

Queer belonging: women at a bar in Rio de Janeiro

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Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.



Queer belonging: women at a bar in Rio de Janeiro*

Andrea Lacombe**

How can we understand a woman who, without thinking of herself as a man, goes beyond the established limits of what it means to “be a woman”? We are talking about women who use male underwear, touch their groin in order to accommodate an imaginary “package,”¹ use spaces that are socially reserved for men. But these women also use make up, take their color combinations seriously, diet to get rid of their belly for the summer and shave their legs regularly throughout the year.

To think about masculine women does not necessarily imply an “inversion” of generic roles: it means thinking from a new angle. It means perceiving the establishment of alternative forms of masculinity which are not necessarily inscribed in the social and/or biological body of a man. Moreover, it means understanding the establishment of new forms of being a woman which do not correspond to established feminine roles.

The present article deals with modes of social interaction that take place in “Flôr do André”,² a bar near downtown Rio de Janeiro whose clientele consists mostly of women who maintain sexual and romantic relationships with other women. I cannot—and I do not intend to—establish a fixed category that can be applied to the customers of “Flôr do André”. To the contrary! My intention here is to show the different ways in which these women experience their sexuality, accounting for the most masculine and the most feminine behaviors they display as well as the wide range of possibilities and nuances that lie between and beyond these polar extremes, while assiduously avoiding the abuse of such essentialist categories as “GLS culture” or the “working class”.

* Translated from Portuguese by Ana Lopes. Adapted from: LACOMBE, A. 2005. “‘Pra homem já tô eu’: Masculinidades e socialização lésbica em um bar no centro do Rio de Janeiro”. (MA Thesis). Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Museu Nacional. Rio de Janeiro. Chapter 2, “*I’m Man Enough: Masculinities and lesbian socialization in a downtown bar in Rio de Janeiro.*”

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¹ I came across this word—“mala;” literally “suitcase”—in a conversation with sociologist friend Carlos Figari. This is the familiar way *cariocas* (especially gays) refer to the protuberance that can be perceived through men’s trousers—the outline of the penis and testicles (the bulge). As a suitcase, it only gives away the external size of the set, this “package” does not allow one to observe single items within it. In portuguese dictionaries, “mala” might also be defined in the following way: “Brazilian: Coloquial. The male genital organ.”

² “Flôr do André” is a *boteco* (“dive bar”): a place frequented by working class men, usually located near the entrance of a *favela* (shanty town) or in city areas where cheap housing abounds. The duration and permanence of the bar are of key importance in fixing its clientele: “customers’ assiduity is such that often the bar depends on its regulars for its survival” (Machado da Silva, 1969: 163). At “Flôr do André”, women (instead of men) make up the *boteco*’s clientele, giving this bar a sociological singularity that attracted my attention.

The aim of this article is to outline the modes of interaction that take place in “Flôr do André” and which make it a unique space. These interactions are constructed through collective or unique experiences in which women, dykes, and butch women interact with heterosexual men and where performances of masculinity and femininity mix and mingle.

The “knowing” look: how to recognize a peer

- Detinha, how do you spot an *entendida*³ on the street?
- [Looking at me as if saying: “You ask such silly questions!”] What kind of question is that?
- I mean... when you like someone, how do you know whether or not she likes women?
- Eh, girl! Can’t you tell?
- Sometimes I can, sometimes I can’t, it depends. Maybe because I’m a foreigner...
- Being foreign has nothing to do with it!! You can always tell!!
- What can you tell?
- Ehhh! That the woman you’re looking at likes women!!! I don’t know what it is but I can always tell...

How to reproduce in words what the body knows? How to describe certainties constructed through the *look that knows*, beyond the conscience that leads to the explanation? I asked customers at “Flôr do André” a thousand times what characteristics a woman must have in order to be considered an *entendida*. A thousand times I got the same answer: “you can just tell”; “you look in their eyes and you know”; “it takes a thief to know a thief”. None of these expressions points to specific clothing or body language: they all point to a recognition achieved through the gaze.

To deconstruct our perception of the *other* as an equal is no simple task. This is why it is difficult for customers at “Flôr do André” to answer my question. The process of reconstructing with words what has been acquired experientially means putting into discourse actions that have never been verbalized. In Tim Ingold’s words: “Learning to perceive is not a matter of acquiring conventional schemata for ordering sensory data, but of learning to *attend* to the world in certain ways through involvement with others in everyday contexts of practical action” (Ingold, 1993: 222). To like women is not a particularity that is distinguished as a separate element within my informants’ discourse: it is part of a continuous world in which family, friends and bar occupy similar places. Be that as it may, however, these women feel the need to meet in their own space. I

³ Translator’s note: the term *entendida* may be translated as “one who is in the know”, or literally, “she who understands”. It is a slang term for homosexual, similar to queer. It is mainly used by lesbians, although it originated among gay men.

could venture to conjecture that “Flôr do André” is constructed as such through the juxtaposition of lattices. In the bar, different relational logics co-exist where the term *entendida* acquires different layers of meaning. Women who are “*entendida*” recognize each other within a shared experience.⁴ Other customers (mostly heterosexual men who have long frequented the place) recognize the difference that separates them, in terms of experience, through a complicity that unites in the act of sharing space and friendship with lesbian women. Therefore, understanding acquires different facets, but it always implies a knowledge that results from experience. Moreover, the term *entendida* or the expression “she understands” has in this context a single meaning: lesbian.

