

**Between tarantulas and razor blades:
'Travesti' history and the public sphere in Brazil's democratic transition**

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Abstract

This thesis is centered on the cultural formation of what it means to a *travesti* in Brazil, with the democratic transition, in the late 80s, as a key historical period to what is contemporarily understood as a transfeminine gender identity. “Travestilities” encompasses not only *travesti* as a gender identity, but also an embodied experience, a political community, and a figure in the social imaginary. The democratic transition is set in the crossings of the aftermaths of the Civic-Military Dictatorship (64-85) and the impact of the AIDS crisis, including both brutal persecutions against *travestis*, but also the first steps of an organized social movement engaging in counter-narratives and alliances. Therefore, this research seeks to analyze how a sense of *travesti* subjectivity was shaped in the Brazilian democratic transition, in the entanglements between science, state, and society, and the connections between self and “Other”. To do so, this research focuses a) on how a set of stigmas became associated with *travestis*, and in what sense they legitimized violence; b) on the historical emergence of different constitutive meanings of *travestilities*, namely in the centrality of body modifications, sociability networks and politicization; c) on the connection of such elements in *travesti* subjectivity, in complex self-identifications; d) on differentiation processes in the democratic transition, including the distinctions with “homosexuals”, “transsexuals” and “women”.

Resumo

Esta tese se centra na formação cultural dos significados da categoria “travesti” no Brasil, sendo a redemocratização, no final dos anos 80, um período chave para o que se entende contemporaneamente como uma identidade de gênero transfeminina. “Travestilidades” abrange não apenas “travesti” enquanto identidade de gênero, mas também enquanto corporalidade, comunidade política e uma figura no imaginário social. A redemocratização se insere nos cruzamentos entre os desdobramentos da Ditadura Civil-Militar (64-85) e o impacto da crise de AIDS, incluindo tanto perseguições brutais contra travestis quanto os primeiros passos de um movimento social organizado engajado em contra-narrativas e alianças. Com isso, esta pesquisa busca analisar como um senso de subjetividade travesti foi moldado na redemocratização brasileira, nos entrelaçamentos entre ciência, estado e sociedade, e nas conexões entre o *self* e o “Outro”. Para tanto, esta pesquisa propõe analisar a) como um conjunto de estigmas passou a ser associado às travestis e em que sentido eles legitimaram formas de violência; b) a emergência histórica de diferentes significados constitutivos das travestilidades, nomeadamente na centralidade das modificações corporais, redes de sociabilidade e processos de politização; c) as conexões de tais elementos em uma subjetividade travesti, em complexas auto-identificações; d) os processos de diferenciação na redemocratização, incluindo as distinções com “homossexuais”, “transexuais” e “mulheres”.

Resumen

Esta tesis se enfoca en la formación cultural de los significados de la categoría “travesti” en Brasil, siendo la redemocratización, a fines de la década de 1980, un período clave para lo que actualmente se entiende como una identidad de género transfemenina. “Travestilidades” engloba no sólo “travesti” como identidad de género, sino también como corporeidad, comunidad política y figura en el imaginario social. La redemocratización se inserta en la encrucijada entre los desarrollos de la Dictadura Cívico-Militar (64-85) y el impacto de la crisis de SIDA, incluyendo tanto brutales persecuciones contra travestis como los primeros pasos de un movimiento social organizado comprometido en contra-narrativas y alianzas. Con eso, esta investigación busca analizar cómo se formó un sentido de subjetividad travesti en la redemocratización brasileña, en los entrecruzamientos entre ciencia, estado y sociedad, y en las conexiones entre el *self* y el “Otro”. Por lo tanto, esta investigación se propone analizar a) cómo un conjunto de estigmas se asociaron a las travestis y en qué sentido legitimaron formas de violencia; b) la emergencia histórica de diferentes sentidos constitutivos de las travestilidades, a saber, en la centralidad de las modificaciones corporales, las redes de sociabilidad y los procesos de politización; c) las conexiones de tales elementos en una subjetividad travesti, en complejas auto-identificaciones; d) los procesos de diferenciación en la redemocratización, incluyendo distinciones con “homosexuales”, “transexuales” y “mujeres”.

Acknowledgments

In a way, the “acknowledgments” section materializes the non-linearity of academic writing processes. It starts a thesis, but it is usually the last section written, amid the joy and the tiredness of finishing a work like this. It can be seen as a form of celebration, and has often a particular style of intimate writing hardly found otherwise. Writing this, at this moment, amid the European summer that just arrived, is also a symbolic end of a two years journey across the world. Living all my life in the Brazilian countryside, I had the unique opportunity to live for the first time abroad – namely, in Hungary, Austria, Japan, and Portugal. Communicating to a broader international audience (publics, we might say), and learning in these exchange processes, has been an amazing learning during the HIPS (History in the Public Sphere) program, and one that I seek to do in this thesis as well.

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Navigating different systems and understandings of this story and body was not an easy task, but I was able to have forms of institutional support. Here, I namely thank Lisa Auzinger and the CEU Equality Hub, as well as the always-supportive doctors at the CEU Medical Centers, in Vienna and Budapest, and my own psychoanalyst, Alexandre, which followed me remotely for the past year. I thank for the extra funding provided by CEU with the CEU Emergency Fund and CEU Disability Fund – it would not be possible to continue my studies otherwise, so I am truly thankful for this economic assistance for healthcare. Finally, it is always important to remark that universities do not exist without a range of workers, from librarians to third-party contracts. So I here thank all the support with this as well, namely at the CEU Student Center, CEU Career Services and NOVA's PsII+ services, particularly to Dr. Olga Cunha, which guided me through Lisbon's trans networks.

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This thesis is a step in a broader history, also pointing out to the future. I recently had my first experience of being invited to an event abroad, in Porto, Portugal, and I was invited to write my first book chapter in English, together with other Brazilian *travesti* and trans authors. Back in Brazil, my previous thesis is resulting in journal articles and the publication as a book soon. Discussions involving this new thesis in Public History have already been resulting in experiences in lecturing in and outside universities. Here, I namely thank the remote

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As I emphasized in the Introduction, writing this, in such an excruciating historical and political moment, has not been an easy task – but, in a way, this work comes in handy especially because of it. Writing is also a form of healing and collective construction. It is a way to get in contact with other lives and experiences, and learn from them – to shape one’s attention and to build strength to keep resisting. I write this final/first section, filled with great memories, already a bit nostalgic, and with a sense of having learned and gained so much.

With that being said, I dedicate this work to all the gender-diverse people across the world – particularly to all trans immigrants that I meet and that I will still meet along the way. As Conceição Evaristo, a Brazilian novelist, once wrote, “they decided to kill us – but we decided to not die”.

We reclaim the future and the possibility to be otherwise, at the crux of transitions.

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List of abbreviations and organizations

Abbreviations

AI (for example: **AI-5**) – Institutional Act (In Portuguese, “Ato Institucional”).

AIDS – Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (In Portuguese, “SIDA”). Can result from untreated HIV infections.

CFM – Brazil’s Council of Medicine (In Portuguese, “Conselho Federal de Medicina”).

DOI/COI – “Internal Operations” Department and “Internal Defense” Center (In Portuguese, “*Departamento de Operações Internas*” and “*Centro de Operação da Defesa Interna*”). Specialized centers for the imprisonment and torture of “opponents” of the Civic-Military Dictatorship.

DSM – Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. Internally used classification of mental disorders and conditions.

GLS – Acronym referring to “gays, lesbians, and sympathizers”. Used in Brazil by the 90s, after the generalizing “homosexual” term.

GRS – Gender reassignment surgery, also known as gender-affirming surgery (GAS), sex reassignment surgery (SRS) and gender confirmation surgery (GCS). Synonym to “sex change” (outdated term). In this thesis, it refers specifically to “male-to-female” GRS surgeries.

HIV – Human Immunodeficiency Virus.

HRT – Hormone replacement therapy, also known as gender-affirming hormone therapy (GAHT), and transgender hormone therapy. HRT can be used by both trans and cis (non-trans) people – in this thesis, it refers specifically to gender-affirming HRT for trans people.

ICD – International Classification of Diseases. Formulated by the World Health Organization (WHO). International protocol for medical diagnostics.

LGBT/LGBT+ – In Brazil, acronym referring to “lesbians, gays, bisexuals, travestis and transsexuals”. Abroad, the T tends to refer simply to “trans people”, or “transgender”. Used in Brazil by the 2000s, after the “GLS” acronym.

LGBTI/LGBTI+ – In Brazil, acronym referring to “lesbians, gays, bisexuals, travestis and transsexuals, and intersex people”. Abroad, the T tends to refer to “trans people”, or “transgender”. Used in Brazil today, with the inclusion of “intersex people” in the late 2010s.

LGBTQIAP+ (and other variations) – Proposed acronym, which also includes queer people (Q), asexuals (A), and pansexuals (P), between other identities. Variable across different countries and specific political/cultural contexts.

MSM – “Men who have sex with men” (In Portuguese, “HSH”). Medical category attached to STIs (sexually transmitted infections) prevention policies.

STF – Brazil’s Supreme Court (In Portuguese, “Supremo Tribunal Federal”).

SUS – Brazil’s Public Health System (In Portuguese, “Sistema Único de Saúde”).

U=U – “Undetectable = Untransmittable”, a category used in HIV/AIDS policies to refer to people with undetectable viral loads and, thus, cannot transmit the HIV virus to others.

Organizations and events

Adé Dudu – Black homosexual movement formed in Bahia, in March 1981.

AEL – Edgard Leuenroth’s Archive (Arquivo Edgard Leuenroth), located at UNICAMP (University of Campinas). Main archival source for this thesis.

ANTRA – National Association of *Travestis* and Transsexuals (In Portuguese, *Associação Nacional de Travestis e Transsexuais*). Largest organization of *travestis* and transsexuals in Brazil, formalized in 2000.

ASTRAL – Association of *Travestis* and *Liberados* (In Portuguese, *Associação de Travestis e Liberados*). First organization of *travestis* in Brazil, formed in 1992.

ENTLAIDS – Encounter of *Travestis* and *Liberados* that act in AIDS Prevention (In Portuguese, *Encontro Nacional de Travestis e Liberados que Atuam na Prevenção da Aids*), formed in 1993, with yearly meetings until 2013.

GGB – The Gay Group of Bahia (Grupo Gay da Bahia), formed in Salvador in 1980.

Lampião da Esquina – Known as the first dissident homosexual publication in Brazil, from 1978 to 1981.

MHB – Brazilian Homosexual Movement (in Portuguese, “Movimento Homossexual Brasileiro”)

SOMOS – Nucleus of Action for the Rights of Homosexuals (in Portuguese, “*Núcleo de Ação pelos Direitos dos Homossexuais*”). Known as one of the first homosexual organization formed in the country, in São Paulo, in 1978.

Triângulo Rosa – “Pink Triangle”. Rio de Janeiro’s homosexual movement at the frontline for the inclusion of “sexual orientation” as a form of discrimination in the 1988 Brazilian Constitution.

Timeline

Note of the author: A Timeline can be a didactic, yet dangerous tool, in historical and historiographical work. The biggest trap here is to understand such events as linear and progressive, when in fact they are complexly embedded in often non-linear historicities and temporalities that can move back and forth. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that the writing here is chronological, which is one particular form of reading history and time, and conclusions of causality based on it may fall short to understand its complexities. Furthermore, they can assist readers to organize information on time – and, under a critical reading, it can even led to re/understandings and re/interpretations of historical processes and the arguments presented in this thesis. Additionally, this Timeline also includes the localization of certain archival sources mentioned throughout the thesis, in such chronology.

Earlier periods (30~60s)

Introduction | **1937** – Start of the Estado Novo regime in Brazil, led by Getúlio Vargas.

Introduction | **1945** – End of the Estado Novo regime in Brazil

Chapter Two | **1963** – First reports of the use of female hormones by *travestis* in Brazil.

Introduction | **1964** – 1964’s Brazilian coup d’état. Start of the Civic-Military Dictatorship. General Castelo Branco takes charge after a short period of a military joint division.

Introduction | **1967** – General Costa e Silva takes charge, replacing Castelo Branco, in Brazil’s Dictatorship.

Introduction | **1968** – Implementation of AI-5 in the Civic-Military Dictatorship. Start of the “years of lead”, in most academic readings.

Introduction | **1969** – General Médici takes charge, replacing Costa e Silva, in Brazil’s Dictatorship.

Introduction | **1969** – Start of the “Brazilian economic miracle”.

Early and mid-70s

Chapter Two | **1971** – First GRS held in Brazil, by Roberto Farina, in the patient Waldirene Nogueira.

Introduction | **1973** – End of the “Brazilian economic miracle”.

Introduction | **1974** – General Geisel takes charge, replacing Médici, in Brazil’s Dictatorship. Announced a “slow, gradual, and safe” political opening. Start of the democratic transition and end of the “years of led”, in most academic readings.

Introduction | **1974** – Removal of “homosexuality” from DSM as a disorder, internationally.

Mid to late 70s

Introduction | **1977** – Rogéria’s account on *travestis* as differentiated from other groups during Brazilian street carnivals, marked by permanent body modifications (Veras)

Introduction | **1978** – First reports of ostensive police operations against “homosexuals” (Ocanha)

Introduction | **1978** – Revoke of AI-5 in Brazil’s Dictatorship.

Chapter One | **1978** – Foundation of SOMOS, in São Paulo, known as one of the first homosexual organization in Brazil. Start of the first wave of MHB (Facchini).

Chapter One | **1978** – Start of the “Lampião da Esquina” dissident homosexual newspaper.

Introduction | **1978** – “Greves do ABC” [ABC strikes], a series of massive worker protests across Brazil.

Introduction | **1979** – General Figueiredo takes charge, replacing Geisel, in Brazil’s Dictatorship.

Introduction | **1979** – The Brazilian Amnesty Law is announced.

Introduction | **1979** – First grassroots organizations by *travestis* and other female sex workers are formed against police brutality (Silva, Coacci).

Early to mid-80s

Chapter Two | **1980s** – Shift of *travesti* from an art form to a term associated with “criminality” and “prostitution” (Ocanha, Lopes, Veras).

Introduction | **1980s** – “Lost decade” in Brazil and other Latin American countries, marked by economic stagnancy and hyperinflation.

Chapter One | **1980** – Foundation of GGB, in Salvador.

Chapter Two | **1980** – Inclusion of “transsexualism” in DSM (DSM-3).

Chapter One | **1981** – End of the “Lampião da Esquina” dissident homosexual newspaper.

Chapter One | **1981** – MHB starts to gather support from the scientific community for the inclusion of “sexual orientation” in the 1988 Constitution, firstly at the Brazilian Society for Scientific Progress

Chapter Two | **1981** – Formation of Adé Dudu, in Salvador.

Chapter Two | **1982** – Archival Reference – Lampião da Esquina’s “Brazil: World Champion of travestis”

Chapter One | **1982** – First documented case of HIV/AIDS in Brazil.

Introduction | **1982** – First efforts of MHB for HIV/AIDS prevention.

Chapter Two | **1984** – Roberta Close’s appearance as a Playboy cover. Start of the “time of hormones” in *travesti* history (Veras).

Introduction | **1984** – “Diretas já!”, with massive protests for direct elections across Brazil.

Chapter Two | **1984** – Archival Reference – Condessa’s interview for “Agora!”

Chapter One | **1984** – MHB efforts reach the national organization for Psychiatry.

Introduction | **1985** – Figueiredo leaves office. End of the Civic-Military Dictatorship in Brazil.

Chapter One | **1985** – 1000 new reported cases of HIV/AIDS in Brazil.

Chapter One | **1985** – CPF deems homosexuality is not a disease nor a mental disorder, in Brazil, in their reading of the ICD international medical manual.

Mid to late 80s

Chapter One | **1986** – The “AIDS program” in São Paulo is the first effort in state prevention policies for HIV/AIDS.

Chapter Two | **1986** – Archival Reference – Roberta Close’s participation in “Freshman’s Show”

Chapter Two | **1986** – Archival Reference – Veruka’s interview for “O Globo”

Chapter One | **1987** – Operation Tarantula is held in São Paulo.

Chapter One | **1987** – [Archival Reference](#) – Folha de São Paulo’s Operation Tarantula report

Introduction | **1988** – New Constitution. Symbolic end of the Dictatorship period in Brazil (Quinalha).

Chapter One | **1988** – Voting to include “sexual orientation” in the Brazilian 1988 Constitution.

Chapter One | **1988** – End of Triângulo Rosa, led by João Mascarenhas, within MHB.

Chapter One | **1988** – 10000 new reported cases of HIV/AIDS in Brazil.

Chapter Two | **1988** – [Archival Reference](#) – Brenda Lee’s interview for “O Globo”

90s

Introduction | **1990s** – Emergence of the GLS acronym (gays, lesbians, and sympathizers) in Brazil

Chapter One | **1990** – “Rebirth” of the homosexual movement and start of the second wave of MHB (Facchini).

Introduction | **1990** – Start of the first wave of the “travesti and transsexual” movement in Brazil (Coacci).

Introduction | **1990** – Direct elections are held again in Brazil.

Introduction | **1990** – Removal of “homosexuality” from ICD as a disorder, internationally.

Chapter One | **1990** – The World Bank announces Brazil will have 1 million cases of HIV/AIDS in ten years. Symbolic peak of HIV/AIDS-related moral panics.

Introduction | **1992** – Creation of ASTRAL, known as the first institutionalized *travesti* organization in Latin America, in Brazil.

Chapter Two | **1992** – Inclusion of “transsexualism” in ICD (ICD-10).

Chapter One | **1993** – New voting to include “sexual orientation” in the Brazilian 1988 Constitution.

Chapter One | **1996** – Free availability of retroviral treatment, for HIV/AIDS, in the Brazilian public health system.

Chapter Two | **1998** – GRS surgeries are regulated by the Brazilian Council of Medicine.

Later periods (2000s and 2010s)

Introduction | **2000s** – Emergence of the “LGBT” acronym (gays, lesbians, bisexuals, travestis and transsexuals) and its later variations (LGBTI, LGBTQIAP+...), in Brazil

Introduction | **2000** – Start of the second wave of the “travesti and transsexual” movement in Brazil (Coacci).

Chapter Two | **2008** – GRS surgeries are incorporated in the Brazilian public health system. Start of the “Processo Transsexualizador” in Brazil.

Introduction | **2010** – Start of the third wave of the “travesti and transsexual” movement in Brazil (Coacci).

Chapter One | **2012** – Formation and start of the Brazilian Truth Commission.

Chapter Two | **2013** – Removal of “transsexualism” from DSM as a disorder (DSM-5).

Chapter One | **2014** – Publication of reports with findings by the Brazilian Truth Commission.

Chapter Two | **2018** – Removal of “transsexualism” from ICD as a disorder (ICD-11).

“I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess”

HARAWAY, 2004

“I cried to think of how lucky we both were to have found each other, since it was clear that we were the only ones in the world who could understand what we understood in the instantaneous manner in which we understood it”

LORDE, 1982

Introduction

“Perhaps trans futures, instead of looking like pink neon, blue-gray steel, and shining glass, look like bone and blood, like impure ecologies of mixing and contamination”
cárdenas & CHEN, 2019

Thesis outline: Tarantulas and razor blades

This thesis is centered on the historical cultural formation of what it means to be a *travesti* amid the Brazilian democratic transition, in the late 80s. This complex period was central in shaping what is today understood as a transfeminine gender identity, amid the aftermaths of the Civic-Military Dictatorship (1964-1985) and the impact of the AIDS crisis by the mid-80s. This period also includes the crossings of international depathologization efforts on “homosexuality” in the intersections between social activism and scientific debates, on one hand, and the institutionalization of “transsexualism” as a medical category, on the other. In Brazil, this period includes the first efforts of *travesti*-led organizations, from its early grassroots forms with other sex workers in the late 70s to the first instances of State recognition in the early 90s, amid HIV/AIDS prevention policies. As a guiding concept, “travestilities” refers to a complex entanglement, of not only a gender identity, but also a set of body modifications and embodied experiences, a political identity and community, as well as a figure in the social imaginary, in what I call “image and imaginary”.

The thesis is divided into two chapters, emphasizing how “*travesti*” should be understood as a relational category – thus, enmeshed in historical differentiation processes. This includes its connections with notions of “subversion” and “criminality”, which, although originating from the broader “homosexual” category at first, becomes specifically embodied in *travestis* in the democratic transition, as emphasized in the **First Chapter**, in what I call *travestis* as the “Other’s Other”. With so, *travesti* subjectivity becomes a complex issue of approximations and distinctions with multilayered meanings, as emphasized in the **Second Chapter**. Here, *travesti*, as a category, becomes entangled with a set of body modifications and complex networks in sex work through the 70s and 80s in Brazil, and finally a formalized political movement by the early 90s. This is further complexified by the tensions and disputes with the medical and scientific category of “transsexualism”, which gains track in popular culture in Brazil during the same period, attached to the celebrity status of certain trans figures.

The **First Chapter** is centered on the image of tarantulas, taking the 1987 Operation Tarantula as its starting point. The chapter is divided into three smaller segments, being mainly focused on processes of dehumanization, and the question of violence amid unequal and authoritarian power structures.

In the first part, the field of “dictatorship and homosexualities” will be presented in a continuum of discourses and practices that connect so-called “homosexualities”, as a multilayered category, with notions of “subversion” and “degeneracy”. Particularities of the Civic-Military Dictatorship will be emphasized, such as the nature of police operations under forms of institutionalized repression, the shaping of a vigilant “governmentality” and the building of a neurotic notion of “internal threats” as a form to legitimize violence.

In the second part, these studies will be inserted into a recent “memory boom”, dating to the National Truth Commission in 2014. The specificities of the violence against *travestis* will be exemplified by the story of Martinha, as well as a deeper analysis on forms of torture against *travestis* held during and just after the Dictatorship, in their connections to humiliation and the “public”. Therefore, although a continuum of violence is emphasized, historical nuances will be centered between such periods, including differentiation processes between “homosexuals” and “*travestis*”. As will be observed, the radicalism of such discourses and practices, in fact, increased during the democratic transition period, with the AIDS crisis, leading to social cleansing discourses being materialized in Tarantula, a symbolic peak of historicized specific persecutions against *travestis*. The second part also includes the entry into an analytical apparatus of notions of subjectivity, in the distinctions between self and Other, to better apprehend such violence in its connections with hegemonic masculinity, militarism and the nation-state.

Finally, in the third and final segment, the case of the attempted inclusion of the protection against the discrimination by “sexual orientation” in the 1988 Constitution will be the starting point to better explore how *travestis* were placed in the Brazilian Homosexual Movement (MHB) discourses and practices. So-called “homosexuality” will be crossed in advocacy efforts to the state, under the democratic transition, as well as in scientific and medical connections, in international depathologization efforts, seeking deeper cultural transformations in public opinion. In such movements, *travestis* tend to appear less, throughout the 80s, in archival sources, framed, in the democratic transition, as both the “perfect victims” and “aggressive” figures – the “Other’s Other”. This leads to new forms of social movement’s

organization by the 90s, eventually leading to the current LGBTI¹ acronym, and particular notions of “social respectability” that take shape under the political opening. Such noticeable shifts directly cross the emergence of the AIDS crisis, from the mid to late 80s, where historicized stereotypes and stigmas about sexual and gender dissidence become embodied in certain subjects in the intersections of race, gender, and class, particularly *travestis*. The AIDS crisis further complexifies this trajectory, between moral panics and backlashes, creating a historical shift in such science, state and society interactions. As an endnote, the chapter finishes with discussions on notions of representation, visibility, and respectability, from a more contemporary critical lens, more specifically in public history.

The **Second Chapter** is centered on the image of razor blades, taking Condessa’s report for “Agora!” as its starting point. The chapter is divided into three smaller segments, being mainly focused on questions of agency, creativity and reflexivity in *travesti* history, with a particular emphasis on *travesti* subjectivity, in the complex negotiations of “images and imaginaries” of the self and the other.

