

Death of a gigolo: the current borders of sexuality and transgression

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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.



Death of a gigolo: the current borders of sexuality and transgression*

Claudia Fonseca **

There are matters which promptly emerge when one discusses sexuality—prostitution is one of them. At a distance, through the lens of novels and newspapers, the subject is certainly fascinating—fairly easily absorbed through predictable images of eroticism and transgression. However, as the researcher gets closer to sex workers of flesh and blood, the picture becomes entangled: what was thought as exotic is revealed to be mundane and the extreme diversity of this universe arises.

In the mid-1990's I had the opportunity to conduct ethnographic research among prostitutes in the city of Porto Alegre. For my first article (Fonseca, 1996), I focused on the girls of Alfândega Square: women of a certain age that had turned this public square into a kind of living room, a space of intense female sociality. In the present article, after revisiting this previous setting, I want to look at another “red light district”, where men play a more important role. I will do so by remembering a dramatic event which took place at the end of my field work: the death of Deodoro,¹ a gigolo² beloved by most of the members of his small universe of friends and acquaintances. By closely following the repercussions of this death on the lives of three women who lived and worked with Deodoro, I will examine an almost trivial event (widowhood) under special circumstances. What happens to a sex worker after such a rupture? We will observe how this social drama discloses a series of questions regarding solidarity, particular kinds of insecurity and, above all, the life courses of female sex workers.

This article gave me the opportunity to go back to some data from my first research project and add new information to it. I was able to briefly return to the streets³ and find out what some of my old acquaintances have been up to today (2003). I will return to these points at the end of the paper to stress an idea that has been on my mind

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¹ Although most prostitutes and their partners adopt street names (names that do not correspond to their official names), I chose to give them fictitious names for this article.

² Translator's note: The “gigolo” is a peculiar figure in the history of Brazilian sex work, part pimp, part boyfriend and often a sex worker himself. The best translation would be “a man who makes a living of sleeping with women”, both sex workers and others.

³ Rather than focusing on the changes in the field of prostitution over the last 10 years (which are not few: see, for example, Piscitelli, 2003), or on newer studies of prostitution, I look at the evolution of certain actors who played key roles during my first research project.

since my first months in the field: the lives of these women are, in many aspects (family experiences and personal dilemmas) not very different of the ones led by their more conventional peers.

When I emphasize the ordinary aspects of the lives of prostitutes, questions regarding the constitution of the academic field of sexuality studies often arise. I ask myself: “Do I address sexuality in this paper?” I don’t think so. I speak of women who perform sexual acts deemed unusual, but all that I present aims to deconstruct the common sense that insists on this group’s inherent uniqueness. My inquiry may move to other themes—homosexuality, for instance. Should all research on homosexual parents be automatically classified as sexuality studies, even when most part of the ethnographic work shows that we are dealing with parents like any others (Grossi, 2003)? This segmentation is established by our prejudices, in these cases?

We find ourselves in a paradox: the more we study these “sexualities”, the fewer claims they seem to have for a special field of study. In an even more unsettling way, we might ask ourselves if by following this path we are not being a “kill joy”⁴, if we are not ruining pleasures? Duarte (2004)⁵ reminds us that modern sexuality—bearing a sense of something intense, pleasurable and intimate—has as its foundation the works of *Marquis de Sade*. For the most part in the western world, it is precisely the idea of transgression which enables the erotic, giving meaning to sexuality. So what happens when social movements and intellectuals gather forces precisely to exculpate such practices? When these efforts are successful, could the acts themselves lose their transgressive sense? And, without such transgression, where would we find sexuality, that profound truth of the modern individual (Foucault, 1979)?

To take the exotic out of prostitution through ethnographic observation raises questions regarding the ghosts of our own sexual activities (mine included). However, this is a complicated matter with no clear solution. In the final notes of this paper I will present a sort of self-critique and focus on the political impacts of our current definitions of sexual transgression.

1. Alfândega Square, 1994

Without embarrassment, I admit that just like my undergrad female students, I came to the subject of prostitution out of curiosity... due to the exotic stereotypes that hover over the matter. It was precisely because of these stereotypes that I could not spot the sex workers of Alfândega Square at first, those women who hang around this important park

⁴ Translator’s note: In the original we read “*desmancha-prazeres*”, a Brazilian expression literally meaning someone that undoes pleasure, ruining them.

⁵ English version in the volume.

of Porto Alegre from 10 in the morning on. By engaging in conversation with all sorts of characters, I was able to spot these women out. On those first sunny afternoons, I would always find a group of three or four woman somewhere in the square, chatting and nibbling sandwiches just like old ladies having a picnic in the park. Near the central statue, there was usually a young mother showing off her newborn baby to her longtime colleagues. However, my loose and unconvincing description of my plans (a university researcher interested in studying the “different activities” that took place on the square) ended up evoking evasive replies from these women.