How is understanding constructed? Why is it difficult to explain? What is the significance of the gaze in this construction? According to the idea outlined above regarding acquiring understanding and being able to recognize possible partners, it is possible to catch a glimpse of how the skill is developed and deployed in the social context in which people live. To recognize a lesbian is no more difficult for a lesbian as for other people from the same socio-cultural context. But for a person who does not belong to that *world*, it may be as difficult as for an Englishman who has never been to America to distinguish a person from Maranhão from a person from Alagoas or a Guatemalan from a Nicaraguan. This is so simply because an English person does not need to develop this ability to differentiate, since it is not relevant to their way of being the world. “Learning to perceive depends less on the acquisition of schemata for *constructing* the environment, as on the acquisition of skills for direct perceptual *engagement* with its various constituents, both human and non-human. (...) the perceptual system of the skilled practitioner may be said to *resonate* with significant features of the environmental context of action”. (Ingold, 1993:221)

My informants cannot explain how they recognize an “*entendida*”, because their understanding resides in inhabiting this practice and this inhabiting is not the same for every person, even though it may share some characteristics from person to person. Simultaneously, the gaze is essential in training perception. The art of looking⁵ appears as a fundamental skill in the act of recognizing and being recognized: “Ah, you know [how to recognize a lesbian] because they look at the women and not at the men, so you know (...) There is always something that gives it away: in their gaze, their pose as they sit at the table... something different that gives it away. And we know, you see?” Therefore, the training of the eye seems to emerge from the simple fact of directing one’s gaze at the object of one’s desire (a woman and not a man), and only secondly

⁴ Jaqueline de Oliveira Muniz’s definition of *understanding*, in opposition to Fry and McRae’s (1985) definition, shines some light on this matter. In the gay world, she explains, “it seems more relevant if a possible partner is able to ‘understand’, to ‘do it’ with someone of the same gender, than whether he is ‘really’ homosexual.” This form of thinking about the word *entendida* debunks the idea of a substance or a pre-determined substratum that gives origin to or sustains homosexuality. It also debunks the idea of a supposed homosexual culture or sub-culture.

⁵ Regarding this issue, see Guimarães (2004). The author presents the look as a tool for identification and assessment among gay males in dating spaces, that is, those spaces whose clientele is specifically gay.

from refining a differentiation between women who are and are not *entendida*⁶ and who can thus “understand”.⁷

We learn to look, we train our attention and our senses to understand and process the world we inhabit. We adapt our body to the pursuit of our interests in this world.

Skills such as walking and cycling are developed in response to contextual needs (Ingold, 2000). That which is perceived through the senses follows the same process. It is not natural to be able to distinguish a man from a woman: we learn how to do it because we are trained to naturalize—to therefore render natural and irrefutable—the existence of men and women as two incommensurable beings. But this training is not conscious: it is rooted in bodies. It is *embodied* (Cf. Gibson, 1979 and Ingold, 1993) in such a way that to uproot the process becomes an impossible task. “Perception involves the *whole person*, in an active engagement with his or her environment (...) perception is a mode of engagement with the world, not a mode of construction of it.” (Ingold, 1996: 105).

To inhabit the world implies, in Ingold's words, a commitment, an engagement that has the body as its main instrument, following the idea that perception is embodied.

What are the terms that the customers of “Flôr do André” use to verbalize this way of *inhabiting the world*? What are the keywords of reference?

Denominations and self-references

- Martinha, please explain to me why you use the word “entendida”.
- Look, I don't know where it comes from, but the thing is I don't like the word *sapatão* [“butch”]. But “entendida” is softer... I don't know where it comes from; *entendidas* are those who are able to understand; those who understand each other.
- That's how I would explain it.
- What do they understand?
- That I understand you. *Entendidas* are those who understand the straights and who understands the woman who are their object of desire, get it? For me, that's what the word *entendida* means. Because one does not disrespect heterosexual people and therefore one understands women, you get it?

⁶ The word *entendida* challenges the borders that words *homosexual* or *lesbian* seem to re-delineate. To understand (*entender*) can also mean “being up for it”, as Muniz (1992) explains.

⁷ “If she isn't, she will be soon”, a customer responded to my question regarding why she thought a young woman who was passing by was *entendida*. With this reply, she attempted to legitimate the signs she perceived in the face of my lack of conviction regarding her statement.

In “Flôr do André” the word *lesbian* is not part of the contextual discourse. The [self] labeling modes can do without this term, which appears semantically distant and weak. *Entendida*, when referring to oneself, or simply *woman*, when referring to other customers are the most common terms used in the bar. The expression *ser do babado* (“to be gay”) and the words *sapatona* or *spatão* (both meaning “butch”) are also used, but less frequently.