In the first part, the 1981’s “Brazil: world champion of travestis” report already indicates the centrality of body modifications for *travestis*. Such body modifications include mainly the use of female hormones and silicone implants, which by the 80s already involve complex internal networks. These body modifications shape particular embodied experiences, and a collective sense of identity, defining internal differentiations by such transformations in the flesh, with the means of *travesti* moving from a temporary state (“being *in* travesti”) to a permanent one (“being *a* travesti”). This also crosses a broader historical passage, from the 70s to the 80s, where being a *travesti* starts to be less strictly associated with an art form, and growly with sex work and criminality.

In the second part, medicine takes centrality in historical analysis, particularly with the emergence of “transsexualism” as a scientific category from the 70s to the 80s, including in Brazil (symbolically initiated by Nogueira’s gender reassignment surgery [GRS] in 1971). GRS, in particular, is set as a new technology that re/shapes notions of womanhood, although intrinsically connected to gender, sexuality, race, and class inequalities. Therefore, the in/distinctions (in the sense of both proximities and distances) between “transvestism” and “transsexualism” are critically analyzed through an intersectional perspective, emphasizing how *travesti* becomes a category entangled with race and class inequalities.

¹ “Lesbians, gays, bisexuals, travestis and transsexuals, and intersex people”.

In the third part, the question of *travesti* subjectivity is further developed. Firstly, this is done with an emphasis on popular *travesti* and trans figures, namely Rogéria, on one hand, and Roberta Close and Telma Lipp, on the other, focusing on how they complexly navigated the means of *travesti* in their own self-identification, as well as their distinctions from an historical lens. The figure of Close, in particular, and the rise of GRS as a heated cultural debate, re/shapes notions of womanhood, and the interactions with – as well as between – *travestis* and “female transsexuals”. Later in the section, it is emphasized the nuances of such subjectivity amid the AIDS crisis, the intersections with sex work, and the shaping of *travesti* as a politicized category in the 90s, with the reports of Brenda Lee and Veruka in popular Brazilian newspapers. On a final note, questions on public history are proposed with discussions on representation and storytelling, including the nuances between heroism and victimhood, and the place of violence and resistance. Discussions on the centrality of vision and the act of gazing in subjectivity making are incorporated throughout the section, into the notion of the “public eye”. With so, theoretical discussions are made in how the *travesti* category involves, in this historical period, complexly navigating forms of visibility and “images and imaginaries” of oneself, in the multiple layers of “travestilities”.

The chapter ends with the in/conclusions of the question “after all, what it means to be a *travesti*?”. Taking the image of hidden razor blades as a metaphor, *travesti* is understood as a multi-layered, relational, category that “cuts and crosses” notions of identity, embodiment, and political community, sets of interconnected differences and inequalities, notions of womanhood and femininity, and non-linear historicities. *Travesti* remains open-ended in its insurgent capacity to not be fully categorized and strictly defined. Therefore, working with *travesti* history provokes new frontier ways to work with (public) history, particularly in its connections with activism and politics, between past, present, and future.

At the end of the thesis, a more formal conclusion is included, in order to reconstruct the main arguments of both chapters, and to punctuate the contributions made by this research, with particular attention to public history.

Entangling and re/making history

The proposal that originated this research is a result of previous projects during my Undergraduate and Graduate period, as a student in Social Sciences (BA) and Social Anthropology (MSc), and as a researcher at the Nucleus of Gender Studies – PAGU. The triad between “science, state and society” connects this previous work to this present thesis in the

History in the Public Sphere (HIPS) program. At the program, my primary track is “Histories of Inclusion and Exclusion”², followed by “History and the institutionalization of memory”³.

The origins of this research project date back to an earlier research, where I worked closely with trans scholars, artists and activists, mainly with first-generation trans students in Brazilian public universities. With extensive fieldwork and in-depth interviews, I came in touch with a young generation who was actively and creatively engaging with the emerging question of the history of *travestis*, or travesti history⁴. Many identified as *travestis*, and saw them as ancestors and symbols of resistance.



Figure 1: “Travestis will save Brazil!”

In the original, “Travestys vão salvar o Brasil!”. Photo taken by the author, September 2019. Direct intervention by trans/travesti artists at the University of Campinas (UNICAMP). The use of “y” in “travesti” is a stylistic choice, probably related to intersections with decolonial/indigenous writings⁵.

² “Histories of inclusion and exclusion looks at the socio-cultural, legal and political aspects of gender-based, religious, ethnic, economic, social and other forms of discrimination and violence, and explores ways of negotiating diversity and organizing socio-culturally heterogeneous societies”

³ “History and the institutionalization of memory examines the role played by museums and archives in shaping historical knowledge, including the ways in which institutions of memory are used for the purposes of historical revisionism, and explores the impact these institutions have on the present.”

⁴ Although these terms can be taken as synonyms in this thesis, some authors may argue that there is a nuance between studies where *travestis* are simply the research subjects – the “history of *travestis*” – and new takes that emphasize a particular way of making history from a “travesti” perspective – “*travesti* history” – mainly with the protagonism of *travesti* writers.

⁵ The practice of changing the “i” to “y”, as a form of subverting language, is recurring in this literature.

Pajubá appears in the title of my first Master’s thesis (IAZZETTI, 2021) – symbolically, as a form of disruption and dis/location. Revived by younger generations in practice, *pajubá* is conceptually deemed a cryptolect born in the Brazilian Civic-Military Dictatorship (1964-1985), historically used by the *travesti* community. Linguistic research on its origin is still in early development, although it is already clear that there are direct influences of Afro-Brazilian religions, mainly, as well as indigenous languages (CRUZ & TITO, 2016)⁶. *Pajubá* includes words such as “picumã”, for hair or wig, “alibã”, for police, “amapô”, for women, and “bajé”, for blood. In many ways, the words and expressions of *pajubá* can be understood as responses to the lives of *travestis* at the time, particularly those on sex work⁷.

As a trans/*travesti* student myself, I became a part of a broader group of young *travesti* and other trans scholars in Brazil. This “first generation” has emerged in the rise of affirmative actions and trans-centered public policies, working in transdisciplinary approaches, questioning epistemologies and proposing new forms to engage with theory and practice. Particularly in the case of transfeminism, it has been widely influenced by intersectional and decolonial approaches (ARAÚJO & VERGUEIRO, 2022).

Such historical movements have to be inserted in a broader political and cultural context. In Brazil, *travesti* and trans artists and activists, as well, are being the “first” to break through a series of institutional spaces: from the first black trans women and *travestis* elected for national political charges, with expressive voting numbers⁸, to Grammy-winner musicians⁹ and visual artists featured in worldly renowned Art Biennales¹⁰. These are examples of broader transformations in representation, visibility, and societal acceptance – in general, an increasing centrality of trans people in the public sphere.

Globally, being “trans” has become as well a question in the public sphere in a way that is unique in history. The 2014 Time’s magazine cover “The Transgender Tipping Point” became the symbol of a broader shift in public perception (STRYKER, 2017). Questions on gendered language¹¹ and architecture¹², gender roles and the gender binary from human biology

⁶ Such intersections are further analyzed in the **Second Chapter**.

⁷ This also crosses an often-untold history of the presence of *travestis* and other trans people in such religious houses, which has been also an object of recent study, particularly in anthropology.

⁸ The past two elections in Brazil had an increasing number of *travesti* and trans people being elected, particularly of black trans women and *travestis*. This includes names such as Erika Hilton (2018 and 2022) and Erica Malunguinho (2018), in São Paulo, both with expressive voting numbers

⁹ MPB singer Liniker was the first trans person to receive a Latin Grammy, in 2022.

¹⁰ Names include Castiel Vitorino, featured at the Berlin Biennale (2020) and São Paulo Biennale (2023).

¹¹ This refers to the controversies surrounding “neutral language” and its ban on schools, which are particularly noticeable in Brazil, as well as other Romance language speaking countries.

¹² This refers to so-called “Bathroom Bills”, particularly strong in the US, although not exclusive to it, referring to bills that restrict or deny the access of trans people to public bathrooms.

to education¹³, body modifications and the role of science and medicine for the youth and adults¹⁴ – just to mention a few – inserted trans-related issues (and, consequently, trans bodies, stories, and subjects) at the center of public, and often heated political, discussions.

This includes the rise of trans personalities in popular media and activism, and of organized social movements across the world. It includes a range of acquired rights, including the end of forced sterilization policies in many Western and Northern European countries¹⁵, the rise of interdisciplinary trans-centered health centers¹⁶, and international law principles grounded by the principle of self-identification (YOGYAKARTA, 2007). Finally, it includes the removal of being transgender as a “mental disorder”, in 2012, by the American Psychiatric Association (APA)¹⁷ and in 2019, by the World Health Organization (WHO)¹⁸. Still, the effort of “depathologization” is still ongoing throughout the world, as trans identities have been historically entangled with medical understandings and practices – that, on one hand, became alliances and sources for acquiring rights and, on the other, became limitations and restrictions for the complex possibilities of existence of trans people (in other words, restricting such “image and imaginary” – what a trans person is and can be).

¹³ Anti-trans legislation include re/definitions of “sex” in sports, with a particular emphasis on female competitive sports, as well as bills on formal education, including the substitution or ban of words such as “gender”, and restrictions on sex education.

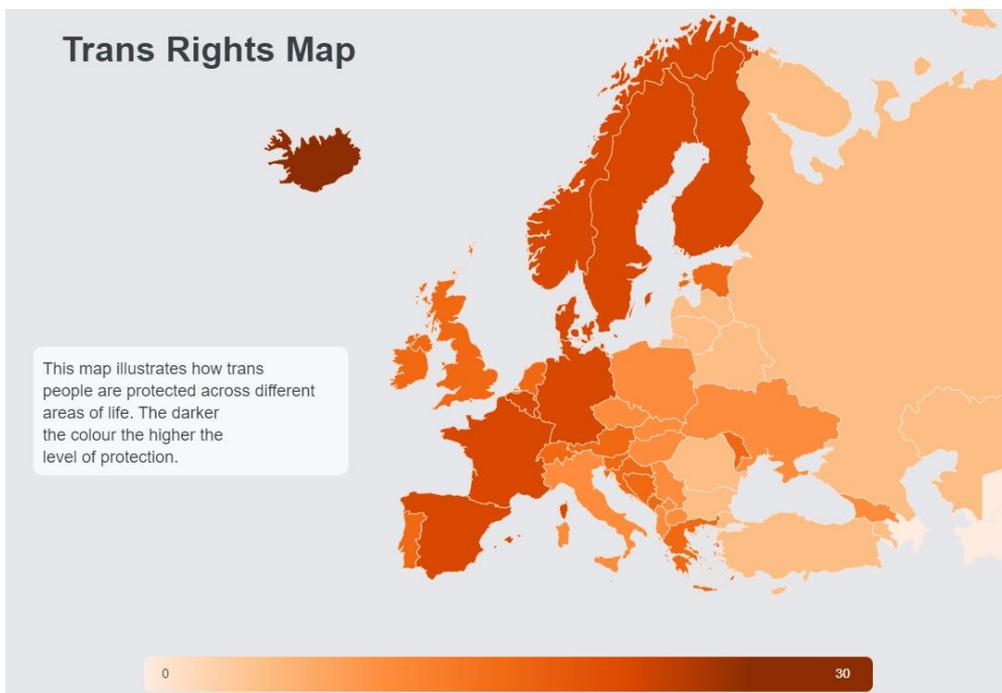
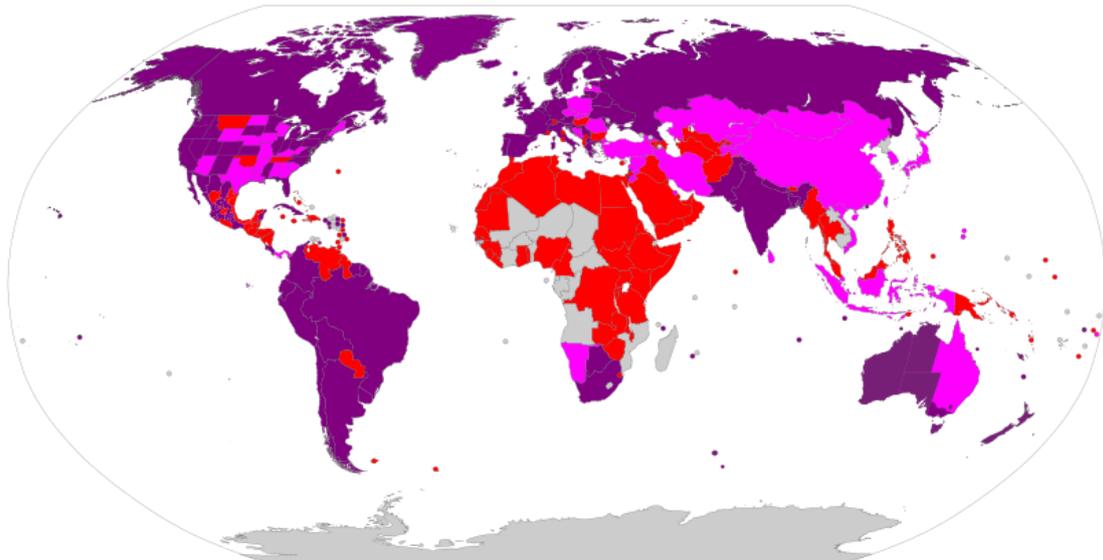
¹⁴ The access to hormones is also another heated discussion, mainly in the case of trans youth, with the use of pubertal blockers, and in the entry of gender-affirming procedures in public health systems.

¹⁵ Source: TGEU / <https://tgeu.org/24-countries-in-europe-still-require-sterilization-from-trans-people/>.

¹⁶ This refers to the emergence of multi-disciplinary medical centers, across the world, dedicated to trans and other gender nonconforming patients.

¹⁷ Source: APA / <https://www.apa.org/topics/lgbtq/transgender-people-gender-identity-gender-expression>.

¹⁸ Source: WHO / <https://www.who.int/standards/classifications/frequently-asked-questions/gender-incongruence-and-transgender-health-in-the-icd>.



Figures 2: Trans rights across the world, and Europe.

First image: Wikipedia, "Laws concerning gender identity-expression by country or territory", updated on March 2023. In purple: legal identity change, surgery not required. In pink: legal identity change, surgery required. In red: No legal identity change. In grey: unknown or ambiguous.

Second image: Trans Rights Map in Europe, including a range of rights. Project organized by TGEU. Image downloaded on June 2023. Available at: <https://transrightsmap.tgeu.org/>.

The trans depathologization movement is a global effort¹⁹. In this model, self-identification becomes central, and the discrimination against trans people is set as socially and culturally constructed. However, it is important to state that the sole centrality of self-identification has been nuanced, or even questioned, in recent years, in its universal application.

¹⁹ The homosexual depathologization movement is further analyzed in the **First Chapter**, with the role of science and medicine in the definitions of "transsexualism" being emphasized on the **Second Chapter**.

This includes, contemporarily, the controversies surrounding affirmative actions for trans people in Brazil, for example, as the self-identification model has been combined with forms of bureaucratization and third-person identification [*heteroidentificação*] that align self-identification with notions of embodiment and personal trajectory – in other words, where accessing such policies is not solely defined by self-identification (IAZZETTI, 2021).

In part of the depathologization readings, being trans is deemed a variability of the human species – with certain discourses attributing this identity, in different degrees, to some set of biological differences (and, thus, “normal” and “natural”) (SERANO, 2007). Certain discourses go beyond, going against the definition of “dysphoria” itself, and gender binarism as a whole, emphasizing the freedom to undergo certain body modifications without the need to a medical diagnostics. This leads to tense connections with identities and the specificities of the demands of access and proper care of the trans population in healthcare (COACCI, 2018).

Especially in recent years, however, such rights and important shifts in representation and visibility have seen a harsh period of backlash (GATE, 2023). Throughout the world, even with a noticeable bath of acquired rights, the number of hate crimes against the trans population has in fact increased (TDOR, 2021), especially against racialized transfeminine people, sex workers, and trans migrants²⁰. The trans population still has alarming rates of suicide and depression, particularly trans youth, inserted in a crossing of discriminations including the family household and school. Trans people still face, worldwide, a harsher reality of poverty, and have more difficulties accessing jobs, formal education, and proper healthcare (ANTRA, 2022; TGEU, 2021).

Although there are several new layers and nuances to contemporary discussions, the issue of “trans history” remains. Gender-crossing bodies and stories exist throughout history and geography, from “invert” to the 19th century “transsexual”, to a wide range of indigenous identities that go beyond Western binary definitions of “man” and “woman” cut by colonial powers (VERGUEIRO, 2016). At the same time, the recent uprising of trans-related issues in the public sphere has proved impactful in academic discussions on trans history as well – including the works of Stryker (2017), Halberstam (2017) and works on historicities and history within trans studies (STRYKER & BLACKSTON, 2022). In Brazil, this has as well led to a new set of studies on the stories of travestilities, and the complex historical and contemporary meanings of the *travesti* category (ARAÚJO, 2022; LOPES, 2016, to mention a few).

²⁰ For an analysis on sex work and race, see McClintock (1992).

Here, there are important historical shifts as well, reflected in changes in vocabulary. Possibly the most important one is the distinction between “sexual orientation” (heterosexual, bisexual...) and “gender identity” (non-binary, trans men...) – which, in recent years, have shaped as well the term “cisgender”, or simply “cis”, referring to non-trans gender identities (cis men and cis women)²¹. Particularly in Brazilian transfeminist literature, this shift has been leading to a range of new analytical perspectives and concepts, such as “cishnormativity”, “cishnorm”, and “cish-tem”, in the (colonial) triad of permanence, binarism, and pre-discursivity (VERGUEIRO, 2016). The entry of such concepts in academia has been subjected to a heated debate, although it has generally gained track and positive acceptance in recent years.

In Brazil, public policies and rights centered on the *travesti* and trans population exist since the 90s, attached to HIV/AIDS²² prevention policies (PELÚCIO, 2009; CARRARA, 2015). Still, the most noticeable advancements are located in the past decade. These include the “social name” [*nome social*] policy, in the early 2010s, which led to the guaranteed and facilitated change in name and sex in official documents in 2018, based on the principle of self-identification²³; the criminalization of LGBT-phobia, equated with racism as a non-bailable offense in 2019²⁴; the inclusion of gender-affirming procedures and surgeries in the public health system [*Processo Transexualizador*], created in 2008 and amplified in 2013; and the emergence of affirmative action policies for trans people in Brazilian public universities since the late 2010s (IAZZETTI, 2021).

By contrast, Brazil remains solely the country with the highest rates of hate crimes against the trans population. It has 40.7% of the murders registered in the world, from 2008 to 2021, with numbers increasing each year (TDOR, 2021). In what has been referred to as transfeminicide, there are interconnections between gender, race, and class: 96% of the victims are *travesti* and trans women, 81% are black, and 78% are sex workers. They are often killed by unknown men or current or former male lovers or clients, mostly in brutal forms, including public lynching, torture, sexual violence, and violation of corpses (ANTRA, 2022).

This produces a particular relation, if not contradiction, between violence and resistance, structure and agency, in the Brazilian context. Although known as “the most violent”, Brazil also has the highest number of access to *travesti* and trans pornography in the world, for

²¹ As stated in the **Second Chapter**, such terms date back in time, mainly in medical writings, but enter the broader public sphere only in recent years.

²² HIV refers to “human immunodeficiency virus” – the virus itself –, which, if untreated, can attack the immune system and lead to AIDS, “acquired immunodeficiency syndrome”.

²³ The Supreme Federal Court (STF) in Brazil is the highest court of law in Brazil for constitutional issues. Judges are indicated by the President and are approved by the Federal Senate.

²⁴ Source: STF / <https://portal.stf.jus.br/noticias/verNoticiaDetalhe.asp?idConteudo=414010>.

example (ANTRA, 2022). Its set of acquired rights is deemed one of the most advanced globally, but they are still fragile, as they are readings of the Constitution made by the Supreme Court (STF), without changes to the Constitution itself, and in fact without new laws passed in the Brazilian Legislatures whatsoever. Especially under Bolsonaro’s administration (2019-2022), moral panics surrounding gender have been widespread, together with a series of anti-gender legislations, from bills that define gender solely as “biological sex” to the ban of gender-neutral language at schools (GATE, 2023).

In such a heated political and cultural context, *travesti* history has been subjected to debates also unknown before. In the contact I had with *travesti* and other trans scholars, artists, and activists, I saw a variety of forms to actively and creatively engage with history – an alive history, connecting past, present, and future, and one that has been collectively re/lived, re/imagined, re/shaped, and re/interpreted. Therefore, this “crossing of crossing” also provokes new questions for public history, mainly in the critical questioning of forms of representation and visibility (HALBERSTAM, 2017) and the negotiations of such “image and imaginary” in the public sphere, in the recognition of history but also possibilities to be otherwise.

One example is Xica Manicongo – an enslaved person from Congo that lived in the Brazilian colonial period who has been today deemed as the “first *travesti*”. Through the efforts of trans scholars and grounded on archival research, Xica was named as such and inserted in the realm of Brazilian trans history. Since then, Xica has become a central figure in the Brazilian black *travesti* and trans community, including in art forms and activist interventions and networks (JESUS, 2019). More recently, “Xica Manicongo” became the first street name dedicated to a *travesti* in the country, in a law project written by Erika Hilton, a trans/*travesti*²⁵ politician in São Paulo, and approved in June 2022²⁶.

Therefore, history plays an active role in the re/shaping of the present and future, in the enmeshments between science, state, and society, as well as theory and practice – which, on the other direction, also re/construct this history. The case of Xica Manicongo is relevant to exemplify such connections – between historical research, State legislation, art, and activism – in their entanglements and blurred lines, here working as an example of *travesti* and trans history “in the making”. With so, this further states the importance of the present thesis for the

²⁵ As it is more common in the present-day, such terms can – and often are – used interchangeably or undistinguishably.

²⁶ Source: Folha / <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2022/06/considerada-primeira-travesti-do-brasil-xica-manicongo-deve-virar-nome-de-rua-em-sao-paulo.shtml>.

field of public history, and in contemporary academic discussions, as well as their entanglements with politics and activism.

Historical frontiers

Democratic transition and the question of historical periodization

The re/discovery of the history of *travestis*, by both activists and scholars, has been centered in the Dictatorship period, which includes the two figures in the thesis title – the “tarantula” and the “razor blade”. More particularly, it has been located in the democratic transition, with the AIDS crisis by the mid-80s and the 1987’s Operation Tarantula.

Standardly, the Dictatorship can be divided into three main periods, attached to the military regimes in charge, and its institutional acts (AIs) (ARAÚJO, DA SILVA & DOS SANTOS, 2013). In this reading, the Dictatorship starts with the 1964’s coup and the declaration of AI-1, which called for indirect elections and opened space for political persecution, under military rule. 1964 to 1967 had General Castello Branco as head of State, and three new AIs: political parties were extinguished and the judicial system altered, bipartisanship was implemented, and a new Constitution was sanctioned. Therefore, the regime had an appearance of legality, which is particular to Brazil in the broader context of the dictatorships in Latin America at the time – which tended to rely on personalized authoritarian figures (Pinochet in Chile, Peron, in Argentina, Stroessner in Paraguay, to mention a few).

1968 to 1974 – the first two under General Costa e Silva, and the following five under General Médici – are called the “years of lead” [*anos de chumbo*], with the intensification of repression and censorship, and the creation of specialized centers for the imprisonment and torture of opponents of the regime – DOI [“Internal Operations” Department, *Departamento de Operações Internas*] and CODI [“Internal Defense” Center, *Centro de Operação da Defesa Interna*]. AI-5 is remarkable in that regard, declaring a state of siege, closing the Legislative chamber, authorizing federal intervention on states, suspending *habeas corpus* in “politically motivated crimes”, suspending political rights of citizens deemed “subversive”, institutionalizing censorship and making “unauthorized political gatherings” illegal.