I especially remember Aracy, one of my first connections in the Square. She didn't flinch when telling me her age (47 years old). With her long hair pulled back, wearing a long black skirt and a white turtleneck, she looked like any other respectable lady. We started talking of our children and moved on to other female subjects, like beauty tips for skin and hair. As the conversation wore on, she offered to sell me clothes and books she had stored in her house. On this first occasion, she did not mention her interest in condom distribution and in taking part on sex workers meetings. But it did not take long for such matters to emerge as I became a regular on the square.

I soon realized that while the male hustlers would merge with the shoeshine boys, the craftsmen and the retired senior citizens, virtually all the women standing or sitting in the square were there to “turn tricks”. However, I realized that the first identity Aracy presented to me was true, too. Most of the woman from the square were also mothers (or grandmothers), women who cared for their looks and sold a variety of products. In this space of female sociality, all women's lives were on everyone's lips. Everybody knew of the quiet dignity of Mrs. Amélia (the square's elder) who, at age of 72, spent her days sitting on a bench in front of the State Bank waiting for a retired man. All the girls knew that Cheine's brother was dying of AIDS in the hospital. They all listened with a hint of skepticism as Lúcia, a woman with three grown kids, talked about her plan to get a high school equivalency degree and go to college. And everybody followed Diva's occasional attempts to enter the formal work market. Even after finding a job as a cleaning lady in a museum nearby, Diva—a veteran from the golden days of the harbors of Rio Grande do Sul—insisted on going back to the square regularly, “*So I won't lose my clients to another girl*”.

I was not surprised that of all the different red light districts of Porto Alegre, I ended up together with the veterans of the Alfândega Square. There were rules to preserve the illegal activities at the square (sale of drugs, theft, fights) and even to keep disputes under control. Otherwise, prostitution would not be so easily tolerated by the middle class citizens (like me) who flooded Porto Alegre's downtown during the day. However, I never thought that this group was representative of a portion of the greater field of prostitution. I already knew other red light districts enough to know there was not such thing as a representative district. So, along with the invitation to revisit my research on prostitutes, I felt challenged to widen my descriptive horizons to experiences beyond

Alfândega Square, to younger and more prosperous populations, where the male presence (of husbands/gigolos) had a deep impact on the work environment.

Let us change location to the crossing of two alleys in the downtown's commercial zone, and change the time of day to the hour when the stores and offices close their doors, between 6 and 10 pm. It was there and then that I would meet the girls of Dr. Flores Street, women who seemed to be able to correct all the aesthetic mistakes of their Alfândega Square colleagues. They were young (25 years old), slim, had nice makeup and wore tight pants and high heels while boldly tossing their long and lustrous hair to draw the attention of potential clients. This half a dozen women worked for two brothers who had been in charge of that corner for years. My relationship with the women took on a new meaning with the sudden death of one of the brothers: an event that tells us about rupture, change and, indirectly, of the future. Even though everything I will relate took place in 1996, we will see how this occurrence brings us up to the present day. Before we go into the story, however, some notes about methodology are necessary.

2. Methodological caveats

Until the 1970's (when ethnographies on prostitution began to appear)⁶ most of the literature on the sale of sex focused on the description of the woes—misery, sores, tuberculosis, mental illness—awaiting the unfortunate women who chose this path. The pre-1970 literature is filled with testimonials of “Therasas” and “Marias” who deeply regretted “dragging their names through the mud, through such horrible mud...”. Portraits abound of agonizing woman “hurt in a certain place” screaming in pain for medicine or assistance, only to finally die alone on a sidewalk. In more recent studies, authors have been putting the morality of these Victorian voices into perspective. They are not always able to shake off the bias imprinted on the data selection itself, however. Data is still usually taken from police files, hospital records and public shelters—documents produced in “places of refuge”, filled by the defeated, forced to regret under the circumstance that they had no other option, stressing their failures, misery and misfortunes (Corbin, 1984).

Times change. By the end of the 1990's, prostitutes had other places where they could express themselves as professionals. A series of NGOs supported by national health projects aiming at containing the spread of venereal diseases were at work in a number of Brazilian capitals. Each group—with slight variations—championed a new order

⁶ See Fonseca (1996) for a more detailed discussion on this literature.

in which “sex workers” (prostitutes, *travestis*⁷ and hustlers) could reject the stigma related to their professional activities in exchange of a new found self-esteem and the political struggle for rights as workers and citizens. I made an effort to conduct my work without the help of these NGOs—I would spend hours in “red light districts” without any “middle man” guiding me. I became captivated by some of the members of this universe. I got close to Estela, the director of a newly opened Prostitutes Association. She was a self titled “hustler’s wife” and her personal style—intimate, straightforward and playful—opened doors for me in numerous prostitution networks. As a “university researcher”—in many occasions in the company of my undergrad students—⁸I found a way to negotiate a place for me in the universe of prostitution in Porto Alegre.

