

Reinventing themselves, reinventing Brazil: feminism, subjectivity and politics

Margareth Rago

Abstract: This paper focuses on the experiences of some radical activists of the feminist movement in Brazil, who have questioned the normative discourses of gender based on biological conceptions, and subverted their identities. Considering the ways in which feminists made many theories problematic, their political experiences in creating new modes of existence and ethical codes developed over the last four decades are highlighted. This research has a wider historical goal: it seeks to view the last four decades of Brazilian history through the lenses of ex-political prisoners and feminist activists who come from diverse areas and spaces. In the universities and research centers, in the NGOs or in feminist autonomous organizations, in feminist theology, and in the 'sex workers' movement, these militants show their personal experiences of fight and their courage in raising silenced dimensions such as abortion and domestic violence to the public agenda claiming to radically change gender, class and ethnic relations. This article is part of a broader research project on "Feminism, Ethics and Politics in Brazil", supported by the CNPq – Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico - since 2007.

In a famous article called "Female Culture", published in 1902, Georg Simmel¹ worried about the phenomenon of modernization and the new ways of social interaction developed in the urban world. He wondered what effects would result from the massive entrance of women in the public sphere.² Simmel anticipated at least two possibilities: on the one hand, the continuity of existing modes and practices, in which he did not really believe. Would women repeat, by participating in all professional areas, the same political games? Would they reproduce the existing forms of sociability? Would they keep the male social organization? Maybe. On the other hand, he suspected the possibility of a more positive effect, that women would transform the objective and rational culture, leaving their mark with all that is their own: the subjective dimension, so as to improve the masculine order of the world. This was a tool that pointed towards a greater capacity to perceive the outer world and of being more sensitive towards the suffering and pain of others and of social demands. Reflecting on women's contribution to medicine, he asserted:

"In the domain of pure science, she should also be able to discover typical connections that are undetectable by the man. Thus she would make distinctive contributions to *objective* culture. This is because, in possessing the same constitution as the patient, the woman has a tool of knowledge that is denied to man."³

¹ Georg SIMMEL (Berlin, 1858-1918) is one of founders of German sociology.

² SIMMEL, G. "Female Culture". *On Women, Sexuality, and Love* (trans. and introd. by G. Oakes). New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984, pp. 65-101.

³ SIMMEL, op. cit., p. 77. On p. 76, he affirmed: "*Here the question does not concern the (...) practical and social value of the female physician, who has the same abilities and does the same work as the male. On the contrary, the issue is whether we can expect from the female physician the sort of qualitative advance of medical culture that cannot be attained by male techniques. It seems to me that this is indeed the case.*"

In 1928, also reflecting on the differences of the sexes in modern times, Virginia Woolf observed like Simmel that female self expression was very restricted in a male-oriented world, where social forms, professional activities, artistic and literary expression had been shaped by men. To participate in the public sphere, to have access to culture, women would have to conceive of subjectivity in different terms and to create their own modes of being. However, as a result, they would strongly contribute to enrich cultural and social life. Referring to female creative power, she argued:

“But this creative power differs greatly from the creative power of men. It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men, or lived like men, or looked like men, for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only? Ought not education to bring out and fortify the differences rather than the similarities?”⁴

Over a century has passed since then and the transformations in the direction surmised by these two authors were many. Feminism, in its second wave, burst out vigorously at the end of the 1960's, and women have occupied the public sphere, going into male professions and challenging cultural practices, the sexual division of labor, the hegemonic ways of acting and thinking, all pointing towards other possibilities of existence.⁵ The positive marks of the feminine presence in the public and social spheres, that is, the ongoing cultural turn towards the feminine in Brazil for at least four decades may be seen in a great many fields of action and reflection.⁶ These achievements are the subject of the present work.

I propose to reflect on the effects of this sudden coming of the feminine in the culture in the last forty years, using the experiences of subjective invention and the entrance into politics of some Brazilian women, now over fifty to sixty years old, as a privileged point of view. Norma Telles, Tânia Navarro Swain, Ivone Gebara, Maria Amelia Teles - “Amelinha”, Sueli Carneiro and Gabriela Leite Silva, all of them high school or college women at the end of the 1960's and beginning of the 1970's, broke, each in her own way, with the traditional model of behavior imposed on women, with the established values and moral codes, bringing into question the *regime of truth*⁷ of the time, both of the left and of the right. They made their own new, dissident, dissonant path, opened with the hard work and the sophisticated tools of trailblazers. In this sense, it is possible to affirm that they have created new “*modes of subjectivization*”, according to Foucault's concept drawn from his

⁴ WOOLF, Virginia. *A room of one's own*. eBooks@Adelaide, 2009, p.53.

⁵ On the second wave of feminist movement in Brazil, see ALVAREZ, Sonia. *Engendering Democracy in Brazil*. Princeton University Press, 1990; SARTI, Cynthia. “The Panorama of Feminism in Brazil.” In: *New Left Review* Jan.-Febv. 1989. Access: <http://www.newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=1369>.

⁶ On the cultural feminization in Brazil at the end of the 19th century, see FLORES, Maria Bernadete R. *Tecnologia e Estética do Racismo. Ciência e Arte na Política da Beleza*. Chapecó: Argos, 2007; for the 20th century, see RAGO, Margareth. “Feminizar é preciso. Por uma cultura filógina”, *São Paulo em Perspectiva*, Revista da Fundação SEADE, vol.15, n.3, p.58-66, jul-set 2001.

⁷ For Foucault, the notion of “regime of truth” (“régime de la vérité”) aims at denaturalizing the idea of an ontological truth, prevailing since the 19th Century, that could be directly accessed through specific scientific tools. On the contrary, in his philosophy the production of knowledge/truth is to be considered within a network of power relations, that produce and sustain it. Thus, he concludes, “*The political problem is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness, or ideology, but the truth itself*”, and what needs to be changed is the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth. FOUCAULT, M. “Truth and Power”. In: *Power: Essential Works of Foucault*. Vol.3, New York: The New Press, 2000, p.133; also see FOUCAULT, M. *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007.

historical investigation on the “arts of living” developed by Ancient Greeks and Romans.⁸ Foucault shows that the Ancients’ “*aesthetics of existence*” or “*arts of living*” were constituted by technologies of the self, such as meditation, writing about oneself, dieting, exercising, truth-telling, care for the self and for the other, that is to say, by practices of constituting relationally one’s own subjectivity as an ethical and political work. In this perspective, *subjectivization* is opposed to subjection, which implies obedience and submission to normative moral codes universally defined and imposed, as it occurred with the rise of Christianity. In Foucault’s words, *subjectivization* denominates

“the intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meet certain stylistic criteria”.⁹

In opposition to modern experience of producing “docile bodies”, as Foucault clearly pointed out in *Discipline and Punish*¹⁰, the formation of the citizen in Ancient Greece implied promoting special conditions of life so that he could develop his own capacities and skills and acquire virtues. Citizenship was not a matter of disciplining the body, of renouncing one’s own desire and pleasures, of producing obedient and subjected individuals to repeat the dominant regime of truth. Based on “practices of freedom” it aimed at constituting autonomously the free man capable of living a self-governed life. That meant that the free individual – opposed to the tyrant - was not submitted to another one and neither was he a slave of his own instincts and passions. Neither oppressor nor slave, he was apt to be a political being who was able to participate in the life of the *polis*.¹¹ In this sense, the *care of the self* (“*souci de soi*”) was not an isolated practice, but involved interactions between people, care for the other and friendship.¹² As Foucault observes:

“The precept according to which one must give attention to oneself was in any case an imperative that circulated among a number of different doctrines. It also took the form of an attitude, a mode of behavior; it became instilled in ways of living it evolved into procedures, practices and formulas that people reflected on, developed, perfected, and taught. It thus came to constitute a **social practice**, giving rise to relationships between individuals, to exchanges and communications, and at times even to institutions. And it gave rise, finally, to a certain mode of knowledge and to the elaboration of a science.”¹³

Even though it doesn’t refer to women nor has Foucault addressed gender issues, this problematization is elucidating as we consider the contemporary debates held by feminist

⁸ FOUCAULT, M. *The History of Sexuality, vol.II, The Use of Pleasure*. New York: Vintage Books, 1986; vol.III, *The Care of the Self*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988

⁹ Idem, p.10; vol.3. *The Care of the Self*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988

¹⁰ FOUCAULT, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: the birth of prison*.(2nd ed).Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

¹¹ FOUCAULT, 1986.