To understand (entender) thus becomes a form of complicity, a way of sharing a secret that, albeit public, is intimate. *Ser do babado*, on the other hand, establishes a sense of belonging to a particular universe; in this case, the universe of homoeroticism. Alternately, the term *sapatona* or *sapatão*, denoting extreme masculinity, is generally used by older women and butch women as a self-referential label. It is also used pejoratively used by young women (but not necessarily as a serious slight).

The money belt as a lesbian badge: female masculinities

During a holiday trip in 2001 to Rio de Janeiro, I heard from a cynical friend an expression I would only come to fully understand at a *forró* ball to which I was invited by members of “Flôr do André’s” clientele.

Back then, I wore a money belt because I did not like to carry a handbag that would get in my way when taking photographs or any other of those things we do as part as a tourist. Once, before leaving my friend’s house, she looked me over from top to toe, focused on the money belt and blurted out: “Only lesbians use money belts”.

During fieldwork for my Masters degree, I was invited to a *forró* ball attended by some of “Flôr do André’s” customers. It took place on Riachuelo Street, three blocks away from the bar itself. I accepted the invitation in order to observe how these women interacted outside the bar, but also to continue my conversation with Edna, a woman in her 50s and an old regular of the bar. Edna only went to “Flor do André” on the weekends, when she left “her woman” at home and went out on her own.⁸ Edna’s look was not very different from that of the bar’s other customers. It embodied a stereotypical masculine appearance: very short hair, almost shaved on the sides, military style; a large short-sleeved t-shirt of a dark color (dark blue or grey) which hid the lines of her torso; carefully ironed baggy cotton shorts of an olive hue; nautical brown leather shoes. Men’s cologne and a money belt, a lack of make-up, and stiff body and arm movements completed the look.

⁸ She told me she “has had a woman” for fifteen years. They live in the same building, but in separate apartments because “I couldn’t stand her son all the time. When we want to be together she comes over to my place; then she can go back to her son. I don’t want kids around.”

Once we got to the ball, Edna and Raquel (another “Flôr do André” customer), both on their own that night, offered to teach me how to dance *forró*.

Raquel took the initiative. I danced a few songs with her until Edna approached us. “Come here Argentinean; let’s dance”, she said and, taking my hand politely, took me out on the floor. We started dancing, Edna taking the male role and I the female. With this, I mean to say she held me in the same way the men in the ballroom held the women: one of her hands was on the back of my waist and mine hand was on her shoulder. We entangled our other hands and our bodies were practically glued to each other. However, “practically glued” was not quite right in our case: with her hand on my waist, Edna squeezed my body against hers so I could learn the dance’s steps. I did not mind this because Edna was politeness personified. Her money-belt, however, was another matter entirely. When two women dance body to body, as in this case, there is no visible protuberance from either of their bodies, at least from the waist down. Even when their legs are entwined, there is no voluminous “package” sticking out from their trousers. In this case, however, the money belt was placed in the exact same place as a man’s “package” so that it brushed against my groin, even though I am fifteen centimeters taller than Edna. What I felt was less like a money belt and more like a “package”. Disturbed, I asked her to move the artifact to the side of her hips. She looked at me and said: “this is where it should be”. She squeezed me even more and went on dancing, teaching me *forró*. Appearance, male perfume, stiff posture, seriousness, politeness and the impossibility of changing who is “leading” and who is “being led” framed this picture—the money belt was at its centre.

It was at that precise moment that the sentence I had heard years before came back to my mind. Although it was my brain that remembered, it was my body that empathically understood the deeper meaning of the expression. Seen in this light, the money belt exteriorizes the genitals by placing them in a body position similar to a man’s. What made me feel uncomfortable was to dance with a woman while reliving a bodily sensation I had only known (and avoided) when dancing with men. The supposed “equality” between bodies that is celebrated in the most romantic and activist forms of lesbian love was debunked by a money belt positioned at just the right spot.⁹

Without wishing to reify the spaces in which genders develop, this example leads me to the idea of a type of masculinity that is not tied solely to a single body, but that is able to jump from body to body. *A dick-less masculinity*, yet one endowed with substitute performative devices that challenge the meaning of the penis beyond its reproductive or penetrating functions. How else could we label these types of performances in which

⁹ Within some branches of lesbian-feminist activism, one finds the belief that lesbian love is ruled by values of symmetry and equality, manifested in the supposed absence of active and passive roles in romantic relationships. This fact is used to underline the difference in relation to heterosexual or gay sex in which someone penetrates and someone else is penetrated. It is worth noting that such discourse excludes from this ideal other forms of relationships between women where equality is not the goal: butch-femme relationships, for example. These are considered politically incorrect by this type of activism.

the body extrapolates the limits imposed by flesh and makes use of other elements to redefine a person's socially attributed identity? In Donna Haraway's (1985: 305) words, why should our bodies end at the skin?

The platonic definition of simulacrum¹⁰ is “a copy for which there is no original”. In this light, the masculinity of the lesbians of “*Flôr do André*” could be formulated as a simulacrum. Man is not the original here and neither is woman. The result is not an inverted mixture of both, but rather a different configuration that does not correspond to any model. To simulate an experience is different from copying it in so far as the copy is a copy of an event that has already happened. The simulacrum is a response to facts for which there are no antecedents for those who perform them.

