

Family, sexuality and female aging

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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.



Family, sexuality and female aging*

Andréa Moraes Alves**

The anthropological and sociological literature presents two family models, used in the interpretation of modern-contemporary societies. One comes from the classic narratives about the “patriarchal family,” among which Gilberto Freyre’s 1933 opus, *Casa grande & senzala (The Masters and the Slaves, 1946)*, occupies a prominent position. In the other, the paradigm of the “modern conjugal family” highlights individualism and the principle of equality. Each of these models can be used to reflect upon gender and age. While the patriarchal model builds on reciprocity and complementarity between sexes and generations, in the modern conjugal model, affection, children, free choice and equality between the members of the couple are key values. In this article, I address constants and changes in the figure of the “old woman” in the family, based on recent studies of aging and gender, in comparison to the classic literature on gender, family and old age in Brazil.

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Female old age has traditionally been seen as being circumscribed by the domestic sphere. According to Lins de Barros’s important studies of generational issues in Brazil, old age is regarded as “doubly insignificant” for women:

Old men receive more attention, in the sense that retirement is understood as a radical change in a man’s life—a shift from the wider, public world to a domestic and restricted sphere... For women, old age is the last stage of a *continuum* that is always linked to the domestic sphere. (Lins de Barros, 1981:13)

In the domestic sphere, the old woman is symbolically linked to the roles of grandmother, wife, mother and/or housewife. In this milieu, the importance of a woman is maintained, to the degree that she continues to exercise functions necessary for the reproduction of the household and its members. While the older woman loses her sexual reproductive function, she maintains her ability to control her home and her position as the decisive center of the domestic sphere remains. Gilberto Freyre (1933) famously speaks of “plantation matriarchs”, “old spinster aunts,” and “elderly Misses,” as examples of

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female old age in patriarchal societies. The first group was required to enter the public sphere upon the death of their husbands, becoming men for all practical intents and purposes: they wore pants, rode horses and dominated their slaves with more rigor than even their husbands had employed, utilizing all the sadistic tricks they had once been subject to as wives. The spinster aunts grew old before their time because they had not married or procreated. They “wilted” and became “soft and yellow,” according to narratives collected by Freyre. Female old age became synonymous with reclusion, with old women being shut away in the house. According to Gilberto Freyre:

Women who often had nothing to do except give strident orders to slaves; play with parrots, monkeys, little black boys. Others prepared fine sweets for their husbands and took care of their children. They devotedly stitched shirts for Baby Jesus, or altar cloths for Our Lady. (Freyre.1975:349)

Modern social scientific work on aging took off by the late 1970s and early the 1980s, at a time when the image of old age was rapidly changing (Debert, 1992). Aging was then conceived as a stage in life in which hedonism, pleasure and the search for personal realization became legitimate and desirable goals. This transformation was fed by several factors, among which we can highlight the diffusion of geriatric and gerontological discourse on healthy and active old age (Caradec, 2001).

Two theories of aging serve as the basis for this gerontological discourse. The first, known as disengagement theory, claims that “normal” aging implies a progressive decrease in the number of social roles an individual plays, and in the social interactions they take part in, transforming the nature of their engagement with the social world. These relationships should begin to place greater emphasis on affective ties, in detriment of other, more functional relationships. At the end of this process of progressive disengagement, the individual achieves a new state of psychological equilibrium. The second, called activity theory, is almost the exact opposite of the first one. Activity theory sees a successful old age as compensating for the loss of certain roles and abilities through the intensification of others. It seeks to foment voluntarism in the elderly, maintaining a high level of engagement in diverse activities and reinforcing social ties of all sorts.

Gerontological understandings have generated a wide variety of self-help manuals. These have been vulgarized via articles in magazines, newspapers and websites, promoted services directed to an aging clientele and to those who seek to stave off the effects of aging through preventive activities, such as diet plans and physical exercise. These sorts of knowledge and practices which usually involve body care are a product of Giddens (1991) called the reflexive character of modernity.