From the first days of my research, however, I was more worried about how to approach the “data” then with its selection—a topic widely discussed in the classic literature. How to choose a style that could evade the classic traps: “the natives” perceived as a homogenous group, with their individual agency and the richness of their different stories concealed behind the anonymity of a collective subject? How to escape the stereotypes of the “eternal prostitute” and at the same time account for the diversity of the characters I came across? A possible solution would be various sets of classification—describing people according to their place of work, how much they charged and the “different services” performed by each category. I attempted something like that with a theoretical mapping of the world of prostitution (Fonseca, 1996:12). But I felt I was engaging in a scientific game, as acting like a naturalist pinning butterflies... or even as some sort of Jack, the Ripper: slashing my object of study, chopping prostitutes into pieces in order to preserve my own ghosts. The shattered outcome still was “the (eternal?) prostitute”, a phoenix that rose from the ashes of theory.

It dawned on me, as it had dawned before, that the virtue of ethnography is its ability to tell stories. Even though such stories are never typical, when seen in their uniqueness they are rendered meaningful. To tell stories is a way to convey something of the relationship between researcher and those being researched, an essential element of the “data”. Here I have no intention to exhaust all possibilities of the “social drama”—which, at its best, brings us an enriched understanding of the historical context in which the events take place (Turner, 1974). Instead, I use the story in order to evoke the agency of the subjects involved⁹, to render them as intelligent subjects negotiating their role under a complex of meanings and power relations particular to the world of prostitution. Readers savvy of the delights of ethnographic research will understand the fact that

⁷ Revision note: *Travesti* is the current Brazilian category for a biological male engaging in female gender performance. The English “transvestite” is not an appropriate translation, as in English it refers to a non-permanent or semi-permanent gender performance, while a *travesti* generally lives as female permanently, and typically engages in some form of permanent body modification. Note local differences in the use of *transsexual* for persons who, unlike *travestis*, feel that they live in the wrong body and typically wish to have gender reassignment surgery.

⁸ Without the help of these students – Alinne Bonetti, Elisiane Pasini, and today, Leticia Tedesco – I would have never gathered the same abundance of data or the depth of human relations with our “research subjects”.

⁹ See Dirks, Eley and Ortner (1994) on the subject as an agent.

excerpts from my field diary are the best way of achieving this end.

Comments in brackets represent my memories and analysis of this scene, several years later.

3. The Death of a gigolo, 1996

Ten o'clock at night, towards the end of October, 1996.

Estela just called me: “Laura and Karol’s Deodoro, had an aneurism. Yesterday (Sunday) he was at the trailer having a snack and suddenly said, ‘I’m not well. Call Nêne’. It seems he fell down onto the floor so hard he broke the planks. The last thing he said was: ‘The girls are not working today’. Júnior—you know him? He is a taxi driver who also has a girl on the street. He and the other guys were the ones who took Deodoro to the hospital”.

“The girls were so desperate... You should have seen it. They went to the hospital saying they should spare no efforts to save Deodoro, that they could pay any treatment, any medicine he might need. You know Jeane, his wife—his real wife—has been with him for twenty years. She was 14 years old and he was in his early thirties when they first got together. She already had a daughter and they had a son together. He’s now 11. Jeane stopped working to take care of the boy while Laura and Karol had everything covered. They are both there at the ER trying to comfort Jeane, but they are all saying that they lost the most important person in their lives, that he was like a father, that he was everything to them...”

[I (Claudia) was not aware of Jeane’s existence, but I had spent some time with Deodoro, Laura and Karol at parties and meetings of the Association. Estela did not hesitate: “We have to go down there to give our support to the girls”. We decided to go to the hospital the next day at 03:15 pm]

Solidarity

The next day:

I arrive late. There are a lot of people in front of the ER. It takes me 15 seconds to find Nêne and some other girls I know from the street. They were wearing shorts and t-shirts with no accessories, quite different from their working outfits. They look even younger with no make-up on. There is an old lady, heavysset and shaky, leaving the hospital. She joins the group. She is Deodoro’s mother. I slowly catch up on who’s there: one of Deodoro’s sisters, two half-brothers, a nephew and their partners, all baffled with the recent news of Deodoro’s brain death.

Soon, Nenê comes to talk to me. I know that charming smile well. Always willing to help, offering rides or making phone calls, he is the most supportive of men with regards to the activities of the Prostitutes Association. I have been to a barbecue at his house where he lives with his father and his wife, Márcia. I heard that the couple is having problems after more than ten years together. Márcia brought a younger half-sister to work with them and “something happened” between her and Nenê. “Under my roof!” cried Márcia. “I can’t take it! I’m not that liberal. I want a husband, not a gigolo!”. Today, however, she and Nenê are here holding and comforting each other, and “lending a helping hand” to their friends.

I ask Nenê who is responsible for the funeral arrangements. “Me,” he answers. “I bought a white suit with a guitar on the lapel for Deodoro. He would have liked it. Even if he doesn’t die, he will like it. It’s something he would wear...” Then Nenê explains: “Deodoro was like a brother to me. He said to everyone that I was more of a brother than any other he had. We’ve known each other for fifteen years. We started a photo store together... look!” (He shows me a business card. Over the address there is the name of the store: “Tonijalma”, a neologism that mixes their two names). “I was the last person to see him alive—cheerful, jolly, loving life. You should have seen it...”

