

Queer refusal

Recusa queer

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Abstract: This paper discusses instances where subjects recognize persuasive and regulatory authority, flaunt their indifference, their disinterest, their refusal in spite of perceived or real retaliation: “I don’t care”. This is a form of linguistic agency that need *not* be tied to privilege. Like other studies of “language from below” (BAYNHAM; LEE, 2019), queer refusal documents the lived experiences of language use, vulnerability and struggle. In this way, the paper’s examples invite dialogue with the totalizing practices of racial hegemonies outlined in raciolinguistic inquiry, not to deny hegemony but to suggest that queer refusal names instances where subjects, defined through oppressive practice, dare to break with oppression and enumerate their own alternatives.

Keywords: Refusal; Queer linguistics; Raciolinguistics; Translanguaging; Ideology

Resumo: Este artigo discute casos em que os sujeitos reconhecem autoridade persuasiva e reguladora, exibem sua indiferença, seu desinteresse, sua recusa, apesar de retaliação percebida ou real: “Eu não me importo”. Esta é uma forma de agência linguística que não precisa estar ligada ao privilégio. Como outros estudos de “linguagem vinda de baixo” (BAYNHAM E LEE, 2019), a recusa queer documenta as experiências vividas de uso da linguagem, vulnerabilidade e luta. Desse modo, os exemplos do artigo convidam ao diálogo com as práticas totalizantes de hegemonias raciais delineadas na investigação raciolinguística, não para negar a hegemonia, mas para sugerir que a recusa queer nomeia instâncias em que os sujeitos, definidos por meio da prática opressora, ousam romper com a opressão e enumerar as suas próprias alternativas.

Keywords: Recusa; Linguística queer; Raciolinguística; Translanguaging; Ideologia



1 “If I lose my sounds, how will people know I am Portuguese?”

In the mid-1970s, I was part of a research team studying Portuguese cyclical migration between the European homeland and locations in the northeastern U.S. and in Great Britain. My assignment was to explore how Portuguese immigrants developed their English language skills in their new settings if they were not already English-fluent, as most were not. Along with informal language learning, I spent time in English-as-Second-Language (ESL) classrooms where Portuguese adults received formal English instruction. I noted how the Portuguese adults participated, with other adult students, in classroom activities, and where possible, I spoke with Portuguese (and other) adults about their interests in learning English and their reactions to formal instruction.

One evening, while observing an upper level ESL class in upstate New York, I noticed that an older Portuguese woman who just joined the class was already participating enthusiastically in classroom activities. The instructor found no problems with the syntax of her spoken English or her use of English vocabulary; neither did I. But, to my hearing, her articulation of English sound segments, her use of stress patterns and her intonation contours combined English and Azorean Portuguese phonological processes. The instructor heard similar combinations, too, and he interrupted her in-class comments each time she spoke, repeatedly encouraging her to adopt a more “standardized” English pronunciation. But try as he would, her accumulation of English and Portuguese phonology would not budge.

One evening, Amelia (the woman’s name) and I started to chat during a coffee break.¹ I told Amelia about our research project; and she agreed that immigrants had to learn English to be successful in their new homeland. I asked if she thought that she was doing well in the ESL program? A thoughtful pause, then: Yes, the program has taught her a lot about English. But the instructors keep wanting her to change “her sounds” (Amelia’s term) but that was something that she would not do. How come, I asked? If she replaced the accumulation of Portuguese and English that she called “her sounds” with the classroom-preferred demands of English pronunciation, then “how will people know that I am Portuguese?”, she replied.

¹ I described this conversation in my field notebook, as close to verbatim as memory allowed, shortly after it ended. These remarks draw from the notebook entry.