The ever-greater fragmentation of knowledge, characteristic of modernity, directly affects the ability of individuals to plan and control their lives. This progressive lack of

control creates anxiety, as knowledge becomes so varied—daily made and remade—that achieving a consensual and precise basis for proceeding in day-to-day life and structuring one's routines so that one may achieve one's goals becomes ever more impossible. Goals themselves are also part of this "reflexive project of the self"—ever changing, always mutating. Aging thus starts to be seen as a process that can be manipulated by the subject, generating discourse that put a premium on the maintenance of individual self-control, and especially of control over one's body. These discourses are contradictory, however, given that they are anchored in systems of information that are ever more fragmented and specialized (Giddens, 1991).

In the French case, studied by Lenoir (1979), the management of aging begins to proliferate in the 1960s. This was concomitant to an increase in the production of gerontological theory which, in turn, fed a tendency towards the management of aging. New forms of consumption and care began to be developed for the elderly, based above all on the care of one's health, the renewal of the body, and the development of an active social life through clubs, associations and classes directed towards senior citizens. All of these tendencies consolidated the new notion of aging, which was now understood as "the third age."¹

Recent studies (Debert, 1997; Lima, 1999) show that in Brazil the management of aging also began to change in the 1960s. It was only in the 1980s, however, that old age acquired greater visibility and began to generate new markets targeted at elderly consumers. The situation was similar to that of France, with new gerontological discourses, demographic changes,² and transformations in the job market combining with new demands from the elderly themselves, especially those who were members of the middle and upper classes. The "third age" concept found fertile ground among the elderly groups associated with SESC (the Commercial Social Service), university courses geared to senior citizens, and a widespread network of associations and groups which popularized the concept of an active old age and the possibility of living the best phase of one's life "after the age of 60."

In research conducted in the 1970s, one of the pioneering studies of aging in Brazil, Lins de Barros (1981) looked at a group of middle class women in the southern neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro. The subjects of her study gave meaning to their lives by participating in public activities, which kept them from falling into the then common-sense pattern of a passive and reclusive old age, in the case of women, typically dedicated to baby-sitting. More than 20 years have now passed since Lins de Barros'

¹ Translator's note: A rough equivalent in English would be "senior citizen."

² "According to projections based 1980 Census data, the elderly population, including those 60 or older, reached 12,674 million in 1999, representing 7.7% of the Brazilian population (...) While the population of those 20 or younger rose 12% from 1980 to 1999, the elderly population rose 70% during this same period, from 7.2 million to 12.6 million." (Araújo & Alves, 2000: 8) The state of Rio de Janeiro was highlighted in these statistics as the Brazilian state containing the largest elderly proportion: 11.2%.

study. The image of the reclusive and passive old woman is now explicitly contested in the social imagination by the normative view of an “active old age,” according to the strictures of those who’ve propagated the concept of the “third age”. Ways of living well after the age of 60 have been popularized by the media, including the testimony of “successful senior citizens,” psychologists, geriatrists, gerontologists and a series of other health professionals.

Women have been the largest audience for these recepies. In the first place, women are the majority of the elderly population in Brazil.³ The appeal of the activities proposed by senior citizen groups was also stronger among women. At State University of Rio de Janeiro’s Senior Citizens’ Open University (Universidade Aberta da Terceira Idade, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro), 85% of the students were women (Goldman, 1999). Upon retirement, men tend to prolong their active life among their peers through game-playing and other activities carried out in public spaces. They also often continue to perform paid labor. Women, however, find in senior citizen groups an opportunity to find a private life that is separate from their families (Debretm 1998).

The greater number of women who seek out senior citizen groups is also partially explained by the kinds of activities offered by them, such as courses, lectures, parties and fieldtrips. Flávia Motta (1998) explains this preponderance of social activities—and especially in groups dominated by women—due to the fact that these practices involve activities that women do well at, particularly the art of being sociable. For the current generation of older women between 60 and 70 years of age, work outside of the domestic sphere was not a domain in which individuality could be constructed. Sociability appears today for them as a form of individuation that does not present drastic ruptures with the codes and values they have known and shared all their lives. Women end up shifting elements of domestic and family life, which they already know, into other spheres, resignifying these elements in non-domestic spaces of sociability.