To paraphrase Butler's (2000) explanation of why homosexuality should not be thought of as a copy of heterosexuality, we could argue that explaining the man-masculinity and woman-femininity binaries on the basis of *a priori* models is invalid. Butler explains that term *homosexuality* was conceived before the term *heterosexuality*, which only appeared as a counterpart of the former word (since heterosexuality is seen as natural, there was no need to name it). Therefore,

“if it were not for the notion of the homosexual as copy, there would be no construct of heterosexuality as origin. Heterosexuality here presupposes homosexuality. And if the homosexual as copy precedes the heterosexual as origin, then it seems only fair to concede that the copy comes before the original and that homosexuality is thus the origin and heterosexuality the copy” (Butler, 2000:100-101).

We only have to think of mixed examples of masculinity and women: men's femininity; gay hyper-masculinity (bears)¹¹ and lesbian hyper-femininity (femmes)¹²; or at an extreme, trans people. If sexuality is imprinted on matter (bodies) through the performance of experiences, if sex and gender are not natural but socially constructed categories, then this explosion of categories and ways of performing and experiencing sexuality becomes lost in the infinite scope of the imagination.

A masculine corporeal performance is therefore not necessarily directly related to male sexuality. That being the case, the performance constitutes the subject that expresses itself through its repetition. Having a masculine look does not imply the use of penetrating instruments in sexual relations. In bed, the “penis” can remain hanging on the back of a chair, next to the trousers and the money-belt: “butches switch between being masculine on the streets and female in the sheets” (Halberstam, 1998:125).

¹⁰ Frederic Jameson in Haraway (1995: 264).

¹¹ “Bear” is a term gay men who look rough and scruffy use to refer to themselves. These men are strong, big and hairy and therefore do not comply to the esthetical standard of the muscled body. “The ‘bear’ model is a man who is not well groomed—who is at least not bothered about his physical or visual appearance.” (Figari, 2003: 362).

¹² “Femmes” are hyper-feminine lesbians. They wear mini-skirts, high heels, lipstick, lots of make up and use subtle gestures. Although historically they are seen as the partners of “butch” lesbians, they are not necessarily interested in them.

The term *butch* is used by Judith Halberstam (following Gayle Rubin) in order to define “women who are more comfortable with masculine gender codes, styles or identities than with feminine ones”. The same author uses *lesbian masculinity* to refer to “women who perform their masculinity within what are recognizably lesbian relations” (1998:120). I prefer to talk about women’s masculinities, since the customers of “Flôr do André” identify as women who are *entendida*, ignoring the term *lesbian* and not being aware of the English term *butch*. It is a fact, however, that none of these terms contribute greatly to breaking the compulsory binary implied in the use of *man* and *woman*.

What the customers of “Flôr do André” clearly reveal is the fragility of the assertive categories of masculine-feminine and man-woman. They destabilize their pretended universality: “female gender (femininity) and male gender (masculinity) are not ultimately regarded as the exclusive province of female and male sexed bodies, respectively. Sex, gender and sexuality may be popularly perceived as irreducibly joined but these remain asymmetrical and not a permanently fixed condition” (Robertson, 1999:8). The categories do not disappear, but their meaning is reinvented. This is achieved simply by inhabiting those categories, negotiating the spaces through practices and diluting the borders that separate feminine and masculine, woman and man, or, in broader terms, nature and culture.

The goldfish: internal sexual exchange

Goldfish have only a three second memory. That means that if it takes three seconds to swim around the fishtank, everything is new once again.

This opening line of “Goldfish Memory”¹³ serves as a parable to portray one aspect of the loving relationships within “Flôr do André”: endogamy.

Generally, endogamy appears in the anthropological literature to refer to keeping sexual relations within a given group. This diminishes the possibility of exchange with other groups. However, in the Brazilian sociological literature which analyses the genealogy of the Brazilian family, this practice is revealed as common among families that possess economic (and later political) power. It is employed to preserve and extend this power by the group itself. (Cf. Wagley, 1968; Canedo, 1998; Duarte, 1966; Azevedo, 1948; Cândido, 1951).

I could use “endogamy” differently by taking the universe of “Flôr do André” as a group in which sexual exchange is often internal, although new and occasional members often also appear (usually brought in as affairs or the girlfriends of someone who is a regular in the bar). Indeed, a particularity relating to the film line quoted above frames the

¹³ This Dutch film was shown in Rio de Janeiro in 2004. It deals with the different ways in which romantic relationships can develop.

scene: memory span is short and this enables quests for new experiences among old acquaintances, sometimes revitalizing, sometimes thinning out the bar's sexual atmosphere.

