledge is spiritual, cumulative and collective knowledge that is constantly renewed."

It is necessary to multiply the points of view, to look at the world through different prisms and through texts conceived by the populations themselves. Why doesn't she give a voice to these women rather than thinking about their position in society? It is thus necessary to multiply points of view in order to deconstruct as many norms as possible: feminine/masculine, but also boundaries between natural and artificial, animal and human (Haraway, 1985; 1991) and the hegemonic center and all its peripheries.

The space of the web and its less hierarchical structure can allow the hatching of previously invisible and unheard voices. Amandine Gay and Djamila Ribeiro both refer to blogs, podcats, and forums, that allow the emergence of invisible words, a word that is not that of the expert. When I meet Marta de Menezes in Lisbon in September 2020, she presents me the "*FEMeeting: Women in Art, Science and Technology*"[ix] meeting as a "direct collaboration between individuals who identify themselves as Women, independently of their sex and explained that in FEMeeting, each one has something to say. Itt is not necessary to be an intellectual, a scientist or an artist, anyone who can identify herself as a woman can speak. This is new in academic circles. In *CYBORGRRRLS: Encuentro Tecnofeminista*[x], the feminist encounters funded by Constanza Pina in Mexico city, all the participants give workshops, and everyone has something to learn from each other. During a residency I made in Brazil at ruralscapes in 2016 and then in Platohedro in Colombia in 2018, I had the chance to experiment new types of artistic colloborations where ancestral and vernacular knowledge and digital technologies awee mixed. In the idea of not hierarchizing knowledge and using digital and technologies to discuss and make visible ancestral knowledge that is forgotten, I could experiment knowledge and practices exchange with women, elderlies and kids.

Intersectionality to deconstruct social and political fictions

Bell hooks uses the idea of the interconnectedness of racial, class and gender systems of oppression to think about the place of black women in American society and lays the groundwork for intersectional feminist approach (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw, a civil rights activist in the United States, demonstrated that U.S. law failed to combine gender and race discrimination, even though most violence against black women involved different types of discrimination overlapping each other. By extension, intersectional thinking explores the plurality of oppressive systems of gender, race, class, sexual orientation and disability and shows how their interaction produces social inequality. Intersectionality allows us to start thinking about the complexity and multiplicity of identities.

For operating this "step sideways" makes it possible to apprehend the center from the margin in a more complex way and to analyze the interrelationships between the different systems of oppression at work in society and to deconstruct fictions such as that of an essentialist feminist identity or a national identity.

These institutionalised fictions are « Imaginary communities » according to Adrienne Shaw quoting Stuart Hall describing the process of nation building as:

> « To put it crudely, however different its members may be in terms of
> class, gender, or race, a national culture unify them in one cultural identity,
> to represent them as belonging to the same great national family » (Hill,
> quoted in Shaw, 2014)

Fictions imagined by the hegemonic center to arouse the adhesion of the crowds, but which in no way allows to think about the complexity of identity and representation matters.

To grasp the question of representation in video games, Adrienne Shaw sets out to meet people on the bangs of the dominant video game culture built around a stereotypical image of the player: the heterosexual white male American cisgender.

> "To find out what people who are seen at the edges of this constructed
> market think about representation and identification with game characters.
> Using online survey and fliers posted online and throughout various
> Philadelphia neighborhoods, I sought out interviewers who were not male
> identified not solely white identified and/or not heterosexual identified. "i
> (Shaw, 2014, p. 42)

What Adrienne Show first demonstrates is that the interviewees, on the edge of a default gender or a default heterosexuality, do not necessarily identify with one or more of these identifiers. In the same way that bell hooks deconstructs the particular position of black women in American society in the 1970s and 1980s, Adrienne Shaw deconstructs the different identities to which a human being can relate and demonstrates that being part of a group do not significate to identify with all the identifiers of that group. She goes on to point out that just because you identify yourself as part of a marginalized group does not mean that you identify with a character in the game who is supposed to represent that group. Like, not all black men and women are the same, not all the queer people behave in the same way and that not all women want the same things or identify to one or several of these identifiers. Especially because of gender, race and sexist stereotypes,

> "A femme woman of color... will probably not be recognised as lesbian,
> first because she is not white, and then because she is not butch"[xi]
> (Walker quoted in, Shaw, 2014, p. 16)

If for their interviewees, the representation issue in games isn't "that important", it's first because representation is intrinsically linked to the identification issue for them. Adrienne Shaw explains that they will more identify with life experiences and emotions than with characters who are "like them" or who are potentially supposed to represent them by "a kind of carefully regulated segregated visibility". (Hill, quoted in Shaw, 2014, p.19) Beyond an essentialist vision of identity that suggests that our race, our gender, our sexual orientation defines us, the process of identification is much more complex and will depend on our background, our encounters, our life moments.