I argue that a second reason for the great demand for senior citizen groups by elderly women has to do with the fact that they were not previously socialized to undertake autonomous social activities in public spaces. Because of this, the formal meeting spaces for senior citizens create opportunities to exercise sociability in closed spaces that are controlled and regulated, with activities being directed by professionals. The closed and controlled nature of these senior citizen spaces create an image of security and protection for these women, while emphasizing the acquisition of knowledge and learning of new skills. This, in turn, makes these spaces attractive to elderly women who seek for alternative forms of living their lives outside the domestic space, but who need a place where social interactions will be largely composed of women who come from

³ “In 1999, there were 6.9 million elderly women and 5.7 million elderly men, or 120 women for every 100 men. This sex ratio increases with age, varying from 118 to 100 for the 65-69 group to 141 to 100 in the 80 and over group. In 1999, the women who reach 60 years of age can expect to live another 19.3 years. Elderly men who reach this age can expect to live another 16.8 years.” (Araújo & Alves, 2000: 09)

similar life trajectories. A space sheltered from “the street,” traditionally understood as a male space.

During their youth, domestic work prevented these women from getting employed outside the home, or enjoying the household itself, outside of contexts involving neighbors or the family. Work, in general, rarely granted them a living, or access to public space. Professional activities were subordinated to domestic life and marriage. The arrival of children typically meant the end of a woman’s non-domestic work life. In my fieldwork, women often referred to the moral tenor of the times during their youth in the 1950s, which condemned women who “adventured outside the house.” A “family girl” did not venture out alone, or only with female friends. Recreational activities, like films and dances, were always supervised by an adult—preferentially an older woman, like an aunt, mother, or neighbor. Men, however, always had the freedom to socialize outside of the house, either in bars or in games with other men. The women who are today active in senior citizen groups and spaces are unanimous in their rejection of the attitudes common during their youth, and reproduce discourses celebrating an “active old age” as a justification for their entry into senior citizen groups, which they see as synonymous with liberation. To “stay at home,” in their discourse, becomes a proof of incapacity.

Middle class urban women in their 60s and 70s are today witnessing fundamental changes in Brazilian society: the acceleration of urbanization and the conquest of women’s rights have, in particular, affected these women’s lives. The increased importance of women’s work outside the home and the “sexual revolution”⁴⁴ are parts of a greater process of change that has impacted upon the lives of this generation of women. The effects of these changes, which were not directly felt during these women’s youth, are now generating consequences in their old age. All my informants denounced what they saw as their generation’s “backwardness”: the excessively rigid education they received from their parents, their lack of knowledge regarding sex, the imposition of marriage and the lack of educational opportunities are all seen as factors that generated negative limitations on their lives. Maintaining an active life in old age is seen by these women as a way of enjoying a life which was denied to them in the past.

But they also stay at home – family and domestic life

Before looking at senior citizen discourse as a late effect of feminist ideology, we should understand its meaning for the women who employ it today. If they condemn

⁴ I agree with Michel Bozon (2004) in his relativization of the sexual revolution that has supposedly taken place over the last few decades. According to him, a more correct interpretation of the changes in men and women’s sexual discourses and practices (changes that are much more salient among women) is that we have moved from a sexuality structured by external controls and discipline to a sexuality organized by internal discipline. This is the “new normal” for sexual activities, which does not rest on absolute principles. “Sexual behavior is an ever more progressive elaboration that is interpreted and reinterpreted throughout the course of one’s life” (Bozon, 2004: 98).

staying at home, this does not mean these women are burning their houses as feminists once supposedly burned bras. The household and the domestic sphere continue to be relevant in structuring their daily lives and identities.