¹² For the distinction between narcissism and the “aesthetic of existence”, see CAMPBELL, Elaine.

“Narcissism as Ethical Practice?: Foucault, Askesis and an Ethics of Becoming”. *Cultural Sociology*, 2010, vol.4, n.1. Access: [Http://cus.sagepub.com](http://cus.sagepub.com)

¹³ FOUCAULT, *The Care of the Self*, op.cit., p. 45.

theorists on the subversion of the female identity¹⁴ and on the construction of what I propose to call “*feminist arts of living*”¹⁵. In this direction, feminist theorists have produced an extensive literature debating the question of how to free women from the universal model of femininity created by male-oriented medical and law discourses since the 19th Century, all of them strongly embedded in misogynous religious systems of belief. They have investigated how to conceive of subjectivity out of dualist terms that oppose hierarchically mind and body, physical and mental, as Grosz puts it.¹⁶ Based on Foucault, feminist philosophers, such as McLaren and Taylor interpret contemporary feminist practices on ethical and political issues.¹⁷ And they all agree in considering that Foucault’s interest in the subjective practices of the ancient Greeks and Romans concerned the present, *l’actuel*, rather than the past.¹⁸ As Taylor observes: “*For Foucault, the study of what other people have been in other eras and other places allows us to recognize the contingency of what we are, and thus to be able to conceive of becoming other than what we are.*”¹⁹

Actually, these reflections provide a useful framework about how to think about the activists I focus on this paper.²⁰ These women were openly leftists, although they clashed with the “traditional left”, uncomfortable inside the centralized structure of the Revolutionary Party and they had some type of political participation in the fight against the military dictatorship that ruled the country between 1964 and 1985²¹ and went on fighting under the democratic regime for women’s civil rights. Some of them went into exile, some were jailed or somehow excluded from the political and social life of those difficult years. Being feminists, they denounced and have continued to denounce the many forms of sexual violence, physical and symbolic that destroy the possibilities of the differentiated inclusion of women in the public sphere. In literature, in academic production, in religion, in the struggle both inside the “organized feminist movement” and outside it, they have acted in spaces built during these decades with “war machines”²², in Deleuze’s sense, and have

¹⁴ See, for example, the well-known work of Judith BUTLER. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990 and, Rosi BRAIDOTTI. *Nomadic Subjects*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, both translated in many countries.

¹⁵ RAGO, Margareth. “Foucault, a Subjetividade e as Heterotopias Feministas”. IN: SCAVONE, Lucila; MISKOLCI, Richard; ALVAREZ, Marcos C. *O legado de Foucault*. São Paulo: Unesp, 2006; in the same direction see the articles published in TAYLOR, Dianna; VINTGES, Karen (eds.) *Feminism and The Final Foucault*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004.

¹⁶ See GROSZ, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994, p.xi.

¹⁷ MCLAREN, Margaret. *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002; TAYLOR, Chloe. *The Culture of Confession: from Augustin to Foucault. A Genealogy of the “Confessing Animal”*. New York, London: Routledge, 2009.

¹⁸ As John RAJCHMAN explains: Foucault “wanted to free the very notion of political subjectivity or political ‘processes of subjectivisation’ from the forms of subject or citizen of a State, within which Kant’s invention of critical philosophy was also rooted; in his place he tried to work out a more ‘agonistic’ or ‘strategic’ model of a critical polity.” “Enlightenment Today”. Introduction to *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007, p. 24.

¹⁹ TAYLOR, Chloe. *The Culture of Confession*, *op. cit*, 2009, p.192.

²⁰ In a previous work I also used the concept of “aesthetic of existence” to focus on the life and memoirs of the Italian anarchist Luce Fabbri (1908-2000). *Entre a História e a Liberdade: Luce Fabbri e o anarquismo contemporâneo*. São Paulo: UNESP, 2002, also published in Spanish and Italian. Only recently I could find an article on another female anarchist based on the same analytical strategies: “E.G. Emma Goldman, for Example”, by Kathy E. Ferguson. In: TAYLOR and VINTGES, *op. cit*, 2004, pp. 28-41.

²¹ On the history of military dictatorship in Brazil, see: ALVES, Maria Helena Moreira. *State and opposition in military Brazil*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985; SKIDMORE, Thomas E. *The Politics of Military rule in Brazil, 1964-1985*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; STEPAN, Alfred. *The military in politics: changing patterns in Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971.

²² In Deleuze’s vocabulary, “war machine” refers to forms of social organization that foster creativity while the

put into action strategies to combat the power of men, of political parties, of the state and of masculine science. The criticism of power relations in daily life and of authoritarianism in the several spaces of sociability gathers strength in their protests.

These women, educated for virginity, for an indissoluble monogamous marriage, for maternity and for the care of the family, for passivity and silence in short, made their own singular way, without reference to previous models, both in their professional life and in the experiences lived in the other dimensions of their personal lives.²³ They produced important breaks and successive shifts in the social imagination with their practices and feminist ways of thinking, especially in regard to matters of morals, of sexuality and of the models of femininity and body politics without referring to earlier feminist theories. They have deconstructed and criticized the traditional ways of producing subjectivity and they proposed new ones based on ethical principles. They have contributed decisively to the critical thought of the present and to the reinvention of politics. These are important dimensions of women's struggle toward greater self-definition that have not been highlighted in Brazilian academic production nor linked to the issue of macro-level social changes.²⁴

Some of them, such as Tânia Swain and Norma Telles, have chosen academic work, which they combine with feminist activism, informal or organized; others, such as Gabriela Silva Leite, Ivone Gebara, Maria Amelia Teles and Sueli Carneiro have devoted themselves to social work with the needy female population. All of them are oriented to political and social questions; they all write or wrote in some period of their lives and were in one way or another punished, being affected physically as well to some extent.

I consider the emergence of this generation of women as an "event" (événement), that is, as forces bursting forth and changing the course of history, as is made clear by Foucault when he asks: "*These mutations that make things to be suddenly perceived, described, characterized, classified and known in the same way no more, what event or what law do they obey(...)?*"²⁵ Or putting it differently, when he defines the event as a rupture, as "*the coming onto the stage of forces (...) the leap by which they go from backstage onto the stage*"²⁶. Thinking along those lines my inquiry is of the conditions of the possibility of this emergence, its source and its powerful implications.

These women can be said to be all part of the same generation, taking into account the contemporaneity of the influences, the events and ruptures that mark their experiences. The participation, in this sense, in a number of events – and particularly in the fights of resistance to the military regime, simultaneous with the student protests of May, 1968 and of all the cultural breaks at the end of the 1960's and early 1970s, when they were very young, and that cannot be dissociated from the impact of the sudden transformations

State is an "apparatus of capture" living off of labor of capture. In his words, "*As for the war machine in itself, it seems to be irreducible to the State apparatus, to be outside its sovereignty and prior to its law: it comes from elsewhere (...)* Rather he is like a pure and immeasurable multiplicity, the pack, an irruption of the ephemeral and the power of metamorphosis..." DELEUZE, G; GUATTARI, F. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987, p.352.

²³ On the contrary of the American female and feminist experience, the knowledge of the women's past in Brazil only started to be produced from the 1970's on. This means that important figures of the first wave of the feminist movement (1870-1930), like Maria Lacerda de Moura, Patrícia Galvão - Pagu, Bertha Lutz and many others were absolutely unknown, as the connections with our feminine/ist heritage were lost.

²⁴ Also see O'GRADY, Helen. "An Ethics of the Self", In: TAYLOR, VINTGES, op. cit., p. 93.

²⁵ FOUCAULT, M. *As Palavras e as Coisas*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1981, p. 231.