Anyone familiar with second language teaching/learning probably has met someone like Amelia, someone who longs to embrace the linguistic obligations of the new homeland but will not sever completely the messages that her ancestral language publicly conveys. While Amelia's remarks are not unique, her remarks and the actions that they describe point to a category of agency (the "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (AHEARN, 2012, p. 278) that extend far beyond the second language classroom. This category of agency, *queer refusal*, is the focus for the discussion in this paper.²

As this discussion will show, acts of queer refusal have several components. As in other forms of agency, the subject/the agent recognizes the pressures to conform to normative demands. However, the subject/agent wants nothing to do with those demands (or, as Amalia shows, with certain demands) and the obligations they impose. But the subject agent is not saying "No!" in such instances. Rather, the speaker indicates: I have a different agenda, the demands don't concern me; the consequences pose no threat, or simply "I don't care!".

Noting the *queer-ness* of queer refusal suggests that messages of refusal are sufficiently "out of sync" (DINSHAW, 2012, p. 4) with normative demands to ensure that refusal coincides with what agents and audiences will term "outlaw work" (FRECCERO, 2006, p. 5). Moreover, as Sedgwick (1993, p. 87) explains, if refusal is "one of the things that queer may refer to", then queer refusal will be expressed through "an open mesh of possibilities" and will never be limited to any single, "monolithic" format. Some forms of queer refusal may indicate "capacities to act" that are not tied to socioculturally mediated agency. The queer refusal of objects, rather than subjects of discourse, suggested in Spivak's question, "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988) is stated more directly in the remark of a Bengali villager to a visiting economist, "It is not very hard to silence us, but that is not because we cannot speak" (SEN, 2005, xiii).

Whatever its form, studies of queer refusal require a careful inspection of materials gathered from a diverse range of sources. Like all work in queer linguistics, these studies, and benefits from a broadly based archive-building, "what-if" question asking, and other features associated with a *scavenger methodology* (HALBERSTAM, 1998, p. 12, LEAP, 2020, p. 48-52).

² Similarly, see Halberstam 1998: 6-8, Leap 2020: 154-169, and Menon, 2015.

2 Queer refusal, raciolinguistics and language from below

Studies of queer refusal gain additional incentive, given arguments in raciolinguistics that emphasize regulatory agendas and practices rather than agency. Their argument is convincing. Paraphrasing now from Rosa (2019, p. 5-7), rather than assuming that members of a racially identifiable group create distinctive way of talking, raciolinguistic perspectives hold that the linguistic practices associated with that group and adopted by the group as markers of shared identity, are construed from the perspectives of those in hegemonically positioned, racially dominant positions of power. Group members may adopt these hegemonically derived, racially based linguistic practices for their own purposes, but doing so means they remain embedded beneath the hegemonically imposed linguistic demands and thereby reauthorize their authority.

Given the occurrences of “I don’t care” – related queer refusal that can be disclosed in other settings – , it is worth asking whether subjects who have been racialized under the heel of linguistic hegemony must remain there, unable to dislodge themselves from regulatory practices that predetermine the boundaries of performativity and opportunity. Harkening back to Althusser’s discussion of ideology, interpellation and recognition (1971, p. 172-173), can subjects, whose status as subjects has been confirmed by their willful recognition of ideology’s interpolative hail, then step outside of ideology, reflect critically on ideology’s obligations and pursue alternative stances and practices.

Raciolinguistic arguments gain particular traction in studies of translanguaging, given how hegemonic messages prejudice “Spanglish”, “Black English”, and other racially-imposed multilinguistic determinations. A useful response to the “under the heel” question in those settings starts with studies of what Baynham and Lee term *language from below* (2019, p. 19-21). That is, recognizing that hegemonic, ideological demands that restrict and racialize linguistic options in settings where linguistic practices move across, within, between and beyond linguistic “boundaries”, research productively focuses on how language use unfolds in everyday experience when faced with and/or in spite of those restrictions (LEAP, to appear).