In my Ph research (Alves, 2003), the “family” topic spontaneously came up in my conversations with elderly middle class women in southern neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro who frequented ball room dance clubs and balls. On the one hand, their speech constantly highlighted their autonomy with regards to their family in terms of their hobby, ballroom dancing. All of the women placed a high value on the fact that their children, grandchildren and husbands were not allowed to interfere in this practice. On the other hand, this affirmation of non-interference was also generally coupled with an remarks about the same children and grandchildren’s dependence upon their parents and grandparents, financial and in terms of domestic chores. This financial and domestic aid was not seen as an obligation but as the fruit of the older women’s disposition to contribute to their children and grandchildren’s lives in the face of the current economic crisis that is shaking the Brazilian middle class. Many of the members of the younger generations in these families are unemployed and others are separated from their spouses. Both situations tend to result in a return to their parent’s home. “I can help my children and grandchildren,” and “I am able to give them a hand” are both typical testimonies that I have collected, where the women describe this practice as an option, a choice.

In narrating their life trajectories, these elderly women remember their roles as mothers and grandmothers in great detail. Their performance in them is highlighted and greatly valued. Marriage and maternity, as well as the arrival of grandchildren, are major markers in the construction of their female identities. The family is thus treated by them as a reservoir of affection and respect, where the elderly woman finds great legitimacy as long as she maintains her position as the decisive center of the household. Helping one’s children and grandchildren to face their financial difficulties and continuing to be active in domestic activities are decisive ways of contributing to the elderly woman’s legitimacy within her family circle. The autonomy these women affirm with regards to their leisure activities can only be practiced if they continue contributing money and services to their families. A fragile equilibrium is thus established, where the limits of mutual interference between the generations are continuously (re)negotiated. Many of my informants made reference to the daily duties they are obliged to perform in order to dedicate themselves to their household, to dance and to their grandchildren. In these exchanges, family members are also often invoked as being decisive in supporting the women’s leisure choices. Medical arguments were often quite useful in generating this support. The fact that the family acknowledges, accepts and often supports the women’s ballroom dancing is a point that is often brought up by my informants, especially by those who are married. The acceptance of the husband, children and grandchildren frees this woman from the potential risks of flirting, a characteristic of ballroom dancing. I will return to this subject below. For now, let me simply state that the family appears as protective shield, preserving the woman’s honor and morals.

This and last year, I had my birthday party at the Ball and my children, grandchildren and family all came. I took them to the ball to celebrate and I've been celebrating at the balls for four years now. My husband, children, grandchildren, friends and family all came along to celebrate with me. It was a lot of fun! (Selma, 65 66)

Lins de Barros (1987) and Peixoto (2000) have addressed the relationships created between grandparents, children and grandchildren. They looked at inter-generational exchanges within the family. Both authors emphasize the emotional aspects involved in these relationships. Lins de Barros, in particular, highlights grandparents' constant interference in their children's families:

This interference is conducted in the name of greater life experience, affection and sentiment, principally referring to the grandchildren, which is where this sort of commentary arises (Lins de Barros, 1987:136).

Affection builds on most readily in the relationships with grandchildren, while paternal and maternal functions tend to be marked by the concept of authority. Authority and affection are the orientating axes of the relationships and generational positions within a family.

The idea of the family is also brought up by my informants when they discuss close dancing in the ballroom. The ballroom is seen as a "respectful, family" place where "pleasure" reigns, shared by all who dance. "Family" here appears as synonymous with acceptance, affection, hierarchy and exchange. The joy of dancing is linked to notions of communion which are also identified within these women's discourses regarding the family. "Communion" is here cast as the feeling of being part of a larger group, absorbed by it. Many of my informants—both men and women—report feeling "pleasure", "transcendence", "freedom" and "escape" when they dance.

Ballroom dancing is freedom for me. It's something that comes from inside the human being. A rich man will dance with a poor maid who works for a family. (Osvaldo, 60)

In this image of the ballroom as a refuge, conflicts are pushed into the background but, simultaneously, the idea of "respect" appears, revealing a hierarchy of social positions which is apparent in both the ballroom dancing environment and the family. In women's reports about their relationships with their male dancing partners, one can clearly see a preoccupation with avoiding contacts that are considered to be more intimate.⁵ This constant vigilance regarding relationships with the opposite sex in the ballroom is understood to be a female attribute, given that women are cast as being responsible for

⁵ All informants' names are fictitious.