> "In her essay *Travels in Nowhere Land,* Bird argues that "we must try to
> see how media use hits into the entire complex web of culture,
> underdtanding how it articulates with such factors as class, gender, race,
> leisure and work habits and countless other variables" (Shaw, 2014, p. 47)

Hybrid identities

It then raises the question of hybrid identities that do not conform to the class, gender or sex stereotypes proposed by most of the texts contained in the media, whether books, films, or video games. She denounces community marketing attempts to attract different minority communities by targeting them in a very stereotypical way

and gives the example of the market for girls' games, which, in the lineage of Barbie games, perpetuate a binary vision of gender. What Judith Butler has conceptualized as gender performance and gender role assignment by the dominant culture. The two authors thus set out to challenge a stereotypical view of gender, sex, and class identity and show how each human being is a very particular mix of all these identifiers, and that depending on education, cultural background, and environment, these identifiers are likely to evolve and change. Each one speaks of a different place and time, bell hooks is an Afro-American feminist and Adrienne Shaw defines herself as a middle class American queer woman. Identity, like gender, are not rigid or immovable concepts, but to be understood in their interrelationship, their transformation, their fluidity.

Figure 2: 22 Arvers- i is an other capture

In my first machinima video, *I is an other*[xii], I address the question of multiple identities based on the premise that what founds us are all those others we have inside ourselves, our roots, our ancestors, our social interactions. (Arvers, 2012) And rather than thinking of the other as external to myself, I assume that I am someone else and that the more I meet others, the more I learn about myself, and the more I am able to understand the other inside me. We are all strangers to someone, somewhere. Our difference is what allows us to be with others and to interact with the world. The other is not one that should scare us because it is different. This is not necessarily, an alien, an enemy, a zombie, a terrorist, or a villain; like in most of the games. The other can be a collaborator, a friend, a stranger who helps us, who

dialogues with us and hears us, sustains us, accompanies us. On the web and in video games, our identity is based on our interactions, on what we produce.

> « As players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction »[xiii] (Turkle, 1996)

As highlighted by A. Giddens, the identity of an individual is based on its ability to create and maintain a narrative on what he thinks of himself. (Giddens, 1991) Our identity is then defined by the discourse that we make about ourselves for the others. This is where the work done through the détournement of game engines in machinima reformulates and plays with these identity questions. Adrienne Shaw points out, that there is a need to rethink issues of identification and representation in the light of critical identity theory and move beyond an intersectional approach. As an example, she cites the words of one of her interviewees:

> "I look white-ish and I don't speak Spanish, so I was always the gringo in Miami. And then I come up here and I've had people say that I am not white. And I'm always confused. (…) As Davon articulated, however, he did not see himself as at the intersection per se. He was both and neither, which resonates more readily with Homi Bhabba's notion of "third space" than it does with intersectionality." (Shaw, 2014, p. 44)

This "third space" notion reflects the possibility in a human being's life to endorse multiple identities depending on cross cultural contexts and on the interaction with others. It deals with hybridation of cultures and the apparition of an "in between" space, at the interstice built upon the fusion of disparate identities.

> "..,the process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation." (Bhabba, quoted in Rutherford, 1990)

Which resonates with my personal childhood and teenagehood. Being French and white, I was born in France, raised by two descendants from different cultures. My father was born in the deep Tunisian south in a Maltese family and my grand father on my mother side was a Jewish Ukrainian. I built myself with other countries narratives, environments, with migratory social, political and psychological specific issues. Because we were moving from place to place due to my father's work, I also experienced a lot of racism and verbal and physical violence, and was always

considered as a stranger in France. I had to go to New York to finally be identified as a French person, because of my love for cheese and wine at the age of 18. Finally settling in Marseille, the "Un-French" city, I succeded not to be considered anymore as a stranger. (Arvers, 2021) The inner meaning of my machinima *I is an other* is related to these personal experiences of cross cultural identities built upon time, meetings, life experiences that shape ourselves along our lifes.