Similarly, as part of their arguments against monolithic inclusiveness (Sedgwick, above), some lines of inquiry within queer theory invite discussions of the specifics of queerness and their relationships to ideological/hegemonic demands. These studies are

necessarily confrontational in basis, however. Studies of *disidentification*, (PÊCHEUX, 1982, p. 159, MUÑOZ, 1999) examine a subject's response to regulatory authority that neither accepts or rejects the regulatory demands, but "works" them, turning the demands inside-out and also back on themselves – though not completely. And as the following example will show, studies of *queer refusal*, like studies of language from below, show how language users assemble linguistics and social practices allowing them to step outside of ideology, claiming alternatives stances while insisting "I don't care".

3 Queer refusal as an "Open mesh of possibilities..."

Writing about how "boy rebellion [becomes] located ... in the sneer of the tomboy" (1998: 5) Halberstam cites the following passage from Carson McCullers's novella *Member of the Wedding*,

Frankie [the "boy-rebel subject" of McCullers' story] thinks that naming represents the power of definition and name changing confers the power to reimagine identity, place, relation and even gender. "I wonder if it is against the law to change your name" says Frankie." Or add to it... Well I don't care... F. Jasmine Addams" (HALBERSTAM 1998, p. 8, citing MCCULLERS, 1946, p. 15).

Berenice, the housemaid and Frankie's confidant in this exchange, reminds Frankie that regulatory structures always impose expectations, but Frankie's response is unwavering: "I don't care." The construction contains a negative, intransitive verb and experiencer (not agent) as headword, with no object, patient, or goal marking the outcome or completion-point of the indicated activity. "I don't care" is a self-contained expression of indifference regardless of consequences, e.g. queer refusal.

Looking back on his undergraduate years at Columbia University during the 1960s, Helms (1998) mentions that "we all cared so much about what people thought of us in those days" but his college classmate Arthur MacArthur "... didn't give a damn & I liked him for that [...]" (1998, p. 73.). McArthur was

[...] the only student I recall who was in any sense of the word "out" which is to say that Arthur was conspicuously nelly... Until I met Arthur, I'd never known that French contained so many sibilants, but I admired him for not caring or seeming to care what people thought about him (1998, p. 73).

These remarks, contrasted with Helms' statement that he and his colleagues "cared so much.", suggest that "Arthur didn't give a damn" is a paraphrase of "Arthur didn't care". Reading for refusal always requires attention to underlying syntactic/semantic comparisons. But reading for modulation may also identify the degree of contrast embedded within those comparisons.

So unlike the classmates, Arthur was "out". But Arthur wasn't just "out". He was "the *only* student who was *in any sense of the word* 'out'", in Helm's description; modulations underlined. Arthur wasn't "nelly," he was "conspicuously nelly." Arthur's French did not contain just sibilants, it contained "so many sibilants", and so on. Similarly, modulation distinguishes what others simply "thought" and Arthur's more aggressive indifference.

Modulations of representations of refusal appear frequently in refusal narratives, and these modulations often provide evidence of the sociocultural mediations of the capacity to act relevant to the given setting of regulatory control.

For example, the women who were members of the All American Girls' Baseball League were required by league management to maintain a feminine presentation while participating in what was commonly identified as a highly masculinized sport.³ The women's uniforms had short skirts exposing, not protecting their legs. The women were required to attend charm school classes where they were taught make-up and hair styling techniques and appropriate social etiquette. A matron stood by home plate at every game, checking each team member as she took her turn to bat, to make certain that every feature of the player's on-field appearance had been effectively feminized, chastising those whose appearance was found to be defective. Understandably, Shirley Jameson (who played for one of the AAGBT teams) told reporter Jay Feldman that dress code violations were "... the last thing in the world someone in a ball game is thinking about." She continued: "[A matron] said that to me when I was coming up the plate in a game-winning situation. I could have cared less. I was playing the game!" (cited in Zipner, 1988, p. 42 fnt 19.)