²⁶ FOUCAULT, M. "Nietzsche, a Genealogia e a História." *Microfísica do Poder*. Rio de Janeiro: Graal, 1979, p. 24.

originating from the accelerated process of modernization in Brazil during the 1970's -, creates an "inter subjective time" in which a common destiny is forged, "*a remembered past, a living present and an anticipated future*" as suggested by Reis²⁷. These women, moreover, have known each other for many years, and interacted with each other directly or indirectly, as they are leftist activists, outside the framework of party politics and think of themselves as "libertarian" or "anarchist" feminists, adopting an attitude of insistent criticism of the micropowers in daily life. Finally, their ways of thinking and their practices are intensively marked by creativity, bringing them to the fore in their social, political and cultural environment after some decades.

It is possible, moreover, to perceive in their courses a constant *nomadism*²⁸, so that, as they lived through a constant loss of subjective territory (deterritorialization, in Deleuze's sense), they have developed an enormous potential of transformation and invention of new personal, subjective and collective spaces. It is also worth noticing the way in which they bring sexuality and the body to the center of their discursive practices and their pragmatic claims, something that characterizes this second wave of the feminist movement. The fight for reproductive rights, against sexual harassment, domestic violence, rape, for the decriminalization of abortion, for the rights of 'sex workers' and for the right to their own bodies and the control of their own lives, the search for the construction of an embodied feminist language and the criticism of the gender hierarchies in social organization – these are today the main objectives of feminists, not only those in Brazil.²⁹

- short histories

All of the women listed here are intellectuals and published authors. Norma, Tânia and Ivone were in universities until recently as assistant professors and Amelinha, Sueli and Gabriela founded their own feminist associations and NGO's. Norma, born in São Paulo in 1942, playfully refers to herself as *an Aquarian, with my head in the clouds, I enjoy the arts. I lack ground, a sense of reality*.³⁰ She graduated in History from the University of São Paulo – USP – in 1974 and took her PhD in the Pontifícia Universidade Católica – PUC/SP, in 1987. She was a teacher there in the department of Anthropology and in the Program of Post-Graduation Studies for thirty years.

"I separated from my husband exactly in 1968, I was very young, I had married when less than 18 years old, had two sons, stayed married for 5 years and my life begins then. A course was to be given in the Sorbonne, at the end of 1968 and there I went, without finishing my secondary education, I had married before that. I had studied at the *Des Oiseaux* to the end of High School and went after that for a period to the US, coinciding with the 50th anniversary of my grandfather's graduation there and I studied there.(...) When I went to Paris, to go to the Sorbonne, the protests had stopped everything. Professor Edgar Morin was the idol of Parisian youth and he would arrive in a motorcycle, in a Sherlock Holmes cape, to general applause. I was there for a French course but

²⁷ REIS, J. C. *Tempo, História e Evasão*. São Paulo, Campinas: Papyrus, 1994, p.75.

²⁸ For Deleuze, *nomadism*, as opposed to sedentariness, refers to subjective displacements in relation to power strategies and discourses that define and impose identities; it refers to the search of becoming other than what we are. DELEUZE; GUATTARI. *A Thousand Plateaus*, op. cit.

²⁹ In this direction, see MACHADO, Lia. "A longa duração da violência de gênero na América Latina". FERNANDES, A. M.; RANINCHESKI, S. (Orgs.) *Américas Compartilhadas*. São Paulo: Verbena Editora, 2009, p.57-83.

³⁰ TELLES, Norma. Interview with author, 2008.

we spent our time at the university. Back in Brazil I worked for some two or three years in an art gallery owned by an architect, a time when I bought a lot of things, and then I worked in a bank, always wanting to study, I had wanted to study history from the time I was a girl. This was one of the reasons for breaking up my marriage, that this was not possible and I had my own ideas.”³¹

Tânia, born in Curitiba, Paraná, in 1944, took her doctorate in history in the Université Paris III, Sorbonne and her Post-Doctorate in the University of Montreal, where she taught at the Université du Québec à Montreal (UQAM). She was until recently a professor in the University of Brasília, in the History Department, where she inaugurated, against a great deal of resistance, the field of “Feminist Studies” with undergraduate and graduate courses. A daughter of a mother who was a writer, she became a feminist when she lived in Paris, where she came into contact with the movement in the beginning of the 1970’s. Feminist questions were from that moment central to her life and not only to her reflections, as is the criticism of sexual identities that are built out of essentialist and biologically oriented concepts.

Tânia is a joint publisher, with the translator Marie France Dèpêche, of an on-line feminist magazine, *Labrys, estudos feministas/études féministes*. *Labrys* names a double edged ax, used as a tool or weapon by the old populations of the Amazon, according to the archeological register. This is, for her, a “major symbol of the affirmation of the feminine”³². The magazine is on its eighteenth issue, publishing articles of superior quality from several feminists from all over the world, contributing for the increase and considerable updating of the network of “feminist studies”.

Ivone, born in São Paulo, also in 1944, took her doctorate in Philosophy in PUC-São Paulo and Religious Sciences in the Catholic University of Louvain, in Belgium. She is a feminist theologian, and has lived in Camaragibe, a municipality in Recife, Pernambuco since 1973. She taught Philosophy and Theology for 17 years at the Instituto de Teologia de Recife and worked, at the request of the leftist Catholic Archbishop Dom Helder Câmara³³, in the Departamento de Pesquisa de Assessoria, that was in charge of the formation of pastoral agents of that Institute, intended for work among poor people. The Institute was closed in 1989, because of pressure from the conservative and obscurantist forces inside the Church.

Amelinha was born in Contagem, in Minas Gerais, in 1944, to a family of worker. She was the daughter of an activist of the PCB³⁴ – the *Brazilian Communist Party*, founded in 1922 - , and soon became a political activist. In her memoirs, activism is a constant and the presence of her communist father is very pronounced.

“I went clandestine when I was 21. I became an activist at 15, in Minas. But when I say that I was always an activist, there’s no exaggeration in that, as we lived in a slum in Santos. I can remember that, this is how it was: a big two-story

³¹ TELLES, Norma. Interview with author, 2008.

³² SWAIN, Tânia Navarro. “Editorial” *LABRYS, estudos feministas/ études féministes*, jan./ jul. 2005.

³³ Dom Hélder Câmara (1909-1999) was one of the founders of CNBB - Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil and a renowned activist for human rights.

³⁴ On the history of Brazilian leftist groups of this period, see RIDENTI, Marcelo. *O fantasma da revolução brasileira*. São Paulo: Editora da UNESP, 1993; REIS, Daniel Aarão; FEEREIRA, Jorge (orgs.) *As esquerdas no Brasil*. 3 vols. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 2007.

house, a wooden flight of stairs and then the rooms, each family in one. That's where my father had the meetings with the communists and they had us sitting on the stairs to watch out. We warned them if the police came and they would go down the other side, coming out on the other side of the street. They would not come out of the front door or they would be caught, so I did this work when I was seven. I watched out for the police and ran upstairs. He said that nobody would notice a child, but I thought everybody was looking. He said no, it was not important, but I thought it was important and that everybody was looking at me."³⁵

Sueli was born in 1950, in the district of Lapa, in São Paulo and was one of the very few black women to graduate in Philosophy in the University of São Paulo – USP in the years between 1972 and 1980. She had her PHD in the Philosophy of Education, in the same University. She has, from her childhood, strong impressions of the world of labor and of a gregarious community.

"I am the oldest of seven children, my father was a railroad worker and my mother a homemaker. Before she married she was a seamstress, a manager in a sewing shop (...) My father comes from the country, called a peasant at that time, born in Minas Gerais, in Uberlândia. At seventeen he left the farm where the family worked and came to São Paulo, a semi-illiterate man that worked all over the country until he ended up in the Santos-Jundiaí railroad, where he stayed until he died. I am the oldest of seven, culturally I come from the community of workers, the railroad has very much its own culture, a proletarian culture. I was born in Lapa and we moved afterwards to an area near Pirituba, where I grew up, and we grew poorer as the children were born and the country got worse. So I come from a poor community, but I come from a time when we had a decent poverty. There was nothing of that extreme poverty, that thing without dignity."³⁶

Gabriela too comes from São Paulo, the capital, where she was born in 1951 to a middle class family and where she lived in the districts of Vila Mariana and Jabaquara.