> "Selves - and their identities - are formed through relationships of exteriority, conflict and exclusion. Differences can be found within identities as well as between them. The Other, against whose resistance the integrity of an identity is to be established, can be recognised as part of the self that is no longer pausibly understood as a unitary entity but appears instead as one fragile moment in the dialogic curcuits." (Gilroy, quoted in Shaw, 2014, p. 77)

Intercultural storytelling

In her book Adrienne Shaw principally focuses on issues of representation and identification of her interviewees with one or more game characters, but questions rarely the notion of representation of the environments in which the characters evolve. As she explains, it is hard to identify with a "cursor" as characters are sometimes seen by players, but what about the environement in which they play, the sets, the vegetation, the urban architecture, the surrounding sounds? Very rarely, her book addresses the notion of representation of non-Western game environments, nor of stories whose contexts that aren't related to Western history and imaginations.

It seems to me that scenery, music, spaces, cities, types of social or economic organization other than those imposed in most o f *Triple A* games should also be addressed in terms of representation. Whether or not the games are a reflection of reality, they give a certain representation of it, unfold a morality, a vision of the world that is generally that of Europe or the United States. When I was in India looking for games and works that could help me understand the culture, history or politics of a country, I met game designers who were concerned about being able to play inside other spaces, other cultural representations, other ways of representing reality.
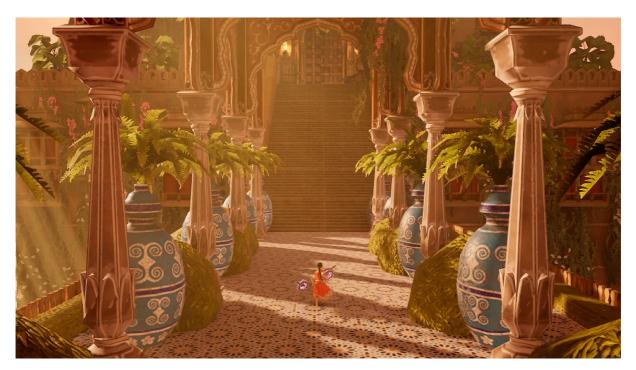
Figure 3: 23-Arvers-raji_an_ancient_epic_review_cover

While in Pune, to give a Machinima workshop to MIT Cinema students, I interviewed the independent game studio *Noddingheads* in October 2019. Founded by three people, Ian Maude, Shruti Ghosh and Avichal Singh, Noddingheads aimed to create one of the most ambitious games in India around a tale rooted in the history of ancient India. The idea for *Raji*, an adventure and action game set in ancient India with many environmental puzzles and many "mandala" puzzles, came from a vacation trip to Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, in 2014. The medieval architecture of this small town captivated and inspired the team. They then began to dream of being able to play in a game that would take place in this type of setting. Because, as Avichal Singh declared:

> "We feel that there is a definite need to represent Indian culture through *Raji,* which adds to the authenticity of the game. We don't want the game to be about India alone, we want the players to feel present, to marvel at the majestic splendor of both the environment and the culture. Another aspect of Raji's universe is the original soundtrack, we think it adds another layer of mysticism that was designed using traditional instruments. Then there are the "Mandalas", they are unique mechanics to this particular universe, knowledge and mythological creatures take influences from epics like "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata""[xiv]

In terms of representation, it also uses the shadow theater technics and the inversed sculpture to immerse more deeeply into different ways of representing things

proper to India.