All of "Flor do André's" customers, in general, have had loving relationship with other members of the group (as girlfriends or passing affairs). This does not necessarily mean that they distance themselves after the relationship is over, however. To the contrary: it often means that *girlfriends* become *friends* or even *family*. Simultaneously, this behavior implies the existence of a permanent tension (one might sarcastically call it a "heightened state"), since all women in the bar are potentially objects of desire. The borders between friendship and eroticism are opaque, here. They are overcome by looks, broken during dances and disfigured through gossip. "You're with your girlfriend. You go to the toilet and your friends start telling her that you're kissing someone else. Then you fight and jealousy is triggered".¹⁴ Gossip also takes place when two lesbians talk to each other for a long time. This behavior means (in the context of the bar) that sex is being discussed; that one woman is flirting with another. It is rarely understood to be the fruit of a simple desire to have a conversation.

Although I was explicit in my intentions to research "Flor de André" and I did not have sexual relations with any members of the bar's clientele, these safeguards did not make me exempt from being the object of gossip. No safeguard was strong enough to face the power of perception. A woman on her own, talking to others for hours, in this context means one simple thing: flirting, affairs, sex. Although no one would talk about it openly, the act had been consummated in the bar's collective imagination. "Flôr do André" functions as a dating space, although you rarely see explicit caresses there. "We are used to this system. We have to respect the others. I believe it is like this; you understand? I personally will not grope a woman in public. If I want to, I take her to a hotel or to my place", was how the regulars explained the system to me.

Invisibility lets the imagination run wild, establishing unspoken codes. In Muniz' words: "the clandestinity, the administration of secrets in the development of a homosexual career and the maximization of the use of non-verbal language, both in the act of chatting up and in the process of identification, confer an indirect and implicit configuration to love between women(...). It is therefore through what makes it mute that lesbianism makes its discourse audible" (Muniz, 1992:66).

Alcohol, on the other hand, contributes towards forgetfulness and the re-arrangement of events. This constructs particular narratives of events that further develop the sexual curriculums of the customers and weave a network of relations which appears as true and real in everybody's eyes. The narrative of desire is built via rumor, having imagination

¹⁴ This was the explanation I was given, highlighting informants' belief that distrust is necessary when one has lesbian friends.

as its source and invisibility as its raw materials. In a venue where the customers themselves establish a moral pact of not exposing themselves due to “respect for others” or for “children who may be passing by” who “should not have to see women kissing or groping each other”, caresses and kisses only happen in private space.¹⁵ Public space is reserved for friendship and flirting: “Here, you look at someone, chat, pass them a note with your phone number, or go to a hotel. This is no place for making out, no it isn’t! This is an open club; anyone can come in.”

The censorship of explicit caresses can also be read as insistence upon placing eroticism within the private sphere. This does not follow the logic Maria Luiza Heilborn has established which defines the private, the home, as a feminine sphere, opposed to the masculine public space, creating incommensurable abysses of meaning and socialization which corresponds to the binary separation of sexes. To the contrary: what I am attempting to show is that it is impossible to taxonomically separate the two universes. Masculine and feminine are part and parcel of the lives of the lesbians who embody nuances that are common to both spheres of gender.

“Flôr do André” is nevertheless known in the area by men as a women’s bar.¹⁶ Its clientele is not kept secret. However, although it is known as a lesbian bar, it does not follow, as a *sine qua non* condition, that it is primarily a meat-market, which is the case of many gay bars and clubs.¹⁷ The social interaction among customers of “Flôr do André” differs in its flexibility, acting as a bridge between masculine and feminine. This interaction develops a veil of intimacy over sex and eroticism, structures flirting and the interactions beyond the space of sexual pursuit in a public, explicitly masculine space such as a *boteco*.

“It is in this way that female homosexuality situates itself in the world. As an unknown region, a type of box of surprises, suspicious of the definitions it divulges. Love among women can disseminate perplexity both when it seems to opt for loud silences and when it allows for translations” (Muniz, 1992:59). The specific translation in this case is the possibility of traversing the masculine and the feminine universes embodied in one single person.

Equally, it seems difficult to pigeonhole the moral values of the lower class women customers in the bar (Heilborn, 1999:179). For the customers of “Flôr do André”,

¹⁵ This pact is not imposed by the bar’s owner nor is it adhered to by all customers. It is very rare, however, to see women kissing each other passionately in the bar. It is even rarer for something more explicit to happen, such as groping. However, later in the night the atmosphere gets more relaxed with the help of alcohol.

¹⁶ When talking to people who frequent other bars, I asked whether they knew about “Flôr do André”. Those who did were quick to clarify it is a women’s bar. *Entendidas* or *sapatonas* were the terms they used to clarify my doubts about what they meant by *women*.