"I come from a lower middle class family, but when I was born we were middle class, really middle class. My father's family was once very rich, my father's father. They were rich, they were farmers and they lost everything gambling, they were gamblers all of them. (...) My mother worked in the farm, the daughter of an Indian, a farm girl. My father once, tired of the bohemian life went for a day in the farm, at time they were rich and met my mother, who was then fourteen. (...) She came to the capital, to São Paulo, to the house of my rich grandparents and she was illiterate, she is still, but she is very intelligent. Although she is an extremely conservative woman. My father was more open-minded, for as he was a bohemian, a creature of the night, he talked more, he gave me my first book to read, Monteiro Lobato, he was self-taught, he read a lot..."³⁷

Still bearing her Christian name Otília, she entered the Social Sciences Course in University of São Paulo (USP), in 1969, after the agitated experience of preparatory

³⁵ TELES, Maria Amélia, interview with author, 2008.

³⁶ CARNEIRO, Sueli, Interview with author, 2008.

³⁷ LEITE, Gabriela Silva, Interview with author, 2008.

school. She would call herself Gabriela only later.

“I went to preparatory school at night and entered Philosophy in USP (...) my first year was the year in which Social Sciences moved from Maria Antonia Street to the sheds in the campus. I entered this turbulent thing and I was very silly. The time of preparatory school was for me very interesting and was when I started “making trouble” for my mother. I lost my virginity when I was 18, at that time.”³⁸

– **from backstage onto the stage**

Starting at the late sixties and beginning of the seventies, the feminist movement, made up largely of leftist activists, former political prisoners and exiles who were returning to Brazil decided to come “out of the ghetto” and increase the range of its action. It got into unions, into political parties, into several organizations in civil society and especially it allied itself with the “women’s movement” that was organized in the periphery of some cities with the support of the Church and of political groups involved in the fight against dictatorship.³⁹ Although it counted on an exceptionally large number of women, its fighting program was not made up of feminist issues in the seventies. It called for more day care centers, urban transportation and an improvement in the conditions of life, but not including in its agenda subjects such as abortion, rape, sexual harassment and domestic violence against women as it was highly influenced by the Church⁴⁰, even considering its leftist wing - the Liberation Theology movement that, according to Ivone Gebara, “*criticized property but not the masculine property*”.⁴¹

This contact between the two movements – the feminist and the “women’s movement” – was certainly most rewarding for all. For the former because they were able to reach a much wider network of the female population; for poor women in the periphery because it brought to them questions about conditions that they would hardly have talked about spontaneously, although they often suffered silently, such as those concerned with sexual morals, and with the body and health. In this partial merging of the two movements, feminism was fundamental, developing and increasing its objectives in the struggle, emphasizing the questions of violence against women and of reproductive rights.

This was the context in which Amelinha, for a long time already involved in political activism, became one of the core organizers of early women’s and feminist movement organizations in the Greater São Paulo area. In 1981, she created the feminist association “Union of the Women of São Paulo”, where nowadays she coordinates the project of “Popular Legal Woman Prosecutors”, destined to enable women from the periphery to have access to justice. Sueli founded, in 1988, the “Geledés – The Institute of the Black Woman”, the first independent black feminist organization in Brazil, with the aim, as she explains of “*developing a political and juridical work for the improvement of the general situation of the black in this country, and specifically of that of the black woman.*” Gabriela founded the “National Movement of the Sex Workers” in 1987, in Rio de Janeiro, and, after leaving The Institute of Religious Studies - ISER, she created the “DaVida” NGO, jointly

³⁸ Idem.

³⁹ ALVAREZ, Sônia. *Op.cit.*, 1990, ch.4.

⁴⁰ See on this issue, STERNBACK, Nancy et al. “Feminisms in Latin America: From Bogotá to San Bernardo”. In: ALVAREZ, Sonia; ESCOBAR, Arturo. *The Making of Social Movements in Latin American: Identity, Strategy and Democracy*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992, pp. 212-213.

⁴¹ GEBARA, Ivone. Interview with author, 2008. Also see more feminist criticism of the “Liberation Theology”, her book *As águas do meu poço*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 2005, p.131.

with the prostitute Doroth and the journalist Flávio Lenz⁴², in 1992, with the objective of fighting for the rights of the sex workers⁴³.

– **abortion X anything**

A socialist feminist, the theologian Ivone sees herself first as a woman and not as a human being, as she says in her autobiography, called *Águas do meu Poço*⁴⁴. This is where she makes clear her feminist positions:

“I believe that the meeting with feminism, as a criticism of a history and a dogmatic male way of thinking, opened the doors for me to think about my life differently. I dare to leave, not unafraid, the admirable perfection of the male philosophical and theological dogmatism I was raised in. I dare to leave behind the definitions to which I must adapt myself, because they make up, as they say, the order of the world, of the fair and correct world wished by God. I dare to doubt what was proclaimed as truth and freedom”.⁴⁵

This abandonment of the previous references, of the old models of the constitution of subjectivity and of acting are also mentioned in her text: “*I feel nowadays in a perspective of 'the end of the models'*”, leaving behind me the codes of behavior coming from outside and that were imposed by some recognized authority. The feeling grows, in such a context, of being a foreigner in transgression also:

“I had learned so well that thinking was a male preserve that I sometimes felt a foreigner in my vocation of woman philosopher. Such a feeling never lasted long(...) I liked unusual people, outside the recognized rules of society”⁴⁶.

Ivone has the image of a rebel, of a radical and a transgressor, especially inside the Church, as in the 1980's there were there very few women publicly destabilizing the regime of truths in force in this universe, gender hierarchies above all. The fight to be fought there is doubtlessly one of the most extraordinary, as it brings into question the divine figure and authority itself. The contact with foreign books opens, therefore, a wide space for the structuring of a strong critique of the traditional modes of the religious institutions, as they are male and profoundly authoritarian and hierarchical.

“I criticize that which makes of religion a space of the domination and domestication o women. I felt in the flesh the loss of liberty due to my condition as a woman that chose to think about life, for yes, thinking is dangerous in this hierarchic world where we are asked only to obey.”⁴⁷

Besides her activity in the world of academia and the publishing of many books, Ivone has a history of intense activity in political feminist activism that includes the publication of several books, like *What is Feminist Theology?*⁴⁸ She worked for many years teaching

⁴² Flávio Lenz is a human rights activist in Rio de Janeiro, where he has also worked as a journalist for a long time. He has recently published *DASPU, A moda sem-vergonha*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Aeroplano, 2010.

⁴³ On the history of NGO DaVida, see STRACK, Friederike. *Mulher da Vida*, published in German, 1996.

⁴⁴ GEBARA, *op.cit*, 2005, p.26

⁴⁵ Idem, p.26.

⁴⁶ Idem, p.30.

⁴⁷ Idem, p.68.

⁴⁸ GEBARA, Ivone. *O que é Teologia Feminista?* São Paulo: Brasiliense, 2009.

courses at the university and working as an adviser to social movements in the northeast of the country. She now lives and works in Camaragibe, a district of Recife and lectures, gives seminars and workshops, both in Brazil and abroad, advising on gender questions in the sphere of feminist theology. And yet, in her evaluation of her life, there is the weight of the contrasting metaphor of the “*pastel colors of a large part of my life*”, and this for her, who enjoys so much “*the strong colors, the rich food, the great passions, the adventures!*”⁴⁹

This is not how I see this woman, who dares raise the flag of decriminalizing abortion, both in and out of her conservative environment.⁵⁰ This, as we know, has a price. After giving an interview to *Veja Magazine*, in 1994, she was summoned by the bishop in Recife to apologize publicly. On the same side, the conservative press lost no chance of punishing her, publishing daily notes on the “abortion nun”. Ivone reacted to that:

“everything is a plot to blame women and clear men of their own responsibilities. Women are made responsible for the fate – most times miserable - of the children, for their education, their life. The masculine judges, the feminine is judged.”⁵¹

A year later the suit is shelved but there was soon another one, throwing suspicions on her religious ideas and listing her “mistakes”. In this context of punishment she was soon sent to study at the Catholic University of Louvain-la -Neuve, in Belgium.

It is interesting to observe that the life story of each of these women, though they follow such exceptional paths, comes together in the measure in which they faced common political and social questions. The military dictatorship put them on the side of the resistance movements, at the same time that they were forced to open their own territories because of the difficulties they had in finding suitable spaces for feminine expression, something they accomplished despite many misogynous pressures.