Similarly, when I meet the studio Holy Cow Productions located in Bangalore, Goutham Dindukurthi one of its founders tells me about his need to be better represented as people of color in video games but also in a more multicultural way and introduces me to their latest production. *Mystic Pillars* is a mathematical puzzle game set in the southern part of ancient India. With more than 100 logical puzzles to solve, the player embodies a mysterious traveler who travels through the kingdom of Zampi. His goal is to prevent a drought by solving puzzles and destroying pillars blocking the water. Available in over 20 languages - English, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Russian, Chinese (simplified and traditional), Japanese, Korean, Portuguese EU, Polish, Turkish, Portuguese BR, as well as Hindi, Kannada, Telugu, Tamil, Arabic, Catalan, Hebrew. It should be noted that the voice-over is available in English but also in Kannada, the local language in Bangalore, in order to reinforce the immersive part in the narration of the game which is inspired by a traditional African game also found in South India: the *Awale* game.

As we previously said the monopolistic use of english and occidental sounds and music in most of the texts needs to be decolonized as it doesn't allow an immersion in different types of environnements and diverse cultures.

Representing members of marginalized groups is important when it leads to more diversity in representation and not to pluralism, as discussed by Adrienne Shaw. However I would argue that it is also important to offer more diverse stories representing other cultures less visible because marginalized by American cultural imperialism or made invisible through colonial history. To tell stories from this "third space" by reappropriating one's history but from one's own point of view. And in this I join Adrienne Shaw when she concludes:

> "The goal in increasing representation in games is not expanding customization options but rather making more games that reflect more modes of being in the world." (Shaw, 2014, p. 143)

Because she demonstrates that the issue of the representation of marginalized groups is usually put in the "hands" of the players, leaving them the possibility of representing themselves differently than the default heterosexual white man, and because sexualities on the margins also depend on the players' willingness to push the "gay button", to use Anna Anthropy's expression, it seems essential today to queer video game narratives. To bring other visions of the world, not only by allowing

players to customize their characters to make them similar, or to have same sex relationships, but by modifying the default criteria for character design and by offering stories outside of the hetero patriarchy and Western hegemonic history.

Counter fictions from the margins

This is what motivated my search for queer, feminist and decolonial games and artworks in the souths. To find other stories told by those who have been the protagonists of invisibilisation or from their descendants. And to start, games created by indigenous people, like *ITA*, a game created by Daniela Fernandez in Buenos Aires. Daniela Fernandez is a descendant of guaranis, indigenous people from North Argentina in Chaco. In the desire to go in search of their past, their culture, their traditions, and to make known the indigenous myths and beliefs, which have been almost eradicated by colonialism, she created *ITA*, who is her self portrait. During our interview in Buenos Aires in November 2019, Daniela explained:

> "This project is an attempt to recover through play the stories I was told during my childhood. The magical world of the Eternal Night is a tribute to my ancestors, to the original Qom and Guarani peoples (former opponents), who inhabited the Gran Chaco and whose legends are still alive today in the inhabitants of their lands."[xv]

To allow these voices, these silenced stories to be seen, heard and played, experimented and to join Gayatri Spivak's post-colonial thinking by highlighting knowledge produced by groups that were once the subordinates of Europe, I argue there is a need to decolonize art and videogames through the promotion of diversity in gender, race and sexuality. To tell stories, but from an other point of view, from a resisting point of view.

> "What we are saying in short, therefore, is that we want and demand that the history of slavery in Brazil should be told from our point of view, and not only from that of the one who conquered, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin (…) I insist: in spite of the limits imposed, the dissonant voices managed to make noise and flay the hegemonic narrative." (Ribeiro, 2017, p.86-87)

Figure 4 24 Arvers -ANGOLA-JANGA

These voices, these representations of the world, these points of view must also exist in video games. During my stopover in Sao Paulo, I met the Afro-Brazilian game studio *Sue The Real* founded by Raquel Motta and Marcos Silva, with the aim of creating experiences with emotional and social impact through games with Afro-Brazilian themes. They created *Angola Janga: Picada dos Sonhosi,* a 2D game based on the book *Angola Janga* by Marcelo D'salete. Angola Janga was a Quilombo. The Quilombos were settlements of former slaves or slavery survivors who escaped in the mountains and lived under their own government inspired by African laws. They founded Angola Janga, meaning, "little Angola"[xvi] In the 2D game *Angola Janga*, we have to help Soares and Andala to find the long dreamed path to reach Quilombo de Palmares.