Estela and I went up to the 3rd floor to say our goodbyes to Deodoro. There were a lot of people sitting on a bench outside the doors of the ICU. I see Karol, freckly without makeup. In one hand she holds a folded tissue to dry up her tears; in the other she holds the hand of another girl, slightly older than her, wearing glasses. There is a striking resemblance: they are both skinny blonds with bangs and short hair. I think of Deodoro’s third lady, Laura [who I was told was at home, comforting Deodoro’s son and Jeane]. The three women have something in common: they are not dazzling beauties, but have a certain daintiness to their features. I hug Karol, trying to comfort her, but soon realize I have made a mistake, for the woman next to her is Jeane, the main widow. She is the one who should receive my first condolences.

[So far we had witnessed a scene not much different from that of any other family grieving a tragic death. The fact that Deodoro was a “gigolo” did not seem to block relatives from showing up, short circuit friends’ solidarity or his women’s loyalty. It was only when Jeane tried to picture the future ahead of her that we saw some of the particularities of the situation, along with the common anxieties any low income widow would have.]

Conflicts and uncertainties

Fifteen minutes later, we are back on the sidewalk in front of the Emergency Room and Jeane vents some of her fears (she has a way of biting her upper lip by stretching out her chin as someone who is mad, or maybe very determined). “What am I going to

do? Can you believe this? We only have 5 grand... There are a lot of bills to pay. Think about it: the boy's school, the installment on the house and the apartments (she has a house financed by the bank¹⁰ while Laura and Karol each live in their own apartments). I haven't worked for three years! I stay at home with the boys, that's it. Think about it. Karol has been with us for 8 years. Laura for 9 or ten. But they are young. They'll soon find another man, but what about me? I never thought of living with another man. I've known Deodoro since I was thirteen years old. I never had any other men! I'm terrified to even think about it! I don't like going to parties. I'm not good at making friends. And how am I going to put another man under my roof, with my boys there?"

Estela, trying to cheer Jeane up, tells about how she got back on her feet after a divorce. She was a housewife who never had to think about expenses. Her husband paid for everything. After getting separated, she had to work as an assistant nurse to support her baby—two shifts, everyday including weekends, at a public hospital. Jeane stops her: "But your house was paid for, wasn't it?" Estela agrees, admitting she had no installments to pay. Jeane goes on: "And you had a degree?" Once again, Estela confirms this, stressing a second and fundamental difference between them. Having established these differences, Jeane admits: "Ok, we are not going to starve or anything. I'm not afraid of hard work, of being a maid or anything. But we are used to a certain standard... And we'll have to get used to something else. (...) We want to stay together, at least for now. I'm not gonna leave them hanging. We'll see. Because we have a lot of things together. We'll have to think. Maybe they'll pay me rent or something. Because I don't work, but I have bills to pay."

But there is a catch to this plan: in the part of the city where the girls work, having a male protector is almost a *sine qua non* requirement for being a prostitute. First, a man offers protection against violent customers. On the day Deodoro went to the hospital, a young prostitute had been forced to drink caustic soda by a client who was obsessed with her. The man escaped, leaving the girl locked in a hotel room, but she was able to drag herself to the balcony and call for help. While her colleagues went up to help her, her man chased the malefactor and held him down until the police arrived.

In this district, a male protector does a lot more than scare off undesirable customers. A man also protects "his girls" against the other gigolos who might otherwise force themselves on the girls. For Laura and Karol, this danger was very real as one of Deodoro's brothers, Caco, also had girls working the streets for him and was threatening to take over his brother's territory. Jeane becomes nearly hysteric when she remembering him...

"I'm telling you, Caco won't let us work!" (We try to convince her he does not have the power to do this.) "What if he beats the girls up? You don't know him! He is loathsome!

¹⁰ Translator's note: In the original we read BNH – Banco Nacional da Habitação (National Bank of Housing), a now extinct institution that financed real estate projects.

When his wife and I went down to the police station, I was still a minor and we were kept there for five days and had to submit to electroshock and all kinds of torture. Deodoro went crazy with the lawyers, trying to get us out of there at any cost. But Caco said: 'Forget about them. Let's find ourselves new girls!'"

[As a matter of fact, by 1996 the demands of the numerous associations for human's rights and sexual difference had already showed some results. Even though the police still "harassed" the girls—arresting and giving them a criminal record—stories of electroshock torture and beatings in jail were something of the past. Hence, Jeane's biggest concern was how to deal with the threats that came from "inside" the world of prostitution. She and the girls were fast to agree that the relationship between a woman and her man (even if he had many women) was a personal thing: "Can you imagine (another man) trying to boss us around?!"]