In such reading, the democratic transition, also called the “political opening” period, or “redemocratization” [*redemocratização*], starts in 1974, under General Geisel, in the context of intensification of the economic crisis after the “Brazilian Economic Miracle”, from 1969 to 1973, as well as increasing societal opposition.

AI-5 is revoked in 1978 and a political opening – deemed “slow, gradual and safe” [*abertura lenta, gradual e segura*] – is announced, still keeping opponents and social

movements out of formal decision-making. General Geisel rules from 1974 to 1979, followed by General Figueiredo, from 1979 to 1985. Protests opposing the regime become massive, including from workers (*Greves do ABC*, 1978) and in the demand for direct elections (“*Diretas Já*”, 1984). Finally, the Amnesty Law, sanctioned in 1979, freed former left-wing guerilla members, as well as military officers, from the crimes they committed – something it would only change with the National Truth Commission’s report released in 2014, over three decades later.

The president elected, Tancredo Neves, would pass away just before taking office – all this amid a period of economic hyperinflation. Direct elections would be held only in 1990, with the president, Fernando Collor de Mello, leaving the office just two years later, after a series of failed economic policies and corruption allegations, in a generally turbulent period. At the same time, although the Constitution changed in 1988, with noticeable improvements from the former Constitution of the Dictatorship period, certain structures remain largely untouched to this day, such as the militarized aspect and brutality of the Brazilian police. Economically, the 80s in general are marked by the extensive Latin American debt crisis, including economic stagnation and hyperinflation.

Internationally, this period is also remarkable as the final years of the Cold War (1947-1991) – which, in Brazil, connects two authoritarian regimes, with the Civic-Military Dictatorship reaching the mid to late 80s, and the Estado Novo regime, from November 1937 to October 1945. This is important to notice, as many of the broader characteristics of the State policies, as well as societal perceptions, on gender and sexuality, and their interconnections with race and class, date back to this early period, and a specific set of discourses regarding nation-building, hegemonic masculinity and militarism²⁷.

²⁷ Such discourses will be further analyzed in the **First Chapter**



Figure 3: “Dictatorship never more”
In the original, “Ditadura nunca mais”. Edited photo posted by Erica Malunguinho, Brazil’s first trans/travesti congresswomen in the Legislative Assembly of São Paulo, at the 1st of April (day of the 1984’s coup d’état).

Although this is didactic for those unfamiliar with this particular historical context, it is important to notice that many of the authors mentioned in this thesis question this division. Quinalha (2021), for example, states 1988 is a more proper end date of the Military regime, historically speaking, with the new Constitution, marked by acquired rights of women, black people, and indigenous groups. By contrast, it is important to emphasize that, even under impressive advocacy efforts, the rights to include the protection against the discrimination of “sexual orientation” in the new Constitution was not successful – such rights would only be acquired decades later, by the 2010s²⁸.

Authors such as Araújo (2022) argue for an analytical emphasis on a continuum of violence against *travestis*, emphasizing how divisions between dictatorship and democracy are often blurred in an ongoing demand for citizenship. This perspective also goes into a deeper questioning of the centrality of political institutions and the acquiring of rights, from a decolonial-grounded perspective in Brazilian transfeminist thought. In the author’s words (ARAÚJO, 2022, *translated from Portuguese*):

Even if we are writing about a historical and political period that comprehends a now “democratized” Brazil, it is necessary to apprehend the limits when it refers to *travestis*. (...) Institutional State violence against *travestis* did not end even after the

²⁸ This dispute will be further analyzed in the **First Chapter**

redemocratization period in Brazilian society. This fact demands an analytical position that comprehends the authoritarianism beyond a conception that crystalizes it as a form of government. (...) The transition of a political regime (...) was not enough to guarantee that Brazilian *travestis* accessed citizenship and democracy.

All these examples raise the question: in what sense there is, in fact, a historical shift, with the democratic transition? Here, the frontiers between authoritarian and democratic regimes end up blurred. *Travestis* are understood as not yet have acquired full citizenship, or even full humanity, to the present-day. In this reading, there is a continuum of violence specific to *travestis* that was not shared by homosexuals already at the time. For homosexuals, the democratic transition became an opportunity to acquire rights, and the scientific community became an alliance already by the 70s and 80s. *Travestis*, however, were set into discourses and practices of “social cleansing” and necropolitics (CAVALCANTI, BARBOSA & BICALHO, 2018) – thus, needing as well a specific approach to historical analysis, beyond a conceptual notion of “homosexualities”.

Counterintuitively as it may sound at first, this radicalization worsened in the democratic transition, caused by the impact of the AIDS crisis. Therefore, these early set of discourses on “subversion” and “degeneracy” become radicalized, justifying harsher forms of violence, including directed and ostensive police operations, including Operation Tarantula, specific forms of persecution and torture, and the increase in the number and action of death squads²⁹.

On the other hand, authors on travestilities have emphasized a continuum in cultural construction. Connected to this, including in activism and the arts, is the notion of “trans-centrality” (*trans + ancestry*) – as proposed by Carvalho (2022) – emphasizing a shared history, within a broader “memory boom”³⁰ in recent years. Identity becomes central, both individually (in the centrality of self-identification) and collectively, in ongoing political goals and the re/shaping of a complex cultural construction of travestilities.

Finally, even if with important nuances, following the readings of Quinalha (2021), it is important to emphasize a set of historical divisions between earlier periods and the Dictatorship. When it comes to state discourse and practices, as written by the author, there is – within the further enclosure of the regime, in 1968 (with the implementation of AI-5) – an effort of centralization that produced a more cohesive set of (repressive) discourses and practices within the broader State apparatus. The democratic transition is marked by the 1988 Constitution and a set of acquired rights. At the same time, from the studies on travestilities we can go beyond a

²⁹ The questions of political violence and dehumanization is centered in the **First Chapter**

³⁰ For more about the origins and nuances of the term “memory boom”, see Winter (2001).

legalist, or strictly formal approach to state, government and politics, addressing in culture, as well, ongoing issues related to a yet-to-be-completed citizenship project.

Waves of the Brazilian homosexual and travesti movements

The 80s is also an important frontier in the history of the Brazilian homosexual movement (MHB). MHB starts with the formation of SOMOS [Nucleus of Action for the Rights of Homosexuals, *Núcleo de Ação pelos Direitos dos Homossexuais*], in São Paulo, in 1978, followed by groups such as GGB [Gay Group of Bahia, *Grupo Gay da Bahia*], in 1980, which exists to the present-day (FACCHINI, 2003). Therefore, Simões and Facchini (2009) argue that the origins of the movement trace back to the late 70s, with further expansions going to the 80s, only to then meet the backlash during the AIDS crisis period. In fact, the number of homosexual groups falls down from about 22, at the start of the 80s, to only eight, at 1988, with a migration to AIDS-centered movements. This leads to a “second wave” of the movement by the 90s, attached to state policies and efforts to reach state recognition. At the same time, inside the movement, this leads to forms of “hygienization” of the “homosexual”, namely the “gay” category, associated with a notion of social respectability (FACCHINI, 2003). Internationally, in medical history, this crosses depathologization efforts to homosexuality – including the removal as a mental disorder by APA, in 1973, and by WHO, in 1990.

It was also between the 80s and 90s that MHB became the “GLS” acronym (gays, lesbians, and sympathizers), officially sub-dividing what was before a single political, and in a sense cultural, category. By the late 2000s, “GLS” became the “LGBT” acronym, which includes both sexual orientation (LGB) and gender identity (T)³¹. In Brazil, the “T” in “LGBT” started to constitute a double, referring to both “travestis” and “transsexuals”. The term combination is also used in the main organizations led by the community, such as the National Association of Travestis and Transsexuals [*Associação Nacional de Travestis e Transsexuais*, ANTRA]. Historically, “travesti” exists before “transsexual” or “trans” – including in law recognition, popular media, social movements, and popular culture. This persistence, even after such challenging historical periods, is deemed by activists today a form of resistance. Therefore, the democratic transition is also a historical frontier in the emergence of social movements, including the re/shaping and re/imagination of differences and inequalities, amid internal disputes, tensions and controversies.

³¹ “LGBT+” became “LGBTI+” in Brazil with the creation of the first national organization for intersex people in the country, in 2015. The acronym is still in dispute, including also queer people (Q), asexual people (A) and pansexual people (P), and its variations, such as “LGBTQIA+”, “LGBTIA+”, “LGBTQIAP+” and so on.

Coacci (2018) states that the national travesti and transsexual movement in Brazil can be divided into three waves across three decades, starting in the 90s. This first generation is marked by the creation of ASTRAL (Association of *Travestis* and *Liberados*) in 1992, with the main demands being the end of police persecution, and the demand for, and defense of, HIV/AIDS prevention policies amid the AIDS crisis³². Although the institutionalized movement was born in Brazil in 1992, reports of early organizations exist at least since at least 1979 (SILVA, 2021). Such grassroots organizations were led by female sex workers against ostensive police operations, mainly in large urban centers, such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Vitória. Recent historical research has observed even earlier reports on activist efforts, such as an attempted *travesti* march in 1969 and an attempted “third-sex” march in 1966³³. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that historical research on this subject is emerging in academia as well, and shifts have been constantly made to re/discover and re/imagine such stories in earlier periods.

Mainly in the 2000s, however, a set of tensions and disputes between the different “T”s – transsexual, *travesti*, and transgender – erupt, as studied in-depth by Barbosa (2013). In his fieldwork with activists, the author writes about a set of disputes and tensions between identities, and its distinct placement within the social movement itself, including in political strategies after the first instances of State recognition and broader entry in the public sphere. On one side, transsexuals would be deemed by *travestis* as perpetuating a stereotype of being a “freak” – figures of a pathologizing medical discourse, deemed “mentally ill”. On the other, *travestis* would be deemed by transsexuals of perpetuating a stereotype of being a “whore” – figures associated with “criminality” and “prostitution” inhabiting the Brazilian cultural imaginary (BARBOSA, 2013). At the same time, transsexuals would often be deemed “superior” to *travestis*, particularly in their placement as woman, in the intersections between gender, race, class, and generation.

Barbosa (2015) works with what he calls a “culturalization” of the *travesti* identity, in opposition to a “transglobalization” phenomenon. By the early 80s, there is the entry of “transsexualism” in medical manuals, namely the ICD (International Classification of Diseases)

³² The second wave of the movement, according to Coacci (2018), goes from 2000s to the 2010s, marked by deeper connections with the state and tensions between different “trans” identities (*travesti*, transsexual, transgender). This is followed by a third wave, starting in 2010s, marked by a “sidestreaming” of the movement to other forms of action outside the state apparatus, and the entry of new subjects, namely transmasculine and non-binary identities³². Contemporarily, it is still up to debate if a “fourth wave” has started, although scholars have mostly agreeing Therefore – with new, ongoing challenges, both in activism and in scholarly debate.

³³ Information gathered from conversations with Brazilian scholars, with findings still unpublished.

and the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders)³⁴, with the creation of international policies and medical protocols by the early 80s. This is increasingly questioned throughout the 90s, with “transgender” being set as a common word, in opposition to “transsexual”, in the emergence of a “global trans imagined community” – although, in practice, centered in the Global North. In the context of international funding for HIV/AIDS, this leads to pressure for the Brazilian *travesti* and transsexual movement to adapt this then foreign category.

However, “transgender” never settles within the social movement and society in general, and “*travesti*” is growly built, in terms of discourse and practice, as a “culturalized” gender identity, stated as a Latin American identity (more specifically, South American identity), including countries such as Brazil, Argentina, and Chile (BARBOSA, 2015). This includes the building of a sense of pride and community – and, I would add, a shared history, or “trancestrality”. Therefore, “*travesti*” goes in a distinct direction compared to most of the world, particularly in English-speaking countries, where “transgender” became an umbrella term by the late 80s and early 90s (FEINBERG, 1992). In recent years, these controversies in the Brazilian social movement have become somewhat more subtle, especially with the rise of the broader “trans” identity, and a younger generation mobilizing identities more loosely and interconnected, although tensions and disputes still exist, as will be mentioned ahead.

As a whole, during the democratic transition, the AIDS crisis played a key role in the history of *travestis*, particularly in institutionalization forms. As with other countries in the American region, the first cases reported in Brazil, starting in 1982 and rapidly growing until the 1990, were concentrated in “homosexuals”, which became the central “risk group” amid ongoing moral panics where AIDS was deemed the “gay cancer” or the “gay plague” (VERAS, 2015). Race and class also take centrality here, such as in the “4H” 1982 definition (before the term “AIDS” was coined), which referred to “homosexuals, heroin users, hemophiliacs, and Haitians”. Between 1988 and 1990, the cases of HIV/AIDS infections doubled in Brazil, amid growing moral panics, on one hand, and expanded prevention policies and connections between the state and the social movements, on the other.

Historically, the entry via public health policies in Brazil has led to certain tensions with depathologization efforts. The first instances of State recognition of *travesti* and trans identities

³⁴ Both ICD and DSM are widely used psychiatric medical manuals to standardize forms of diagnostics. “Transsexualism” is included in the DSM (DSM-3) in 1980, being later removed as a disorder in 2013 (DSM-5), now under the “gender dysphoria” category. The entry in ICD occurs in 1992 (ICD-10), later revised in 2018 (ICD-11), abolishing the terms “gender identity disorder” and “fetishistic transvestism”.

happened in public health, amid the AIDS crisis, in a long story of alliances and connections between social movements and the State, on one hand, and efforts into depathologization, and criticism of the framings and limits of such recognition, on the other (FACCHINI, 2003).

With that being said, the re/vitalization of *travesti* history also responds to demands of its time. Starting in 2011, with a final report released in 2014, Brazil had a National Truth Commission to investigate the Human Rights violations committed in the Civic-Military Dictatorship period, which worked as a response to the controversial 1979's Amnesty Law. This includes specific reports on "dictatorship and homosexualities" (COMISSÃO DA VERDADE, 2014), with scholars working on the persecution and discrimination against the so-called homosexual population during the period for the first time in such depth.

This has produced a "memory boom", with new archival sources available and innovative readings on the period. In recent years, new readings include those of *travesti* and other trans scholars, which have questioned certain understandings of this historical period, including the perspective of "homosexualities" (ARAÚJO, 2022; CAVALCANTI, BARBOSA & BICALHO, 2018). At the same time, such a "memory boom" has produced a wide range of public history initiatives, from museum exhibitions³⁵ to digital projects and grassroots DIY publications³⁶, placing these discussions in the public sphere and in the frontiers between art, activism, and scholarly debate.

³⁵ Although precious case studies for public history, such exhibitions, and their circulations, will not be analyzed in this thesis.

³⁶ As the case of the museum exhibitions, these materials were extensively analyzed for this thesis, but such analyses are not included directly in the final text.



Figure 4: “Pride and Resistances”

Official photo from the “Pride and Resistances” [Orgulho e Resistências] exhibition at the Resistance Memorial [Memorial da Resistência] in São Paulo, from October 2020 to May 2021. Available at: <http://memorialdaresistencia.org.br/exposicoes/orgulho-e-resistencia/>.

In conclusion, the democratic transition is, as well, a “crux of crossings” (PRECIADO, 2020) – it is a period of transition between a dictatorship and a democracy, which puts into question political freedom and personal and collective liberty, from State legislation to social movements. This is complexified by the ongoing AIDS crisis and important shifts in notions of pathology and health in the late 80s related to gender and sexuality dissidence, which further re/shape the entanglements between science, state, and society³⁷. Not by chance, this is, as well, an effervescent context in historical writing and academic debate, including new sources, methods and readings, and to public history specifically, in the effects and affects that history have, and can have, when engaging with people outside academia as well.

Travesti history in and after the AIDS crisis

In many Romance-speaking countries, such as Italy, Portugal and Spain, “travesti” is still considered a slur, and its use tends to be less widespread within the community, particularly older generations. At the same time, at least from my experience meeting activists in such countries, *sudaka travesti* movements have been advocating for the revival of the word “travesti”

³⁷ The context of the AIDS crisis is further analyzed in the **First Chapter**, later returning in the **Second Chapter** on discussions about subjectivity.

in these contexts as well – this is an early history in the making, but it works as an ongoing example of the richness and aliveness of the *travesti* identity to the present-day.

The word *travesti* tends to mobilize an emotional cultural imaginary and imagery in countries such as Brazil. A search online on “*travestis*” will lead mostly to pornographic websites and crime reports in sensationalist newspapers, where their names are rarely seen. It is, to this day, a strong term to say, sometimes still used as a slur. It assonates a visual image in collective culture – it evokes a sense of danger, humor, and lust, that is not the same as terms such as “trans”. *Travesti* evokes an “image and imaginary”, an embodiment – being associated with the aesthetic of *fechação*, known for its flamboyance and excess. Therefore, expressions such as act, dress, and speak “like a travesti” [“*como um travesti*”, use of male pronouns] – although deemed today derogatory – are not uncommon in Brazil.

Travesti is also a racialized term, and is often associated with criminality and sex work, in its intersections with race, class and labor. Here, the distinction with terms such as “trans” becomes ever clearer. “Trans” tends to be associated with medicine, particularly of gender reassignment surgery (GRS), in the case of trans women. As have been written by scholars (STONE, 2006), “trans”, in this case the “female transsexual”, is historically attached to an ideal of delicate and discrete femininity deeply attached to whiteness, and specific notions of gender and sexuality, which tend to exclude racialized people, particularly black people, and sex workers formal healthcare, or even public policies directed to trans people in general³⁸.

My argument here is that both terms are embedded in cultural values and re/interpretations of the in/distinctions between the *travesti* and other trans identities, in its proximities and distances, if not also legislations and regulations on a State level. They are historicized differently, and take distinct spaces in culture, but are entangled in an ongoing history in the crossings of gender, race, class, and other axes of inequality. This is important to better understand the history of *travestis* in the Brazilian democratic transition, but also of the backlash by the anti-gender movement occurring today – where many of the stereotypes and cultural fears and angsts, under new waves of moral panics, appear to be revived and re/shaped.

Still in cultural terms, the role of popular media – mainly the television, in this case – becomes strategic to understand the complexities of what it meant to be a *travesti* in the Brazilian democratic transition. While violent police operations were happening on the streets, and the AIDS crisis was leading to widespread moral panics through politics and popular media itself, gender-crossing celebrities were populating television for the first time as sex symbols.

³⁸ Such intersections will be further developed in the **Second Chapter**.

The question of body modifications, such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and GRS, was leading, both in Brazil and abroad, to ongoing transformations in cultural perceptions on what it meant to be a woman – inserting *travestis* in yet another frontier, between not only “homosexuals”, but also “female transsexuals” and “women”³⁹.

Authors such as Lopes (2016) and Coacci (2018) write that there is an important shift in what means to be a *travesti* between the 70s to the 80s. Before, the term was strictly associated with an art form, being a synonym to what would be contemporarily described as a “drag” or “cross-dresser”. In earlier writings, dating at least back to the 50s and 60s, being a *travesti* meant “to be in *travesti*”: “*travesti*” was not an identity, but a moment in time, associated with certain clothes and mannerisms (VERAS, 2015). Growly, the term becomes more directly associated with “men dressing up as women”, specifically with nightclub performances that often mimicked glamorous Western European cabaret shows, and Hollywood celebrities.

Starting in the late 70s, this category starts to be associated with “prostitution and criminality” (LOPES, 2016), leading to the stigmatization and the construction of a “*travesti*” stereotype. It is also in this period that body modifications take centrality, such as female hormones and silicone implants, and *travestis* move from the “semipublic” to the public sphere. According to Veras (2015), such a shift occurs from the 70s to the 80s, from the “time of wigs” to a “time of hormone”. The author emphasizes 1984 as a transition year where *travestis* become what I call an embodied experience, including the connections not only with femininity in general but also womanhood. Yet again, the AIDS crisis further complexifies this history, in a backlash of a broader history of the sexual revolution – and, as Veras (2015) writes, an “opening-arousal” of the political regime⁴⁰.

Brazil also has a particular history when it comes to forms of criminalization, and the relation between law and practice, that needs to be addressed. “Sodomy” was illegal during the colonial period, under the Portuguese Penal Code, but this shifted already during the Imperial period, in 1830, being one of the first former New World colonies to do so (TREVISAN, 2018). Over a century later, in 1985, Brazil was one of the first countries in the world to not consider homosexuality a deviance, by the Federal Council of Medicine (CFM). Furthermore, Brazil has an ongoing story of violence against sexual and gender dissidence, and other legal apparatus have been historically mobilized for forms of direct persecution and legal discrimination. As with other countries crossing authoritarian periods at the time, namely in Latin America and the

³⁹ Such connections will be further developed in the **Second Chapter**.

⁴⁰ This particular reading of the period will be further developed in the **Second Chapter**.

Iberian Peninsula, this includes a set of loitering⁴¹ laws [*leis da vadiagem*], by the 1940s, besides a series of laws, throughout the world, where a notion of the “public” was mobilized to particularly target certain historically marginalized groups, including “public health” and “public safety” (COWAN, 2016; QUINALHA, 2021).

A similar story can be told about the criminalization of HIV/AIDS transmission, also called HIV non-disclosure. Across the world, including in Western Europe and North America, transmitting HIV “intentionally” or “recklessly”, including in not knowing your diagnostics beforehand, is judicially categorized as a crime⁴². While laws such as this since the late 80s, forms of criminalization in Brazil are more indirect, with other laws being mobilized in these cases. To this day, this is an ongoing struggle for HIV+ and anti-AIDSphobia movements in the country (OLIVEIRA, 2021). This crosses an ongoing history where cases of HIV/AIDS in Brazil have in fact increased in the past decade, having the highest prevalence in Latin America. This has led to a series of debates in public health, as the country is known as a global reference in prevention campaigns. This includes, since 1996, free availability of antiretroviral treatment in the public health system (SUS) for HIV+ patients, as well as both Pre-Exposure and Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP and PEP)⁴³ prevention treatments. It also includes, historically, a series of campaigns and free availability of different forms of prevention, mainly preservatives – although with noticeable budget cuts in recent years.

Another ongoing issue, which particularly affects trans people, is the lack of quantitative research by the Brazilian state. Most of the data available – for example, in terms of transfeminicide – comes from independent social movements and activist networks (COACCI, 2018). In public health, trans people were historically often assigned as their “sex at birth”, rather than their self-identification. In the case of *travestis* and trans women, this meant, and sometimes still means, their inclusion under the “MSM” category (*men who have sex in men* – in Portuguese, “HSH”) used in public health, particularly in HIV/AIDS policies. Here, it is important to also point out the ongoing stigma related to sexual and gender minorities, connected to the history of AIDS crisis. Still by 2020⁴⁴, in Brazil, if you were under the MSM in the past 3 months – again, which often included *travestis* and trans women – you could be

⁴¹ Loitering is “the act of standing or waiting around idly without apparent purpose”. In practice, such laws were used to incriminate historically marginalized groups, from drug users to homeless people and street sex workers, in a regulation and vigilance of “public”, outdoor, spaces.

⁴² Similar laws exist to prohibit the immigration of seropositive (HIV positive) people, and are active to the present-day, even in situations where the person has undetectable viral loads, with ongoing treatment (U=U).

⁴³ PrEP is a set of preventing medications that protect seronegative people from getting the HIV virus. PEP is used in emergencies, after risk exposition by seronegative people.

⁴⁴ This recently changed as, in May 2020, the STF judged that the restrictions made by national health agencies on the donation of blood by “HSH” were unconstitutional.

denied to donate blood, which did not apply to heterosexual couples. Finally, Oliveira (2021) points out new forms of hierarchization that emerges with categories such as being U=U (Undetectable = Untransmittable), in recent years⁴⁵.