> "In our authoring games, we like to address introspection, representativeness and ancestry, connecting the player to simple premises, which can entertain, vibrate and raise awareness through the game. »[xvii]

There is therefore a need to reappropriate the narrative about slavery history and from the point of view of descendants who will present some strong resisting figures to colonialism and slavery as heroes and games protagonists. A strategy to avoid the stereotypical use of under-represented people in video games, that Adrienne Shaw evokes by studying *Resident Evil 5,* whose protagonist is a white man and in which all people of color are represented in a hostile way, and not only when transformed into zombies. The plot unfolds not as Shaw mentions in an "African village" but rather in Kenya. I learn this when I'm in Nairobi myself in November 2020, helding a machinima workshop around traditional Kenyan tales. In the desire to mix Kenyan

stories and virtual play environments, we need assets of huts and local markets. Dennis Mbuthia, professor of game design at the African Digital Media Institute, who participates to the workshop, tells me that we might be able to find them in *Resident Evil 5*. When we start playing it, I see the faces smiling as the characters speak in Swahili. However, to return to the issue of the representation of people of color in a game designed for the American market, *Resident Evil 5* gives a colonialist vision of a declining, poor and hostile Africa, that the workshoop participants obviously didn't enjoy.

> "Focusing on the representations of the African zombies, throug the eyes of a Western protagonist, and produced by a Japanese gaming company, *Resident Evil* 5 depicts the decaying African state characterized by the ruins of colonialism. The subaltern of African are already seen as zombies in many ways in that they are not only regarded but also depicted as disfranchised mobs, viewed in the West only in context of footage protests, and civil war." (Geyser, Tschabalala, quoted in Shaw, 2014, p.179)

An imagery that Limpho Dee Moeti wants to change and reappropriate. Limpho Dee Meti is game producer at *Nyamakop,* an independent game studio based in Cape Town, South Africa, one of the few studio mainly composed of people of color (the only one in South Africa) and in which half of them are women. During her presentation at the *Art & Games World Tour - Africa session* that I curated for the *Amaze* Festival in August 2020, Limpho insisted on the imperative to give another image of Africa, the diversity of its cultures and its wealth through video games. *Nyamakop* is currently working on the production of an African futurist game where you reclaim African artefacts back from western museums. For this game, they take the cultures as they are and ask, what are these specific cultures be like in 100 or 200 years with technology? How will this culture marry with certain technology? What are the beliefs of this particular culture, and then wander how they could show that. How they could show the continent or at least the cities in which they want the game being set in a futuristic set?

> "It is amazing to take our culture and to imagine it in a positive and in a futuristic light. I think that there is still the assumption to a degree, that African cultures are backwards or primitive or behind in some ways. So, for a game like this, it has been really interesting to break these ideas."[xviii]

Inspired by the richness of the music, the fashion, and the culture, it intends to

present an African futurist text that would represent a counter narrative to how the West sees Africa and even to show to the African diaspora that other narratives are possible. Discussing the difference between Afro Futurism and African Futurism, Limpho presents Afro futurism as a "African diaspora thing" that imagines the continent as if there was no colonialism.

> "It has a tendency to what I refer to "Wakandification"[xix] Wakanda, this imaginary country in Black Panthers that takes authenticism of more than one culture and blend them together to create a more futuristic sense of Africa. African science fiction is more tight to that thing of authenticity, to telling stories from the continent, with the perspective of the continent, but imagined in the future. And for me, it is not one that run away or that is shy from the past, but also it feels as more hope in terms of where Africa could be in the future. Sometimes, I find that the diaspora has not a lot of faith on the continent."[xx]

Her next game will be an african fantasy game, a genre that also needs to be decolonized according to Limpho's word as she deplores the lack of diversity in fantasy genre. "We have very rigid ideas of how fantasy should look like and the kind of stories that are told. The kind of sets where they are told are quite limiting." and points ironically: "Like, all the fantasy happends in middle ages in Europe! Of course, that's where all the magic is!" She also persue on explaining to me that there is a push from the people on the continent to tell different stories to disrupt this tendancy:

> "Because there is still this push to present Africa as the dark continent to wripe for exploration, it is so deshumanizaning! The big thing for me is that so many stories are about suffering and pain when there is so much more to tell than that! It is important to break away form the idea that what connect me with other people of color is just racism experiences or the stereotypes that we have to come up against. Especially on the continent, I think by just telling stories of poverty and pain, we create this image that this is the entirety of the black experience and it is not!"[xxi]