"Deodoro wasn't like that," Jeane complains. "He was always kind to us. He was a gigolo, but a soft one. He didn't know how to make money off the girls. If it was too cold, he would tell them to stay home and when it was too hot it was the same deal. Even when they had their period...! In one month, they would work 20 days and take 10 days off. That's why we never made it. There was too much pampering—clothes, parties, that kind of thing... Caco never bought clothes for his girls. They only had one outfit for work and everything. Then he saw Deodoro making clothes for me (YES! He sewed me dresses!) and bought his girls tons of clothes, just to try to top his brother."

Indeed, Caco is also on the sidewalk in front of the Emergency Room. He came because Renata, his main wife, insisted. He was eager to let everyone know that he was there against his will. He looks like a Mexican soap opera star—a tall, a little overweight, wearing a wife-beater and cut off denim shorts, white shoes with no socks, mirrored sunglasses, two heavy gold chains, a watch and a thick gold bracelet. He looks like he deserves whatever is being said about him. He is talking loud and cursing: "The guy had to die anyway. I never thought of him as a brother. He was not a brother. A brother is someone who helps you, who is always around. He wouldn't give me the time of the day... You know what he is? He betrayed me for that black guy (referring to Nenê), that starving bastard...! They are cut from the same cloth."

The embarrassed crowd tries to ignore Caco. Someone whispers: "It's the pain speaking". Another mutters: "He really is an asshole". But it is Jeane who has the strongest reaction: "I swear to God, I'm going home and I'm going to load my gun. If I didn't have a son to raise, I swear to God, I would kill that man right now!"

[End of field diary excerpts.]

Turning the page

What future could Karol, Laura and Jeane expect? There were a lot of things moving against them. As Jeane stressed: they had no formal training, a lot of debts and no male protection. On the other hand, they already had become used to a certain standard of living—with nice clothes, plenty of food, houses of their own and even a new car every two years. The question was how to maintain that standard and not fall back.

I stayed in touch with the girls for two months following the death of Deodoro and watched them as they took their first steps towards a new period in their lives. At first, Karol and Laura found work through some friends at a bar in the Bom Fim neighborhood, but they could not get used to the new environment. They would finish up late at night and could not find a bus back home. They had to drink a lot and talk to the customers... The place was very “sophisticated”—attended by politicians and powerful men. Very different from the streets. The clients went there to get to know the girls. Only after two or three nights would they go to bed with them. So, there was not a lot of money to be made, at least at first.

However, as the time went by, Karol and Laura discovered the perks of working without a male protector. The advantages had nothing to do with financial gains (they swore they made more money when they worked the streets than at the bar). Slowly, they started to pay attention to the different stories floating around this new prostitution milieu: “Isn’t that the girl who became a lawyer? Now she has her own office, all paid for by a client—a guy that wanted nothing to do with her when they first met”. As they talked, they started to see the differences between married and single clients. Puzzled, they said that “single guys” seemed to try to lure them over before going to bed with them. Six weeks after the death of Deodoro, Karol received her first kiss on the lips from a customer... and liked it. She would speak excitedly of the parties, the games, the hot guys she was meeting. A *single guy* had come back twice to see her: “We hit it off so well he invited me to go to the beach this weekend, but I said no. I barely know him!”.

This was back in 1996. I had already began to work on another research project (even before the death of Deodoro) and I soon lost track of the girls. It was only at the end of 2002, when I went to see Elisiane¹¹ lecture at a public event on prostitution, that I met Laura once again. With a huge smile on her face, she quickly showed me the ring on her finger: “I got married! It’s been four years now!” She told me all about how she started to work only with previous customers and that after a week of vacation on a beach in the northeast of Brazil with one of them, they got married. She still attended the Prostitutes Association meetings “to help them out and meet the girls”, but she didn’t work anymore. Rejoicing and satisfied, Laura told me that Karol was also married

¹¹ Elisiane Pasini, was a doctoral student at the Pagu Center of Gender Studies with experience in ethnographic research in several Brazilian cities (2000, 2001). Also, we all share a great debt to Tina Taborda, president of the Center for Studies on Prostitution, who opened many doors to the team during our field research.

and already had a baby, to whom Laura was the godmother. Later, I discovered that, at least in the eyes of her colleagues, they both had made “good marriages” with men with “good jobs” who supported them. Today, Laura is also the mother of a daughter.

4. Final thoughts

Ten years latter: What’s new?

The reader might be impatient by now. She might ask, “All these stories are interesting, but what conclusions can we make of these ethnographic snapshots? Can the case of Deodoro’s girls be considered to be exemplary as something that is ‘typical’ in the field of prostitution?” My answer would be: “Certainly not”. I believe that any anthropologists working in the field of prostitution would agree that “typical” does not exist when it comes to our object of study. However, we must remember that the ethnographic case does not *usually* represent a statistical claim. A certain description of reality, properly registered in the literature for present and future debate, becomes an instance of possibility—no more, no less. The case of Laura and Karla, as is the case of many other accounts captured by the ethnographer’s imagination, operates as “another country heard from” (Geertz, 1973: 23), undermining the stereotypes of common sense.

