

### The body denied by its “extreme subjectivity”: expressions of the coloniality of knowledge in research ethics

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In the quest to understand the (in)visibility of non-heteronormative bodies in medical education, a process that systematically grounds its institutional discourse on the biological coherence, I looked at my gay body both as a doctor and professor to understand this culture and its consequences. The objective of the article is to discuss the initial institutional confrontations faced by an autoethnographic research regarding homoaffectivity in medical education and practice. This work is aimed towards understanding the silencing imposed on subjectivity, existence and participation as a subject-researcher in “Science”. Thus, amidst a muted cry of a denied body, “misunderstood” for its “extreme subjectivity,” this text represents the audacity in speaking and breaking with the mortifying silence imposed by the supposed “scientific” hegemony.

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The next moment in qualitative inquiry will be one at which the practices of qualitative research finally move, without hesitation or encumbrance, from the personal to the political<sup>1</sup>. (p. 26)

I am exploring and sometimes exposing my own vulnerability to racial, gender, and cultural critique as a method of both understanding self and other, self as other, while engaging in performances (written and embodied) that seek to transform the social and cultural conditions under which I live and labor<sup>2</sup>. (p. 433)

### **"Once upon a time..."**

The term 'once upon a time' alludes to a series of past, present, and future stories that cross those timelines, being one of the possible starting points of this text. I understand that my story presents several non-linear and non-chronological starting points that compose the plot of the senses of my existence. Therefore, I decided to start with one of several "Once Upon a Time" to contextualize, even briefly, the location of my speech in this text.

I had already observed from the distant times of my existence that the place from which it was talked about gay bodies was tied to the conditions of sexual behavior / promiscuity deviance. Also, it was difficult to see that my existence - and other non-hegemonic bodies - regarding health teaching, was restricted to that circumstance. I felt a gradual and continuous process of reductions in my possibility of existence, which should be confined to a "closet"<sup>3</sup>. I observed the reiteration of a discourse of deviation from the agreed-upon norms of biological coherence in the field of health<sup>4,7</sup>. These norms presupposed that my biological sex would define my gender, which in turn, determined my sexual orientation, which should be heterosexual<sup>8-10</sup>.

In the midst of these questions, I felt the embodiment of the "experience of injury"<sup>11</sup> as an expression of heterosexism and homophobia<sup>12</sup> during my academic training that was based on "cultural terrorism"<sup>11</sup>, making fear of physical and symbolic violence the most efficient and effective enforcement of compulsory heterosexuality<sup>10,13</sup>. I wondered at that time if subjugated bodies can produce knowledge while being subject to the oppression they experience in their daily lives. How those bodies marked by different forms of racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, gender identity and social class may cross the "boundary" and produce knowledge without having to hide their multiple identities under the lens of objectivity? But what can happen when we, the so-called "producers" of knowledge, insert our own body into the texts we produce? How can I produce knowledge disregarding not only who I am but also how I am in certain circumstances? Would it be ethical to erase the plot of my story in the lines of a research using the justification of the necessary detachment? With these and many other questions that went and still go through the bodies of the authors of this article and their practices of research and production of knowledge, we kept in our minds as a possible guide the writings or manifestoes of other authors marching from personal to political<sup>1</sup>, using our own vulnerabilities<sup>2</sup> in order to transform the social and cultural conditions of our lives<sup>14-17</sup>.



## "Once upon a time" ... interfaces of the research ethics committee and the protection of "subjects"

Within an electronic address, apparently lacking a physical materiality, no previous explicit paths to walk by, traverse and describe, but with very explicit subsequent paths related to the "approved" and "disapproved" verdict, we find the so-called Platform Brazil, which coordinates the Research Ethics Committees (CEPs) in Brazil. It is a place where the research projects are sent and later evaluated by a commission made up of people from different scientific fields and different settings, including non-university participants. It is filled with "unexpected roadblocks", and the tabs of this platform reveal themselves and demand explanations of "desires", intentions and research, to guarantee its goal: "the protection of the research 'subjects / participants'"<sup>(d)</sup>.

While reflecting on ways and strategies to respond to the numerous questions in each of the "tabs" about my doctoral research proposal, I understood the challenges of thinking qualitative research in an electronic interface conceived for quantitative research<sup>(e)</sup>. I had to think quantitatively and respond qualitatively, in order to "frame" the qualitative intentions within the quantitative spaces. At that moment, I felt the first annoyances and discomforts related to this process of objectifying the subjective. Why would I have to do this framing process? Why was this necessary? What representation of science was being (re) produced? What science was stimulated to be produced, to be consumed? Should this commission be the regulator of this cultural circuit<sup>19</sup>?