Figure 5: 25-Arvers Africa-legends-reawakening

To challenge this approach, studios like Kiro'o Games in Cameroon and Leti Arts in Ghana are developing African Fantasy games based entirely on African mythology and traditions. *Africa's legend* is a franchise developed by Leti Arts based on the creation of superheroes imagined starting at archetypes from different parts of Africa and developed into comic books and video games. Characters include *Ananse* the West African god of wisdom, king *Shaka Zulu* the warrior of South Africa and *Pharoah*, based on Egyptian rulers.   These heroes are inspired by stories or traditional icons of African folklore. Eyram Tawia thinks indeed that it is highly important to help new generations of African youth to believe in their country, on the possibility to become someone, a hero, in their own country, to start to identify to local heroes and heroic stories. That's also something that Eyram insisited on when we met, on the importance to promote more success stories coming from Africa. Leti Arts is currently producing *Africa's Legend Reawakening*, a massively multiplayer online AAA-type game designed for the pan-African mass market.

> "I strongly believe that video games are the only thing that is rseally missing on the African continent and I feel that Africa could benefit from this and develop very quickly to be on par with the West, like the games made in Finland, USA. And that is something that I believe in very much. "xxii

Figure 6 26-Arvers-Aurion

While *Aurion* imagines an Africa that would not have been colonized, the game is inspired by different African cultures and traditions, but also by real stories. The battle gear is Maasai, the outfits are Yoruba, Tuareg. The voice over is dubbed in Bassa dialect. Kiro'o is a name derived from "Kiroho Maono", which means "spiritual vision" in Swahili.

> "Auriona, the planet this fiction takes place upon, is made up of six continents each with their own ethnic group, all of whom are connected by a "horrible history." Importantly, as with Africa's history of colonization and slavery exportation, this trauma suffered in the past is something for the inhabitants of Auriona to overcome together. And so, the game focuses not on encouraging further cultural clashes but on uniting the people. Or, as the team put it, acting as "an ointment for [the peoples'] harmony." It's a fantasy that looks forward to a more positive future, rather than dwelling on the past.."[xxiii]

In terms of queering the narrative and decolonizing the inner structures of representation, the exemple of the upcoming MMO RPG game *The Wagadu Chronicles* represents a significant moment in the history of blackness and queer representation in video games. Developed by *Twin Drums*, a studio based in Berlin with a very diverse team including afro descendants, queer and female members. Their website announces: "Twin Drums was borne out of the desire to place diversity, and especially blackness and queerness, at the center. Eventually, we would like to study other "non-conventional" (non-Eurocentric & non-patriarchal) forms of

imaginary escapism." This seems to have gone very well, after a very successful Kickstarter campaign and the back up of *Riot Games*, famous for *League of Legend,* who decided to support under-represented communities, following Black Lives Matter movement and the death of Georges Floyd.

The Wagadu Chronicles is an Afrofantasy entirely based on African mythology and has been extremely well received by Afro-American players who feel dispossessed of their ancestry, cultures and knowledge and for whom, to be able to experience a pre-colonial Africa has been a much appreciated experience. The game is inspired by the Yoruba culture in Nigeria and Maasai culture in Kenya and shows how notions of queerness, gender or even hunt can be seen differently in certain African cultures as already seen in the previous chapter on African feminism.

A non binary option is availbable in one of the first lineage playable in the beta version inspired by Maasai, as Alan Cudicio, Twin Drums funder, half Italian and Ghanaian, wanted to show that queerness was part of African culture and has been partly erased by colonialism. A subject they develop in a thread[xxiv] on Twitter, which also joins my research during my stay in Nigeria, Ghana, Togo and Kenya. In these countries where homosexuality is illegal, I met LGBTQ artists and activists with whom we discussed the evils of colonialism, Victorian thought and missionaries on the supposed Un-Africanness of queerness. Interviewed by Alan Wen for the Verge magazine Cudicio asserts:

> "I'm not saying that Africa did not have patriarchy, but you also have many strong matriarchal elements. Women getting married to each other was a tool in many different cultures and had just as much value as marriage between man and woman. "[xxv]