Although such questions were not at stake in the 80s, it is possible to observe, with this, an ongoing history of marginalization based on seropositivity (being HIV positive) and the notion of “AIDS” itself – connected to notions such as healthy/sick, risky/safe, clean/dirty – besides the ambiguity, if not unintelligibility, of *travesti* and other trans identities when faced with State policies and formal recognition. Therefore, HIV/AIDS is far from being a socio-cultural and political issue that ended by the 90s and 2000s.

During the democratic transition, “AIDS” was used as a way to legitimize violence against *travestis* by the Brazilian state. As stated previously, *travesti* was an identity understood within “homosexuality”/“homosexuality”, but already attached to certain embodiment. Operations by the civil and military police against “homosexuals” are reported at least since 1968, already with the centrality of a specific gendered body. Terms such as “invert”⁴⁶, “*travesti*” and “boneca”⁴⁷ were used to name the targeted subjects, which were growly associated with criminality, and as a threat to conservative moral values, in their acts of *trottoir* (OCANHA, 2014)⁴⁸.

This forms a complex layering of what it means to be a *travesti* – it took some elements of the previous “character”-like definition, but it was also a set of permanent body modification, as well as a figure deemed hypersexual and dangerous. As will be further developed as well, this connection – solidified throughout the 80s – is also historically associated with the rise of the AIDS crisis, and of specific entanglements of gender, race, and class, with sexuality playing a key role in the shaping of what it means to be a “*travesti*”, in opposition to “homosexual” and “transsexual”. This creates complex self-identifications with the category both in identity and community belonging⁴⁹.

Therefore, in the entanglements with race and class, *travestis* became a privileged group in the set of discourse and practices that emphasized the evils of urbanization – not by chance, these operations were supported or even publically demanded by civilians, especially those who

⁴⁵ U=U refers to people with undetectable viral loads, meaning they cannot transmit HIV to others. The term is used by organizations such as WHO.

⁴⁶ “Invert” is a derogatory and somewhat outdated term to refer to so-called “homosexuals” or “sodomites”, dating at least back to the 18th century.

⁴⁷ “Doll” is a term used to this day, in different countries, to refer to *travestis* and trans women, mainly in sex work. The term is not deemed offensive, and it is widely used by the community.

⁴⁸ The analysis of specific forms of violence against *travestis* will be held in the **First Chapter**.

⁴⁹ Such complex self-identifications will be further analyzed in the **Second Chapter**.

deemed to be “affected” by the appearance of *travesti* sex workers next to their houses⁵⁰. On a similar note, working with ostensive police operations against so-called homosexuals in São Paulo from 1976 to 1982, Ocanha (2014) states *travestis* were already the main target of State violence, being associated with “criminality”, “prostitution”, and “addiction” – centered as the main threats to the fall of the “moralities” and the “good behaviors” of the Brazilian nuclear family⁵¹.

Initially, such directed persecutions were concentrated in street carnivals, where “men dressed up as women” raised turmoil in part of the society and were the main subject of imprisonments by the police, under a logic of “public order” (LOPES, p.158, 2016). At the time, “being in *travesti*” was limited to events such as carnivals, nightclubs and cabaret concerts. According to these authors, the 70s saw the rise of *travestis* in prostitution – as well as increased violence by the police, culminating in the late 80s, in the democratic transition and the AIDS crisis, which led to more ostensive police operations, namely Operation Tarantula, in São Paulo, in 1987.

Science also plays a role in such operations. Cavalcanti, Barbosa and Bicalho (2018) emphasize how certain operations were informed in the entanglements between positive criminology, penal law, and evolutionist thinking, mainly inspired by Cesare Lombroso’s⁵² writings and the readings by Nina Rodrigues in Brazil⁵³. Therefore, part of the ostensive operations against *travestis*, particularly during the Dictatorship, was informed by a search for a “natal criminal”. This was further informed by the fact that such police operations were often personalized, with the police officers in charge having great power over their reasons and procedures (QUINALHA, 2021).

Building the research

State-of-the-art and theoretical-conceptual grounds

One of the main references for this project is the “dictatorship and homosexuality” field of studies, focused on the persecutions against so-called homosexuals during the Dictatorship.

⁵⁰ Works with *travestis* and trans people in rural areas is still an undeveloped field of study. Recent efforts include the work of Azevedo (AZEVEDO & PEREIRA, 2020), in Brazil. Therefore, the understanding of *travesti* as an “urban phenomena” is deemed outdated, and alternative stories of *travestis* in rural areas are still in the making in anthropological and historical research.

⁵¹ These conservative cultural values, and their connections to notions against so-called “homosexualism”, will be further analyzed in the **First Chapter**.

⁵² Known as the founder of the Italian school of criminology, Lombroso (1835-1909) led theories on anthropological criminology, noticeable inspiring theories on inherited criminality, and identifications of people as “born criminals”.

⁵³ Nina Rodrigues (1862-1906) is known as the founder of Brazilian criminal anthropology, known for his early works on black culture. Rodrigues adopted deterministic perspectives and was an open defender of eugenics.

In the **First Chapter**, this mainly includes the works of Renan Quinalha (2021), published in Portuguese, and Benjamin Cowan (2016), published in English. In the Portuguese language, this field is often attached to the 2014's Brazilian Truth Commission and following projects on public history. These authors emphasize the historical connections between notions of hegemonic masculinity, the nation-state and militarism in Brazilian history, with Cowan working with the continuities and shifts between the Estado Novo regime (1937-1945) and the Civic-Military Dictatorship (1964-1985), and Quinalha specifically with the Civic-Military Dictatorship, with an interest in ongoing political questions, given the author's work with the Truth Commission.

Moving to the **Second Chapter**, theoretical groundings shift to writings mainly by trans and *travesti* scholars, with names such as Maria Clara Araújo (2022), Céu Cavalcanti (2018), and Pisci Oliveira (2021) and, broadly, authors working on the specificities of the history of *travestis* in Brazil, such as Elias Veras (2015) and Bruno Barbosa (2015). These authors seek to respond to absences in the previous works on Brazilian LGBT+ history and resistance, including new conceptual and methodological approaches. Often, such approaches cross the field of transfeminist literature as well, which, in Brazil, has developed particular interests in intersectional and decolonial approaches, as well as on the concept of "cisnormativity", as mentioned previously. Writings in this field have yet to be translated to English, including only extremely recent efforts (ARAÚJO & VERGUEIRO, 2022).

The term "travestilities", although with particular nuances, is borrowed from this bibliography. Inspired by the concept of "homosexualities", this term refers to the complex entanglements of what constitutes the meanings of being a *travesti*, not only as a gender identity but an embodied experience, a political community and a figure in the social imaginary. It is also from this bibliography that an emphasis on the race and class-based elements of travestilities, in their differentiation processes to categories such as "homosexual", "transsexual", and "women", is theoretically grounded, in order to better apprehend such nuances in archival research.

Connected to such efforts are works on intersectional perspectives, here mainly inspired by the readings of Patricia Hill Collins (COLLINS & BILGE, 2020), which emphasize the interconnectedness between axes of difference and inequality, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, further complexifying readings on power, culture, and state discourses and practices. In the writings on "travestilities", in Brazil, such influence involves reconsidering legalist writings in historical periodization, as well as the centrality of the body in *travesti* history. When it comes to this second issue, the concept of "flesh", in particular, will be further developed in

the **Second Chapter**, as a site of both trauma and resistance, inspired by the readings of C. Riley Snorton (2017) on the work of black feminist author Hortense Spillers (1987).

Most of the readings on “homosexualities” and “travestilities” are in Portuguese, crossing a broader history of Gender Studies in Brazil, particularly in writings on Brazilian LGBTI+ history, which has led, more recently, to works on the nuances and specifics of the history of *travestis*. Such works include names such as Regina Facchini (2003) and Thiago Coacci (2018), which have made substantial efforts to historicize, under specific periods and “waves”, such history. With so, such authors have built the historiographical foundation that is further developed, and sometimes questioned, in this thesis.

Here, it is important to remark that the Portuguese bibliography is mostly centered on national approaches, including efforts attached to Brazilian government policies. In comparison, global approaches would be closer to what we may call a relational perspective, where the parts (or, “beings”) exist always in relation, and not as pre-existing entities. Saying so also means tensioning part of this bibliography, which tends to emphasize strict national boundaries. Therefore, even if still preliminary, this project also seeks to open space for further connections in the broader context of the Cold War, the circulation of scientific and medical definitions and protocols, as well as taking into account that the *travesti* identity is not exclusive to Brazil – also existing in other Latin American countries, and currently traveling to Europe mainly by the influence of *sudaka* movements. Saying so also means possibly opening space, in the future, for shared efforts in public history. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize the particularity of the extension of violence against *travestis* in Brazil, both in the present-day and historically.

At its theoretical baseline, this bibliography – particularly in the studies of “homosexualities” – is strongly inspired by Foucauldian readings (1984). Power is understood here as a productive force, as constitutive of subjects – rather than simply a top-down approach to state forces – and is always followed by forms of resistance. Therefore, the analytical focus moves to a set of discourses that identifies, organizes, classifies and, ultimately, seeks to control populations’ conduct, operating in a specific set of mechanisms. “Control” becomes more nuanced, including forms of shared vigilance and surveillance – which does not exclude from historical analysis elements such as violence, repression and coercion. From Foucault, the concept of governmentality, in particular, is further developed in the **First Chapter**, emphasizing such embodiments of power and control in the blurred lines between “state” and “society”.

Concurrently, it is important to consider, as well, further readings on the Foucauldian conceptualization, an author who inspires most of the Brazilian literature previously mentioned.

Firstly, this includes the works of Judith Butler (2016), mainly with the discussions on “frames” and “framings”, which more directly appear in the **First Chapter**. Here, such a set of discourses and practices are set as a form of performativity – they are framed “as such”, in entanglements between form and content. Secondly, this includes the works of Donna Haraway (2004), particularly in the **Second Chapter**, with the author’s discussions on the primacy of vision and knowledge-making, which inspires by take on “images and imaginaries”. Here, “material-semiotic” knots are emphasized, in the frontiers and specific “compounds” that can define life and death.

Finally, this thesis is also inspired by readings on the Anglophone field of trans studies . In the English language, we can read scholarly writing protagonized by trans authors already in the late 80s, with the emergence of trans studies – tracing back to “The Empire Strikes Back”, from Sandy Stone (2006) – often in blurred lines with the concurrent field of queer studies (STRYKER, 2004). Transfeminism, in the entanglements between activism and scholarship debate, emerge as a word in the late 90s, although debates on the presence of trans women in feminism and feminine-only spaces date back at least to the 70s (KOYAMA, 2006). Specifically in history and historiography, works on trans/queer studies include publications such as “Transgender History”, published by Susan Stryker (2017), besides a wide range of writings on queer temporalities and historicities by the 2000s (HALBERSTAM, 2005). From this bibliography, specific discussions on questions of trans history are addressed, including questions on representation, visibility and, in the case of Stone, discussions on medical and scientific protocols for “transsexualism”⁵⁴.

Inspired by these readings, when it comes to state discourses and practices, it is here important to distinguish the idea of a unified, top-down, understanding of “State”, to the “state” as a set of grounded practices. Analytically, in the concreteness of archival research, what one has at hand is an apparently random set of documents, with distinct practices and discourses – if not sometimes contradictory – that become entangled as being one or, in other words, as a multiple that “holds itself together” (MOL, 2002). In concrete terms, this raises the issue that the apparent cohesiveness of political regimes, especially authoritarian ones, is in fact framed/compounded as such, in order to produce its legitimacy – the inquiry into archives provides ways in which we can understand and question this historical construction, in its frontiers. Such emphasis will be central in the **First Chapter**.

⁵⁴ The field of trans studies is also known for its transdisciplinarity, including ongoing efforts in the intersections between art, activism, and scholarly debate, as well as its emphasis on the connections between theory and practice, which influence a certain tone of writing of this thesis.

In general, there is an underlying effort to align intersectional studies to feminist science and technology studies (FSTS), from a theoretical standpoint. The field of FSTS (HARAWAY, 2004; M'CHAREK, 2017; MOL, 2002; to mention a few) inspires the discussions on the entanglements of science, state, and society, and the emphasis on the production and circulation of knowledge, here concentrated in the **Second Chapter**. Following such writings, this triad is understood as intrinsically connected – the emphasis is relational in the sense that, for example, science constitutes the state, and vice-versa. The elements in this triad are, in the specificity of the relation, sometimes distinguished (science versus the state), and other times blurred (science-state)⁵⁵.

I understand their combination as analytically powerful in the balance between flows and their cuts, the lived creative experiences and the rigidity of power structures, as well as the combination between theory and practice, and the possibilities and limits of experimental forms of academic writing, and its connections to community building and political making. Frontiers here become a methodologically strategic site for research – as privileged sites to understand the world in practice, from subjects to historical periods and geographical boundaries. From a feminist and queer approach, this is also openly political – not in a sense of an ideal, or utopic path – but as a form of foresight and critical questioning that the world could have been, and can be, otherwise.

Aligning such effort with a particular interest on intersectionality is still recent in social and cultural theory, including names such as Amade M'Charek (2017) and Rebecca Jordan-Young (2011). The concept of circulations is particularly inspired by M'Charek, which comprehends circulations as performative, in the connections between temporality and materiality. In the author's readings, circulations re/make subjects and their embodiments – they “bring out identities”, “make context” and “are permanent”, in the sense such flows are “only cut actively” (M'CHAREK, 2017). This reading is important to better apprehend how *travesti* embodiments are shaped through the complex networks of circulation of female hormones and other body modifications, which are not excluded from “cuts” of violence, particularly in the form of ostensive police operations⁵⁶.

Another important reason to do so is the incorporation of recent studies on HIV/AIDS, particularly within trans studies. Such emphasis has been centered in the Anglophone literature.

⁵⁵ Again, this is mostly inspired by a Haraway-informed reading on frontier thinking (2014). Another inspiration for this reading comes from the philosophy of difference, namely Deleuze (1995).

⁵⁶ FSTS readings also influence a certain tone of writing, as many of these authors combine form and content in proposing new forms of knowledge-making, including academic writing.

Although works on HIV/AIDS and culture have a long history in a range of different fields, there is a recent revival, by trans scholars, on this subject, and broader questions on sexuality and desire, as well as its intersections with the medical definition of “transsexualism”, including names such as Eva Hayward (GOSSETT & HAYWARD, 2020) and J. R. Latham (2019). These readings will be central in the **Second Chapter**, in the nuances between the “transsexual” and *travesti* categories, mainly in forms of subjectivity.

These bases have guided this work into bridges with the field of public history. The “public” is here understood precisely as what emerges in such entanglements between science, state, and society. Although the concept of the “public sphere” originally traces back to Jürgen Habermas’ writings in 1962 (1989), my understanding of the term is mostly inspired by further feminist, queer, and post/decolonial writings (FRASER, 1990, CALHOUM, 1992; SQUIRES, 2002; to mention a few). In such readings, the “public sphere” is understood in the process of re/making – as a frontier, we could say, where difference and inequality is re/produced and re/imagined or, in other words, performatized⁵⁷. The public sphere is not simply a shared space of decision-making, but it is also a critical take on who is speaking, for and about whom – or, even more deeply, who is indeed allowed to speak, and who has the capacity to hear, and in which ways, these voices. “Public opinion” is a multi-layered concept enmeshed with a complex history of difference and inequality, particularly of race, gender, and class (SPIVAK, 2010; BUTLER, 2016; COLLINS & BILGE, 2020, to mention a few).

Such definition also crosses a particular notion, or project, of public history – inspired by queer public history writings (BELOLAN & CASE, 2019; JETTE, 2019; STEIN, 2022), as well as writings on trans studies (STRYKER & BLACKSTON, 2022). Here, questions on publics versus counter-publics, multi-layered publics, community-building strategies, and tensions and disputes regarding public perception – related to broader debates on the question of the public sphere – take centrality. Therefore, the “public” itself – from “public health” to “public decency” – is understood as a complex concept, as in ways in which differences and inequalities constantly re/shape and re/construct the notion of the “public” itself. The public is re/created in the entanglements between science, state, and society, where travestilities, in their complexity, are differentially located across history.

⁵⁷ Throughout the thesis, constructions with “/” emphasize the complexity of historical processes, that both can, for example, “reproduce” sets of inequality, but also “produce” new, alternative, forms of difference-making. Other textual constructions include, for example, “in/distinctions”, emphasizing a blurred frontier line. This is inspired by several references mobilized in the thesis, including Haraway (2014) and Vergueiro (2016).

Historiography at the limits of language

In general, we can state that, contemporarily, the *travesti* identity is understood within the broader transfeminine umbrella – thus, a “trans”, or “trans*”⁵⁸, gender identity. Therefore, the use of female pronouns is widely understood as recommended and more adequate, and is already becoming more common, particularly in younger generations, including outside activist and academic circles. This recent shift also produces effects on historiographical writing.

Here, it is important to point out that Portuguese, like other Romance languages, is a strongly gendered language. Most nouns are deemed male or female, with the use of “o/um” or “a/uma” [*the/this*] – a “table”, for example, is a female noun. Therefore, gender-neutral language becomes particularly complex, when compared to languages such as English, with alternatives such as “they/them” pronouns. Although today “standardized” in female ones, historically, the use of pronouns for *travestis* is complex, including male, female, neither, or both, and with noticeable distinctions between first and third-person reports. This is often lost in translation to English and, therefore, whenever relevant, the original quotations of documents across this thesis will be included, as in: “[use of male pronouns]”.

Language, in general, presents great challenges to this thesis. Even if we consider that such choices are always political in academic writing, these are particularly controversial terms, to this day. Therefore, it is inevitable that the thesis takes specific language choices that imply certain positions on ongoing questions of sex, gender, and so on. This includes the affirmation that *travestis* and other trans people exist, and that self-determination should be respected. This crosses, as well, the use of the term cisgender, or simply cis, as an adjective, inserted in a broader range of concepts, as previously mentioned. However, such choices should not dismiss historical specificities and nuances. Therefore, the use of the term in brackets, across the thesis, indicates that this is a present-day reading, with contemporary terminologies, to historical periods where it was not used as such, as in: “(cis)”.

Another important position is the use of the term “sex work”. This is a long and complex debate, particularly in feminist theory. Although these will be not developed in-depth in this text, my perspective is one that follows the demands of *travesti* sex workers themselves, mainly in the demand for decriminalization, and that understands sex work as a form of labor. Understanding it so means comprehending forms of labor in a highly unequal capitalist society,

⁵⁸ Trans*” is a broad analytical category mobilized in recent years by academics around the world as an umbrella term for gender-crossing identities and embodiments, including the works of Halberstam (2017), in the U.S., and Radi (2019), in Argentina. As such, it is not limited to identities such as “transsexual” and “transgender”, and provides concepts such as “trans* specialities” and “trans* temporalities”, with an important (although tense and disputed) influence of queer studies.

thus outside a perspective on sex work that simply emphasizes individual choice – but rather focuses on the complexities of agency/structure. Additionally, it is important to emphasize that “prostitution”, particularly street prostitution, is a specific form of sex work that crosses many of the stories here mentioned. Although in many of the reports mentioned across the discussion this is a morally charged term, as well as deemed attached to criminality and drug abuse, this is not my own perspective – indeed, I believe studying it emphasizes the need for decriminalization and the de-stigmatization of sex work from a historical perspective.

Finally, there is the term “*travesti*” itself. The term will be used in italic, and will not be translated. This follows the demands of the present-day *travesti* moment, and my own perspective as well, that translating *travesti* to terms such as “transvestite” or “travesty” is improper and limited considering its historical and cultural nuances (similar to other deemed cultural gender identities such as “*hijra*”). Additionally, although today *travestis* are understood within the broader trans umbrella, particularly the transfeminine one, many *travestis* authors have emphasized that the constant repetition of “trans people” as a generic, all-encompassing term may invisibilize the *travesti* identity. Therefore, sometimes, throughout the thesis, I use the expression “*travesti* and other trans people”. This is also an effort to re/place such categories, and centralize *travesti* stories and experiences textually, as well as with respect to their centrality in Brazilian history. The use of terms such as “*travestis* and other people”, thus, de/center and re/shuffle such notions, in the context of the centrality of such category in this thesis.

With that in mind, it is possible to investigate questions on historiographical conceptualization. As a whole, the question of classification and, more broadly, the act of naming, is a central subject in queer and trans history (FAUSTO-STERLING, 2000; HALBERSTAM, 2017), considering the possibilities and challenges of mobilizing contemporary terms to describe previous historical moments. If, on one hand, this can lead to anachronisms and distortions, on the other, applying these terms to the past can work as a way to connect dots, shedding light on an often erased and diminished part of history. It also plays a significant political role, in the present, where these subjects and communities are still subjected to marginalization and violence – including in the statements these are simply “trends” or “external influences”.

At the same time, it raises a methodological challenge – both by the diffuse origin of the archives, and by the fact that these stories often blur strict, classical, historical

periodization⁵⁹. Therefore, even if this research is more strictly situated in the late 80s, in the democratic transition, the efforts on *travesti* history demand to move back and forth in chronological time – which, in fact, builds a distinct repertoire and understanding of history and historiography itself. According to Jack Halberstam (2005), queer temporalities disrupt and challenge normative concepts of time, including linear narratives of progress and “success” informed by notions of capitalist productivity and Westernized civility. Therefore, moving back in time, historically, also means opening alternative modes of understanding and living in the world. In *travesti* history, this can apply to the disruption that this history may cause into more traditional ways to frame the distinction between democracy and dictatorship in the mid and late 80s in Brazil, as well as the category of “*travesti*” itself, settled in a set of frontiers.

In such reading, stories of the past open to creative and unexpected forms of agency and resistance in challenging times – of different ways to live and to express one’s identity and body. The strangeness and often awkwardness of the terms used – in the magazine report, and even by herself, to the present-day reader – are possibilities to, in the present and future, “assemble a vision of new things” through this sense of the unfamiliar and the unknown (MARSHALL; MURPHY & TORTORICI, 2014, p.10). Therefore, the ways of writing and doing (public) history are also “in transition” – the nature of the research itself demands the dis/place of epistemologies and methods, as well as the re/shaping of questions.

In terms of methods, accessing different forms of archival sources is particularly important in understanding how these forms of classification interact with each other – from official State reports, to notes of the homosexual movement, and the voices of *travestis* in first-person reports presented in documents and other primary sources. Classifications are extremely variable in this historical period – as have been widely researched by scholars on both homosexualities and travestilities. Larissa Tanganelli (2019), for example, lists at least 17 names used as offenses, during the period of “Lampião da Esquina” (1978-1981), an underground publication by the homosexual movement during the Civic-Military Dictatorship. Many, with difficult direct translations to English: “fags [bichas or veados, literally “deer”], “dools” [bonecas], *baitolas*, bambi, third sex, middle’s column, perverted, inverted, immorals, *xibungos*, effeminate, falses to the body [*falsos ao corpo*], *maricas*, mentally sick, fruity [*frutinhas*]”.

These classifications have different historical origins as well, crossing scientific, religious, state and socio-cultural definitions and nomenclatures, including some used

⁵⁹ The question of historical periodization is further described in the **First Chapter**, with the particularities of *travesti* history and *travesti* subjectivity being developed in the **Second Chapter**.

specifically in certain regions of Brazil. Some are today mobilized by the social movements as empowering, in certain contexts, while some are perceived solely as derogatory. Finally, a few have fallen out of use throughout history, being outdated or even unintelligible in the present-day, especially for younger generations.