⁶ My research concentrated on ballrooms in the southern (more affluent) sections of Rio de Janeiro. These venues concentrate middle class white women over the age of 60, residents of this region of the city, and young black men from working class suburbs.

preserving the “respectful atmosphere” of the ballrooms. As one of my informants puts it, when she describes her relationship with male dancers, she “knows how to behave:

Look I've known them all [the male dancers] for many years now and they all know me. They all respect me and I don't have to tell any of them anything. Some of these boys are as young as my grandchildren! I treat them all as boys because to me they all are boys. My oldest son is 41, so to me they are all boys (Selma, 66).

Sex and danger

The topic of sexuality in old age has awakened the curiosity of specialists (mainly gerontologists, and geriatricians) and the general public. When I speak about my research at conferences, one inevitable question is always asked: Do these women have sex or not? Do they have affairs? This interest in their sexual lives, interacting as they do with young men, reveals a hidden preoccupation with sexuality during old age. According to Bozon (2004a), women's sexual lives have been prolonged beyond 50, but there has also been great reluctance to openly deal with this issue. Paradoxically, as Bozon points out, a recent French study indicates that older women have expressed the greatest degree of satisfaction with their sex lives. According to Delbes and Gaymu (1997), this increase in the sexual lifespan of the elderly (and particularly of elderly women) has a clear generational component. It is those who entered old age in the 1990s who have maintained their sexual activity, even though they have sex less frequently and practice fewer sexual variations than the young people of the 1990s. This expansion of men's and women's sexual life spans is a clear sign of the importance sexuality has acquired in recent decades as a form of social relations and a construction itself. The sexual imperative has become the latest peculiarity of current times (Bozon, 2004a)

Sexuality is now understood as a space for the construction of personhood and autonomy. It is made up of individual intimate decisions that are nonetheless structured less upon patterned and generalized logical forms and more upon affective trajectories that are not necessarily conjugal in nature. Sexual practices are no longer absolutely linked to the concept of marriage and reproduction as they used to. Today, they have become autonomized, although they are still seen, simultaneously, as the necessary basis for the initiation and maintenance of conjugal relationships. It is no longer age or conjugal status that determines sexual activity, but more diffuse factors that demand that the individual constantly exercise reflexivity in this sphere. This change has had direct consequences on the ways in which sexuality is experienced and understood today.

The ever-more reflexive attitude that actors adopt in their behaviors implies an increase in the demands for meaning and interpretations out of sex. This attitude

may represent the continuation of the couple, the persistence of an intimate self, the capacity for appeal, the manifestation of social power, a form of resistance to aging (...) The means of expression that actors may put to use are also quite varied; thus, the continuation of a couple may be marked by regular, routine and ritualized sexual activity or, to the contrary, be understood as a series intermittent periods, sometimes of decreased sexual activity, other times of theatrical moments of sexual rediscovery. Aside from this, when actors seek to give coherence to their experiences, they are often led to refer to potentially contradictory meaning pairs—for example, seeking continuity through renovation or, on the other hand, seeking renovation through continuity (Bozon, 2004a:136).

Gerontology utilizes sociology in order to defend senior citizens' sexual activity (Brigeiro, 2002). This therapeutic approach towards sexuality among the elderly is based upon a naturalization of female and male sexuality in the construction of fixed gender identities based on distinct and complementary psychological characteristics. The use of sexology as a parameter for the discussion of sexuality in old age on the one hand leads to seeing sex as an apparatus which regulates pleasure and subjectivity among the elderly. On the other hand, it crystallizes and justifies gender differences as distinct and stable. Old men are thus seen as beings with desires, desires which need to be internally dealt with and recovered (excellent examples of this can be found in the recent discussions around Viagra). Complementarily, women are seen as repressed and as the object of the masculine other's desires. This "other" is inevitably seen as a husband or at least someone with whom the woman has maintained a long-term affective relationship. For elderly women, sexuality is framed by conjugality. Elderly men are considered limited in terms of their sexuality, which is associated with penetration and they are understood to be more interested in sex than elderly women.