¹⁷ On this issue and the modes of appropriation of bars and clubs employed by gay clientele, see Figari (2003), Green (1999) and Parker (1999). The spaces known as “dark-rooms”, typical of gay clubs, where sex can take place, do not exist in lesbian public spaces.

marriage is not a goal; even homosexual conjugality falls outside their experience. You can often hear them say things such as: “Thank God I’m single” or “I’m a *xoxolteira*”.¹⁸ Such expressions, exchanged among the bar’s regulars, attribute a positive value to polygamy. If we take into account the fact that the main age group in the bar is in their 40s, not having marriage as a goal seems even more strange, especially in the light of the logic of a non-modern or holistic ideology which some authors attribute to the so called “working classes” (Cf. Duarte, 1986, 1987; and Heilborn and Gouveia, 1999). The idea of reproduction as the expectation of sexuality, another characteristic of the female sexual “ethos” among the working classes, remains outside the economics of pleasure of the bar’s customers. I am not trying to dismiss the existence of maternal desires in some of these women. What I want to make clear is that the way the lesbians of “Flôr do André” experience sexuality does not match relational conceptions under which female sexuality among the working classes operate. This is because this framework of analysis disregards a variable that is crucial in my research area: sexual orientation and the particular way in which people experience it. Pleasure is not coupled together with “reproduction and social obligation” (Duarte, 1987:223). There is no shame in talking about the pleasure given by a partner or produced in her. To the contrary, this is the focus of long conversations that take place in the bar. Thus, sex is experienced as pleasure without any other consequences.¹⁹ This may be exemplified by a dialogue I exchanged with one of the bar’s long-term customers. More than two years before, Detinha decided to enter into heterosexual practices for the very first time in her life, to see “whether she was missing something”. Taking advantage of the moment, she decided to have a child: “Since I was with a man and I wanted to be a mother, I took the opportunity of making him the father. But once I was pregnant I didn’t want to stay with him anymore. I became totally dedicated to my son. Now that I’m no longer breast feeding and that I saw I had nothing to lose (laughs) I went back to women... It’s nicer; their soft skin and smell, hummm! Very different from men! A woman in bed is always better! [Laughs from all at the table who agree with her]”.

What are the differences that establishes class or sexual ethos? Do such neat categories exist? Or do they merely contribute to an understanding of how subjects are placed, in which the intersection of networks that share experiences of class, gender, family, sexual orientation, race, nationality and age allow us to specify coordinates where we can draw an “x” that metaphorically pinpoints people’s social identity? Understanding identities as closed spaces to be investigated as fields of research freezes the ever-moving and relational borders of the subjects themselves.

If “Flôr do André” is understood as a different space, the interactions that happen in it mold and permit such mobility.

¹⁸ Word play that includes the term *xoxota* (vagina) in the word *solteira* (single); this implies polygamy or the search for occasional sexual partners as part of the non-conjugal experience.

¹⁹ I do not mean that this freedom is limited to lesbian women. I am simply presenting the impressions I got from the bar in order to showcase how my informants differ in their behaviors from those expressed by theoretical crystallizations that lead to the closing off of subjects within fixed categories.

“We’re all family here”: interactions in the bar, belonging and exteriority

Even if the customers refer to the “Flor do André” as a familiar space and to the interactions within the bar as being those of a “family”, to belong implies entering the space with a double and opposite meaning: one becomes an object of desire and a potential rival (competitor) in the fight for new (or old) prey. How are interactions in the space configured? What are the markers of belonging and exteriority?

Most of the bar’s customers have known each other from a young age. They live in the neighborhood and constitute a significantly tight knit group in spite of the squabbles that continually occur. To a certain extent, these arguments build up the relational map by creating alliances and enmities that may or may not persist over time, depending on the level of escalation. Arguments are almost always exclusive to the women’s universe and men are very rarely involved.²⁰ I would often arrive at the bar and encounter a strange atmosphere where women who formed a group were divided into two factions due to a recent argument. Often, the next time I visited, the group would be united once more. Nevertheless, there are differences that cannot be resolved and results in limitations on interactions both within and outside the bar.

There is a group that constitutes the central core of the bar, made up of those customers who began appropriating the space quite some time ago. This “hard core” works to control, in a dissimulated fashion, who is and who is not allowed in the space. Other customers (those newer to the place) treat the older ones with deference. This is made explicit in the use of terms such as “the nobility”, “the aristocracy” and “the locals”. These terms, used in a manner that is somewhere between ironic and respectful, establish a certain prestige wherein the time spent frequenting the bar has a symbolic value. Within this logic, if a lesbian has a problem with anyone in this founding group, it is very likely that others in the bar will ostracize her. The immediate consequence of this is that she will not be welcomed at tables and in conversations. In the language of Maria Isaura de Queiroz (1976), the clientele of “Flôr do André” can be understood metaphorically as having a structure and movement similar to the logic of *an extensive family*²¹. The subaltern sectors of the bar’s social pyramid respond to the opinions and precepts of the higher sectors in such a way that to go against the core is also to go against the group. Mechanical socialization, on the one hand, allows for cohesion and the protection of the group’s members; on the other hand, however, it leads to exclusion and abandonment of outsiders.

²⁰ If they do, it is usually when a man has taken into his head to flirt with the girlfriend/affair of some customer. This is elevated to the category of an unpardonable mistake.