This is what happened to Amelinha, who began her political activism early, partially inherited from the life with her father and who discovered feminism later. She met the women who were beginning to get organized at the end of 1974, when she was released from prison. After her traumatic experiences in the torture centers of the military regime in the years between 1970 and 1973, she committed herself to their work in the periphery of São Paulo, under the guidance of the PC do B, where she had been active for a long time. It was, for the party, a matter of making the “Cost of Life Movement” in an effort to broaden its base to include more members of the working class and women. The principal demand of these poor women at the time was the creation of day care centers, a need that had been underestimated by the political party. Amelinha asserts,

“But the party and the Church suppress this claim and put in its place salaries, land reform and freezing the prices of basic food - these are important, who can be against that? But what is the reason for taking the day care centers out. It started me wondering and it made me one of those who organize the popular movement for day care centers in the State of São Paulo.”⁵²

⁴⁹ GEBARA, *op. cit.*, 2005, p.33

⁵⁰ See RAGO, Margareth. “*A aventura de contar-se: Foucault e a escrita de si de Ivone Gebara*”, 2010, in print.

⁵¹ GEBARA, *op. cit.*, 2005, p. 151.

⁵² TELES, Maria Amélia, interview with author, 2008.

There was an increase in the lack of satisfaction with the authoritarian and masculine positions in the party; the distance between the feminists and the PC do B increased, as she explains,

“The controversies were many, and I lived them inside the Party from 1975 to 1987, for I thought women were entitled to their own space and that their demands were as important as those of the “Brazilian people”. In this matter of day care centers, there were women discussing everything, we had meetings with sometimes 200 women in the south region of the city, in Figueira Grande, Campo Limpo, Grajaú. We started with churches, with societies of friends, schools, health centers, parish rooms, anywhere.”⁵³

The most important demand of Amelinha and her feminist partners became the creation of their own female space inside the social movements fighting the military dictatorship, apart from the male-dominated political party:

“the *Women’s Union* was founded in 1981. In 1980, it was created in the city of São Paulo a network of day care centers for the first time in its history. We had this group of women who discussed day care centers and we thought we had to have a group to discuss our own problems, for in the popular movement for day care centers, the discussion was about where to set up the day care centers, about a committee to follow the establishment, of forming the criteria for the children to go to the centers and what is the relationship to be with the mothers. For when the father came, with a gun, they came for a fight, to kill. The discussion centered on the children and we asked: “What about us women?”, we then formed these groups and the women were to discuss our sexuality, the matter of abortion, the matter of violence...We formed then this group of women and it was like giving birth, a very difficult thing, for the Party wanted to own the Union of Women.”⁵⁴

The creation of the “Geledés” also came from the finding of an enormous void in connecting to black women in Brazil. If the feminist movement had already gathered many women around the central questions of their struggle, nonetheless black women felt marginalized and forgotten by all. Sueli observes:

“Geledés was established in 1988. At the beginning we were six, all of us black. I and Maria Lucia da Silva, Edna Bolam, Solimar Cordeiro, Sonia Maria Pareira do Nascimento, I can’t remember all of them. It was not a thing that came from nothing, this is born of a process, a process that in truth began to be built around 1982...the landmark was the construction of the Black Women’s Movement in São Paulo when the State Council on the Feminine Condition was created in São Paulo. The movement of the black women was part of the general women’s movement, there was not as yet an organized space, exclusively of the black women. There were black women acting in the feminist movement, in the black movement.”⁵⁵

The foundation of these feminist associations was hard work. They lacked all kinds of

⁵³ Idem.

⁵⁴ Idem.

⁵⁵ CARNEIRO, Sueli. Interview with author, 2008.

support and that included the leftist groups dominated by men, who defended more general political and economical questions such as the matter of wages and labor and union demands, and considered the women's demands as secondary. They insistently repeated that sexism would "wither away after the revolution", an argument that legitimized their manipulative practices toward the women's movement.⁵⁶ They continually associated feminist demands with the sphere of rich and "alienated" feminist women in a supposedly indefinite pursuit of freedom. It is also worth noting that as late as the 1980s, the growing presence and the cultural accomplishments of women, both from the elite and the workers, who since the end of the 19th century fought for entrance into the public sphere was still unknown and the fact that a great number of women participated in the social movements of resistance to the dictatorship, strengthening different political groups, those led by the Church especially, without however stating publicly their own feminine needs also was ignored.⁵⁷ Extending the criticism of the leftist organizations in her book *Breve História do Feminismo no Brasil* (1993), where she argued that even though many women were incorporated to the leftist groups in the urban centers and rural areas, real spaces were never opened for feminist issues⁵⁸, Amelinha asserts:

"The Communist Party of Brazil (PC do B) opposed abortion with the constitution, opposed abortion with salary raises, to show that our struggle lacked importance. They have nothing to do one with the other, they opposed things instead of joining them. You would not believe the amount of persecution we endured and still do, this goes on. It is such a strong persecution, it is like that of the dictatorship... it leaves a mark, all authoritarianism leaves a strong mark in the political life of people (...) We were always, I am stigmatized, maybe my generation was stigmatized in everything we did, we broke with many prejudices, many of us could not take it and stayed home, those feminists of the seventies who are inside their homes and can't hear anything more, no criticism. All this discussion being conducted is necessary, no proposals can be elaborated without a discussion, the mindsets need to be changed."⁵⁹

In regard to "Geledés", Sueli states the idea of creating it was rooted in the interest in finding an independent space to enter a dialogue with the State, to make proposals, to demand some rights and at the same time to criticize it. Fundamentally it was created to empower black women in their struggle for civil rights, as she explains,

"Another (idea) one was the necessity of constructing a political instrument for the struggle of the black women, a political instrument that could give them a voice, votes and visibility in their questions - all of this in the process of a historical critique of both the feminist and the black movements, that gave the black women' agenda a secondary position. The need was then for the creation of specific organizations, political instruments to break the silence and the invisibility of black women; "Geledés" was then conceived as an organization that had the added intention of carrying out this mission. We aimed at constructing an organization of black women that would be able to talk to the government on this subject and that could engage in a conversation on equal terms, first with feminism, then with the anti-racist struggle and other social

⁵⁶ See STERNBACK, op. cit.

⁵⁷ See ALVAREZ, S. "Politicando as relações de gênero, engendrando a democracia". In: STEPAN, Alfred (Org.). *Democratizando o Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1988.

⁵⁸ TELES, Maria Amélia de Almeida. *Breve História do Feminismo no Brasil*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1993, p.65

⁵⁹ TELES, Maria Amélia, interview with author, 2008.

movements, with other social actors. Such was the intention of “Geledés”, that's how it came to be and after that we structured a plan of action, set at first on three axes, human rights, health and communication.”⁶⁰

The prejudices Gabriela faced in her defense of the rights of sex workers were very strong, mainly by the absence of support from the groups on the left, who perceived prostitutes through the Marxist category of “lumpen-proletariat”, gathering those who would inevitably be suppressed by the economic development of the productive forces. Leading the prostitute's movement reinforced the stigmatization hardened in the social imagination, in a difficult relationship in which the feminists were included.