Questions of spitituality, collaboration and symbiotic relationships with nature make it possible to rethink the notion of combat in a game like *Wagadu*. Alan Cudicio even thought of making a non-combat mode. But they finally decided to opt for a non Eurocentric vision of the question of combat or hunting. This is what I experienced myself in Togo, where we speak directly to the plants we are going to cut to thank them for what we are going to share with them. This spitituality and inter species collaboration is present in *Wagadu*:

> "A lot of games is nonconsensual killing and getting rewarded for it, whereas in *Wagadu*, and with nature, it's about consent," explains Cudicio.
> "That's like traditional Yoruba hunters of the south of Nigeria. When they

hunt, they chant a blessing and ask permission for the animal. In some cultures, you also ask for forgiveness or thank them afterwards. I think it's important to rethink hunting not as something that's very Western and capitalist — which is about the domination and destruction of nature — whereas in African societies it's about balancing and respecting it."[xxvi]

They conclude this interview by arguing that they prefer to create their own fantasy rather than claiming more representation for people of color in the current fantasy landscape. And in this, they not only allude to the characters, but to everything that makes culture and that can be represented: spaces, architecture, rituals, beliefs, etc.

"Let's look at what African weapons look like, what African armor looks like, what African magic spells look like, what African architecture looks like. That's what *The Wagadu Chronicles* is, and it's already more representation for Black people than 99 percent of fantasy or science fiction."

These are just a few examples of counter-fictions, but they show that new voices are emerging and being heard, and that they don't need others to be heard or to be liberated, but are taking care of it themselves : they speak up, become the subject of their creations.

Conclusion

"Europe is not my center. Europe is on the outskirts of Africa. After 100 years here, did they speak my language? I speak theirs. My future does not depend on Europe... Take the map of Africa, place Europe and America together and there's still room left. Why be a sunflower and turn toward the sun? I myself am the sun!"[xxvii]   Sembène Ousmane

You're always on the edge of someone, somewhere, at some point. The periphery is geographically variable but creates positions of speech from the "third space", that of the woman of color who is the other of the other, or that of hybrid identities where cultures, struggles, personal and collective experiences mingle with economic, social, political and historical context. Bell hooks advocates a revolutionary feminism that would change the very structures of society and challenge imperialism, patriarchy and capitalism. "Any effort to make feminist revolution here can be aided be the exemple if liberation struggles led by oppressed peoples globally who resist

formidable powers." Stories of resistance, success stories, stories from the other side of history, with an non euro centric point of view have to raise, not only from th emargins in the West but from all peripheries.

For Nawal El Saadawi, Revolutionary Egyptian feminist, emprisonned by Sadat for her ideas and who lived most of her life in exile precises : "Feminism is not a western invention, feminism was not invented by american women as many people think, no, feminism is embedded in the culture and in the struggle of all women all over the world. » And to to the question on how we can still change the world ? She answers in 2018:

> « We have to organize and to reeducate people to make people aware. Because people are brainwashed by media, by education, people don't know… We have to unteach them, to eradicate the very traditional bad education, so they will start to know their rights, and to battle for their rights. We need to continue the struggle « glocally » because we cannot fight alone in Egypt. It is an universal battle, an universal battle, but it has to start locally! » [xxviii]

New territories have to be explored under the layers of cultural and colonial imperialism, to make discuss technologies and ancestral knowledge based on collaborative, collective and indigenous knowledge and practices. To imagine how oral cultures and digital can mix to reveal words from the past, rituals, ancestral knowledge, struggles. To make the voices heard. To revive ancestrality and oral culture though indigenous and digital collaborations.

At the origin of the Machinima virtual storytelling workshop project I held in Lomé, Togo, in 2020, mixing traditional Togolese tales and Machinima, there is *Kantata. Kantata*, is a virtual memory project of the Togolese living art initiated in 2020 by Hodin Seynion, actor and author, which is born from the following observations.