²¹ The extensive family is formed by a set of individuals who share blood, spiritual (godparents/godchildren), or alliance (matrimonial unions) ties. Most of the individuals of an extensive family originate from the same trunk, either legally or as bastards. (Queiroz, 1976: 179)

This behavior spreads through *disdainful gossip* as a way of making the core's opinion explicit and imposing it upon the wider group that cannot (and often does not want to) reject or challenge the sentence passed by the core. According to Elias (1994), gossip works as a means of social control, becoming an element of rejection and humiliation (in the case of despising gossip) or of admission and recognition (in the case of complimentary gossip). The former type is used by a group to refer to outsiders and the latter to refer to members of the same group, as a way of differentiating and of belonging. Nevertheless, in "Flor do André" solidarity is manifested not only in a negative manner, by rejecting despised elements, but also in a positive manner by reinforcing belonging and friendship.

Why not label as family friendships that are long-lasting and in which intimacy, solidarity and affection work to develop ties as strong and enduring as those of consanguineous kinship? This analysis is built upon the reformulation and permanent critique of the naturalization of categories in the pursuit of science-making, never losing sight of the goal of breaking, in Ingold's terms, the primacy of the great divisors. Why not, then, reclaim the expressions that often appear in the speech of lesbians and which extend the notion of family beyond blood kin? Kinship, Franklin and McKinnon argue, is no longer understood as being based on a singular and fixed notion of "natural" relationships. Rather, it appears to be built self-consciously through a multiplicity of possible fragments (Cf. Butler 2004:254).

Perhaps families beyond consanguinity or traditional alliances are showing the way to a form of non-traditional kinship. Perhaps this is the moment to remind ourselves that in some heterosexual relationships, procreation does not occupy the place it once did. Monogamy is slowly giving way to "open relationships" (in which couples do not necessarily cohabit or retain the idea of corporeal fidelity) or to relationships maintained by partners living in different cities or countries, who have two homes, different social networks, different languages or cultures and yet nevertheless preserve the word "couple" to refer to their relationship. The rule of conjugal binary is still dominant in the world, but this is not the point of the present discussion. What I am saying is that there are other possibilities that depart from this norm.²² Given types of relationships that escape the definition of friendship and are close to family (according to my informants), Judith Butler's formulations with respect to kinship may be used to denominate, once again, the margins of the norm and the rupture of a symbolic order. The new ties of kinship thus formulated "may well be no more or less than the intensification of community ties, may or may not be based on enduring or exclusive sexual relations, and may well consist of ex-lovers, non-lovers, friends, community members".²³

²² How can the figure of the aunt be understood if there is no sister/brother? What will family structures be like for new generations of Chinese people if the state persists in its iron hard policy of birth control, allowing only one child per couple?

²³ I do not believe all friendships are seen as family ties. I am merely presenting, alongside Butler, the possibility of this idea. Again, I am not attempting to crystallize theory but, to the contrary, leave the door open for the debate.

In this sense, then, relations of kinship arrive at boundaries that call into question the distinguishability of community from community, or that call for a different conception of friendship. These constitute a “breakdown” of traditional kinship that not only displaces the central place of biological and sexual relations from its definition, but gives sexuality a separate domain from that of kinship, also allowing for durable ties to be thought of outside the conjugal frame and opening kinship to a set of community ties that are irreducible to family. (Butler, 2004:255-256).

Butler allows us to glimpse the slowly transforming notions of kinship and the expansion of the idea of family without attempting to force us to impose new rules. To the contrary, this is an analysis of the explosion of sexuality categories that has overcome boundaries and achieved the criteria of kinship. This can perhaps be seen as tracing the history of theoretical and juridical categories, exposing their fickleness and listening to natives’ voices.

Man to man: the place of men in the bar

Men who frequent “Flôr do André” are a minority when compared to women. Most are heterosexual, apart from one or two friends of the barman²⁴ and a Dutch man who left for the Netherlands halfway through my fieldwork. In all, I was able to identify ten men who show up regularly, but never all at the same time. Only at parties can such men be seen in any number and even then, they are still much fewer in number than the women.²⁵

In general, the men appear to be quiet, solitarily drinking their beer. They seldom take part in the conversations. The time they tend to show up is around noon or after lunch, but there is always one or two in the bar. At times when the clientele is markedly female, one can see them tucked away in a corner, between the sound system and the end of the counter. “I’ve been coming here for years”, Francisco tells me. Francisco is about forty years old and lives in a hotel on Riachuelo Street. He works as a body-guard, but is unemployed at the moment. He told me he spends much of his time drinking *cachaça* (sugar-cane brandy) in “Flôr do André” because he does not have the will to do anything else. He remains apart from others, including men. As far as I could observe and also on the basis of comments about him, I believe he is not trusted by the clientele. He told me: “Before there were no women, but then they started coming. One brought another and so the bar changed. Now it’s a women’s bar. I don’t have a problem with it, but many [old locals] do not show up anymore. They go to other bars.”

²⁴ The barman is also gay and is part of the oldest group of customers. He started frequenting the bar as a customer and soon after that started working there. Nilda, the waitress who works during the day, had the same trajectory, but only started one and a half years ago.

²⁵ They were about eighty at Rubi’s birthday; between forty and fifty at other parties and on birthdays; twenty on a weekday and around thirty (depending on the weather) on weekends.