“The NGO DaVida begins in 1992. (...) It was a very hard beginning, there was some opposition from the ISER – the *Institute of Religious Studies*⁶¹. Of all our financial backers only one remained, from the US, that helped us with our infrastructure. Nobody else. The ICO, for instance, a Dutch financial institution. When I left ISER we were closing a project with the European Community and we needed an institution. This guy came to talk to me, the guy who called Flávio a pimp. They wanted to make a project with prostitution, organized, so I had presented a project and they came to us and this shitty Dutchman called Flávio a pimp. We were at the moment at a meeting in IBASE and I left the place thinking I want nothing of that anymore. So we left. We had only this small financial backing from Oscar. There was a group in ISER opposed to us inside the Ministry of Health. We had no place to take the headquarters of DaVida and my friends in (the samba school) Estácio, I have friends there, one of them had a very large plot of ground and offered it for us to build something there. There we went and put up a large wooden shed, we have a photograph of that. I know many people in that place, I stayed many years in that red light district.”⁶²

- Norma's Library

Norma was, from a very young age, in search of her own references on feminine autonomy: “*from the time of my mother I was looking up women (feminists), I was always arguing with them (she asserts) that there had been women in their time who had been free, but I had no examples*”. If on the one hand most of the women around her preached obedience and submission, on the other, the girl could count on some strong women in her life, such as her maternal grandmother and her great grandmother, “*whom I knew very well and always waited for us to read a poem*”. She enriched herself besides with the reading afforded by the huge library of her grandfather. This is an inheritance associated with the conquest of freedom. She says,

“There was a polarity about me, for my grandfather had studied in America and he used to say to me ‘women have to be better prepared as life in the world is more difficult for women’, probably on account of having lived in America. He was the one who had a library and I was allowed to take any book. I think that this base and this negation, this angry rebellion, for I kept being told that “girls don't go there” and I thought – Why don't they? “Girls don't study much”, this was a constant in my life. And at the same time I had a library where I could be

⁶⁰ CARNEIRO, Suely, Interview with author, 2008

⁶¹ Gabriela and Flávio were involved with the human rights NGO ISER for many years before they decided to found an autonomous association. On ISER, see: [anhttp://www.iser.org.br/site/](http://www.iser.org.br/site/)

⁶² LEITE, Gabriela Silva, Interview with author, 2008.

free, where I was not forbidden books, they belonged to my grandfather and he had some things that I have to this day. He was an engineer, graduated I think in America, but he had more of a humanist formation. He had the collection of the works of Shakespeare, the sacred books of humankind – Zoroastrianism, Occultism, Buddhism, Hinduism and they made me most curious and I found out that they were all of them interesting. This was a great shift for someone out of traditional nun's school, very closed.”⁶³

When studying History, at college, the student had found the German communist Rosa Luxemburg, such a fascinating activist for this generation, although not exactly a feminist. Those were “*the heavy years of the dictatorship*” in her words, where the focus was far from feminist questions. In the following decade she translates the love letters of Rosa to her partner, Leo Jogiches.⁶⁴ “*I fell in love, I did not know this aspect of her, this femininity, you have here already a feminist discussion*”. If Norma cannot remember exactly when she found feminism, again the memory of the library gains space in her memoirs:

“I grew up, with all that, reading Charlotte Bronte, I have still the 1902 edition of my grandfather. I was so passionate about these books... that, afterwards I was to ask: Are there Brazilian woman writers? People said no, but I was stubborn and went in search of them...”⁶⁵

It may be that the above mentioned lack of striking references to women in her life largely explains her unceasing search for the writers of our past, generally unknown women who needed to have access to a masculine identity in order to be heard. Many female writers had to adopt masculine names in order to have their books accepted by editors, not only in Brazil. Her indignation against the sophisticated forms of exclusion of women and the certainty that the transmission of the past is not absolutely guaranteed are also responsible for her untiring work of rescue. Reflecting on the difficulties faced by historians in charge of producing women’s history, she argues:

“The process of exclusion of women from historical narratives has determined both the scarcity of works by women, as compared with works by men, and the lack of transmission. It is never too much to emphasize how important is the transmission of a legacy for the succeeding generation. It is then a matter not only of discovering the past but also of new ways of relating to it and transmitting it.”⁶⁶

This is then the direction in which Norma brings a great contribution to the knowledge of female writers, who, as we know, are not in the traditionally respected Histories of Literature, with very few exceptions. Until the 1980s and 1990s names such as Carmem Dolores, Julia Lopes de Almeida, Maria Benedita Camara Borman, Lola de Oliveira and Narcisa Amália, among a great many, were completely unknown and only recently have some of their books been published.⁶⁷

“I started looking them up in bibliographical dictionaries and started noticing

⁶³ TELLES, Norma. Interview with author, 2008.

⁶⁴ LUXEMBURGO, Rosa. *Camarada e Amante. Cartas de Rosa Luxemburgo a Leo Jogiches*. Trad. Norma de Abreu Telles. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1983.

⁶⁵ TELLES, Norma. Interview with author, 2008.

⁶⁶ TELLES, Norma. “Notas para uma aula: história das mulheres”, mimeo, 2007, p.2.

⁶⁷ TELLES, Norma. *Encantações. Escritoras e imaginação literária no Brasil do século XIX*. São Paulo: Nat Editorial, 1998.

they could be found in histories of literature, in Antonio Candido we can find Narcisa Amália, but we don't see them when we pick up the book and we can't see them, for we think they do not exist, we know there are no woman writers. One or two decades back we were sure things started with Cecilia Meireles⁶⁸ and Clarice Lispector⁶⁹.”⁷⁰

The identification with the writers and their characters and the creative dialogue with the plots became important sources of inspiration for Norma's personal, intellectual and emotional work. As a woman, her subjectivity is always present as a reflexive approach.

“When I saw Gilbert and Gubar, *The Mad Woman in the Attic*⁷¹, when I saw this crazy female in the attic, I went emotionally crazy, I said: ‘this is me, ‘this is us, this locked up woman is a Latin American woman, a Brazilian, who will afterwards write...’ the madwoman was black??? Maria Benedita Borman gives me the impression of having written that if the madwoman had left the attic she would have become a writer, this is how I read *Lésbia*”⁷².

Concerned with myths of origin Norma finds *Lilith*, the so-called “first woman”, a rebel, a transgressor, at a time when nobody had heard of her. Eve still dominated the religious imaginary as the first woman, according to the biblical story, out of Adam's rib, passive and submissive. Touched by the character, however, Norma translated the book of the Italian anthropologist Roberto Sicuteri, *Lilith, a lua negra*⁷³ that went on to several editions in Brazil.

-Otília, Gabriela

This identification with transgressive imaginary female figures like Lillith, comes close also to the one that joins Gabriela to the prostitutes and fuels her fight for them. The experience of many years as a professional prostitute, as she affirms, makes her a most singular person, for she speaks from the interior of this universe then so distant and so unknown, not only to women, in Brazil. Moreover, the prostitutes that came from the poorer classes, had a college degree and became political activists were exceedingly rare in the eighties. Gabriela, born Otília, also chose to change her name, an attitude that can surely be read as the assertion of a different subjectivity, the definition of a new way of being, more independent, free, sensual, daring and transgressing.

“In my birth certificate my name is Otília Silva Leite. Gabriela is a very old name, a part of me, much more than Otília. It is really the name I chose. I changed it when I went into prostitution. This was in the early seventies. I have a law suit moving on in the courts to add Gabriela. I will be Otília Gabriela. I have both of them. Everybody calls me Gabriela, except my mother.”⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Cecília MEIRELES, Rio de Janeiro, 1901- RJ, 1964

⁶⁹ Clarice LISPECTOR, Ucrânia, 1920-Rio de Janeiro, 1977

⁷⁰ TELLES, Norma. Interview with author, 2007.

⁷¹ She refers to the famous book by Sandra GILBERT and Susan GUBAR. *The Madwoman in the attic. The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination. (1st ed.)* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979.

⁷² *Lésbia* is the title of Maria Benedita Câmara BORMAN's novel, published in 1890, with introduction by Norma Telles. Florianópolis: Editora Mulheres, 1998. Borman is also called Delia.

⁷³ SICUTERI, Roberto. *Lilith, a Lua Negra*. Trad. Norma Telles e J. Adolpho S. Gordo. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1985.

⁷⁴ LEITE, Gabriela, Interview with author, 2008.

We have to consider the historical context in which she operates, in order to understand how radical her choices were and their reach. The break promoted by her was enormous for the generation that was raised for marriage and maternity in the fifties and sixties, to the point that her mother is the only person not to recognize her as Gabriela. We can, moreover, say that Gabriela is a feminist, as she interprets herself, and as we take into consideration that her fight is for the rights of poor women, women that lived in conditions of absolute social abandonment, despite the clashes with the feminists themselves. Gabriela founded, with all those aspects in mind, the 'DaVida' NGO, that fights for better work conditions and for the quality of life of prostitutes. From the eighties, when this movement was born in Brazil, they have been called "sex workers", with the understanding that their activity is work like any other and demanding professional recognition from the state.