According to studies, female sexual activity largely depends on male intention. Decreasing sexual activity in women is also associated to disease among their husbands, their indifference, and high male mortality. Data show that they were less interested in sex, and their socialization was framed by stronger control and obstacles to the exercise of sexuality in old age (Brigeiro, 2002:177, English translation in this volume).

The sexual therapies promoted by gerontology thus recommend that old men teach their partners to broaden their sexual repertoire and that old women be liberated from the shackles of their repression. An interesting example of this sort of ideology can be found in medicine's new views on menopausal women. Rather than seeing menopause as the beginning of a woman's withdrawal from sexuality, new treatments underline the importance of maintaining feminine sexual activity during and after this change. Gerontological knowledge and teaching about sex operate under the understanding that they are at the service of improving elderly people's well-being. Sex and the construction of subjectivity are aligned in this medical-therapeutic view. According to Bozon:

The medicalization of sexuality proceeds hand-in-hand with the consolidation of a functionalist view of sexuality. Physiological and psychological descriptions now define the technical norms of a properly functioning sexuality, underlying proposals for psycho-medical interventions. Nevertheless, the influence of the medical representations of desire, pleasure and the sexuality responsible for them extends far beyond those who actively seek treatment. It renews certain sexual cultural scenarios to the degree that it creates the capacity for individuals to evaluate their own sexual gestures and worry about non-conventional sexual functions in a way that is apparently technical (Bozon, 2004b:150).

My female informants know that they are dealing with a borderline situation when they frequent ballroom dancing salons—a shadowy area where desire and danger intermix. Close dancing awakens sensuality, but my informants feel that it is a woman's place to know how to deal with it. In the final analysis, it is up to the women to create the ball's sensual atmosphere and to serve as objects of gentlemanly desire without letting this desire overcome the socially acceptable boundaries of interaction between men and women of such different classes, ages and ethnic background. "Gentlemanly behavior" is an element that is thus highly regarded by both the men and women at the balls, and which regulates interpersonal relations based upon strong gender distinctions.

"Gentlemanliness" is the principal moral code of ballroom dancing. Through this code, men are endowed with the ability to act and women retain their honor. The lady should understand how to follow the gentleman's commands and the gentleman should understand how to conduct the lady in such a way that the couple is a success on the dance floor. It is the man's responsibility to invite women to dance and it is the woman's responsibility to act in such a way that she attracts the eyes of the gentlemen and is thus invited to dance. These are the complimentary roles of male and female which ensure harmony among the dancers. Each one acts out the role they are expected to play and works towards a proper result for the group as a whole. This hierarchical view of the male and female functions within a couple reflects a more traditional view of gender shared by the members of the ballroom dancing set. The rigorous patrolling of gender roles creates an alibi for sensual encounters between men and women on the dance floor within a socially stratified and heterogeneous space. This control makes clear something which the social sciences have already remarked upon with regards to sexuality: the norms regarding what one can do and with whom in the sexual realm have not been "relaxed. Rather, they have been internalized and are being constantly put into operation by people in their everyday interactions. Ball room dancing offers a scene and a script for these interactions: a scene and script based upon hierarchical interrelations between male and female sexes clearly outlined and understood as to complement each other.

Solidarity and autonomy

In the hierarchical relationship between the sexes established in the ballroom, solidarity between the dancers is highly prized. During my fieldwork, I found several situations in which mutual aid between dancers emerged. Male dancers would help other male dancers find a job, for example. Female dancers would aid financially male dancers whose wives had just given birth. The older female dancer who was considered wiser and more experienced provided orientation to her dancing partner—a young man of twenty—on how to conduct his financial life and his conflicts with his parents and girlfriend.