As Ms. Jameson indicates, ignoring the matron's wardrobe critique did not mean disregarding the matron's message; it meant that Ms. Jameson had other, more pressing

³ Social critic Paul Gallico once wrote: "... baseball [games] played right were games for men, and good rough ones" and "...if you don't play it right, why play it at all?" (1936, p. 13).

priorities: “playing the game.” That was what mattered – even though refusing regulatory expectations of management could seriously compromise their continued involvement in League-sponsored ball-playing. Poorly applied lipstick, inappropriately combed hair, and similar flaws in the public presentation resulted in a loss of privileges, financial penalties, and other forms of demerit. Moreover, as was true of the public at large, management considered the refusal of feminine appearance to indicate more sinister forms of female masculinity, which was inappropriate in the public arena.

Such assessments of the refusal of femininity have occurred in other moments in women’s sports history and prompted additional moments of refusal, often heightened with modulation.

Babe Didrikson Zaharias was a target of such homophobic stereotyping throughout her career in professional sports, even though she was a first place winner in eight events at the National Women's AAU Track Meet in 1931, captured the overall championship at that event in 1932, won first place in track and field competitions in the 1932 Olympic Games, played exhibition and competition ball-games on women’s and men’s ball-teams throughout her career, and went on to compete successfully in amateur (and then professional) golf tournaments.

Sportswriters were fascinated with what one writer termed “the world beating girl Viking from Texas.” The same author noted however that “[t]his chin of the Babe’s, the thin set lips, the straight sharp profile, the sallow suntan, undistinguished by rouge... are likely to do her no justice.” (cited in CAHN 1994:, p. 215 fnt 29.) A second writer noted that the Babe’s “boyish bob and freakish clothes, [and her] dislike of femininity” led observers to dismiss her initially as an “Amazon” (LADER, 1948, p. 158).

Didrikson usually ignored such statements, letting her athletic success speak for itself. But sometimes she responded, framing her anger through indifference rather than direct invective. In one newspaper interview, a journalist prompted Didrikson to confirm that in addition to participating in track and field, Didrikson also played basketball, baseball, and numerous other sports. Then he asked: , “Is there anything at all you don’t play?” Without missing a beat, Didrikson replied: “Yeah dolls.” (cited in CAHN 1994, p. 116).

Finally, modulation may also reshape syntactic relationships, as shown in the opening comments offered by one the men that Leznoff and Westley (1956) interviewed

while researching “a homosexual community in a large Canadian city the 1950s.” The speaker is a hairdresser, and Rosenstein is the owner of the salon where the speaker is employed:

Rosenstein can go to hell as far as I care. She works you to the bone as if she can get away with it. She told me I run around the place like a regular pansy. So I told her I am a pansy and if she doesn't like it she can get somebody else to do her dirty work for her. I know she wouldn't fire me. All the ladies ask for me and I don't have to pretend to nobody (LEZNOFF and WESTLEY, 1956, p. 259).

The main clause opening the first sentence – Rosenstein can go to hell – paraphrases the negative reference in other statements of refusal; but here negative reference is indicated through metaphoric association (the suggested association with “go to hell”) rather than predicate-centered adverbial support. This initial refusal then precludes a second refusal. Similar to Didrikson's use of “dolls”, the hairdresser upstages the likely intent of Rosenstein's invective (pansy), by embracing the status of pansy, treating it as the key to his success, and using it to strengthen his indifference to anything that Rosenstein might do in reply. “I don't have to pretend to nobody” – another modulation of “I don't care” – concludes the commentary.

But refusal can also be indicated in text without negative copying, metaphoric association, explicit annotation of text, or syntactic modification: once the speaker has confirmed the parameters of the narrative by clarifying the factual details and the associated storyline, the speaker can then “refuse the text” (LEAP, 2008), moving away from the assumed parameters and into entirely unexpected, often more personally relevant, terrain.