Grounding archival sources and methods

With that being said, the question of first-person reports (hence, how one names oneself) also becomes central – which crosses the questions of who is speaking, about who, how, and to whom, as well as who and how these voices are, and can be, heard (SPIVAK, 2010). Such question can be applied to archival research, as has been studied by queer and post/decolonial authors, from Halberstam (2005) to Saidiya Hartman (2008), emphasizing the power structures on the formation of archives, the creation and distribution of documents and their classification as properly “historical” and/or “archival” documents, as well as on taxonomies and classifications themselves, in the re/production of differences and inequalities. Writing in the field of trans studies, Rawson (2014) writes:

In its radical recontextualization of historical materials, the archive emerges as a discrete object of selection and representation that always involves silences and exclusions. (...) Thus, while archiving transgender materials is important for community and personal identity formation, political advocacy, and historical memory, it should be treated as a powerful mechanism of memory and identity with far-reaching impacts.

This is important as most of the sources analyzed for this thesis come from archives – which demands a further look into sources and methods. The main source of the documents analyzed for this research comes from the AEL [*Arquivo Edgard Leuenroth*], located at the University of Campinas (UNICAMP)⁶⁰. The archive is publically funded and was created in 1974. It has over 150 funds and collections, with a focus on social movements starting in the 60s in Brazil. The ones consulted for this research are mainly personal archives from former leaders of the Brazilian homosexual movement, acquired through donations. Overall, the archive is historically centered on the Dictatorship period, including important and rare records. The archive also has several reports on the AIDS crisis, including those after the period, in the 90s and 2000s, in more recent fund acquisitions.

At the time, many funds were just acquired through a new batch of donations, or were being organized (as the photo here presented). This is particularly challenging at AEL, since

⁶⁰ Local archival research was held biweekly for two months, with further consultations in its online databases.

funds and collections often include a wide range of types of sources, from posters, to personal and public letters, originals and copies of official documents, and newspaper cuts. Additionally, there is an ongoing effort to digitalize documents. Therefore, even after the on-site period, archival research was kept being held through the access of the AEL digital archives, besides personal digitalization.

Specifically, three fonds were extensively consulted in-person. The “João Antonio Mascarenhas” fond, the “Turma OK” fond, and the “Grupo Outra Coisa” fond⁶¹. The “Mascarenhas” fond, donated in 1989, ranges from 1943 to 1988, being sub-divided in 8 groups – one of the largest and more known fonds in AEL, was one the main fond analyzed for this thesis. “Turma OK” ranges from 1963 to 1990, with 16 folders, being still under organization (photo below), and “Grupo Outra Coisa” ranges from 1980 to 1984 with a couple of folders.

Although the Mascarenhas was the most extensively researched for this thesis, the other two folders were also of extreme importance, as they have been not subjected to as much research, particularly in the English language, with documents that are still unavailable otherwise, outside AEL itself. These new archival sources also raise ongoing questions of periodization, as the history of MHB is convoluted in terms of origins across Brazil, and internal disputes and tensions (for more complete takes, see Facchini [2003]; Simões & Facchini [2009]).

Another reason to do so was the nature of the fonds. “Turma OK”, from Rio de Janeiro, was formed in 1962 – however, its place as the first homosexual organization in Brazil is contested, as the group was mostly focused on networks of sociability, unlike groups such as SOMOS or GGB, which were more strictly political. Although such historicity will not be debated in this thesis⁶², in archival terms, it is important to emphasize that the “Turma OK” includes more documents about cultural elements and the day-to-day life of homosexuals at the time, compared to the “Mascarenhas” fond, which is mostly focused on the connections with the State and with scientific and medical circles. Again, this is a complex history – one that is ongoing, in historiographical research – with organizations such as SOMOS having dissident organizations already by 1980, just two years after it was funded. One of these groups was “Outra Coisa”, which formed the short-lived MHA (Autonomous Homosexual Movement, *Movimento Homossexual Autônomo*). Although the group did not have as much impact as

⁶¹ The digitally available “Paulo Ottoni” fond was consulted as well, although the documents were not included in the final thesis.

⁶² Conceptually, this would also demand a more in-depth analysis of what can be defined as “political”. Although discussions are made on this topic at the end of the **Second Chapter**, a more in-depth analysis of MHB itself is needed to make grounded statements in such periodization.

others existing at the time, it is known as one of (if not the) first to produce documents on the AIDS crisis, already in 1982⁶³.



Figure 5: Records at the AEL Archive.
Photo taken by the author, August 2022. The fond was being organized when the photo was taken.

Curiously, at the time, AEL was presenting an exhibition on *travesti* and trans history, after the acquisition of the personal archive of a trans activist – although, located in the late 90s and early 00s. Documents from earlier periods were found in other types of archive, related to the “homosexual” movement more broadly. This illustrates an ongoing challenge in the works on the history of *travestis*, as there are little to no specific archival sources, or even fonds, particularly in Brazil⁶⁴.

Therefore, particularly in the **Second Chapter**, a wider range of sources will be analyzed. This includes the entry into public digital archives from some of the most popular

⁶³ I thank the AEL archival team for the generous recommendation of searching these fonds, after our conversations about my research interests, for this thesis.

⁶⁴ An extremely recent effort include AHMUTHA (Historical Archive of the Transgender Museum of Art and History), released in 2023 – the first of its type in Brazil. Efforts abroad include the Museo Travesti, in Peru, and the Museum of Transology, in the UK.

Brazilian newspapers at the time, and to this day, namely “O Globo”⁶⁵, “Folha”⁶⁶, and “Estadão”⁶⁷, with the use of strategic keywords, such as “trans”, “*transsexual*” [transexual], “*travesti*”, “*entendido*”, “*transformista*” [transvestite], and “AIDS”. Such effort also opened space to understand a broader perspective on cultural discussions at the time, by the observation of this form of public media, particularly with ongoing moral panics during the AIDS crisis.

There is, doing so, an effort into finding first-person reports by *travestis* themselves, which were not found in previous archival research, for this historical period. Another source mobilized in the Second Chapter are interviews made at the time, in different types of visual media, namely documentaries, as well as public media sources, namely television programs, available through independent publishing and/or streaming platforms, and/or shared by other researchers.

Similarly to newspapers, there is here an effort into finding *travesti* and trans first-person reports and filling gaps encountered in previous archival research, with a particular attention to broader cultural discussions in the public sphere. This does not mean these are ways to access the “truth” but, rather, ways to access different takes on one’s subjectivity in a way that can be contrasted with the takes on them. This combination creates the possibility to connect these personal, individual takes, with broader social and cultural constructions on *travestis*.

Additionally, I was able to receive, digitally, personal donations from scholars working on *travesti* and trans history, including newspaper reports, book segments, and official documents digitalized from public sources. Many of them were also consulted in informal interviews in order to better apprehend ongoing discussions on the subject. These documents will not be deeply analyzed here, but they already contributed, here as a form of consultancy, for the arguments here presented.

This includes, as well, fonds from AEL that could not be analyzed for this research, given its limited length. Namely, within lesbian and feminist movements and the question of inclusion of *travestis* and trans women. Another possible branch of studies comes from the connections with other female sex workers, briefly mentioned in the **Second Chapter**. Although such fonds – such as “GALF” or “SOMOS”⁶⁸ – have been consulted, and present an interesting and relevant story on their own, they were not included for the purpose of this thesis.

⁶⁵ Available at: O Globo / <https://oglobo.globo.com/acervo/>.

⁶⁶ Available at: Folha / <https://acervo.folha.com.br/index.do>.

⁶⁷ Available at: Estadão / <https://www.estadao.com.br/acervo/>.

⁶⁸ The full list of AEL fonds is available at: AEL / <https://ael.ifch.unicamp.br/pf-ael/2022-09/relatoriofundos.pdf>.

Other efforts, for future research, also include connections with transmasculine movements and the question of the “male transsexual”, and the connections with other *travesti* movements in Latin America.

Crossing crossings: On positionality

Finally, it is important to emphasize ongoing political and cultural issues, related to the trans population, which also crosses my own, present-day, positionality, as a trans woman/*travesti* myself. As of April 2023, the world is facing a generalized backlash on trans rights by the so-called “anti-gender movement”, centered economically in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). The recent report produced by GATE (Global Action for Trans Equality) points out a heated cultural war, where anti-trans legislation has spiked in ever-growing funding and socio-political support to such initiatives. Countries that already observe in practice the effects of such movement have seen a rise in hate crimes against, and suicide attempts by, trans people (GATE, 2023).

The discourses associated with such movement are growingly radical as well. Recently, in the US, on March 2023, a speaker at one of the most important conferences of the Republican Party called for an “eradication of transgenderism from public life”⁶⁹. What were legislation bills centered on children and female athletes are now expanding to books and certain terms being banned from schools, general health care access, and prohibition of gender-crossing artistic performances. In the UK, a few months before, in October 2022, a report on how (cis)⁷⁰ lesbians felt “pressured” to have sex with trans women included a quote from an activist who advocated for the public lynching of trans women in her personal blog⁷¹. Examples are widespread throughout the globe – from Europe and America to Asia, Africa, and Oceania.

Even in the context of a new “pink tide”⁷² in Latin America, Brazil is not excluded from this backlash. Recently, in March 2024, at the Chamber of Deputies⁷³, Brazil’s most-voted

⁶⁹ Source: Human Rights Campaign / <https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/human-rights-campaign-extremists-at-cpac-laid-bare-hatred-at-root-of-vile-legislation-targeting-trans-people>

⁷⁰ “Cis” refers to “cisgender” people, who identify as the sex/gender assigned at birth (cis women, cis men). The term is here in brackets as this is a contested term in this context, being opposed by the anti-gender movement and trans-exclusionary radical feminists (“TERFs”)/“gender critical” feminists.

⁷¹ Source: Trans Safety Network / <https://transafety.network/posts/bbc-cover-up/>

⁷² “Pink tide” refers to a wave of left-wing governments in Latin America, during the 1990s and 2000s. After a period of decline during the 2010s, a new “pink tide” has resurged in recent years, although its consistency in the short to long term is still highly debatable by political scholars.

⁷³ Brazil has two Legislatures in the National Congress, the Chamber of Deputies (lower house) and the Federal Senate (higher house).

deputy in the past October 2022 elections⁷⁴ wore a wig in his discourse during Women’s Day ironizing “men who say they feel like women”. Bills on “neutral language” and the access of trans youth to healthcare are at the center of anti-trans legislation in the country. This crosses a broader recent history of discourses and moral panics involving so-called “gender ideology”, with origins in the 1980s and global spread by the mid-90s (MIGUEL, 2016).

The first time this research project was written, in 2020, Jair Bolsonaro was the president of Brazil. The Minister of the former “Ministry of Woman, Racial Equity and Human Rights” ministry – now, called “Ministry of the Women, Family, and Human Rights” (MDH) – Damares Alves, famously said “It’s a new era in Brazil. Boys wear blue and girls wear pink”⁷⁵. After decades of advancements in rights, there was a noticeable pushback – sex and gender were back to being a frontier that could not be crossed.

All this comes embedded by a defense of a strict definition and binary division of sex/gender – the ideal of the nuclear patriarchal family, deeply attached to the ideal of a white and Christian nation-state. Biological “truth” – the “truth” of the gametes, in its most recent version – is associated growingly apart from scientific discourse itself (where sex differentiation is deemed a highly complex concept). There is a politics of fear, under constant moral panics (CRITCHER, 2008)⁷⁶, that seeks to exclude trans people from public life, and which has been gathering growing support as a result.

In this discourse, trans people are at the center, but also at the tip of the iceberg, as this movement – particularly in the case of the US – also expands to anti-abortion laws, and even the end of no-fault divorce⁷⁷. Here, the question of fertility and a defense of a “naturalness” of motherhood takes centrality as well, with women being pushed back to the privacy of the nuclear family – a backlash that goes as back as the 60s and 70s, with the sexual revolution (ALLYN, 2016).

As a trans women/*travesti* myself, writing this thesis in this scenario has been particularly challenging. The stories that I will write here appear to be less distant in time – in fact, it often sounds frighteningly close to what we are seeing today across the world. Trans people are set as outsiders of the “public life” – as inherently dangerous, and as mentally and

⁷⁴ Elections in Brazil are mandatory and on biannual terms, for different Presidential, Legislative, Gubernatorial, State and Municipal positions, which alternate every four years, with the exception of the Federal Senate (with alternate every eight years).

⁷⁵ Source: Folha / <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2019/01/menino-veste-azul-e-menina-veste-rosa-diz-damares.shtml>.

⁷⁶ The concept of moral panics is further developed in the **First Chapter**.

⁷⁷ No-fault divorce is an acquired right – achieved in the 70s and 80s, across the world – that guarantees that either party can dissolve the marriage without proving wrongdoings judicially.

morally inferior. Trans bodies are described in gruesome detail, close to animals and other creatures – they/we⁷⁸ are deemed less than human. Trans people are described to be “infesting” and “spreading” the world in what is today referred to as “transgenderism” – they/we “turn the world upside down”, corrupting the natural, and/or divine, laws and traditions.

Throughout the past two years, I have lived in four other countries – Hungary, Austria, Japan, and Portugal. As a result, I had to navigate different placements as a trans person. A body and a story in frontiers. I was able to change my own personal documents in 2019, in Brazil, but this wouldn’t be possible in Hungary, for example – the only country in Europe where trans people are not, in any circumstance, authorized to change their name and sex in their official documents. In Japan, I would have to pass a wide range of bureaucracy to be authorized to do so. I would have to undergo gender reassignment surgery (GRS), be unmarried, and I would not be authorized to have underage children, a remaining of historical eugenic policies.

At the same time, in such crossings, I had the chance to meet vibrant queer communities in divergent landscapes of law and societal acceptance, including some under critical political moments. I faced several challenges in my access to healthcare and had to navigate ever-changing readings of my trans-ness, queerness, and womanhood, if not also race and ethnicity. I met trans migrants running away from what should be home countries, where they felt marginalized and threatened. I easily navigated many spaces with my white skin but faced stereotypes when I mentioned where I was from, or where my accent was noticeable. I attended protests and events that locally mourned the death of trans people.

Not by chance, I opted to write the final part of this Introduction in the first person. In times when trans people are growly dehumanized⁷⁹, attesting one’s story like this is also an act of resistance. In alliance with many of the references mentioned in this thesis – some of which are currently, or in the process of being banned, in part of the world⁸⁰ – it is also a way to understand writing as a form of resistance, and of stating the presence, our presence, of trans people, as subjects, including subjects of knowledge.

I understand this thesis as positioned in a series of crossings – of transitions of the body and the world that it habits. Preciado writes that the crossings [*prácticas de cruce*] of sex and migration put their subjects in the “limits of citizenship (...) and even humanity” – a “radical

⁷⁸ The “they/we” construction is inspired by Anzaldúa (2021).

⁷⁹ The concept of “dehumanization” is further analyzed by Haslam (2006).

⁸⁰ Across the world, many academic disciplines are at the crux of moral panics and conservative backlashes – from the ban of Gender Studies in Hungary to the opposition of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the US.

transformation not only of the geographical, linguistic and the body itself, but the human community that welcomes or rejects them” (PRECIADO, 2020). With so, I hope that this thesis will work as an analysis of the set of discourses and practices that underline these ideals, from a historical standpoint, including how trans people take centrality in such cultural wars. Therefore, I also seek to open space for dissonance and resistance. How we can learn from history also as ways to re/learn strategies and re/create different outcomes.

As much as writing this text, under such challenging times, is often painful, crossing wounds of this im/personal story⁸¹, it is also an opportunity to raise voices, and to celebrate travesti and other forms of trans resistance, joy, and love. In times where the closing of frontiers in strict binaries has led trans people into the margins of humanity itself, celebrating them/us, and their/ours complex history, is an act of understanding frontiers as open spaces for experimentation, creativity, and livable futures. As spaces for unexpected encounters and alliances – for another idea and collective defense of what is, and could be, the public sphere.

⁸¹ “Im/personal” refers to the blurred lines between self and other – in other words, how “personal” reports can tell something about the world around it.

First Chapter: Tarantulas

“Am I the one who dies? Or I am the one who kills?”

Quem morre sou eu? Ou sou eu quem mata?

LINN DA QUEBRADA, in the song “Bomba pra caralho”

Tarantulas’ arms, tarantulas’ bite: *Travestis* in the city



Figure 6: “Civil Police ‘fights’ AIDS arresting travestis”.

In the original, “Polícia Civil ‘combate’ a AIDS prendendo travestis”.

“Folha de São Paulo” headline, March 19, 1987.

In March 1, 1987, one of the headlines of the “Folha de São Paulo” newspaper – already at the time one of the most popular in the country⁸² – states: “The Civil Policy ‘fights’ AIDS arresting *travestis*”. Started on the day before, already with 56 detentions and expected to continue throughout the year, the operation is described as a “special policemen command that seeks to detain in *flagrante delicto*, *travestis* in the main places of *trottoir* practice (...) in public zones”. Throughout the report, *travestis* are solely referred to with male pronouns [*os travestis*]⁸³.

The historical context of the operation is remarkable as well. It dates back almost two years after the end of the Civic-Military Dictatorship⁸⁴ that lasted in Brazil from April 1964 to May 1985. It is, thus, located in an already officially democratic regime. This young democracy

⁸² “Folha de São Paulo” (formerly “Folha da Noite”) was founded in 1921 and circulates to the present-day, as the most (or at least one of the most) popular newspapers in the country. It has a well-structured digital archive, consulted for this research, and is publically available at <https://acervo.folha.com.br/index.do>.

⁸³ As stated in the **Introduction**, although the use of female pronouns to refer to *travestis* is today standardized, this is complex historically, including in clashes between first-person and third-person reports.

⁸⁴ As stated in the **Introduction**, the term “Civic-Military” refers to the fact that this authoritarian regime was highly supported by civilians in its early period. As will be further developed in this chapter, this regime was rather unusual in the sense that it had the appearance of a democratic regime, including elections every 4 years and operating in a techno-bureaucratic structure, often based in legal groundings.

was, in many ways, still flawed, under a broader process of democratic transition, with indirect elections being held in 1985, and still under the same Federal Constitution as the Dictatorship. A new one, in place to this day, would be approved in September 1988, where the rights of historically marginalized groups would play an important role – but with the so-called homosexual population being left out, even with noticeable efforts to include “sexual orientation” in the realm of discriminations recognized by the Constitution.

The goal of Tarantula is described as to “scare the clientele [*freguesia*] and, with this, diminish the disease propagation”. The police officer in charge of the operation, Márcio Prudente Cruz, stated that the “times of Nostradamus have arrived”, arguing they were living in a “pre-apocalyptic” era. Curiously, the term *freguesia*, in Brazilian Portuguese, can also be translated to “parish” (having, then, a religious innuendo) – shaping a strong contrast between “inside” and “outside”, “us” and “others”, “victims” and “villains” – the ones infected and the ones being infected.

Cruz further states that the so-mentioned *travestis* would not be submitted to “AIDS exams”, but that they would answer legal procedures in the matters of public decency [*ultraje ao pudor*] and the crime of venereal contagion. Both laws originate from 1940, in an earlier authoritarian regime in Brazil (Estado Novo⁸⁵), having been historically written and put into law enforcement in the persecution of sex workers, often in the matters of “public health”. This is true in Operation Tarantula as well, with *travestis* in the frontiers between male and female “prostitution” – being referred to in the report as male, but suffering a set of practices historically directed towards female sex workers.

Finally, Cruz states the name “Tarantula” is because these animals “have several arms (...) and the goal [of this operation] is to reach several streets and avenues where the indecent *trottoir* is made”. “Folha de São Paulo”’s reporter further writes that, in popular cultural believe, the tarantula bite can lead to *delirium* and collective hysteria (tarantism⁸⁶). It is also mentioned in the report the existence of a 1955 horror movie, “Tarantula!”, where a failed scientist’s experiment leads to a creation of a giant spider that escapes the laboratory, growing larger over time, and wreaks the local inhabitants.

In this short newspaper segment, it is already possible to observe the complex entanglements involved in this operation. At its base, it is a ground-based police enforcement

⁸⁵ As stated in the **Introduction**, Estado Novo went from 1937 to 1945, led by Getúlio Vargas. More about the regime, in its discourses and practices, will be mentioned in this chapter.

⁸⁶ “Tarantism” is a form of mass psychogenic illness historically known to be caused by the bite of a tarantula, leading to a form of dancing mania (although today such link is understood as unrelated). The term originates from Southern Italy, in the 11th century, and continued, since then, to have track in popular culture.

operation. Still, the discourses and practices entangled with it connect a myriad of distinct elements. Firstly, law enforcement, since *travestis* would be persecuted and arrested under specific laws of “public decency” and “venereal contagion”. Secondly, on the intersections between state and science, in the name of “public health”, with the ongoing AIDS crisis as the main argument for the operation. Thirdly, with the cultural (here, strongly religious) elements presented, with the police officer in charge stating these were “post-apocalyptic” times, and the tarantula being a popular image associated with madness, destruction and chaos. All these elements shape a specific set of differences and inequalities – they set frontiers, framing what it means to be a “*travesti*” and, thus, who is or is not a “*travesti*”.

The tarantula is a relevant image in its own, throughout the report – in a sense, it refers both to the police and the *travestis*. Here, *travestis* – with their *trottoir* throughout the city – are described as tarantulas with many legs, a form of dangerous parasite to be eliminated. At the same time, the police is itself animalized, becoming a tarantula to fight the pest, as indicated by the police officer in charge. The “Tarantula!” comparison written in the newspaper has a double meaning as well, depending on the point of view: the havoc caused by the giant spider growing larger over time can be described for both the police officers (here, representing so-called “civilians” – the parish) and the *travestis* (subjected to an arbitrary and violent operation, with little to none guaranteed rights).

Travestis are described as “male prostitutes” who are a danger to society – thus, inserted as outsiders of this same society, as invaders. They manifest this in their body and their behaviors, including where and when they walk in the city⁸⁷, being figures visibly identifiable by the police. In this situation, their self-identity is not a place – what matters is their image. The “Tarantula!” imagery mobilized in the report is remarkable as well, pointing out to a certain bodily monstrosity – an excessive, abnormal, dangerous, body. This monstrosity is associated as well with a kind of imminent danger in science and technology development: a kind of failed experiment with no clear mad scientist – indeed, the mad scientist and the monster appears to be one and the same.

Travestis exist in the public space and the public imaginary, but their existence itself is deemed both indecent and contagious. It is further remarkable that *travestis* are specifically the ones persecuted and arrested by the operation, as the causes of the AIDS crisis, although its goal is to “scare the clientele [*freguesia*]” – symbolically, a way to protect the parish. The parish,

⁸⁷ Perlongher (1993) emphasizes how, in such forms of “male prostitution”, territorialities are enmeshed with identities and embodiment (in Portuguese, “corporalidades”, or “corporificação”), including for *travestis*.

here, represents a passive and imagined “us” – in contrast to an imagined “Other” that should be removed from the public: the *travesti*.

“Dictatorship and homosexualities”: *Travestis amid science, state and society*

Re/shaping discourses/practices: On the construction of internal enemies

One of the few publications in English about homosexualities, and its connections to notions of nation-state, hegemonic masculinity⁸⁸, and militarism, within the Dictatorship, comes from Cowan (2016). The author works with right-wing politics in Brazil during the Cold War, emphasizing the centrality of moral panics⁸⁹ and moral politics in these authoritarian (yet socially supported) regimes. The author writes about the historical shaping and framing of this set of views on family, gender, sexuality and morality – in what I describe, throughout this chapter, as state, society and science interactions⁹⁰. The author argues for an ideological continuum between the Vargas’ Estado Novo regime and the Civic-Military Dictatorship, in what he calls a “regressive idealism”, grounded by discourses on anticommunism, eugenics, antiliberalism and antimodernism, where hegemonic masculinity, the military and the youth played a central role. This conservative discourse was combined with an ideal of the technical, the developmental and the patriotic, in a period of increasing industrialization and urbanization.