> "Dean Eklu-Natey Ablodevi, actor, renowned storyteller, precursor of the Togolese oratory art is no more. We keep in our hearts and memories his theatrical scenes, his tales and his radiant smile of happiness. But when you Google his name, you will not see the full extent of his creativity, a great loss of heritage to pass on to the new generation. »[xxix]

By using digital technologies to document, distribute but also co-create, Kantata aimed to act as a virtual memory of oral traditions and cultures. In this text, written as a post in his blog to announce the restitution of our 2 weeks workshops, Hodin

started to imagine the concept of the machinima vaudoo church. It came to his mind, because we were working in a garage covered with Vaudoo masks and this workshop was so much about exchanges that more and more people were coming to participate every day. So, he invented the « Machinima Vaudoo church » : In a holy garage , there are storytellers in front of PCs, inspired by voodoo masks to reach the virtual world thanks to machinima.

> « To spread the good news of the digitization of Togolese living art, we decided at the machinima church to begin with an evangelization campaign of storytellers in the virtual world. To start this prophetic maneuver of never again letting the memory of Togolese living art die, we have called upon the Machinima voodoo priestess, Isabelle Arvers, who is white in skin but black in soul, for the great convention ever organized in our church. »[xxx]

We joined forces, skills, knowledges, beleifs and rituals and collaborated on one of the most amazing wokshops I ever held, because it was a true collaboration and exchange, which, while it was happening, looked like to justify and explain my entire project : to use digital media and their détournement to disseminate the word. For this workshop, because I became the Machinima Vaudoo prestress, I received a Vaudoo name – Azongnike – which means in Ewe, the spirit without ennemies. This name was given to me by Kokou Nouwaki, artist in charge of the cultural space in Lomé La Case Des Daltons. He told me that as a machinima evangelist, I needed to travel and meet a lot of people and couldn't have any ennemies, that's why I would be called from now on Azongnike. The day I received this name, I was initiated to Vaudoo in a protection ceremony.

I was not only in charge of promoting voices from the marhins, but I could help to document, co-crate, distribute words and creations by the detournement of soft power tools. Because I agree with Adrienne Shaw when she argues that the need for representation doesn't have to be only put on the buren of the audience, but I do beleive that we need to produce our own fictions. Trying to imagine how communities through digital meda can offer other visions of the world, other possibilities of being together and to show this diversity instead of complaning that representation isn't resent enough...

Adrienne Shaw demonstrates that while representation is not so important to marginalized groups, diversity of representation and content is, and she adds that we need to go beyond this and rethink the way the video game industry operates. Both

authors call for a structural revolution because, as with racism, queering and decolonizing art and video games depend not only on the content but on who produces the content, who is trained for, through which modes of representation, through which language ?

That was the subject of my last exhibition curated for the Festival Overkill which 2020 theme was The end of the world as we know it : « More and more communities and minorities feel unrepresented by the media, the governments and the culture they live in. When online platforms offer to regroup, to socialize and organise yourself, does it give these groups tools to express their ideas and opinions? We are wondering how these communities are/could transform these online social tools for their own reappropriation. »

After one year touring the art & games souths world, I found out that today we have to speak of neo-colonialism rather than post-colonialism in which "soft power" of digital texts plays a huge rôle to impose a monopolistic culture. But a new generation of artists and activists is doing its own decolonization: a new world is emerging and affirming its own voice, stopping working for, or like others, but rather recalling its own history, its roots, its beliefs. Networked culture and digital media facilitate the merging of these voices. Online platforms, crowdfunding and collaboration can be seen as counter-strategies to tactically use mass consumption objects, by hacking them, by operating a detournement, to turn them into means of expression. (Arvers, 2020)

These tendencies resonate with the feminist book : *Don't liberate us, we'll take care of it* (2020) by Bibia Pavard, Florence Rochefort and Michelle Zancarini-Fournel; and the quote from Felwin Sarr "Decolonization has to be done in both sides of the mediterranean sea." It is now possible to produce counter-fictions, strong enough to deconstruct and fight the soft power effects of cultural imperialism and send it back, by reappropriating the tools, ressources and references. Making new alliances, new kin families alike, we can now reinvente discourses on ourselves. Natacha Tontey in her speculative fiction *Pest to Power*:

> "As the manifesto of xenofeminism argues, the future is not only for the child, but it is also a landscape for the nonhuman. When we start thinking less anthropocentric, we think more ecological. The future is cockroach. (…) Our parents may have beliefs, fictions - also called religions - but each religion has its own narrative structure. What would happen if we said that the structure we have to believe in is the fiction that

is in our heads? »

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