Chester Christian “refused the text” in this fashion, while he was telling me about the first time he heard a story about queer-bashing in Washington DC (LEAP, 2010).⁴ Chester moved to Washington DC in the late 1960s, to be part of a summer college athletic program. He was aware of his same-sex desire since early childhood, but had not wanted to explore them until he could leave his hometown. The DC college campus where he was staying was not a gay supportive environment, however. In fact, one of other

⁴ Chester described this exchange to me in 1996, during an interview for my DC gay geography project; so his report is retrospective narrative as much as simple memory. But as I show in Leap (2010) his phrasing of that retrospective is consistent with other men's descriptions of their encounters with homophobic violence in real-life experience.

athletes in the summer program told Chester that he and his team mates often travelled from campus to Lafayette Square or Dupont Circle, then they “[...] walk around a little bit, couple of queers come by, um we let them get sort of friendly and then we take 'em somewhere and then we just roll 'em [...]” When Chester asked his friend: “what do you mean, ‘roll ‘em’”? The friend replied: “Oh, you know, strong arm them, get some money off of them”. Chester’s initial reaction to what he heard was a skeptical, “you gotta be kidding.” Skepticism aside, “[...] the thing stuck in my mind that there were people somewhere in this town walking around”, he told me (cited in LEAP, 2010, p. 198).

While Chester found the references to queer-bashing to be disturbing, Chester ignored those references, turning instead to the realization he could find other men like himself, if he, too, travelled to the same locations in downtown DC. This meant he was ignoring the possibility that he might be putting himself at risk of homophobic violence by visiting those sites. But never mind: He set off the next day to find one of these downtown locations, and (he told me) within a half an hour he met up with the man with who soon became his partner in a seven year relationship.

In this case, Chester refused the text, albeit selectively, refashioning the athlete’s narrative into a statement that (successfully) addressed Chester’s own interests. Sometimes, the subject’s attempts to refuse the text addressed the interests of the listener and the bystanders, as well as the concerns of the subject.

One such example comes from an incident described in from *Mother Camp*, Esther Newton’s (1972) classic study of female impersonators in 1960s American heartland. The incident builds on the tensions between two groups of female impersonators: “street impersonators” and the “stage performers”.

The street impersonators “perform by lip-syncing to pre-recorded music” (1972, p. 7), are in their twenties and basically younger than their stage counterparts, often unemployed, and are closely associated with confrontation and drug use. The stage performers “tend to work live, providing the audience with verbal as well as visual impersonation” (1972, p. 7) Stage performers become skilled in comedy routines, song stylings and dance numbers and the techniques for m.c.’ing a stage show. A major determinant of their on-stage success is their beauty and glamour which is cultivated both through experience and under the careful mentoring of more established stage performers.

Receiving such guidance is part of the “secondary and more specialized socialization” (1972, p. 42) which is essential to a successful on-stage career.

Street performers ordinarily do not access to such mentoring, and that helps ensure their location off the stage and on the streets. But in some cases, a stage performer takes an interest in a street impersonator, and that is the background relevant to this example, an incident involving Tris (a stage impersonator), and (Tris), and Jean (a street impersonator) who Tris has been “mentoring” and for whom Tris apparently has developed personal concern (Newton, the researcher, is the first person voice in this passage).

As Tris...and Jim (a bartender) and I were leaving the club last night to go to the car, Jean ,, came out with a very scraggy-looking women whom Tris says Jean used to pimp for. Jean swayed over and announced, “I’m drunk.” To my consternation, Tris said, “Good for you,” and by way of approval and award asked Jean to go shopping with him next week (NEWTON, 1972, p. 14.)

Read on face value, Jean’s “I’m drunk” followed by Tris’ “Good for you. [...] ‘Let’s go shopping’” displays a discordant use of adjacency pairing. The expected response to Jean’s comment would more be a statement of sympathy (“I’m sorry”), an offer of support (“Can I help you home?”), bald criticism (“What a stupid thing to do!”, “How gross!”) or simply silence. Tris’ “Good for you” validated Jean’s inappropriate behavior and his public proclamation of it. Moreover, linking the endorsement of Jean’s drunkenness with an invitation to go shopping removes any barriers between Jean’s antisocial behavior and Jean’s continuing demonstration of her rights to citizenship: participation in acts of consumption (FOSTER, 2003, p. 109). This moment of turn-taking displays a surprising collocation of linguistic and social assumptions.