I accept the statistical frailty of my calculations and not engage in an idle attempt to pull quantitative conclusions out of an ethnographic experience. I am now ready to speculate on the prostitutes’ reality “ten years later”, however... Unfortunately, it seems that most of the fifty or so women encompassed by my first research project are quite distant from the standard of living now enjoyed by Karol and Laura. These two—young and white women with a certain cultural and social capital—might be classified among that minority of prostitutes who are able to profit from their professions in order to accomplish plans of social mobility.¹² Apparently, most of the sex workers I have met are still struggling on the streets where we occasionally run into each other. Some of them were able to find themselves regular customers with scheduled appointments, so they can arrange their lives without lengthy waiting on the sidewalk. Others are still checking in at the same streets, alongside ever younger rivals. Up until last month I could meet Dona Amélia, as old as my mother, still sitting on a bench in the square. Was she waiting for a customer? I doubt it. But the fact that she is almost never alone, usually chatting with some colleague, leads me to believe that there are other reasons that keep her from “retiring”.

Apart from aging, sickness is another occupational hazard that can thwart wishes of improvement. Diva, that fifty-something woman that had me amazed with her stories of

¹² In his research on American prostitutes of the XIX century, the historian Joel Best estimates that 10% of the prostitutes were able to significantly improve their standard of living. I would suggest that this hypothesis is also valid for a similar proportion of the women I knew.

sailors in the harbor, had to take some time off—three months working as cleaning lady for a cleaning company. The last time I met her, however, she was back on the streets. She had just discovered she “had the auntie”¹³ and needed comforting. “I don’t know how caught it, girl! I always wore a condom, I swear!” It was utter irony: more than thirty years working as a prostitute, having dodged generations of venereal diseases, only to give in now to HIV. Diva assured me she was still in great shape and that she “took care of herself” (without having to take medication). However, I heard from Estela that other girls had already passed away from AIDS. Still others were getting treatment and leading fairly normal lives, apart from their HIV status. Just like Diva, they balanced their lives between different activities—sometimes working as *sacoleiras*¹⁴, other times as cleaning ladies and sometimes as prostitutes.

All together, this batch of women is not particularly striking. Nevertheless, I am not convinced they ended up worse off than many of the lower class housewives I met during other research projects. Each of these women, according to the color of their skin, their age and personal abilities—all with particular experiences and relying on specific social networks—were able to create a life for themselves. Being a sex worker was just one aspect of those lives.

The social pathology hypothesis

One might claim that my outlook risks trivializing a hard and highly stigmatized profession. However, by stressing the ordinariness of these women’s extra-professional lives, it denies psychological reductionism—a perpetual thorn in advancing the analysis of prostitution. Generally speaking, the reductionist plea goes like this: the prostitute woman was surely abused as a child and faces numerous shocks to her self-esteem. Unable to look in other directions for her sustenance, she turns to prostitution, the ultimate form of female degradation. This perspective is not that much different from the degeneracy thesis of prostitution popular at the beginning of the 20th century (Cf. Carrara, 1996; and Chevalier, 1978). As Corbin (1984) warned us, whether in 1900 or 2000, the gullible observer will always find someone ready to tell him the story he wants to hear.

Oddly enough, none of the women I used to talk to presented themselves as victims, with rare exceptions. They would tell me of hard times and deprived childhoods, but only in order to emphasize their extraordinary willpower and ability to bounce back against all the odds. Karol, for example, would always tell me how she started as a street kid. She ran away from home when she was around 13 or 14 years old, arriving

¹³ Translator’s note: In the original “*com a tia*”, a Brazilian slang for being HIV positive.

¹⁴ Translator’s note: *Sacoleira* is common informal work among Brazilian women of lower income. It consists of buying products at a low price at wholesale centers in Paraguay or São Paulo and taking them back (inside of suitcases or bags—*saco/as*) to sell retail in their hometowns.

in Porto Alegre with the clothes on her back. She had nothing until she got Deodoro to take her in. “At first he didn’t even wanted me. He said I was too thin... I knew nothing. I was like a wild animal. Slowly, he taught me how to dress, how to talk, everything.”

Stories of a “street childhood” appear in many men’s and women’s accounts. Deodoro himself had followed a similar path. Ironically, this is the kind of narrative that is used by vulgar psychology to “explain” a woman’s moral downfall and entry into prostitution. Still, the accounts I heard had a completely inverted moral: women would proudly tell me how they started from absolute zero. They could have been anything: a thief, a drug addict, a homeless person... and look how well they turned out!

I don’t want to make the same mistakes made by beginner researchers, pushing for “deep” conclusions by jumping carelessly from sociological data to psychological interpretations. By presenting my informer’s account I am not trying to establish a new or “true” version of the facts. Their adjustment of their comments to the circumstances of the conversation is obvious. My analysis dwells on the values they activate during the course of a sophisticated negotiation of self-image (Becker,1998). It does not display some deep truth regarding the subject, nor does it intend to diagnose any given prostitute’s particular psychological profile. The fact that Karol and Laura made the transition to more conventional lives fairly smoothly, when given the opportunity to do so, leads me to believe that they have a “psychic structure” as solid as any of their more conventional neighbors. Having said this, I would not dare to infer that prostitutes are stronger or weaker than any other class of women.