“Flôr do André” has been open for over twenty-five years (thirty according to some old customers) with the same name and in the same place. The clientele, however, which used to be made up mostly of men changed with the introduction of the new management that took the place over five years ago. Although the introduction of lesbian women in the clientele made some old customers look for other bars, some do not mind their presence and continue to visit “Flôr do André” regularly. Even the use of toilets incorporates this change in the appropriation of the space. Although there are two toilets, there is a single queue, given the number of women who have decided to appropriate the toilet reserved for men, based on the physiological need produced by the accumulation of liquids in the body (especially beer). Faced with this situation men take the same attitude: that is, none. They do not argue, do not demand, do not complain. They wait parsimoniously: ‘What can you do?’, they tell me. “This is a women’s bar. We have to respect that.”

Carneirinho works in a hotel in the city centre. He usually comes to the bar in the evening and weekends when he does not work. He is close to the customers who make up the hard core and one of the few men they dance with at parties. “I like them”, he says of the women. “We have been friends for a long time. I help them to get women and they help me to get women [he laughs at his own joke]”. Several women told me they saw him as a good friend, a person who can listen to them and with whom one can talk “man to man”. Nevertheless, as the evening goes on and the alcohol start to dominate the women’s impulses, Carneirinho is rejected because “he is too sticky”. This refers to the way he changes when he is drunk; he tries to kiss women or offers to keep them company in bed.

The women do not accept any fragment of flirtatious behavior from the men. The customers of “Flôr do André” insist on making clear to men that flirting is a waste of time. This disdainful attitude towards men is repeated every time a man tries to chat up a lesbian. They do not hesitate to reject men and even despise them through looks, gestures and expressions such as: “Do you think I like the sausage you have between your legs?”; “I like pussy, not dick”; “Go! Take your dick home to your wife who’s waiting for you and leave us alone”; “Get out, John. Don’t you know where you are? Here we like women”. In the face of such interjections all the men can do is to keep on filling the women’s glasses because, even though the women insult and despise them, they keep on demanding beer from those men who flirt with them.

I would dare to conjecture that even when it comes to the men, dick-less masculinity is still the condition for interacting in the bar. There is no space for a man to seduce a woman. Those who insist on flirting are excluded from the groups and sometimes taken away from the bar by the barman who bans them if they insist on continuing their behavior. Men are seen as friends or mere alcohol providers: their sexual desires are not part of the interactions that seem to be ruled by women in a homo-social manner.

They are received as equals, man to man. Men's biological genitalia lose their symbolic power in "Flôr do André". Despite the supposed equality, what in reality seems to operate is an inversion of gender inequality or at least the inequality between hegemonic and alternative masculinities. If, as Cornwall and Lindsfarne (1994) explain, generic identities are necessarily constructed in reference to others who appear as *different* or *dominated*, to talk about masculinity/ies implies a logic of power in which some define themselves in relation to those that are seen as hegemonic. In feminist, gender or, more recently, queer or gay and lesbian studies, hegemonic masculinity is based on the white, heterosexual, middle-class man of central or metropolitan countries. As the possibility of other masculinities opens up, these contribute to the denaturalization and disempowerment of hegemonic masculinity, hitherto seen as the only possible or visible one. (Cf. Halberstam, 1998; Butler, 1993; Rosaldo, 1974; Rich, 1980; and Moore, 1988; among others).

Women's masculinity in "Flôr do André" subverts this order, placing itself as dominant in relation to men's masculinity. Men are shifted to the margins. They lose any special centrality and are relegated to a corner of the bar. They lose their place as conquerors and flirts, not because they are now the object of conquest, but precisely because they do not take part in the ruling economy of desire.

Why do they remain? Perhaps for the same reason they insist on flirting: in terms of seduction, the network in which they operate is not the same as the women's. They are friends: they drink together, talk about women, share a liking for women. Meanwhile, the way they inhabit the world is different. They know they are not in competition with the women through irrefutable signals such as rejection and lesbian self-denomination. They can gaze at the flirting that takes place in the bar, see the "forbidden" kisses that are nevertheless visible. However, these men seem to hold a secret hope that they might one day succeed in seducing a lesbian. This incomprehension does not stop them from using the space or developing friendships with the women, so long as negotiation is respected. These small differences in a world that is seen as continuous establish diverse perceptions which are negotiated on the basis of a shared socialization. This "continuous world of small differences instead of great oppositions, of chains of similarities instead of equalities or binary oppositions" (Velho, 2003) is in line with Ingold's idea of difference as part of living in a world in which we have to interact with others who are similar but not equal, different but not unapproachable—simply other links in the chain of relations called socialization.

As it has been presented throughout the article above, the lesbians who frequent this bar manifest behaviors constructed according to a so-called masculine logic. Through their behaviors towards men or among themselves, they allow us to glimpse possible nuances between the binary categories man-woman and masculine-feminine. In the terms of Judith Butler (2004:230), they illustrate *places of uncertain ontology*: even though they are understood as lesbians, the type of practices that go beyond dominance

place them outside the field of legitimacy as women and also off the lesbian map of the city. This is a double abjection that raises questions about the meanings that fill the categories *woman*, *man*, or *lesbian*—terms that the lesbians of “Flôr do André” seem to inhabit only at the margins.

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