Already by the 30s, State and societal discourse flirted with ideas that modernity was deviating gender and sexuality conventions, and the natural/divine structure of the nuclear family, denouncing these via pathologizing, and even eugenistic, arguments (COWAN, 2016). The government already here centralized educational and family law policies grounded on “morality” – as a way of going against forms of “subversion”. Similarly, certain State apparatus in legal groundings, such as loitering laws [“*lei da vadiagem*”] were also structured in this early period, later mobilized and expanded in the Dictatorship law and law enforcement. Created in 1942 in Brazil⁹¹ and similar to other laws across the world at the time⁹², these laws were historically used to target minority groups, such as homeless people, drug users and sex workers, justifying police brutality and arbitrary arrests in the name of “public order”.

⁸⁸ The term “hegemonic masculinity” underlines that this a specific form of masculinity, following the field of masculinity studies, within gender studies, led by authors such as Connell (2005).

⁸⁹ “Moral panics” is a concept that will be further analyzed in this chapter, here inspired by the writings of Critcher (2008).

⁹⁰ As stated in the **Introduction**, this triad is understood as necessarily relational. These entanglements here cross social movements and the State, as well as cultural and religious understandings, in the shaping of public perception. Science, technology and medicine crossings will be further analyzed in the **Second Chapter**.

⁹¹ The last imprisonments authorized by loitering laws were held in Brazil in 1990.

⁹² Loitering laws can be traced back to the UK, in the late 19th century. Similar laws also existed throughout the Americas, as well as within the Iberian Peninsula, during the same period.

Additionally, science and religion were mixed, if not blurred, in the structuring of these discourses and practices. Analyzed in-depth by Cowan (2016), ranging from Catholic writings to eugenics, sexology and criminology texts, these intellectual works circulated in translations and reinterpretations in conservative Brazilian circles, leading to direct influences in the government⁹³. At the same time, given its range of influences and fronts, the Estado Novo regime itself had divergences with certain right-wing groups, mainly those invested in forms of “re-moralization” or “re-Christianization” (including conservative Catholic and Nazi-fascist groups). The government also kept “assistentialist” [*assistencialismo*] and populist practices in alliance with social movements (including workers, women and black communities – some of which gained their first set of acquired rights in this period)⁹⁴.

With this, Cowan (2016) points out key differences between these regimes. Firstly, and mainly, during the Civic-Military Dictatorship, the “enemy” became internal. While in Estado Novo the enemy was the Soviet Union, in the Dictatorship the enemy was already inside Brazil. The “subversive” figure was in the breast of the nuclear family – the communist hidden in plain sight. Morality was centralized in State discourse and practice, and more progressive policies from the Estado Novo regime, in alliance with social movements, were abandoned. The dangerous “Other” was now an internal enemy, a kind of dangerous parasite within the nation and the household, both intrinsically attached.

As a whole, there is a constellation of conservative discourses that connect what were, before, separate entities and terminologies. In this understanding, modernization would be leading to decay – the dangers of the big cities, with alcoholism, criminality and prostitution, and of the dangerous impact that modern art forms such as cinema and theater would have on an easily influenced youth. This “moral crisis” led to “spiritualized socialization” and “masculinization” practices, grounded by the principles of “national security”, “morality” and going against “subversion” – here, understood as a form of “communism”. In summary, “these various elements (...) united eugenics, masculinization, antimodern moral panic, and militant vigilance against communist subversion, laying the groundwork for decades of conflating immorality with communism” (COWAN, 2016, p.25).

⁹³ For the purpose of this thesis, the nuances of these texts, and their circulations, will not be developed in-depth.

⁹⁴ As will be stated in the **Second Chapter**, the emergence of homosexual sociability spaces date back to the 50s and 60s in Brazil, in an early form (compared to other social movements). This is cut short already by 1964, with the coup d'état.

After the 1964's coup, the democratic period after the Estado Novo⁹⁵ was framed as causing a set of evils, including the rise of grassroots social movements, now seen as a necessary focus of vigilance and suspicion by the military security forces. Therefore, "homosexuality" was understood as inherently "subversive" – and against a (naturally/divinely) established set of values within the so-called "morality and good behaviors" [*moral e bons costumes*] – in a broader group of enemy forces plotting against the State, under a neurotic anti-communist logic (COWAN, 2016).

The place of repression in/and the Civic-Military Dictatorship

Published in Portuguese, there is a broader field of studies of "dictatorship and homosexualities" that gained track in 2014 (GREEN & QUINALHA, 2014)⁹⁶, including scholars that lived the origins of the movement, in the late 70s and early 80s, in their youth. Centered on the persecutions in the Civic-Military Dictatorship against "homosexuals", the term "homosexualities" emphasizes what is in fact a multiplicity of identities, bodies, and stories. Until the early 90s, "homosexual" was a broad term to refer to a range of gender and sexuality dissidence, including by grassroots social movements and their activists, which would, decades later, become the current "LGBTI" acronym in Brazil.

Cowan (2016) himself argues that the continuous moral panics re/produced⁹⁷ by the Dictatorship regime were in fact constitutive of the maintenance of the regime and the need for the continuity, if not expansion, of repressive practices. We can extend this argument for Operation Tarantula, in the blurred lines of the democratic transition and the ongoing history of Brazilian police brutality and deep-set militarism. A similar statement comes from Quinalha (2017, *translated from Portuguese*):

It was fundamental to create an appearance of large support from part of important society sectors to slow down the rhythm of the [democratic] opening and the intensity of the liberalization, mainly the moral. Super-estimate the social legitimacy of particular claims was an old strategy of the groups more aligned with the "hard-line" [*linha-dura*]⁹⁸ of the Brazilian Dictatorship, always pressing that their positions were hegemonic and unified the information, security and censorship communities.

⁹⁵ Estado Novo is also marked by a series of policies on race, particularly through flows of immigration that attempted to "whiten" the nation. Immigrations were strongly hierarchized based on their closer connection, or not, to whiteness, hence, intrinsically attached to scientific models of racial hierarchy at the time, related to notions of the "nation-state" and "civility".

⁹⁶ As stated in the **Introduction**, this field is strongly attached to the National Truth Commission.

⁹⁷ The use of "re/" is further explained in the Introduction, emphasizing a performative take on processes of production and reproduction, making and remaking, imagining and reimagining, and so on.

⁹⁸ As stated in the **Introduction**, the "hardline" was a segment of the military government that advocated for harsher forms of repression and further centralization of the State. They eventually became head of state, leading

Largely inspired by Cowan’s argument, although more specific to the Dictatorship itself, Quinalha (2021) argues that “homosexuality” was set at the center of a State discourse founded in a neurotic threat of an “internal enemy” – where homosexuality was deemed inherently “subversive”, a form of “degeneration” and corruption of the youth (QUINALHA, 2021, p.25). Also in a similar argument, Quinalha emphasizes the confluence of elements in this discourse – connecting elements as diverse as “pornography”, “dissolution of the family”, “youth domination” and “Marxism” (QUINALHA, 2021, p.55). This was in fact strategic for the regime, guaranteeing its legitimacy also in societal support, while grounded in conservative cultural values (QUINALHA, 2021, p.45, *translated from Portuguese*):

Mothers, families, religious groups and other citizens did not act, necessarily, for repulsion of a communist threat, but, indeed, by an almost atavistic feeling of auto protection of the social roles and traditional values they treasured when faced with the cultural shifts seen in the horizon.

Working specifically with the repressive State apparatus in his archival research in official State documents, Quinalha (2021) argues the Military regime had a noticeable difference between its discourse and its practices, in terms of repression. Although its discourse was somewhat cohesive, the practices were often personalized. The repression itself was also differentiated, with distinct practices between the censorship apparatus and police operations, such as Tarantula.

This constellation of discourse elements could produce disputes, tensions and divergences⁹⁹ – including in different practices within the State apparatus, often operating in a personalized matter – but, analytically, they constituted a unified, even if multiple, form of what we can call governmentality – as in a set of control techniques that shape subjectivities, including in forms of self-regulation, in the enmeshments of knowledge and power (FOUCAULT, 1984)¹⁰⁰.

On one hand, there was the censorship apparatus – with censors hired as public servants, under an authoritarian, yet techno-bureaucratic, state. Therefore, censorship practices were open and widely known by society in general – indeed, conservative groups often incentivized stricter forms of it, based on continuous moral panics that went back and forth between the “state” apparatus and civil “society”.

to the approval of AI-5, in 1968, and the Médici’s government, from 1969 to 1974, known as the “lead years” [*anos de chumbo*].

⁹⁹ These differences include the role of religion (including Catholic ideals, and anti-Semitism views), the ideal of “modernity”, in a moral, economic and political sense (including takes that advocated for a return to the rural and bucolic), and the proximity to the United States (including takes on a “doubly equal” evil).

¹⁰⁰ Such theoretical perspective is further mentioned in the **Introduction**.

According to Critcher (2008), a moral panic can be defined “as extreme forms of risk discourses integral to the process of moral regulation”, referring to social phenomena where there is an irrational widespread fear that appears to threaten the community or society. Such moral panics are often perpetuated by mass media, often in combination with policymakers. Analytically, it can guide the understanding of agents and their roles in history, and what I call “image and imaginaries” – in an entanglement with a similar concept in science and technology studies, although more specific to science itself, “controversy”, referring to the clash of ideas in knowledge-making (JASANOFF, 2012).

This reveals an important element in the Brazilian Civic-Military Dictatorship, which is its foundation on “ordinary legality”, a form of legal legitimacy even in a deeply authoritarian regime (QUINALHA, 2021, p.48). It also reveals, given the neurotic thread of an “internal enemy”, a noticeable effort by the military to form a “moral” education that puts citizens as censors themselves (QUINALHA, 2021, p.79) – a (govern)mentality of constant vigilance and “taking matters into your own hands”.

On the other hand, there were police operations, which were undoubtedly arbitrary, with the lack of any guaranteed rights for those persecuted¹⁰¹, vague legal justifications, and crude military force. Not by chance, police and death squads often operated side-by-side – a practice that, in fact, exists to the present-day, in so-called “militias”¹⁰² – outside the realm of the technobureaucratic, “legal” practices of the regime. Another ongoing issue comes to the fact that what would be the “civil policy” was (and in fact still is) militarized. Being a centrality of power on its own, the police often operated in the frontiers of legality and the State itself, with bribery practices being extremely common, and with the police often working with (or, rather, being the) criminals themselves.

At the same time, these police operations were often deemed possible by the vagueness of laws and the absolute lack of transparency and consistency in their application (QUINALHA, 2021, p.50). Counterintuitively, then, this apparent “openness” and “vagueness” of the laws were indeed mobilized to enforce centralizing and authoritarian practices, including in the dismissal of voices that would oppose or even describe the dictatorship as such (that kept operating in a discursive regime of “legality” and “legitimacy”).

¹⁰¹ With AI-5 (see: **Introduction**), from 1968 to 1978, there was no right for *habeas corpus*, meaning that those charged by the State could not pledge to court to report an unlawful detention or imprisonment

¹⁰² “Militias” are self-organized crime organizations led by current or former police officers, originating from the 70s, in Rio de Janeiro, and with great political power to this day.

Eliminating Others, shaping the “public”: On memory and violence

The 2014 Brazilian Truth Commission

The efforts on studying the persecution against today’s LGBTI population, particularly during the Brazilian Civic-Military Dictatorship, are historically recent. Although the first studies on “homosexuality” start in the mid and late 90s in Brazilian academia, the field of “dictatorship and homosexuality” emerge as such in the 2010s. This field is deeply attached with the National Truth Commission [*Comissão Nacional da Verdade*] starting in 2011 and having its final report released in 2014 – which included a side thematic text dedicated to “dictatorship and homosexuality” (COMISSÃO NACIONAL DA VERDADE, 2014b). In the same year, a book was published by some of the authors involved in the Commission, although not directly attached to it (GREEN & QUINALHA, 2014). As with other commissions in Latin America, the Brazilian Truth Commission is a response to an Amnesty Law, in this case the Brazilian 1979 Amnesty Law, which freed of charge former State, military, officials¹⁰³.

Historically, the commission was implemented rather late, compared to other similar efforts in the continent¹⁰⁴, and it had its own set of controversies. Different from other truth commissions, the Brazilian Commission was non-punitive, meaning that legal procedures were operated individually starting from the data collected and organized. Victims and executioners accused of Human Rights violations were called for testimony in non-mandatory attendance, and the commission had no obligation to publically disclose their findings.

Therefore, the final report on homosexualities (COMISSÃO NACIONAL DA VERDADE, 2014b) includes only a set of recommendations, both within criminal justice and in a wide set of politics of memorialization. While some of these efforts have later proven successful – such as the criminalization of LGBTphobia¹⁰⁵ and gender identity laws for trans people¹⁰⁶ – others, such as a formal State apology and reparation policies for victims, have not been yet achieved. It is important to remark, as well, that the only mention on “*travestis*” comes from this specific document – neither *travestis*, nor “homosexuals” in general, are mentioned

¹⁰³ As mentioned in the **Introduction**, the Amnesty Law was inserted in the political opening period, freeing of charge not only former State officials, but also former left-wing guerrilla members.

¹⁰⁴ Truth commissions have a long history in Latin America (ROHT-ARRIAZA, 1998), dating back to the 80s, in the case of Argentina, and early investigations in countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala and Chile, by the 80s and 90s. One of the complicating elements, in the case of Brazil, is that the Civic-Military is (imprecisely) often deemed “softer” than other Latin American dictatorships at the time.

¹⁰⁵ As mentioned in the **Introduction**, LGBTphobia was equated with racism, by the Brazilian Supreme Court, in their writings of the 1988 Constitution, in 2019.

¹⁰⁶ As mentioned in the **Introduction**, gender identity laws, based on the self-determination model, were established in Brazil in 2018, with early developments with the “social name” policy by the late 2000s.

in the first, and main, 976-page report (COMISSÃO NACIONAL DA VERDADE, 2014a), but only in this specific side thematic report released in a second moment¹⁰⁷.

The case of Martinha and the specificity of the violence against travestis

Even if met with legal and political limits, the Commission has played an important role when it comes to the studies on LGBTI history in Brazil, since its release. Including in its noticeable collective research effort, the Commission created the possibility of an important shift in archival and historical research, not only in the re/discovery of documents, such as in the case of ostensive police operation reports, but also in the creation of new ones, such as in the case of testimonials and oral history¹⁰⁸.

Therefore, we can associate the Brazilian Truth Commission with a “memory boom” – enmeshing activist, scholarly and artistic efforts. Although the first-person takes of *travestis* that survived the Dictatorship are absent in the final report published by the Commission, many survivors were encountered and interviewed in further projects. Therefore, the efforts within the Commission fomented the amplification of these voices in the public sphere¹⁰⁹, including in successful public history efforts, and played an important role, as well, in the memorialization and ongoing history of the *travesti* identity.

One of the most known¹¹⁰ testimonials from *travesti* survivors¹¹⁰ comes from Marta Maria de Sá (Martinha), featured in the 2018’s project “Bodies that resist” [*Corpos que resistem*]¹¹¹, focused on elderly LGBT people, as well as several reports on newspapers later on¹¹², becoming a regular figure in activist discourse¹¹³, although herself being quite reserved.

Born in 1956, Martinha was 8 years old at the year of the Military coup. She ran away from her house, still a kid, where she was constantly threatened to be killed by her mother, for “acting like a girl”. She also suffered violence in formal education and, after being expelled from four different schools, was not able to finish her studies. After failing of being accepted as a housekeeper, she started in sex work still as a young kid. Martinha states she was arrested over 200 times during the Dictatorship period, including in bright daylight. In her testimony,

¹⁰⁷ Other reports include “Human Rights violations against indigenous people”, “Human Rights violations in universities” and “Human Rights violations against peasants”.

¹⁰⁸ As mentioned in the **Introduction**, many of those involved in the Commission later worked with public history projects, such as exhibitions and media participations. In terms of public history, it inserted these questions and debates in the public sphere, at such scale, for the first time.

¹⁰⁹ This concept is further developed in the **Introduction**.

¹¹⁰ Created by an independent journalism organization, this online interview, as of 2023, has over 300,000 views (in comparison, other views of the same channel have about 1000 views each).

¹¹¹ Available at: YouTube / <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zM9ATZUsOZg>

¹¹² Available at: Correio / <http://blogs.correio24horas.com.br/emcantos/geracoes-travestis/>

¹¹³ This was observed by my own experience in such spaces, from my previous ethnographical research.

she mentions *travestis* were arrested at any given time – they could not circulate in public, even in the most mundane of tasks, such as doing groceries, or going to the bank to pay bills. In prison, she was often forced to “behave like a man”, and was constantly tortured and humiliated by police officers and male inmates for being deemed a “*travesti*” and a “fag” [*viado*].

During the 80s, now in her 20s, she reported pedestrians often screamed “AIDS” when they saw her in the street, and mentioned one situation where she was even expelled from public transport for being deemed “contagious”. Still, her work in sex work continued, and she was able to save enough money to travel to Western Europe, namely Italy, as many other *travestis* at the time. There, she was able to make enough money to later return to Brazil and buy her own house, where she accommodated other queer people in vulnerability. Twenty years later, however, the house was attacked and destroyed in an arsonist attack, reasons unknown, leaving Martinha yet again homeless, depending on social benefit programs from the government for the rest of her life, and with no direct reparation policies from the State¹¹⁴.



Figure 7: Martinha shows her scars.
Fragment of the video “Bodies that resist” [*Corpos que resistem*], 2019.

Therefore, Martinha became a symbol of the extensive violence of this historical period, showing scars on her body and memory. Her report also explicit that this period crossed not only ostensive police operations but also, under the AIDS crisis, further society marginalization, exclusion, and stigmatization.

¹¹⁴ As will be clear in later sections, my goal in bringing a secondary historical source here is to add a further layer of complexity of the insertion of *travestis* in the public sphere today, as in mobilizing as well forms of representation in its limits and possibilities.

At the same time, in many ways, Martinha’s story repeats itself, to the present-day, working as a kind of cornerstone story, with repeated reports of *travestis* suffering extensive violence. This includes being expelled from their houses by their families at a young age (in average, at 13 years old), not being able to finish their studies, and ending up in street prostitution (ANTRA, 2022).

In fact, Martinha’s report is close to what is generally described by the authors of the “Dictatorship and homosexuality” report (COMISSÃO NACIONAL DA VERDADE, 2014b), including the arbitrary prisons against *travestis* even during the day, and the harsher forms of torture they suffered by police officers.

At the same time, it is stated at this side report that there was “no formalized and so coherent policy by the State in the sense of exterminating homosexuals” (COMISSÃO DA VERDADE, 2014b, *translated from Portuguese*). With this, the authors argue that the violence against homosexuals should be understood more broadly, including the ideological-based stigmatization that led to ongoing marginalization in the workspace, formal education and the household, and the destruction of what was an emerging dissident social movement already by the 50s and 60s.

However, especially when it comes to operations such as Tarantula, based on the first-person reports of *travestis* themselves¹¹⁵, this may not be completely adequate for the reality of *travestis* in the period. This has been studied, in the past decade, by *travestis* and trans scholars themselves, which understand that the persecution against *travestis* in the Dictatorship should be understood in terms of social cleansing¹¹⁶ and necropolitics¹¹⁷ (CAVALCANTI, BARBOSA & BICALHO, 2018). Therefore, it becomes important to understand similarities and differences between the violence against homosexuals, more broadly, and *travestis* – hence, the specific placement of *travestis* in this larger group at the time.

In a way, the persecutions against *travestis* are inserted in a continuum of a longer history of the persecution against homosexuals in Brazil¹¹⁸. Although not criminalized, a set of specific laws were used to, in practice, incriminate homosexuals throughout history: public hugging or kissing by same-sex couples, for example, could be deemed a “libidinal or compromising act” under the laws on Indecent Assault [*atentado ao pudor*] and Assault to

¹¹⁵ First-person reports will be further developed in the **Second Chapter**.

¹¹⁶ This crosses a long-term international history of “recognition” of trans subjects under eugenics policies, such as in forced sterilization practices, as studied by Radi (2020).

¹¹⁷ Necropolitics is a concept coined by Mbembe (2019) to describe the social and political power that defines lives and deaths. The term is a further development of the Foucauldian concept of biopolitics.

¹¹⁸ As stated in the **Introduction**, early forms of persecution against homosexuals, namely those with specific gender performances, trace back at least since the late 60s and early 70s, in Brazil.

Morality and Good Behaviors [*atentado a moral e bons costumes*]. In practice, these arrests were held to coerce, and remove these acts, if not the people themselves, from public spaces.

If they had enough money, those arrested would pay the police officers a small amount of cash to be released, in generalized bribery practices. Those who were poor, however, would be arrested for a short period, and could face verbal, physical and sexual violence – a fact already known by the homosexual movement at the time, already in the late 70s¹¹⁹. We can also state that, based on archival analysis and oral history sources, the violence against black homosexuals was noticeably harsher as well, compared to their white counterparts.

At the same time, besides such crossings of race and class, there are particular differences in the experience of *travestis*. *Travestis* were also arrested under the justifications of “public decency” or “disturbance of public order”, but this was based on their physical appearance, and not on certain acts of affection with others. Their embodiments¹²⁰ were at the core of these persecutions, to a point – as Martinha reports – where ordinary daily acts became unsustainable due to ongoing persecution. Additionally, *travestis* in sex work were subjected to loitering laws as well, if not also direct state actions in the realm of “public health”. Therefore, police could target and arrest anyone considered “idle”, without a “proper work” or in “illicit occupations”, which directly affected *travestis*, growingly associated with *trottoir* practice.

Already by these examples, it is possible to understand why, and how, the violence perpetuated against *travestis* was set differently, and harshly, compared to the general homosexual population at the time. This also adds a layer of complexity to the means and nuances of the *travesti* identity. Being a *travesti* was here visible: it meant a public display of the body in a certain manner – an embodied experience connected to a social imaginary, a combination of gestures, clothes, traits, and behaviors¹²¹. *Travestis* were not asked about their own identification when being persecuted in these police operations, thus making self-determination approaches limited in historical analysis. Similarly, amid the AIDS crisis, Martinha faced verbal and physical abuse by pedestrians simply for appearing in public in a certain manner, not by showing affection to others. Her existence itself, her embodiment, was deemed indecent, or even dangerous. All this goes in the direction of a visibly *travesti* body that is read as such and is subjected to extreme forms of violence because of it.

¹¹⁹ This was observed in archival research, namely in the early Lampião da Esquina writings.

¹²⁰ Embodiments, and the concept of “flesh”, will be further developed in the **Second Chapter**. This will be important, as well, to better comprehend the specific violence against black homosexuals and *travestis*.

¹²¹ The centrality of body medications will be further developed in the **Second Chapter**.

Quinalha (2021) mentions a relevant case study, in July 1985, in another segment of repression: censorship. Already in the final year of the Dictatorship, a legal norm, grounded in a law from 1946,¹²² explicitly addresses gender expressions and performances in the visual arts, stating: “The scenic treatment given to (...) the visible homosexual or the “*travestied*” [*travestido*] cannot be offensive to human dignity (...) nor apologetic of transsexualism¹²³ or homosexuality” (QUINALHA, 2021, p.71). Again, what is up to question, here, is the expression – the presence of certain bodies in the public sphere (here, in popular media) deemed inherently offensive – “internal threads”.

The centrality of the travesti body and the place of torture

Influenced by feminist readings on political violence and considering reports from archival sources at AEL, as well as oral history reports, another way to approach the centrality of the *travesti* body comes into the gendered and sexualized aspect of the violence perpetrated by the police at the time. So-called homosexuals were often forced to “dress up as women” and were raped by police officers and male inmates. The physical, financial and verbal violence was combined with sexual and emotional violence. Examples include, as collected in newspaper reports¹²⁴: “The police officer Heraldo Gomes (...) beat and submitted Orion de Oliveira Batista to humiliation, making him dress up as a woman and locking him in a cell, to be raped by other inmates”, and “the Brazilian Law Order protested against the humiliation imposed to Rogério da Cunha Ribeiro, that, when arrested, was forced to ‘model’ and ‘twist and turn’, dressed up as a woman” (*translated from Portuguese*)¹²⁵.