In order to answer these questions, I stopped filling countless "tabs" trying to understand what I was doing instead of reproducing them as mere academic formality. I remembered an ethnographic text by Rui Harayama<sup>18</sup> that addressed these issues related to the CEP with Human Beings, now enhanced by the speed of the Brazil Platform for the Analysis of Research Protocols.

According to Harayama<sup>18</sup>, there was a "need to transform scientific research ethics into a matter concerning the civil society as a whole" (p. 326) to prevent "ethical deviations" and "control the action of its researchers." Therefore, the CEP System in Brazil, since its first resolution in 1996 has been linked to the National Health Council to exert the social control and its independence relative to the Ministry of Health. Although not having legal value, the scientific community respects it, as there is a certain obligation of CEP's opinion for the research to be published in certain media, such as indexed journals. Thus, several CEPs were established by Brazil, which "understood in a different way the means to carry out the mission of protecting and securing the rights of the subjects of research"<sup>18</sup> (p. 329). They configure a "bureaucracy of virtue"<sup>20</sup> in the search for "caring" for the relations between "subjects" and "objects" of knowledge<sup>18</sup>.

Once confronted with this "bureaucracy of virtue" in which I was trained, I returned to fill the "tabs" to finalize the research protocol. As soon as I continued, I came upon another difficulty. How to describe a research proposal that has as its method the autoethnography, a method that positions the researcher as a "subject / participant"? I knew that, according to Lionnet<sup>21</sup>, the autoethnography is the problematization of resistances between the "I's" (auto) and the collective (etno) in the act of writing (graphy). And that, according to Denzin<sup>22,23</sup>, this act of writing calls for criticism at the most basic level of relationships, aiming at oppressive structures in our

<sup>(d)</sup> We chose to keep the names "research subject" and "research participant" together as a way of referring to Resolution 196 of October 10, 1996 and Resolution 510 of April 7, 2016, which established the definition of these terms, respectively, keeping the logic related to them.

<sup>(e)</sup> Hardy et al. apud Harayama<sup>18</sup> pointed out that even in the biomedical, interventionist and quantitative sciences, more than 60% of the research evaluated by the CEP in 2006 belonged to the area of social and human sciences. In 2016 the National Health Council signed the Resolution 510, of April 7, 2016, (<http://conselho.saude.gov.br/resolucoes/2016/Reso510.pdf>) seeking to solve some of the obstacles of the social and human sciences framework in a biomedical model. This last resolution, at the time of the research, had not yet been fully implemented, due to the "difficulties of understanding" and its "recent publication", according to a CEP report that evaluated this research project in 2016.

daily lives. Thus, autoethnography can be considered “a form of knowledge that has the potential to examine social justice, oppression systems and the neocolonialism of our encounters with experiences lived between identities and worlds”<sup>24</sup> (p. 39). In this way, I understand that autoethnography expands the theoretical and critical interest, since it attributes to writing a political value in the visibility of certain subjectivities that, in the interactive relation between culture, society, subject and subjectivity, constructs the self<sup>2,23,25-27</sup>. In order to research the theme related to gay bodies in medical school using this theoretical device related to the chosen methodology, my advisor, co-advisor and myself, decided to face the Brazil / CEP Platform with our project, to understand, to problematize and (re) think the discourses and practices surrounding this process.

The story to be told and debated in this autoethnographic paper, therefore, is not the one of the “Other” observed, examined and analyzed, neither it refers to the researcher’s self as a psychoanalytic reflection. Instead it constitutes the story that is dispersed in the feelings, thoughts and actions in the body of the autoethnographer, from the encounter with the one that appears in the relation, which in this case is the report of the Brazil / CEP Platform. Seeking to understand “self and Other” and “self as the Other” to somehow “transform the social and cultural conditions”<sup>2</sup> that work (p. 433). It is then the disappearance of the “Other” and the self as fixed space-time locations, for the recognition of the performative flow of the “Self-Other” / “Other-Self” and the “self as the Other”<sup>22</sup>. It aims to problematize the normalizing, disciplinary, colonial effects of the system formed by the CEPs, exerting its classificatory and silencing power. For that end, a contextualization of the researcher encountering the doctorate was initially done in order to improve readers’ comprehension about the intersections in confronting the opinion of the Brazil/CEP Platform. In this way, the paper moves from personal to political<sup>1</sup>.