– the deconstruction of Tânia

Tânia is a radical critic of the binary system of thought inspired by Foucault, and a post-structuralist feminism. She adopts the view that emerged in the last few decades that challenged the masculine definitions of female identity, encompassing the phallogocentric interpretations by the Church, medicine and the media, destined to inform public opinion or to update the misogynous social imagination. As a historian, her fight for the transformation of a male-oriented area was not easy. This is a direction in which she conducted a re-reading of the history of Brazil, seen traditionally from an exclusive and hierarchical masculine point of view. In this direction, in an article about the relations established between the Portuguese colonizers, the Jesuits and the Indians, she denounced:

"in the sphere of sexuality it is male desire, the presence of men, male sexuality that appear as the regulators of order, as the definers of morals, as the parameters of insertion in the social/sexual contract that is established in the Portuguese colonization. The inequality that here appears with the establishment of a "difference" and of an exclusion. In this way that which is taken as the cause of a political/social exclusion – the biological difference – is nothing else than the fruit of setting up an inequality forged in the political realm. Actually the Jesuits' teaching practice in the schools for boys, for instance, creates a new division between the sexes, a new moral, a new axis of knowledge directed exclusively to the male sex, the interlocutor chosen by the Portuguese in their contact with the Indians".⁷⁵

In proposing the deconstruction of the lesbian identity the author wrote *What is Lesbianism?*⁷⁶, a book in which she has shuffled all the possible answers to the question asked, revealing the traps there implied. She presented, that same year, the text "*Nomad identity: Heterotopies of myself*", where she proposed her own inventions of the self, making use of Foucault's notion of "heterotopy", that is, of "other spaces"⁷⁷. Here is where she asked:

⁷⁵ SWAIN, Tânia N.. "História: construção e limites da memória social". In: FUNARI, P. P. A; RAGO, M. *Subjetividades Antigas e Modernas*. São Paulo: Annablume, 2009.

⁷⁶ SWAIN, Tânia Navarro. *O que é Lesbianismo?* São Paulo: Brasiliense, 2000.

⁷⁷ SWAIN, Tânia Navarro. "*Identidade Nômada: Heterotopias de mim*". In: RAGO, M.; VEIGA-NETO, A; ORLANDI, L. *Imagens de Foucault e Deleuze, ressonâncias nietzschianas*. Rio de Janeiro: DPA, 2002, p.325-342. For the notion of "heterotopy", see FOUCAULT, M. "Des espaces autres" (1984), *Dits et Écrits*, IV. Paris: Gallimard, 1994, p.752-762.

“Who then are “we”, locked into sexed bodies, built as nature, passengers of fictitious identities, constructed in more or less ordered behaviors? Who am I, marked by the feminine, represented as a woman and whose practices point unceasingly to the failures, the abyss of identity held in the dynamic of being itself?”⁷⁸

Tânia published in 2003 the ironic article “*Old? I? Self Portrait of a Feminist*”, where she began with humor and originality a performance art criticism against the modern stigmatization that locks up the body, sexuality and the identity of the woman in the category of old age, that in turn is associated with menopause.⁷⁹ She denounced this “*as still and always the prescription of sexuality in action, as described by Foucault*”. There is no need of recalling that menopause until recently was described in the medical discourses as the “decline” of feminine sexuality, that is, the moment of closure of sexual life and when, differently from men, women would stop having any sexual capacity and so, be robbed of their main social role of childbearing. Writing in a humorous style and daring to expose herself in the text, asserting a radical refusal of a pre-established body and identity, Tânia affirms:

“I wear my hair white and long, a crime of *lèse majesty* for a woman in Brazil. I dress as it strikes my fancy, to the scandal of my colleagues and the delight of the students, who share my tastes. I have never tortured my feet in those pointy, high heeled shoes that prevent us from running, jumping, having a correct posture. I feel well and comfortable in the running shoes that carry me between lectures and conferences, from the theses panels to my usual classes”⁸⁰

Her critique deconstructs those interpretations that make of old age a period associated with degeneration and death, a moment of incapacity and loss of potency, particularly for women, from whom, more than from men, is demanded a higher aesthetic standard, especially in the “tropical” Brazil:

“What is after all old age? We see, even among the ranks of feminists, the groups of “young people” compared to “classic” feminists, traditional, elderly, in one word, old. What brings about the coherence of the groups of young people? What are their limits, their bonds and their objectives? How can age determine the belonging, if not to a world drawn, established, defined, where tastes and preferences are given by advertising, by publicity, this ultimate avatar of a devastating globalization in progress? And what are the subtle details that place a person, beyond appeal, among the “old”? Does the age of the senior citizen begin at 30 or 31, at 42 or 54? What of the ages that follow that? How many wrinkles and how much white hair determine such a passage?”⁸¹

- Back to Simmel...

It is not possible to consider the important transformations of the lives of women in Brazil, nowadays, without mentioning the experience of the feminist movement and of several women such as those mentioned here. Along their different paths, facing taboos and deep-rooted prejudices, breaking with the stereotypes of their time and opening new manners

⁷⁸ SWAIN, 2002, op.cit., p.327

⁷⁹ SWAIN, Tânia Navarro. “*Velha? Eu? Auto-retrato de uma feminista*”. In: RAGO, M.; VEIGA NETO, A. *Figuras de Foucault*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2006, p.261-270.

⁸⁰ Idem, p.263.

⁸¹ Idem, p.264.

of political, professional and personal action, they asserted new ways of being and new ethical codes. They are singular and exemplary people, and it is not possible to deny them the recognition of their merits and victories. As we observe their political achievements, such as the creation of the association “União das Mulheres”, and the NGOs “Geledés” and “DaVida”; when we think of the theoretical production now in existence in the country, the provoking reflections and the strong criticism brought to feminist studies with the work of Tânia Swain, Norma Telles and Ivone Gebara, among other well known feminist scholars; when we come to know the intense work in the sphere of religion done by feminist theologians, in their fight for the decriminalization of abortion, for a different reading of the Bible, for new interpretations of the sacred texts, among other fundamental subjects, we come out very much empowered.

In this sense, it is worth noting that until the beginning of the seventies, in Brazil, the expression “mulher pública” was not an equivalent for “public man” as it was a synonym for “prostitute”. Four decades later, if many issues were enthusiastically discussed during the last presidential campaign, such as the decriminalization of abortion or of president Lula’s manipulative influence on the next president, Dilma Rousseff’s gender identity wasn’t at stake. It seems Brazilians have realized that women in politics tend to challenge the “culture of corruption” prevailing even in high levels of political, administrative and military staffs, as Lúcia Avelar asserts.⁸²

“In the União de Mulheres”, says Amelinha, “*we have today a board of directors with 13 women and our principal project Popular Legal Prosecutors, that groups 3500 women in all São Paulo, this is field work.*” As to the “Geledés”, Sueli explains:

“They are 23 people that work every day. The “Geledés” nowadays does not deal only with the matter of women, but the focus is on the black woman. We set up a type of program that allows us to work on the question of the black woman in particular and in the general questions of the interest of the black community, that is, the general fight against racism. We share this double identity, we are feminists, anti-racist and we fight both fights in both battle fields.”⁸³

It is in the same way that the NGO “DaVida” positions itself as a respected space for the fight and demands of the sex workers, also abroad, with the publishing of the “Beijo da Rua” newspaper (Street Kiss), run by the journalist Flávio Lenz and the ready-to-wear clothes industry “DASPU”, an ironic allusion to the powerful designer clothes “DASLU” that was involved with corruption some years ago. And Ivone Gebara, who no longer needs to fear her blunt declarations, part of her daily exercise in freedom and her enviable autonomy, can publicize her reflections as when she asks:

“This all too heavy living leads me to think or dream of something else: what if God were not powerful, but pleasurable? What if pleasure were the fundamental constitution of our being? What if we were in this world to enjoy life? Weren't we in the beginning all in Paradise, according to the Genesis myth? Wouldn't paradise and happiness perhaps constitutive of our origin? (...) And aren't we endowed with the nostalgia of the lost paradise?”⁸⁴

⁸² See on this issue AVELAR, Lúcia. *Mulheres na elite Política Brasileira*. São Paulo: UNESP, 2001.

⁸³ TELES, Maria Amélia, interview with author, 2008.