Several similar reports of *travestis* mention they were forced to have sex between themselves, with police officers and male inmates. Humiliation also plays a central role in the reports of *travestis* on police brutality, in ways different from other social groups – Martinha, for example, describes a scene where she and other *travestis* are tortured together, in this way, on a beach by a group of police officers, although never directly touched by them¹²⁶.

¹²² Instrução Normativa n. 03/85, com base no Decreto 20.943 de 1946

¹²³ The medical and scientific crossings of “transsexualism” will be developed in the **Second Chapter**.

¹²⁴ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond.

¹²⁵ In the original: “*O delegado Heraldo Golmes (...) espancou e submeteu Orion de Oliveira Batista a vexames, fazendo-o vestir-se de mulher e trancafiando-o em uma cela, para ser estuprado pelos demais presos (...) A Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil protestou contra a humilhação imposta a Rogério da Cunha Ribeiro, que, ao ser preso, foi obrigado a desfilar e a fazer requebros, vestido de mulher*”.

¹²⁶ The fact that this torture practice was contactless is also relevant, as stated, in a similar case study, by McClintock (2009) in her work on torture and neurosis.

These torture practices are different from the types of torture held against left-wing groups, and those deemed “communists” in general, in their forms and goals. Against left-wing guerilla groups, the goal of torture was mainly to extract information (COMISSÃO DA VERDADE, 2014a), while the torture suffered by *travestis* was often described by survivors as ways for the police “to have fun” – in the sense it had no directly apparent political goal, set as an outsider with the broader discourses on anti-communism. In these practices, *travestis* were taken of their individuality and their humanity – they were (collectively) dehumanized. “In the strongest sense, humiliation, denudes the human, as a disqualification that acts in the moral, symbolic and psychological scope (...) it explicit that the person is sub-human (...) an incomplete human” (DÍAZ-BENITEZ, 2019).

The centrality of humiliation in such violent acts also goes in the direction of the public – different from other forms (for example, at DOI-CODI¹²⁷), these torture practices were set in groups, it not explicitly in public spaces. Humiliation plays a key role in a notion of the “public” – it creates distinctions between people (“us” versus “them”), and feelings of shame and guilt on those affected by such violence: the ones deemed outside such “public”. Therefore, these forms of torture were set more indirectly in their means within the regime and its bases on notions of militarism, hegemonic masculinity, and the nation-state.

Even though they were considered “men”, these set of practices undoubtedly sought to feminize *travestis*, while masculinized figures were the ones perpetrating the violence. This goes in the direction of feminist studies on widespread male-male sexual violence and torture in male-dominated societies, particularly in militaristic contexts. Here, violence is understood as a form of sociability, such as in the case of collective rape – it creates a dehumanized, destroyable Other, while also working to set bounds and establish sociability and internal hierarchies within those collectively practicing these forms of violence (PUAR, 2005). This is explicit by the public and collective aspect of the torture practices against *travestis*, by police officers – including the active participation of male inmates (in that sense, bounded by a shared hyper-masculinity, in a sociability grounded in violence).

In a patriarchal structure, feminizing means, as well, dehumanizing – the ones that face violence are diminished. This goes into a set of torture practices, as well, that emphasize the gruesome and the disgusting – practices that are often interconnected with racial hierarchies (MCCLINTOCK, 2009), where the racialized Other is animalized, often in the interconnections

¹²⁷ As stated in the **Introduction**, DOI and COI were specialized centers for the imprisonment and torture of opponents of the regime.

of a racialized nation-state. Thus, there is a dichotomy between civilian and barbarian – the one dressed and clean, for example, and the one undressed and dirty.

When it comes to the violence against *travestis*, several first-person reports mention that, as in the case of homosexuals in general, the brutality against black *travestis* was particularly noticeable. Again, this goes into connection with broader studies on how black men were (and are) specifically targeted, in white supremacist societies – where they are associated with hypersexuality – to specific forms of sexual and emotional violence (PUAR, 2005), such as castration in lynching, that seek to de-masculinize and de-power a racialized Other.

McClintock (2009) further states the role of neuroticism in these forms of torture – images such as the one of the “terrorist” sets an imminent and constant threat lurking within the nation-state. In the Dictatorship, this fear is inserted in a neuroticism of a constant, internal, “Communist” thread which – one can argue, on a broader conceptualization of governmentality – is, as well, internalized in the subjects, producing a shared culture of vigilance. Torture becomes a form of paranoia, and is embedded in a nation-state grounded in the fear of impurity (MCCLINTOCK, 2009) – with its mentality being spread outside its core security structure, in a shared logic of constant fear and threat.

In Brazil, one can argue that the vigilantism logic of “taking matters into your own hands”, historically complex – as lynching is still an ongoing widespread issue (MARTINS, 1996) – goes in the direction, as well, of still existing death squads and serial killers (so-called “*matadores*”) that specifically persecute *travestis* and other trans, and gender non-conforming, people. In this extreme, the Other is exterminated, and society is deemed “cleaned”. Such brutal acts often follow rituals of dehumanization, which also can be observed in archival research and in the present-day (ANTRA, 2022), in the case of *travestis*.

In a similar reading (SHIGEMATSU, 2012), committing violence can be understood as a way for those committing it to eliminate something they fear in themselves. Eliminating this “Other” is a form to eliminate an aspect of their “self” – in this case, to protect their positions in hegemonic masculinity and “virility” within a patriarchal structure (or, in other words, a response to the fear of their own castration). This nuance is particularly noticeable in another recurring form of violence against *travestis* and transfeminine people¹²⁸, where they are killed by male current or former lovers, as well as clients (in the case of sex work), repressing such desires and re-affirming their place in hegemonic masculinity and virility in public. These individual cases should not be separated from broader societal and cultural elements that inform

¹²⁸ This was widely observed in archival research, and in fact exists, in a similar pattern, in the present-day (ANTRA, 2022).

this extreme neurosis, especially considering the nature of these crimes to be recurring historically.

For the purpose of this section, considering the intersections between hegemonic masculinity, the military, and the nation-state, it is remarkable to notice how the public is shaped to produce an internal thread and, at the limit, an eliminable “Other”. These bodies are set outside of the “public” – they are the “Other” of the public itself, of the nation-state itself. Set as outsiders, the “public” can be defined as such. They, preciously, disturb the “public order”, go against “public decency” and are a threat to “public health” – the “subversion” of the “national security” and the neuroticism of the “degeneration” of traditional gender roles in new urban settings. The “public”, as such, establishes a frontier of citizenship, if not also of humanity.

Difference is established in a strict frontier, in such a manner that this racialized “Other” is the one that is violated, if not annihilated, under a logic of social cleansing. The “violated” “parish” becomes the one committing the violence – in fact, it is violence itself that defines its bounds and boundaries. Dehumanization is taken to the extreme, in the realm of social cleansing, not simply by individual psychological processes, but by a culturally defined legitimization of this violence, which should be historicized.

Travestis as the “Other’s Other”

The 1988 Constitution: “Homosexuals” in scientific, state and societal crossings

The 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution is, to this today, known internationally as remarkable in its amplitude of rights. It is mostly referred to, in Portuguese, as the “*Constituição de 88*” [88 Constitution], or “*Constituição Cidadã*” [The Citizen Constitution]. Already at the time, it established a set of rights for historically marginalized groups that were affected by the Dictatorship, namely women, black people, and indigenous groups. As with homosexuals in the early 80s, these groups had established, within the Dictatorship, a set of organizations and initiatives demanding their rights, including the end of State violence, and laws against discrimination – all in a broader demand for the end of the military regime.

However, different from these other groups, homosexuals were not able to conquer rights at the 1988 Constitution, even with impressive advocacy efforts and strong networks across science, state, and society. The final voting, held on January 28 1988 was considered a failure by the movement, with 130 votes in favor, 317 against it, 14 abstinences and 98 absences

by the National Congress of Brazil¹²⁹. The billing in question would include “sexual orientation” together with the already established rights and protections against “prejudices of race, sex, color and age”. A second and final new voting was later held in 1993, only to be lost again – with only 53 votes in favor, 250 against it, and six abstinences.

In my inquiry into the AEL Archive¹³⁰, I was able to access rare original documents in which it was possible to narrate the broader political and cultural disputes at stake. My first and main point of research was the fond collected by João Antonio Mascarenhas. Mascarenhas is one of the founders of SOMOS, in 1978, known as one of the (if not the) first homosexual organization in Brazil – the so-called Brazilian Homosexual Movement (MHB). Mascarenhas was also one of the creators of *Lampião da Esquina*, a Rio de Janeiro’s dissident newspaper print released in the alternative press during the Dictatorship, running from 1978 to 1981, and an object of a series of academic works since then.

The editors of *Lampião* were inserted in a crux of intellectual circles – Mascarenhas was a polyglot and many activists at the time were, or later became, academics themselves. They often had prestigious social and economic roles – Mascarenhas was himself a lawyer – even if crossed by a series of discriminations based on their sexuality. At the same time, left-wing groups at the time, including guerilla groups, often excluded, or even discriminated, homosexuals, emphasizing a class perspective on political struggle. In the late 70s and early 80s, *Lampião* had an imagery of dissidence and counterculture¹³¹. As stated by Simões and Facchini (2009), at the time, the militarized “State” was deemed a repressive enemy – hence, activists were against the State itself, under a range of possible alternatives, from communist and anarchist groups to struggles for democracy.

The goal of “getting out of the ghettos” is seen in letters and publications since 1978 (the first register found in AEL). In this context, homosexual activists such as Mascarenhas reported the ultimate goal of acquiring rights and being seen as more respectable within the public sphere. Therefore, “conscientiousness” became another keyword: the homosexual should not be ashamed of his “nature”, with “coming out” being constantly remarked as an important political strategy. In this game of hide and seek, however, there are already nuances of differentiation processes and a certain hierarchy of respectability that takes centrality later on, in the opening political regime. In “The ghetto” [*O gueto*], published in March 1978, it is

¹²⁹ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond.

¹³⁰ As stated in the **Introduction**, AEL was the main archival source for this research.

¹³¹ For the purpose of this thesis, the nuances of the newspaper and its different forms and takes throughout the years will not be written extensively. For this, see Tanganelli (2019).

stated: “contrary to what is usually imagined, the homosexual with ostensive characteristics of the opposite sex represents solely the tip of the iceberg, the basis (the majority) goes unnoticed”¹³².

Still, the efforts by MHB are remarkable, including a series of open and private letters to lawyers, politicians, syndical movements, and Catholic leaders – including the Pope himself, when on a visit to Brazil. Leaders from the homosexual movement around the world were also constantly contacted, from the U.S. to Western and Northern Europe. “SOMOS”’s name itself was an ode to a homosexual publication in Argentina (running from 1971 to 1976). The alliances with journalists would also result in publications in magazines and newspapers, especially under the democratic transition, seeking to impact public opinion and create directed policies and rights in State legislation. Additionally, letters and collected documents show a careful understanding of the political scene both during and after the Civic-Military Dictatorship, including in-depth analyses of the nuances of Cold War politics and the context of social and cultural movements throughout the world.

Scientific publications on sexuality were also carefully collected – a process that, in fact, existed since the late 70s, with books on this theme circulating illegally in English and French in these homosexual activist circles. The Mascarenhas fond include a set of a series of exchanges between representatives of the movement and scientific communities – seeking support to include “sexual orientation” in the realm of discrimination mentioned in the 1988 Constitution. Therefore, it is possible to understand that their goals were also in the direction of shaping alliances with scientific communities and, accordingly, generally impacting public opinion and State policies. Again, this was carefully held in attention and connection to what was happening in other regions of the world. This includes, in 1974, the removal of homosexuality as a mental disorder by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), in 1974 – led by the spark in the queer movement caused by the Stonewall Riots¹³³, in the US, in 1969.

The early and mid-80s saw a series of positive outcomes in these connections. In 1985, the Brazilian Federal Council of Medicine (CPF) [*Conselho Federal de Medicina*] officially deemed that homosexuality was not a disease nor a mental disorder, in their reading of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD) – five years before the same decision was made

¹³² Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond.

¹³³ The Stonewall Riots is a cornerstone historical moment in queer history, leading to the emergence of the gay liberation movement in the US, and greatly influencing other countries.

by the World Health Organization (WHO)¹³⁴. The full report by CPF mentions “profound divergences in the studies of homosexuality” regarding it being or not a disability or disorder, indicating internal tensions within the scientific community. Furthermore, the majority of the Council, in response to homosexual activists, opted for depathologization, grounded by a range of recent international studies within medicine and the social sciences¹³⁵.

This was a remarkable achievement for the movement, with the Brazilian medical community being one of the first in the world to make such a statement in their specific readings of ICD, namely after the Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. This came after a series of victories in advocacy-making, gaining support from the Brazilian Society for Scientific Progress, in 1981, and national organizations in Anthropology (1982), Population Studies (1982), Social Sciences (1984), and Psychiatry (1984)¹³⁶.

Here, as well, it is possible to observe noticeable differences between homosexuals and *travestis*, as well as transsexuals¹³⁷. In fact, the mention of *travestis* is much more common in earlier periods – in the origins of MHB, in the late 70s and early 80s, where a clandestine and marginal imagery still pervaded, amid the Dictatorship. When it comes to the writings on the 1988 Constitution, *travestis* tend to disappear from being mentioned in the documents. Historically, this is noticeable as well, as there are no mentions of police operations such as Tarantula (1987) in these reports – a surprising archival dis/encounter, especially considering these operations were publically known at the time. In terms of archival research, it thus reveals a historical shift throughout the 80s, with the democratic transition being an important division. This raises the question of who, under this new political context and a new set of differentiations in place, was deemed or not “respectable” for the public, “normal” for science, and a proper “citizen” in new State policies in an emerging democracy.

This reading follows a long history of academic publications in the Portuguese language about this period. According to Simões and Facchini (2009), the opening of the political regime made it possible to demand rights to the State and formalize homosexual social movements, where the notion of fixed identity started to take a central role in State politics. Across the 80s,

¹³⁴ ICD is a diagnostic tool used to create medical protocols and standards across the world. It is today administrated by WHO, a specialized agency in the United Nations responsible for international public health. Homosexuality is kept in ICD as a form of identification, although it is removed as a form of disability or disorder (similarly to what would happen, decades later, with trans identities).

¹³⁵ Here, it is important to remark that specific studies in Brazil were still rare, with initial efforts being made within the medical sciences. It would be only by the mid to late 90s that broader studies on the history of homosexuality gained track, for example.

¹³⁶ As stated in the **Introduction**, this goes into ongoing efforts, at the time, to depathologize homosexuality across the globe, which directly influence the works of activists such as Mascarenhas.

¹³⁷ The differentiation processes between “*travestis*” and transsexuals, in both science/medicine and activism, will be further developed in the **Second Chapter**.

however, the AIDS crisis made the homosexual movement lose strength – only to have its “revival” in the 90s, now attached to HIV/AIDS prevention policies, in the connections between activism and State. As emphasized by Facchini (2003), this is attached to a sense of “hygienization” of the homosexual identity, in efforts to reach “social respectability” in the eyes of the state and society in general.

Here, it is also important to remark as well what Veras (2015) calls an “opening-arousal” of the military regime. The democratic transition crossed a moment of the “gay boom” – in Brazil and abroad – as was already acknowledged by activists at the time. At the same time, not only homosexuality, but sex, gender and sexuality more generally, took a central role in popular media and in the public sphere more generally. In such reading, all the (literally) repressed instances of the sexual revolution in the 60s and 70s¹³⁸ came unleashed with the political opening. However, the AIDS crisis quickly sets a backlash in this opening by the mid to late 80s, re/shaping notions of “respectability” and the “proper”, “clean”, set of behaviors and conduct, in the complex negotiations by activists about the “image and imaginary”¹³⁹ set upon them, including in their demands to the State and their impact in public opinion more generally.

The dis/place of travestis in the homosexual movement: Public victims and private burdens

The nature of the archive itself reveals nuances of the takes by homosexual activists about *travestis*, in this particular context. As the fonds studied were collected personally by activists, they often include different types of documents, from newspaper cuts, to scientific publications and open letters. Therefore, they are not only set in different contexts, but tend to be addressed to different publics as well. With that in mind, it is possible to critically analyze such documents to distinguish “public” and “private” writings – namely, on one hand, public letters and publications and, on the other, personal letters that would be only revealed to the public years later, with the donation of such materials to public archives such as AEL.

From the mid to the late 80s, under the democratic transition, the rare mentions of *travestis* in the analyzed archive fonds are usually in the framings of suffering violence. This is especially true in the work of GGB, located in the Northwest coast of the country. Together with SOMOS, GGB is inserted in a “first generation” of MHB (FACCHINI, 2003), being

¹³⁸ In Brazil, this also crosses readings on popular media, as the late 80s and 90s are known as particular sexualized moments in media such as television. In film, this includes the end of *pornoanchadas*, a genre of sex comedy originated from the late 60s, similarly to the Italian *commedia scollacciata*. The end of the Dictatorship period also meant a decline of the genre, also historically attached to the popularization of hardcore pornography in the 80s. Discussions on popular media and culture will be further developed in the **Second Chapter**.

¹³⁹ This concept will be further developed in the **Second Chapter**, in the discussions about subjectivity.

founded by Luiz Mott in 1980 and still active today. In terms of archival research, although they exist¹⁴⁰, the distinctions between these specific groups is often blurred, as activists growly were connected throughout different urban centers spread across the Brazilian coast. GGB was one of the first officially recognized homosexual organizations in the country, and is still known today for its reports on hate crimes.

The archival research shows the yearly development of these studies, which reach the hundreds in less than a decade. By 1985, *travestis* represented ¼ of the victims, with most murders being located in larger cities. As Mascarenhas, GGB often collected reports on these crimes, which were often located in sensationalist newspapers, including headlines such as: “Pederast died after being beaten by a club: the killer bathed the body in boiling water” “Strangulated homosexual: he was naked with his hands and feet tied”, “Terror in Ipanema: car chases and kills *travestis* on the sidewalk”, and “Faggot [*bichona*] dies hanged” (*translated from Portuguese*¹⁴¹). Other efforts include the list of victim names, and how they were killed, in a somewhat spectacular violent tone, for example (use of male pronouns, *translated from Portuguese*)¹⁴²:

- [Victim number] 143) Tigresa (...) *travesti* prostitute, 19 years old, killed with 10 knife stabbings in the chest and back (...) [accused to have] stolen a stereo
- 144) Floripes (...) 50 years old, chef, the oldest and more famous *travesti* in Bahia, killed by beating (...) because of an *acarajé* [a type of Brazilian street food] (...)
- 146) Luiz Carlos (...) [Also known as] Suzy or Paula (...) 39 years old, *travesti* (...) found dead with several knife stabbings in the chest.

At the time, one of the main efforts of homosexual movements was to collect data on these crimes, combined with critical analysis. This was politically strategic, as this framed a picture of the concrete reality of homosexuals in Brazil at the time, grounding the demands of the movements when it came to advocacy for guaranteed rights and specific public policies. In Mascarenhas’ archive, this effort is centered on collecting pieces from media sources with derogatory views on homosexuality, as well as firm responses from activists in their counter-statements. For example, in an open letter to the Brazilian Society for Scientific Progress, in

¹⁴⁰ For the purpose of this thesis, the nuances of MHB will not be further developed, and its different takes around Brazil – such as the distinctions between SOMOS, GGB and other movements. As mentioned in the **Introduction**, the convoluted history of MHB, in its origins and sets of tensions and disputes, is ongoing in historiographical research.

¹⁴¹ In the original: “Pederasta morreu a porretada: o assassino banhou o corpo com agua fervente”, “Estrangulado homossexual: estava nu com as mãos e pés amarrados”, “Terror em Ipanema: fusca persegue e mata travesti no calçadão”, “Bichona morre enforcada”.

¹⁴² In the original: “143) Tigresa (...) *travesti* de pista, 19 anos, morto com 10 facadas no peito e costas ... [acusado de ter] roubado um aparelho de som; 144) Floripes (...) 50 anos, cozinheiro, o travesti mais antigo e famoso da Bahia, assassinado a murros e pontapés (...) por causa de um acarajé; (,,) 146) Luiz Carlos (...) Suzy ou Paula (...) 39 anos, *travesti* (...) encontrado morto com várias facadas no peito”.

1981, in the context of advocating for the inclusion of the discrimination against sexual orientation in the upcoming Constitution, it is written::

Travestis are arrested and beaten under the accusation of crimes they usually did not commit (...) Fags [*bichas*] and dykes [*sapatões*] are unfairly pointed in the ironies of sensationalism as authors of a large number of delinquencies they never committed.

Therefore, *travestis* are depicted as victims – if the not “the” main victims – of hate crimes, here inserted in a broader context of marginalization and stigmatization, being deemed as criminals for crimes they did not commit. As with “fags” and “dykes”, *travestis* presented their dissonance in their bodies and their behaviors. Therefore, *travestis* are framed – in these public sources – as a sort of “perfect victim”. They appear as names in the list of murders collected by homosexual activists, and as a group particularly affected by state violence and societal discrimination. However, little is known about them outside that – they are strictly represented as figures persecuted and murdered in gruesome forms. This is different from earlier reports by homosexual activists, by the late 70s and early 80s, which include closer takes on the lives of *travestis* in a more nuanced manner and reading of such violence¹⁴³.

In this new context, such analyses appear to be more strategic and technical rather than self-critical¹⁴⁴ to the homosexual movement itself. Analyzing critically the data on violence from a contemporary perspective, it is possible to observe that the crimes against *travestis* had specific nuances, something that went underanalyzed by the homosexual movement at the time. At the same time, such violence is described as a force from the outside of the homosexual moment – at any moment homosexuals themselves are seen as exclusionary, even if they were deemed so by other movements at the time, including lesbians and black homosexuals¹⁴⁵. This is further complexified taking into account that, at the time, *travesti* grassroots organizations existed across the country, and *travestis* were questioning such framings, already deemed derogatory, by the homosexual movement at the time.

This type of “public take” on *travestis*, in the fonds analyzed, contrasts with a different set of writings, from the same historical period, which can be observed by other types of documents, particularly in the case of personal letters. One of the figures with explicit (and often emotionally charged) reluctance to *travestis* was Mascarenhas himself. In a personal letter

¹⁴³ A long report on *travestis*, on Lampião, published in 1981, will be further analyzed in the **Second Chapter**.

¹⁴⁴ On another take on self-criticism in social movements, here particularly in the case of the feminist movement, see the previously mentioned Shigematsu (2012). For a transfeminist perspective, see Koyama (2020).

¹⁴⁵ The intersections with race will be further analyzed in the **Second Chapter**, including in the activism by black homosexual groups already during the 80s.

sent in 1978 to a fellow homosexual activist, he writes about the roles of “flamboyant fags” [*bichas pintosas*]¹⁴⁶ and the “*travestis*” in the movement, stating (*translated from Portuguese*):

The flamboyant fag is aggressive (...) which is comprehensible, for the pressures they suffer, but is not justifiable (...) the flamboyant subject is aggressive because it feels insecure and, deep inside, feels guilt, because they internalized sexist [*machista*] values (...). The one stigmatized curves themselves upon the oppressor and feels obligatory to use the seal left by a branding iron. ¹⁴⁷

The *travesti*, even more, take this attitude to paroxysm, even submitting themselves to surgical operations to hide their identity. Their maximum ambition is to transfigure themselves into a *vamp woman*, a sophisticated sex object (...) A posture – we should say – absolutely outdated that, today, any intelligent woman rejects violently. ¹⁴⁸

Besides this first archival example, as other activists at the time, Mascarenhas firmly stated this same position throughout the years, more and less nuanced¹⁴⁹. For this group of homosexual activists, *travestis* were a simulacrum of femininity for the purpose of consumption, with permanent body modifications being seen as the most extreme case. In this reading, *travestis* were, indeed, men deeply inserted in patriarchal values, who were hiding their “true” identity. I understand this as structured in a specific re/understanding of nature – where masculine gay men would be deemed “adequate” to their own nature, and where sexuality dissidents were justified as a “natural” human variance – a persistent argument in the advocacy made by the homosexual movement at the time.