### **Once upon a time” ... interfaces with my professional trajectory**

Throughout my medical training, I sought to understand the issues of gender and sexuality that crossed my body and its bridges or abysses with health care, understanding “as I am” in the most diverse circumstances<sup>15</sup>. Recognizing my positionality as a white gay man who experienced a series of health silencing; having a body that did not (co) respond to the presumed heterosexuality that is “expected” for all bodies, I asked myself about the forms of care intended for the bodies in the various teaching and learning settings of the medical school. I acknowledged the lack of spaces in the curricular and extracurricular structures that allowed for critical reflection on the aspects of gender and sexuality beyond hegemonic heterosexual white bodies.

In the face of this, I sought strategies for minimizing and overcoming the numerous voices muted by power relations and knowledge<sup>13</sup>, which silence the “deviant”, “out of the norms”, “outsiders” voices<sup>28</sup> lived by my body and also observed in the silencing and violence reported by other gay colleagues. Would it be possible to make room to consider the existential possibilities of the subjects and, in this manner, reiterate that autonomy, human rights and the promotion of diversity are the primordial elements for health? I was reminded of Paulo Freire’s readings on the pedagogy of hope<sup>29</sup>,

dialoguing with the problematic around the oppressed<sup>30</sup>, in order to think about a pedagogy that promotes the act of asking<sup>31</sup>, questioning, generating autonomy<sup>32</sup>. In that sense, it can break away with the medical training that lead to dehumanization, in order to achieve a solidarity that strengthens the spirit of community, which will allow the existence of social justice<sup>33</sup>. It allowed me to understand that health education with care practices based on these assumptions aimed at Freirean pedagogy could result in the liberation of the trained and oppressed bodies by hegemonic rules based on certain genres, sexualities, races / ethnicities and classes

However, in the absence of reports of indexed research on these issues, it was necessary to problematize how health education, specially medical education, included and excluded certain bodies, based on culturally constructed rules and standards, reiterated by the (un) certainties of medical discourse, relating to the field of "natural"<sup>5,7,34</sup>. Rules, standards, norms that said - and still say - what personal and professional practices were expected for each gender and sexuality, always endorsed in the foundations of the medical discourse, by the "immutable" order of "inherent nature of the body"<sup>11,35</sup>. It was necessary, then, to propose reflections on the body, not only as a natural fact, but its correlation with bodies that (not) matter (in) to medical practice.

### **"Once upon a time" ... meeting the doctorate**

During 2015/2016, while I was a researcher collaborating in an investigation on the quality of health access of the LGBT population to primary health care, I came across with several discourses on the non-importance of the theme for the medical school. In the culture of care that I observed and that dialogued with my previous experience, "diseases" are "equal" in all people, regardless of other aspects such as gender and sexuality, since they are expressions of a deviation, a pathology in relation to a normal, healthy one<sup>36,37</sup>. In addition, the LGBT population was mainly "approached" in direct relation with sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) / HIV-AIDS<sup>4,6</sup>. Through the discomfort that those discourses awakened in me, I again felt, lived and observed in my own body the effects of discourses and practices of silencing, neglecting, and excluding non-heterosexual bodies.

This context encouraged me to search for professional improvement in this field, through the completion of the doctorate. The doctorate would allow me to investigate the relations of power and knowledge that are (re) constructed in these teaching-learning scenarios and that (re) produce the visibility/visibilities in daily health care. In addition, I would be able to understand how these powers and knowledge (re) construct strategies for keeping the gay body as "pathology", even in the face of de-pathologizing of homosexuality.

Moreover, I was looking in the doctorate for a methodological research strategy that would allow me to investigate these objectives in depth and include and consider my impressions, reflections and experiences as strategies to avoid silencing the body of the researcher. For this reason, the methodology / auto-ethnographic analysis proved to be a potent resource<sup>16,17,24</sup>. This methodology is not related to the production of generalizable data or to the production of the kind of vision embodied by probabilistic







from my eyes. My vision still blurred, I began to try to identify what I was feeling. Looking for crumbs, for small fragments of my subjectivity, I sought to understand the senses present in this encounter. After a while I realized: there are no feelings! There's nothing to speak about! There is nothing to feel! There is nothing to ponder! There is nothing to materialize in this process in which the very existence of the researcher's subjectivity has no space, no right, no voice. I cannot exist. I cannot research. I cannot speak about my body that has systematically undergone processes of silencing and exclusion during my training. I cannot speak as a gay man. I cannot speak as a university professor. I cannot speak as a researcher.