But Tris is refusing the expectations of textual practice here for what were (for Tris) highly relevant reasons. The two ordinarily discordant statements showed that Tris was (in his own words) “proud of [Jean] for being drunk instead of high on pills and dope.” Drug use, much more so than alcohol use, is more likely to disrupt an on-stage performance, Tris later explained to Newton, who added: “Tris fears and dislikes the unconventionality of drugs and the society of drugs which at this level is comprised of hustlers, whores and thieves” (NEWTON 1972, p. 14) Tris’ mentoring of Jean was intended to lure Jean away from those conditions, Jean’s public drunkenness demonstrates a (momentary) separation from his home turf (refusal ?), and thereby

confirms the effectiveness of Tris' mentoring. Tris acknowledges that separation, and the mentoring effectiveness, by refusing the expectedness of adjacency, listener reactions notwithstanding.

4 Queer refusal is not queer privilege, but it could be

Tris' "Good for you; let's go shopping" is a very different formation from Frankie's "I don't care", and Jameson's "I could care less", and all three differ from "there were people somewhere in this town walking around", "I don't have to pretend to nobody", "Arthur didn't give a damn", and "Yeah, dolls". At the same time, all of these statements reflect stances of noncooperation, disinterest, and indifference in the face of ideological/normative regulation. That their similarities in meta-discursive detail are not mapped into similar structural or sociolinguistic expression invites the paper to conclude by listing out the possibilities of expressing refusal in textual practice. But this is *queer* refusal, an "open mesh of possibilities" does not yield to monolithic statement, as Sedgwick has explained. This is why queer refusal is so closely tied to expressions of agency, even when the socioculturally mediated conditions that make agency possible are not always or entirely favorable.

Perhaps queer refusal is a form of privilege, limited only to those who are already safe enough to endure the consequences which an "I don't care" stance will unavoidably provoke. The hairdresser's reclaiming of *pansy* (Leznoff and Westley, 1956) and Tris' "let's go shopping" (Newton 1972) are two examples that question such a categorical claim. In both cases, the speaker/agent is not in a secure position, economically or socially, but response to normative regulation with queer refusal because compliance, objection and even disidentification are not, in the subject's explanation sufficiently accurate forms of reference. By way of contrast, to show what a privileged refusal might entail, here are the comments of an attorney who, unlike the hairdresser cited above, was not "out" or part of the homosexual community in their hometown. He refers to members of that community in the following statement:

I know a few people who don't care. They are really pitiful. They are either people who are in very insignificant positions or they are in good positions but are independent. I know one who is in the rental business. He doesn't care. [...]. I just don't get along with anybody who doesn't care. [...] And I try to

avoid them. Sometimes personal friends become this way. Then there is a mutual rejection of the friendship. [...] I am just no longer interested when they adopt that point of view. From their point of view it means completely living outside of society and they are no longer interested in people who they consider hypocrites (LEZNOFF and WESTLEY 1956, p. 259).

As before, the speaker used a subject marker, a negative AUX and the reference “care” to express messages of queer refusal, but now the statements are not self-descriptions. Instead, the statements indicate the speaker’s disdain for the inappropriate behavior of certain others. By citing *their* acts of queer refusal, this speaker embraces the heteronormative validity of a disguised homosexuality even though he continues to refuse the heteronormative demand for a fully heterosexual identity. It is unlikely such a privileged combination falls within the “open mesh of possibilities” that shapes queer refusal. However, this privileged sexualized perspective may overlap, at least in part, with the hegemonic gaze cherished by those in racially dominant positions of power. Sometimes, these are the same subjects, sharing the same gaze(s) and the same privileges.

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