What astonishes me as a researcher is how easily beginner students jump to conclusions based upon data that is as shaky as mine. This generalization is even more tempting when the research takes place in hospitals or psychiatric clinics—places evoking narratives of defeat and abjection, homogenizing prostitution. Having gathered two or three stories combining the practice of prostitution with child sex abuse, the student feels authorized to confirm a hypothesis of pathological etiology. Such thinking conveniently ignores the bulk of the prostitution phenomenon—a phenomenon that can add up to as much as ten or twenty percent of all the female population, not that far back in history (Cf. Gilfoyle, 1992; and Guy, 1994). Were all these women abused during childhood? The need for methodological controls is set aside. One does not compare, for example, prostitutes with women who suffered abuse and *did not* become prostitutes. Incidentally, I know three colleagues with PhD’s in Anthropology, who have told me stories of sex abuse during their childhood (Cf., for example, Langdon, 1993). Could we not jump to conclusions, based on this, regarding the individual or familiar pathology of the female social scientist?

I feel deeply outraged when faced with accounts that reduce prostitution to a family or individual pathology. Recently, I came across another example of such an opportunistic analysis in an article published by a student magazine in a large private university.

Besides violating the rights of the women who were interviewed by publishing photos which identified them without permission, the article places emphasis on the analysis of a psychologist who, without ever meeting the women mentioned in the article, concludes that: “These women feel very lonely.”

I wonder why these subjects (prostitution, sexuality) make usually cautious experts feel authorized to speak without preparation, and push seemingly sophisticated readers/students to uncritically accept poorly reasoned *clichés*. When addressing the idea of engaged knowledge, Bourdieu (2001) reminds us that it is precisely for their academic skills—probity, objectivity and detachment—that scholars enjoy some measure of social authority. On that note, I would suggest that is a highly political act for a researcher to recognize the limits of his knowledge, revealing the pseudo-science that so easily emerges around the all-revealing field of sexuality.

What normality?

Now, there is the need for discussing normality in this context: not of the prostitutes themselves, but of the lives that are depicted in the present article. From an ethnographical and relativistic perspective, these women seem to lead “fairly” normal existences. I ask myself, however: is this “normality” similar to the one lived by besieged people during war? Is this a little like the Baghdad citizens following their daily routines even while being bombed? Or would I be giving in to yet another ethnocentric attitude by equating engaging in professional sex to a bombing experience?

As a matter of fact, the NGOs devoted to the rights of sex workers are eager to banalize sexual activity. They stress that it is a job like any other and pride themselves in successfully pushing the INSS¹⁵ to put prostitution on its list of professions. We must acknowledge that there is certain logic to these tactics. They are an effort to reduce prejudice against prostitutes and to attain for them a certain respectability. Last month, for example, I attended a public hearing where the coordinator of an NGO strongly stressed the differences between a mature prostitute and a “sick junkie” street girl, between a sex worker and a thief. She described the prostitutes of her association as “discrete” women, who do not harass clients and who work against underage prostitution, giving the profession a good name. The fact that most of the workers who attended the meeting had started at prostitution at the age of 13 or 14 was something they thought not worth mentioning. In the current political scenario, they present themselves as upstanding citizens.

It is understandable why activists choose to present a simplified version of their reality in

15 Translator's note: the Brazilian Social Security Institute – *Instituto Nacional de Seguridade Social* (INSS)

order to achieve political goals.¹⁶ The researcher, on the other hand, plays another role in the debate and does not have the same excuse when presenting outdated images of reality. However, as I take a closer look at my papers on prostitution, I ask myself if my ethnographic relativism is not also entangled with the activists' relativism. Both outlooks try to remove the "exotic" from sexual activity by emphasizing the normality—not to say the morality—of prostitutes. I now see that I have "rescued" these girls by making them fit my standards of decency. But they certainly played a role in this process: the ones I got to know showed themselves as caring mothers and heterosexual women with steady partners. My interlocutors were always in the company of kind men like Deodoro (the soft gigolo), a thoughtful partner who would even sew clothes for his girls. It was the *other girls* who had pimps. It is no accident that Estela likes reminding all and sundry how this or that gigolo began to "behave like a husband" after joining the prostitutes' association.

To all appearances, even the most politically committed women—the ones who dignify their work—hold rather conventional standards of happiness. We may find proof of this in Laura's triumphant smile when showing off her wedding ring. Lúcia, another woman who was very successful (in my opinion) does not enjoy the same prestige. She got her high school equivalency degree, was accepted in a private college, held a federal researchers' scholarship and majored in sociology. However, when the girls want to point to someone who "made it", Lúcia is not the woman who comes to mind, but the girls who made "good marriages" and had babies.