I CAN'T!

I DO NOT HAVE THE RIGHT!

I AM NOT ALLOWED!

I AM NOT ALLOWED by someone else to speak about my body, my existence, about the relation me-Other.

I cannot exist in this interface with the other, since this interface is the participant as a researcher and the researcher as a participant, and this is impossible for "Science". I have to be distant in research, to supposedly reduce the bias of the researcher to crumbs of possibilities. But what kind of "Science" is this that prevents interaction? What does this "Science" intend to safeguard? Does one want to protect the universal and immutable truth with rituals, regulations and policies in the production of this "Science"? Or is it, as Latour<sup>41</sup> points out, an attempt to make society a "laboratory", as a realm of impartiality? Can "Science" prove that it can be achieved by generalizable and reproducible methods outside of reductionism, essentialism, and stereotyping<sup>39</sup>? What kind of "Science" is this, where everything is predictable, calculated, limited, minimized, isolated, reproduced and generalized? Where are the individualities? Where are the persons? Why does subjectivity terrify this "Science" guardians of "subjects / participants"? Why to remain, as Latour<sup>41</sup> questions, in this dualism between human and non-human "objects"? Why do we want to maintain this paradigm, according to Ortega<sup>42</sup> between object-bodies and people-bodies? Why?

While giddily thinking and questioning my reality, I could only feel the tears coming down my face, falling in front of my supposed materiality, vanishing through my subjectivity and blurring my vision. I never found through scientifically adequate, tested, and reproduced responses with highly significant and highly reliable "n", meanings that would allow us to represent the "whole." What reminded me of Said's<sup>43</sup> studies on the construction of the East from the perspective of the West, which in this encounter between me-CEP's report / CEP's report-me represented the construction of hegemonic science alluding to the West about alternative ways of doing research, which inserted the researcher inside and into the research, here appearing the East. Moreover, I perceived the university with all its functioning devices, as the "great uniform apparatus of knowledge"<sup>44</sup> (p. 219), reducing knowledge to a simple and singular collective identity, free of differences and qualities<sup>43</sup>. Thus, it exemplified in my own body, in my own knowledge, in my researcher-researched interface, what Foucault<sup>44</sup> asserts about the disciplining of knowledge from the operations of selection, normalization, hierarchization and centralization for the production of this "Science".

This "Science" is based on a logic of guarantees grounded on essentialism and universalism, assuming that the social and historical existence of all known relationships had, and still has, to be "in the way they are", i.e. certain and fixed<sup>40,45</sup>. Thinking without guarantees as proposed by Stuart Hall<sup>40</sup>, would mean taking an anti-essentialist stance, rejecting universality, partiality and detachment, being open to new possibilities, constructing political and contextual theories and descriptions of "cómo se hacen, deshacen y rehacen los contextos"<sup>46</sup> (p. 31). In this dialogue with Grossberg, my body (re)lived as the contexts were and are still done, redone and shattered in the quest to maintain or subvert the norms and order, that in a civilizing exercise seek to keep the established ones<sup>28</sup> and to avoid "moral panic" due to the discomfort when confronted by ambivalent practices<sup>19</sup>. Practices such as autoethnography represent the blurring of the boundaries between the researcher and the one that is researched, threatening the scientific "essence" and therefore subject to be repressed, reproved and classified as "extreme-bias-misunderstandings".