⁸⁴ GEBARA, op. cit., p.185.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ALVAREZ, Sonia. *Engendering Democracy in Brazil*. Princeton University Press, 1990;
 _____ “Politicizing Gender and Engendering Democracy”. In: STEPAN, Alfred. (ed)
Democratizing Brazil: Problems of Transition and Consolidation. New York: Oxford
 University Press, 1989, pp.205-251.
- AVELAR, Lúcia. *Mulheres na elite Política Brasileira*. São Paulo: UNESP, 2001
- ALVES, Maria Helena Moreira. *State and opposition in military Brazil*. Austin: University of
 Texas Press, 1985.
- BRAIDOTTI, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.
- BUTLER, Judith. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York:
 Routledge, 1990.
- CAMPBELL, Elaine. “Narcisism as Ehtical Practice?: Foucault, Askesis and an Ethics of
 Becoming”. *Cultural Sociology*, 2010, vol. 4, n.1. Access: [Http://cus.sagepub.com](http://cus.sagepub.com)
- DELEUZE, Gilles; GUATTARI, Félix. *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.
 Trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- FLORES, Maria Bernadete R. *Tecnologia e Estética do Racismo. Ciência e Arte na
 Política da Beleza*. Chapecó: Argos, 2007
- FOUCAULT, M. *The Politics of Truth*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer; Introd. John Rajchman. Los
 Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007.
- _____ “Truth and Power”, *Power: Essential Works of Foucault. 1954-1984*, vol.3. Trans.
 Hurley; Ed. P. Rabinow. New York: The New Press, 2000
- _____ *The History of Sexuality, II. The Use of Pleasure*. New York: Vintage Books, 1986
- _____ *The History of Sexuality, III. The Care of the Self*. New York: Vintage Books, 1988
- _____ *Discipline and Punish: the birth of prison*. (2nd ed). Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York:
 Vintage Books, 1995.
- _____ *As Palavras e as Coisas*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1981
- _____ “Nietzsche, a Genealogia e a História.” *Microfísica do Poder*. Rio de Janeiro:
 Graal, 1979.
- GEBARA, Ivone. *Vulnerabilidade, Justiça e Feminismos. Antologia de textos*. São Paulo:
 Nhanduti Editora, 2010
- _____ Entrevista com a autora, 2009, 2008.
- _____ *O que é teologia feminista?* São Paulo: Brasiliense, 2007.
- _____ *O que é teologia?* São Paulo: Brasiliense, 2006.
- _____ *As águas do meu poço. Reflexões sobre experiências de liberdade*. São Paulo:
 Brasiliense, 2005.
- _____ *La sed de sentido. Búsquedas ecofeministas en prosa poética*. Montevideo:
 Doble Clic Editoras, 2002.
- _____ *A mobilidade da senzala feminina (mulheres nordestinas, vida melhor e
 feminismo)*. São Paulo: Paulinas, 2000.
- _____ *Rompendo o silêncio. Uma fenomenologia feminista do mal*. Rio de Janeiro:
 Vozes, 2000.
- _____ *Le mal au féminin. Réflexions Théologiques à partir du féminisme*. Paris:
 L’Harmattan, 1999a
- _____ *Longing for running water. Ecofeminism and Liberation*. Minneapolis: Fortress
 Press, 1999b
-

- _____. *Teologia Ecofeminista*. São Paulo: Editora Olho D'água, 1997
- GROSZ, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994
- LEDOUX-BEAUGRAND, Evelyne. "D'une sororité à un corp(u)s éclaté: l'imaginaire de la communauté dans la littérature des femmes", *Labrys, estudos feministas/études féministes*, ago/dez. 2005. Acess: <http://www.unb.br/ih/his/gefem/>
- LEJEUNE, Philippe. *On autobiography*. Edited by Paul John Eakin; translated by Katherine M. Leary. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989
- LEITE, Gabriela Silva. *Eu, Mulher da Vida*. Rio de Janeiro: Rosa dos Tempos, 1992.
- _____. *Filha, Mãe, Avó, Puta*. Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2009
- LENZ, Flávio. *DASPU, A moda sem-vergonha*. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. Aeroplano, 2010
- LUXEMBURGO, Rosa. *Camarada e Amante. Cartas de Rosa Luxemburgo a Leo Jogiches*. Trad. Norma de Abreu Telles. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1983.
- MACHADO, Lia. "A longa duração da violência de gênero na América Latina".
- FERNANDES, A. M.; RANINCHESKI, S. (Orgs.) *Américas Compartilhadas*. São Paulo: Verbená Editora, 2009, p.57-83.
- MCLAREN, Margaret. *Feminism, Foucault, and Embodied Subjectivity*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002
- O'GRADY, Helen. "An Ethics of the Self", In: TAYLOR, D.; VINTGES, K. (eds.) *Feminism and The Final Foucault*. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004, pp.91-117.
- RAGO, Margareth. "A aventura de contar-se: Foucault e a escrita de si de Ivone Gebara", 2010, in print.
- _____. "Foucault, a Subjetividade e as Heterotopias Feministas". IN: SCAVONE, Lucila; MISKOLCI, Richard; ALVAREZ, Marcos C. *O legado de Foucault*. São Paulo: UNESP, 2006
- _____. *Entre a História e a Liberdade: Luce Fabbri e o anarquismo contemporâneo*. São Paulo: UNESP, 2002
- _____. "Feminizar é preciso. Por uma cultura filógina", *São Paulo em Perspectiva* Revista da Fundação SEADE, vol.15, n.3, p.58-66, jul-set 2001.
- RAJCHMAN, John. "Enlightenment Today". Introduction to *The Politics of Truth*. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2007, pp.1-27.
- REIS, José Carlos. *Tempo, História e Evasão*. São Paulo, Campinas: Papyrus, 1994
- SARTI, Cynthia. "The Panorama of Feminism in Brazil." In: *New Left Review* Jan.-Feb. 1989. Access: <http://www.newleftreview.org/?page=article&view=1369>
- SICUTERI, Roberto. *Lilith, a Lua Negra*. Trad. Norma Telles e J. Adolpho S. Gordo. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, 1985
- SIMMEL, Georg. *On Women, Sexuality, and Love* (translated and with an Introduction by Guy Oakes). New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984
- STERNBACK, Nancy et alli. "Feminisms in Latin America: From Bogotá to San Bernardo". In: ALVAREZ, Sonia; ESCOBAR, Arturo. *The Making of Social Movements in Latin American: Identity, Strategy and Democracy*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992.
- SWAIN, Tânia N. "História: construção e limites da memória social". In: FUNARI, P. P. A; RAGO, M. *Subjetividades Antigas e Modernas*. São Paulo: Annablume, 2009.
- _____. *O que é Lesbianismo?* São Paulo: Brasiliense, 2000.
- _____. "Identidade Nômada: Heterotopias de mim". In: RAGO, M.; VEIGA-NETO, A; ORLANDI, L. *Imagens de Foucault e Deleuze, ressonâncias nietzschianas*. Rio de Janeiro: DPA, 2002, p.325-342.
- _____. "Velha? Eu? Auto-retrato de uma feminista". In: RAGO, M.; VEIGA NETO, A. *Figuras de Foucault*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2006, p.261-270.
- TAYLOR, Chloe. *The Culture of Confession: from Augustin to Foucault. A Genealogy of the "Confessing Animal"*. New York, London: Routledge, 2009
- TAYLOR, Dianna; VINTGES, Karen (eds.) *Feminism and The Final Foucault*. Urbana and
-

- Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004
- TELES, Maria Amélia de Almeida. *Breve História do Feminismo no Brasil*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1993.
- _____; MELO, Mônica. *O que é Violência contra a Mulher?* S. Paulo: Brasiliense, 2002
- _____. *Os Cursos de Direito e a Perspectiva de Gênero*. Porto Alegre: Sérgio Antonio Fabris Editor, 2006.
- TELLES, Norma. *Belas e Feras*. São Paulo: NatEditorial, 2007
- _____. *Inscrições*. São Paulo: NatEditorial, 2004.
- _____. "Intuição do Instante". Mimeo, 1997.
- _____. *Cartografia Brasília ou: esta história está mal contada*. 1ª.ed. S. Paulo: Ed. Loyola, 1984.
- _____. *Encantações Escritoras e imaginação literária no Brasil do século XIX*. São Paulo: Nat Editorial, 1998.
- WOOLF, Virginia. *A room of one's own*. eBooks@Adelaide, 2009
-