To sum up, it is obviously important to tear down wretched stereotypes by highlighting the diversity of the prostitution universe and to include stories of "success" in our descriptions of this universe. Nevertheless, we must be careful not to confuse politically correct discourse, the native's viewpoint and the researcher's analysis (simply defining *who* "did well" is a moral statement by itself). Thus, while the first two forms of speech reaffirm a fairly conservative morality, the researcher's "eternal epistemological self-watch" demands a radical questioning of her own limits of normality.

What sexuality?

During a recent lecture, Sergio Carraro and Adriana Vianna¹⁷ raised this same issue. As they commented on the new-found acceptance of traditionally discriminated sexual—masturbation, homosexuality, promiscuity (and heterosexual prostitution, I would add)—they asked: where are the new frontiers of transgression? What are today's "intolerable behaviors" that call for an expert's attention? Shouldn't we take

¹⁶ See Ramos (1991) and Turner (1994) for more on identity politics.

¹⁷ Lecture given at the "Sexual and reproductive rights as human rights" seminar, during the Traveling Workshop on Human Rights (Brazilian Association of Anthropology), Porto Alegre, May 2003.

a critical outlook at the debates over pedophilia, S & M, and “trafficking” in women? Certainly, this is not an easy analytical path. In a way, like the Marquis de Sade, once we as anthropologists question the limits of what is tolerable, we are inviting the public (students and readers) to become “accomplices in evil knowledge (Moraes, 2004). Is that a sheer “academic perversion”? Is this the layman’s famous critique of the “intellectual masturbation” of academic work?

To answer this question, I would like to evoke one last episode which recently took place in the prostitution universe of Porto Alegre. The arrest of Marcele, a 50 years old *travesti* accused of trafficking in children for sexual exploitation, exploded in the local news with a certain *bang*. What added even more interest to the story was the fact that Marcele is a *travesti* political leader who has been active in local NGOs for many years.

So what happened? The sex workers unanimously shouted about “police persecution”. They claimed that due to the class’ political actions, hotel owners, pimps and even sex workers have stopped paying bribes to police officers, leaving the cops frustrated. Nowadays, in order to harass the sex workers—taking them temporarily out of work, hauling them down to the police station, taking their pictures and giving them a criminal record—the cops must allege severe crimes such as trafficking in women or child sexual exploitation. A 16 or 17 year old girl (*nay*, a *travesti*) sleeping at a friend’s house is enough to stir up a complaint. We must remember that the chain always breaks at its weakest link. Now, when there is a police raid, the prostitutes of Alfândega square are no longer the ones being arrested. The *travestis*, accused of child sexual exploitation, are the new target.

This drama might be enacted on a bigger scale when we observe the international arena. The enormous effort devoted to fighting the international trafficking of women and children (I ask myself why the overlap of women and children? Male hustlers and *travesties* cannot be trafficked as well?) may easily raise some questions. Without denying the possibility of cases of extreme violence¹⁸, the observer must pay attention to what abuses of *official* power such campaigns and the wide range repressions they employ might serve. Who can question the fact 99% of the prostitutes who immigrate do so willingly, looking for more profitable horizons (Cf. Piscitelli, 2002; on sex tourism)? And are we not to suspect that most of the campaigns launched against this so called “traffic” might actually be connected to the desires of “First World” governments to stop illegal immigration, their need to push back the tide of poorly qualified people “invading” their wealthy countries?

Of course there are cases of abuse. However, the large amounts spent on such research compared to the scant results in actually finding and rescuing sex slaves shows a poorly reasoned policy. Should any suspect found in the police files (like Marcele, above) be

¹⁸ See, for example, Landesman’s paper published in the *New York Times Review of Books*, January 25th, 2004, p. 32+.

labeled as “another case” of child sexual exploitation? Is the journey of any prostitute who migrated from the country to the city enough to define a “trafficking route”? When a dozen foreign women, “sexual slaves”, are found living under forced confinement, does a researcher or journalist carefully contextualize this small group within a universe that is maybe a thousand times bigger and mostly made up of autonomous professionals, whose biggest enemies are customs and immigration officials? Why, precisely, in the case of supposed sex crimes, researchers forget methodological caution? Why does the general public cast critical thought to the wind when it comes to these issues? As researchers, is it our duty, above all, to question the uses of shocking images and the paths (economical, political and moral) through which priorities on the political agenda are established? Should we stay alert to the possibility that today’s categories of sexual transgression—whose harmfulness are not at all clear—might be used as an excuse to persecute people and practices?

We are miles away from vulgar cultural relativism, here.¹⁹ We do not want to advocate specific categories, showing prostitutes as “good girls” worthy of being included on (presumably) our side of the transgressive border. Nor do we wish to abolish all limits or—worse—say “anything goes”. Our duty as researchers is, above all, to question such limits, disclosing them to be man-made and in need of constantly renewed critical attention.

¹⁹ See Geertz (1988) for a discussion on the different types of relativism and the critiques they stir.

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