How, then, to think regarding a no-guarantees scientific practice<sup>40</sup> in this context where only established practices<sup>28</sup> are possible? Is there a possibility to think beyond the "double reduction" of the epistemological hegemony of science based on orthopedic knowledge and epistemicide<sup>47</sup>? May this response of the CEP embody the constraints and impoverishment of the knowledge and of those recognized as valid as well as the reduction of the field of possible, resulting from this orthopedic knowledge in the University? Or is it that this response to the research proposal that was submitted to CEP was a reflection of the epistemicide made by Cartesian science that suppresses other knowledge through the process of epistemological monopolization of "Science"<sup>48</sup>? I may not know the answers to these questions, but I knew that I was experiencing a materialization of the "representational coloniality" that establishes place and non-place of the other knowledge and their subjects<sup>47,48</sup>. These places are marked by the classificatory, totalizing / essentializing senses of a culture of making science, which uses the construction of differences as a strategy to reiterate power and hegemony through, for example, values of superiority / inferiority<sup>45</sup>. "Whoever classifies controls knowledge"<sup>49</sup> (p. 415), therefore, to think of an autoethnographic research would mean recognizing and problematizing the classification of the non-place of existence of self-and-Other and self-as-Other in research as a possible place of existence and possibility of research, no longer produced as non-existent.

Inexistence means not existing in any form of being relevant or understandable. Everything that is produced as non-existent is radically excluded because it remains outside the universe that the accepted conception of inclusion itself considers to be the Other<sup>47</sup>. (p. 32)

In the following days I pondered if there was a strategy to face this encounter, to overcome the limits of orthopedic knowledge, confronting the epistemicide that appeared like a resource of the logic of coloniality of the power and the knowledge, that assign a group the role of "suppliers of experiences while others are exporters of theories to be applied and reaffirmed"<sup>49</sup> (p. 412). Faced with the fear of facing this culture of doing science, I wondered if I would reproduce absences, non-existence, abjection and disenfranchisement, to somehow secure a future title of doctor. I could



not deliberately let fear undermine my existence, my experiences, my knowledge reconfigured and culturally re-enrolled in the encounter with the Other. The me-and-Other and the me-as-Other should emerge, exist as a possibility, a bet favoring the construction of an "ecology of knowledge", which recognizes the plurality of knowledge in a territory of permanent questioning, having a transgressor's character, in which "cosmopolitan reason" confronts the monopoly of rationality and modern science<sup>50,51</sup>. Thus permitting the existence of queer-decolonial thinking, denouncing the processes of building universality, questioning theories, and criticizing the normalizing effects on identities, on bodies<sup>49</sup>.

Even confronting this, I still feel the hegemony of a dominant group<sup>52</sup>, of a coloniality of power<sup>53</sup>, related to "Science" seeking to silence my voice, my being, through an institutional culture supposedly intended for the protection of those subjects / participants who are directly or indirectly involved in the research. How this can be thought, if the argument for non-approval was related to the results? In this encounter with the report, I find the reality that "Science" and the Platform Brazil / CEP want to ensure: the supposed scientific TRUTH about an object of knowledge "coherent" with the scientific presuppositions of distance, neutrality and coherence with nature, which can be systematically observed, reproduced and generalized. I remembered the words of Norman K. Denzin<sup>54</sup>, in his critique of the Institutional Review Boards of the United States (equivalent to the Committees of Ethics in Research with Human Beings of Brazil):

We live in a depressing historical moment, violent spaces, unending wars against persons of color, repression, the falsification of evidence, the collapse of critical, democratic discourse, repressive neo-liberalism, disguised as dispassionate objectivity prevails. Global efforts to impose a new orthodoxy on critical social science inquiry must be resisted, a hegemonic politics of evidence cannot be allowed. Too much is at stake<sup>54</sup> (p 155).

### **"Once upon (another) time"...**

In the midst of a muted cry of a denied body with "misunderstandings", this text constitutes an audacious intent to speak and break away with the mortifying silence that "scientific" hegemony has imposed upon me. Its aim, according to Said<sup>43</sup>, is to "go towards the freedom of man" (p. 26), from the process of questioning / "unlearning" the "inherent dominating mode" (p. 60). I question, therefore, immutable truths, I stress the robotization of research and I subvert the norm, order, rule, theory, and colonial power, allowing the possibility of bringing into existence what is invisible, what is silenced, which is excluded and neglected. In the midst of this attempt at resistance, I asked myself: What strategies can be used to confront/(re) construct this "Science"?<sup>(6)</sup> While groping for answers to this question, I have referred to the result as a political strategy for thinking in the enlargement of boundaries<sup>14,15</sup>. But this is another story where "once upon (another) time ..."

<sup>(6)</sup> Norman K. Denzin, in his article entitled "The elephant in the living room: or extending the conversation about the politics of evidence" (2009), points to eight questions that may help us think about confrontations / (re) constructions of this and other "Sciences".

## Authors' contributions

All authors participated actively in all stages of preparation of the manuscript.

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