It is highly significant that I had little contact with my informants' relatives. The narratives I collected are versions by dancers themselves. Even during home interviews, family members did not contribute to the data and kept away from both the researcher and the dancer. In my view, this emphasizes the women's discourses regarding their autonomy and highlights their individualist posture with regards to the domestic and family spheres—a posture that does not, however, exclude inter-generational ties of reciprocity. These women's autonomy is based upon their children and grandchildren's dependency and is simultaneously legitimized when the children, grandchildren and husbands give their permission for the women to attend the balls. I witnessed cases in which daughters accompanied their mothers to the balls (one of the women even earned the nickname of "mommy" because she was always accompanied by her daughters) and of husbands who took their wives to the balls and picked them up later. Thus, a network of reciprocal protections was forged between the older and younger generations and between the genders in the families.

I thus defend the notion that there are different levels of autonomy and that these are unequally distributed between the genders within the domestic space during the course of an individual lifetime. In the case of the elderly women I studied, the establishment of a private recreational sphere that is separated from the domestic world is dependent upon the ability to establish exchanges with other members of the family. The question which should be asked (and which is central to the theory of reciprocity) is: What does one give away in exchange for the ability to exercise one's individuality? In the case of the women I studied, what one gives is time, money and the engagement of one's own body in domestic chores in order to construct another body: that of the dancer.

Another aspect elaborated in this exchange is a new form of temporality. The woman leaves domestic, everyday time and enters the ballroom time: those four magic hours in which she can "forget about life". Elderly women dancers' individualization is configured through moving bodies: bodies which are fundamentally different from those in the reclusion within domestic space. Through ballroom dancing, a distinct and public body is constructed. To this is body all the possible techniques of transformation. Special clothes are bought for it, as well as special make-up and accessories. It is subject to

diets and exercise regimes and even cosmetic treatments and surgeries. This new body requires women to invest in it. Such investments, in turn, are based upon socialization. It is at the ball that one learns how to dress. One learns that one should create an appealing figure using long skirts, high heels, fine stockings, jewelry, perfumes and other elements.

Older women's body autonomy is conquered and maintained through reciprocal exchanges between the genders and the generations and this is a novelty in terms of social understandings of the elderly woman's place in society. Extra-domestic activities and sociability have become the channels through which today's elderly women construct a private life outside of the household, one which is nevertheless seen as legitimate by other family members. In this new life, domestic activities take on new meaning, as Flávia Motta reminds us in her work (cited above). Private life extends beyond the walls of the household, but the domestic logic still orientates female extra-domestic behavior. The balls, the parties and the fieldtrips revive certain characteristics of the domestic and familiar sphere, such as the art of sociability, the exchange of recipes, care with one's appearance, the open expression of emotions, and a certain hierarchy of positions. "The Gold Years [*tercera idade*] discourse," emphasizing such popular values as freedom of choice, is quite compatible with older gender logics that emphasize complementariness and reciprocity.

Rather than looking at family models and the normative position of the woman within the family in opposition or conflict—traditional versus modern, for example—, one must take a long, hard look at how female individuation has been practiced throughout elderly women's life-cycles. Those women who are in their 60s and 70s today were married and having their first children in the 1960s. After that decade, women's trajectories began to take on alternative routes due to an increase in feminist radicalism, the "sexual revolution" and the growing participation of women in the labor market and educational system. Exploring these trajectories is properly the role of gender studies. Such investigations may reveal answers to questions regarding individualism in complex societies and the gender distinctions that are constructed throughout individual lives.

I studied elderly urban middle class women because this group has been engaged in the construction of a major turning point in perceptions of feminine old age. In interviews with the female dancers I met in the ballrooms, it became evident to me that the construction and exposition of the body was central to the discourse that these women developed about themselves. The relationships they establish with their own bodies, the stories they tell about their bodies and their transformations, their interactions with the bodies of the opposite sex, made explicit through dance, translate the positions these women occupy in the social world. It is through the analysis of these discourses and practices regarding the body that we can better comprehend how this generation constructs its understandings of the feminine.

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