The branding iron metaphor used in the excerpt is noticeable as well – branding iron [*ferrete*], today used in cattle in some rural regions in Brazil, was historically used to seal enslaved people and prostitutes, which makes the metaphor used charged with specific meanings on humanity/animality, gender, sexuality, class, and race. In this part of the homosexual movement, most of the main figures were white men, and from a certain positionality of economic privilege and insertion in deemed intellectual elites (thus, with

¹⁴⁶ Although there an offensive usage here, “*bicha*” [*fag*] is also mobilized as a self-identity in the present-day, as well as at the time, thus not being necessarily derogatory. “*Pintosa*” [*flamboyant*] also has a double usage, from offensive to empowering, depending on the person speaking and the context.

¹⁴⁷ In the original: “*A bicha pintosa é agressiva, agressividade que (...) se compreende, pelas pressões que ela sofre, mas que não se justifica (...) o sujeito pintoso agride, e agride porque se sente inseguro e, no fundo, tem um sentimento de culpa, porque interiorizou os valores machistas (...) O estigmatizado curva-se ante o opressor e passa a julgar-se obrigado a usar a marca que o ferreiro escolheu para ele*”

¹⁴⁸ In the original: “*O travesti, então, leva essa atitude ao paroxismo, chegando a submeter-se a operações cirúrgicas para ocultar a identidade. Sua ambição máxima consiste em transfigurar-se na mulher vamp, [um] sofisticado objeto sexual (...) Uma postura – convenhamos – completamente ultrapassada que, hoje em dia, qualquer mulher inteligente rejeita com violência*”

¹⁴⁹ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond.

cultural capital¹⁵⁰ as well). Historically, this should be understood in a specific context of the opening of a before noticeably authoritarian and enclosed political regime, in an extremely harsh period. Furthermore, it is important to analyze this under an intersectional perspective that takes into centrality such differences and inequalities, including in the “tolds and untolds” of archival research.

On one hand, we can read this effort into the concept of strategic essentialism, coined by Spivak (EIDE, 2016). In this sense, “homosexuals” would be emphasizing a shared identity in order to represent themselves, amid the democratic transition, in order to gain State recognition and conquer rights, in a simplified mode of identification. However, these processes tend to establish stricter frontiers, meaning a clearer separation of “inside” and “outside”, which was not in place in earlier periods, such as the early 80s. Additionally, this also crosses particular alliance possibilities – Mascarenhas’ quote on “intelligent women” implicates a specific reading on women liberation that may indicate the search to establish political alliances.

At the same time, from a critical intersectional perspective, we can observe such quotes from the outside as well – in the sense of emphasizing the groups excluded in such essentialism. This includes black homosexual groups, which by the 80s already created specific organizations that denounced the exclusions within the broader homosexual movement¹⁵¹. Although black organizations exist since the slavery period, the birth of the current black movement in Brazil can be traced back to the Unified Black Movement (MNU), in 1978 (DOMINGUES, 2008). Lesbian movements were between the first to create separate organizations, also detach from the broader homosexual movement, at the same period. Early lesbian publications include “Chanacomchana”, starting in 1981, and noticeable historical events such as the Ferro’s Bar Riot, in 1983, a “Brazilian Stonewall” led by lesbian activists (SOARES & COSTA, 2012).

Interestingly, early reports within the lesbian movement show initial efforts to include trans women within feminist efforts, such as the report “Roberta Close: man or woman?” [*Roberta Close: homem ou mulher?*] published in the lesbian dissident publication “Chana com chana”, in 1985 (MOIRA, 2023). Finally, it is important to remark that *travesti* grassroots organizations exist in Brazil since the late 70s, within the context of sex work¹⁵².

It is important to remark, as well, that other readings within the broader homosexual movement on *travestis* were more positive, putting them at the forefront of a fight against

¹⁵⁰ Cultural capital is a concept developed by Bourdieu (1985) to refer to accumulated cultural knowledge that confers, to certain people, prestige and power, which can be embodied, objectified or institutionalized.

¹⁵¹ This includes Adé Dudu, in Bahia, as further developed in the **Second Chapter**.

¹⁵² As previously stated in the **Introduction**, and further developed in the **Second Chapter**.

compulsory heterosexuality, with different views on their “aggressiveness”¹⁵³. Based on archival research, this support¹⁵⁴ is more noticeable in the writings of black homosexual groups. Already at the time, these groups worked in the intersections of what it meant to be “homosexual” – critically understanding their specific placement within the movement and the community, often feeling misplaced and marginalized by the “mainstream” homosexual movement. Here, not only sexuality, but also race was a forefront category¹⁵⁵ not only in activism, but also in their readings on state politics and public opinion, particularly in the Brazilian context. This analysis included efforts into the particularities of Brazilian history, in its colonial and slavery history, and its processes of racialization and racism. This contrasts with more internationally oriented takes by organizations such as SOMOS, which intended to more directly import categories and readings from other countries, mobilizing more closely essentialist takes, particularly in its intersections with science and medicine, in the Brazilian democratic transition¹⁵⁶.

For the purpose of this chapter, it is important to comprehend the complexity of the takes on *travestis*, including in the homosexual movement at the time. *Travestis* were set into a tense co-existing of being deemed the “perfect victims” – passive figures that “curve themselves upon the oppressor” – and dangerous figures themselves, both to homosexuals and to women. They are described as “vampires” – a strong image that evokes the sucking of blood and the loss of humanity. This danger is understood as a result of a type of “personal weakness” and “stupidity”, relying on outdated stereotypes to access one’s repressed desires, in a somewhat psychoanalytic language prone to the scientific networks mobilized at the time, here somewhat backfired in a new set of differentiations. Although superficially understood by suffering constant violence, this so-called “internal repression” is deemed as manifested through aggressive attitudes, and thus unjustifiable and derogatory for the movement as a whole. Therefore, the *travesti* was both the “victim” and the “killer” – the “one who kills and is killed”. They are the “Other” that is spoken and written upon – but not the one in fact speaking and writing by themselves¹⁵⁷.

¹⁵³ A noticeable example of a more positive take, from the homosexual movement, comes from the 32th edition of *Lampião da Esquina*, analyzed in the **Second Chapter**.

¹⁵⁴ From a critical trans representation lens, we can still argue that this perspective can also fall into forms of unequal differentiation, as they is little room for *travestis* to speak for themselves, and to narrate their own stories and communities, as will be mentioned in the **Second Chapter**.

¹⁵⁵ Again, an emphasis on the deeper levels of intersectionality, in the sense of comprehending the co-constitution of blackness and transness, will be centered in the **Second Chapter**.

¹⁵⁶ Such connections are further developed in the **Second Chapter**.

¹⁵⁷ As stated previously, such first-person reports will be emphasized in the **Second Chapter**. As stated by Coacci (2018), this a long-term demand of the *travesti* movement, including in tensions and disputes with academic debates, particularly in the 2000s.

The differences between the views of the homosexual movement on *travestis* can also be analyzed in the axis of class. On an economic level, it is important to notice that the shift of a protectionist economy during the Dictatorship, to a more liberal and globalized one under the new democratic regime, was also one that created the possibility of the middle-class, white, “gay men” to be more easily incorporated in the open market. This goes together with a broader historical and geographical process where “gayness” was attached to market practices, and where reaching respectability became entangled with economic power (SIMÕES & FRANÇA, 2005).

Therefore, it is noticeable that this group is highly educated, as an “intellectual elite” that is “conscious” of their identity; that they need to “come out”, thus have a specific set of traditional masculine gender performances, described as “controlled” and “discrete”; that their desires are “natural”, thus a non-pathological variance of the human species. Saying so meant to seek a form of incorporation within the nuclear family structure, and an incorporation to the culture and broader social structure – a kind of simulacrum, we could say, of this same structure (BUTLER, 2002, for similar discussions on “same-sex”/equal marriage).

However, due to this, an Other was created, embodied particularly in *travestis*, but also dykes and fags, as the ones “flamboyant”, “excessive”, and “aggressive”. “They” are the threats to society – its economic, social, cultural, religious, natural, family structures – and to the movement itself, in their inclusion efforts. Descriptions went from a certain uncivilized aggression to comparisons with non-human creatures. *Travestis* were the Other’s Other.

Saying so means navigating the complexities and nuances of broader discourses and practices related to hegemonic masculinity, as well as its subtexts in militarism and the nation-state – which, from a more contemporary perspective, we can state as an element in homonationalism¹⁵⁸ (PUAR, 2018) – in this context, in the building of a new “democratic” Brazil. This concept refers to the alliance of nationalist and/or neoliberal ideologies and the rights of LGBTI+ people, aligned with the exclusion of certain groups, particularly in the axes of race and class, which are deemed “uncivilized” – in the particular context, embodied in the “aggressive” *travesti*. Such perspective is also aligned with critical takes on archives, here mainly influenced by queer, and post/decolonial approaches, where absences and invisibilities are also taken into consideration in historical analysis¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁸ This concept is mostly used to refer to contemporary discussions, such in the opposition between Israel and Palestine, immigration policies, as well as Western and Eastern Europe. However, it can also be applied, although more loosely, to the Brazilian democratic transition, in the way in which the demands for the rights of “LGBTI” people can be aligned with a set of hierarchies, particularly in terms of race and class.

¹⁵⁹ Such approaches to archival research are further mentioned in the **Introduction**.

Finally, the connections with discussions on race are noticeable. The own act of emphasizing “coming out” of the closet is remarkable in that sense. Working with the queer black male community, Snorton (2017) states that racialized bodies are in fact trapped in “glass closets”. This moves a notion of visibility, as racialized bodies are deemed hyper-sexualized, deemed “aggressive” and, hence, as figures that need constant vigilance and control. Therefore, in a question also relevant to public history efforts, Snorton (2017) argues that “visibility” is not necessarily a positive asset, particularly when forms of representation do not come from the groups being represented. This includes representations within marginalized groups themselves, in their internal differences and inequalities. Visibility can in fact produce such framings in a way to create stigmas and stereotypes – a type of hyper-visibility that in fact sets targets behind certain backs and further fetishizes certain bodies.

Again, the image of the “vampire” used by Mascarenhas is remarkable. If, on one hand, at least since the late 70s, there is an effort to leave the “ghettos” and reach visibility – symbolically, breaking the doors of the “closet” to reach lightening – *travestis* are described as creatures of the night. They inhabit solely the night, as mysterious, sensuous and threatening creatures. The sunlight burns their skin and could eventually kill them – they have no place at this same visibility.

The AIDS crisis and the democratic transition

The disputes and tensions within the homosexual movement, as well as the nuances of *travesti* history, at the Brazilian democratic transition, should also be analyzed by the impact of the AIDS crisis in public perception. As emphasized by Oliveira (2021), Operation Tarantula being set in 1987 is remarkable as it is historically situated just before the first attempts of criminalizing HIV/AIDS transmission in Brazil¹⁶⁰. Therefore, the author states that, although without a legal framework, these forms of persecution were already sociably accepted.

Similarly, also working with Operation Tarantula, Cavalcanti, Barbosa and Bicalho (2018) emphasize how “rationalities” are shaped through moral panics. Therefore, certain groups were particularly targeted by police violence under the defense of “public security” or “public health”, where “AIDS” was forged as an epidemic, both by the State itself, but also by popular media, in the emergence of the notion of “risk groups”. Therefore, “AIDS” became embodied in certain groups of people, in the materialization of notions of disease, contagion,

¹⁶⁰ As stated in the **Introduction**, to this day there is no formal criminalization of HIV/AIDS transmission, unlike other countries, although there are other laws mobilized to do so.

destruction and death – *travestis* became AIDS itself, and eliminating AIDS meant eliminating *travestis* (OLIVEIRA, 2021).

In Brazil, the first documented case of HIV/AIDS happened in 1982, with over 1000 cases reported three years later, in 1985, and 10000 six years later, in 1988, mainly centered in São Paulo, followed by Rio de Janeiro – the two largest urban centers in the country – with the majority of the first cases being reported in so-called “homosexual men”¹⁶¹. Until the mid-80s, society’s perception on “AIDS” was practically solely stigmatizing and discriminatory – the shift to more sympathetic perspectives would occur only years later, mainly in the 90s. In Brazil, this includes, for example, the death of the popular singer Cazuza, in 1990, still at 32 years old, known as the first “public face” of HIV/AIDS in the country.

In this earlier period, however, terms such “gay cancer”, “gay plague”, or the “4H” acronym were used – the last, a 1982 term, before “AIDS” was coined as a term, referring to “homosexuals, heroin users, hemophiliacs, and Haitians”. As a result, the AIDS crisis led to the embodiment of already existing fears and stigmas against certain historically marginalized groups, in the crossings of gender, sexuality, race, disability, and class.

In this period, there were no free treatments for HIV/AIDS – in earlier years, no treatment whatsoever. Seropositive (HIV positive) individuals were forced into hospitals as “risks to society”, often being left alone to die, being completely removed from public life. On the other hand, the first cases of HIV/AIDS also saw the rise of connections between activism, state, and science, as grassroots initiatives were producing “guerilla”-type of scientific research, promoting prevention policies, creating communities and support networks, and emphasizing counter-narratives on what was growly a moralizing social stigma (OLIVEIRA, 2021).

In Brazil, the first instances of state prevention policies started to gradually emerge in 1986, in connection to social movements, namely at the “AIDS Program” in São Paulo. Throughout the years, responses on a federal level started to be created as well – leading, by the 90s, to the first recognition of *travestis* as subjects of rights in Brazilian legislation. The *travesti* movement emerged as such at this period¹⁶², in 1992, with the creation of ASTRAL, having the end of police violence and the creation of HIV/AIDS prevention policies as leading demands. This interconnection with HIV/AIDS prevention policies was such that the previous “Encounter of *Travestis* and Liberados” [*Encontro de Travestis e Liberados*] became, in 1993, the “Encounter of *Travestis* and Liberados that act in AIDS Prevention”, ENTLAIDS [*Encontro*

¹⁶¹ Source: UNAIDS / <https://unaids.org.br/>.

¹⁶² This is further analyzed in the **Introduction**.

Nacional de Travestis e Liberados que Atuam na Prevenção da Aids]¹⁶³ – with the last edition being held only in 2013. This indicates, as well, the decades-long history that started, by the mid and late 80s, with the AIDS crisis (COACCI, 2018).

While the 90s saw the emergence of prevention policies and increasing State recognition, on a cultural level, moral panics were still widespread, now in the form of media cases where certain figures – mainly, black bisexual men – would be “purposely infecting women” as vengeance. This is set in the context where increasing cases in (cis)¹⁶⁴ women became the center of such discourses. Such panic includes the now infamous quote by the World Bank, in 1990, that Brazil would have over one million cases of HIV/AIDS in one decade. This number proved to be wrong – the actual number was half of it. Although this is, as well, an effect of noticeable prevention policies across this period, it exemplifies a somewhat generalized, apocalyptic, panic, as the report of Operation Tarantula indicates, in 1987 – “the times of Nostradamus have arrived”. The year here is particularly important, in the World Bank statement, as in 1988 Brazil had 3812 new cases of HIV/AIDS, a number that doubled in 1990, making it the second country with the largest number of cases in the world outside Africa (OLIVEIRA, 2021).

As a result, “AIDS” was perceived as a moral issue – re/viving and re/shaping notions of “degeneracy” and “subversion” in the blurred lines between “risky” practices and “risky” subjects. The image of the “*aidético*” – of the body deeply affected by AIDS complications – became a symbol of decadence and degeneracy, deemed a result of guilty actions, or sinful practices. AIDSphobia was then connected to a warlike discourse of threat and risk (OLIVEIRA, 2021). As stated by Perlongher (1987), in what the author calls “the AIDS dispositive”, the period included a complex scientific, political and cultural entanglement, where AIDS led to a process that the author describes as a “reflux of the sexual revolution”.

The documents studied in AEL show, in concrete examples, a discourse/practice radicalization that follows the AIDS crisis, including in open defenses to social cleansing, in the democratic transition. In a newspaper report from January 1985 collected by GGB¹⁶⁵, a group called “Grupo Machão da Bahia” [*“The Macho Group of Bahia”*] affirms their opposition

¹⁶³ This has been widely studied by Brazilian scholars, in a process often called “SIDAnização” (“*SIDA*” – AIDS, in Portuguese – and “*cidadanização*” – citizenship making) (PELÚCIO, 2009), or “citizenship-making of sexual subjects (CARRARA, 2015).

¹⁶⁴ The use of this term in such a way is explained in the **Introduction**, referring to the cautious use of contemporary terminology for an earlier historical period.

¹⁶⁵ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond.

to the demands of the homosexual movement for HIV/AIDS prevention policies, openly advocating for “eradication” solutions (*translated from Portuguese*)¹⁶⁶:

“The ‘Grupo Machão da Bahia’ said they listened in television the worry of homosexuals with the rise of the gay pest during carnival, given the large number of tourists of the third sex that spend this time in Bahia. (...) When the swine fever came to Brazil, the solution was to eradicate completely the pigs threatened with contagion. Therefore, the solution should be the same: the eradication of the elements that can transmit the gay pest. Only that way AIDS would end”.

Not by chance, this period saw a rise in the number of death squads – which often operated side-by-side with the (still militarized) police. In São Paulo, across the 80s, hate crimes against “homossexuals” skyrocketed. In Brazil, “*deer*” (*viado*) is used as a slur against effeminate gay men, trans women and *travestis*. Many of the discourses collected by Mascarenhas explicitly state a “hunting season” against “deers”¹⁶⁷.

Similarly, the 1986 report “The violence against homosexuals” [*“A violência contra homossexuais”*], found in the GGB archive fond¹⁶⁸ indicates that the violence against homosexuals indeed became harsher after the Dictatorship. The report also emphasizes the need to include the discrimination in terms of “sexual orientation” in the 1988 Constitution. The 86 electoral campaigns included a wide range of openly derogatory discourses – described by the author as a “political weapon”. The presence of HIV/AIDS-related reports in the archival sources become growingly throughout the years, and by 1988 there are almost solely directed for this – including efforts in anti-HIV testing, campaigns for de-stigmatization, and the availability of free preservatives as a form of prevention.

In a research report collected by Mascarenhas – also mentioned by Quinalha (2021, p.65) – a public questionnaire organized by the TV show Fantástico in June 1978 states that 25% of those interviewed considered “homosexualism” to be a disease, 19% lack of parental education, 18% a product of a misadjusted world, and 11% as lack of shame. Over 50% of the interviewed considered homosexualism “shocking”. Although we can assume an improvement in public perception during the early 80s, the impact of the AIDS crisis creates an important shift, in a backlash and renewed take on the historically rooted views on the connections of

¹⁶⁶ In the original: “*O Grupo Machão da Bahia diz que ouviu na televisão a preocupação dos homossexuais com o aumento da peste gay durante o carnaval, em face do grande número de turistas do terceiro sexo que vem passar este período na Bahia. (...) Quando houve a Peste Suína no Brasil, a solução foi erradicar completamente os porcos ameaçados de contágio. Portanto, a solução tem de ser a mesma: a erradicação dos elementos que podem transmitir a peste gay. Só assim acabaria com a AIDS*”

¹⁶⁷ A documentary with this name was released in 1988 by Rita Moreira, including pedestrian interviews, as well as activists – from supportive views to open defenses to social cleansing practices.

¹⁶⁸ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “Turma OK” fond.

gender and sexual dissidence with disease, disgust, and shock, and of products of a world falling apart.

Amid the AIDS crisis, homosexuals are described as “aberrations”, “inferiors”, “abnormal”, and as a “disease” – or even beings that should be “condemned to death”. The reports collected by Mascarenhas and GGB in media reports are many times shocking, including quotes such as “Killings fags is not a homicide”, “gays are repugnant”, “keep the city clean: kill a fag every day”, “the solution to end AIDS is to eradicate the transmitters of the gay pest”, “homosexuals are the main transmitters of AIDS. We need to end the legality of pederasty!”¹⁶⁹. These quotes range from the mid to the late 80s, including politicians, journalists and popular media figures. Not by chance, related to this period, there is as well a decrease in the number of homosexual organizations from the early to the mid and late 80s, only to be later revived, in a second wave, by the 90s, almost fully migrating to HIV/AIDS organizations (FACCHINI, 2003).

Several authors on queer history have written how, with the impact of the AIDS crisis, the emerging “gay movement” came to be in opposition to a queerness associated with disease and contagion. Forms of self-representation, such as in gay magazines, shifted from the androgynous looks of the 70s to extremely masculine figures that emphasized virility and strength – symbolized by figures with mustache, muscles and body hair. Therefore, “gayness” was increasingly attached to an ideal of homoerotic, “virile”, hyper-masculinity (WARNER, 2000, for a take on queer “respectability” politics).

At the same time, we can also argue this was also connected to self-defense, as well, as it is indicated in the September 1987 report collected by GGB¹⁷⁰, in a list with five ways to self-protect from crimes, including: “4) Faggots [*bichas*] too delicate, fragile, helpless, are a field day (...): be strong, learn self-defense”¹⁷¹. The report also includes attention to possible sexual partners, which also indicates a certain reclusion of homosexual/gay sociability circles, and previously reached visibility.

Forms of differentiation within the homosexual movement – increasingly fragmented internally, by the end of the decade – can be observed in the documents analyzed – particularly

¹⁶⁹ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” and “Turma OK” fonds.

¹⁷⁰ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “Turma OK” fond,

¹⁷¹ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” and “Turma OK” fonds.

in the opposition between homosexuals and *travestis*. One example is the following excerpt, from 1984, collected by GGB¹⁷² (*translated from Portuguese*¹⁷³):

“transvestism (...) is recriminated by many homosexuals that seek to be normally accepted by society, without further conflict (...) The crazy fag [bicha louca], the *travesti* and the dyke are deturpations outside the [homosexual] movement (...) The *travesti*, recriminated by his family, and the society, ends up many times being recriminated by homosexuals themselves and becomes a very lonely person, without the means to have an effective and longing relationship (...) The homosexual (...) does not want to be importuned and does not bother anyone”.

Therefore, in the entanglements between gender performance and sexuality, “discreetness” was already, in the early to mid-80s, a key element in this differentiation. The emphasis on “effective and longing” relationships built the notion of a monogamous, “nuclear family”-type of structure attached to homosexuals/gay men, in opposition to *travestis*, particularly those in sex work. This became particularly remarkable amid the AIDS crisis, in the re/shaping of the place of desire and sexuality in the movement and their forms of (self-)representation. Creating an “Other’s Other” would, even if unconsciously, work as a way to externalize the problem of “subversion”, “degeneracy” and notions of “social contagion” that were already seeded across history, but took particular growth amid the AIDS crisis. As seropositive patients, *travestis* would be restricted to the private, as lonely individuals to their paths to death – they had no place in the “public”, in “visibility”, or in social life.

In fact, “homosexuals” as a broad definition would reach its end in this same period, with the rise of the “GLS” acronym (gays, lesbians and sympathizers) by the 90s. Already by the late 80s, the term “gay” started to be popularized – at the time, usually written as “*guei*”, as it was more easily pronounced in Portuguese. Therefore, the former, broader definition of “homosexuality” further loses track with the popularity of other terms, such as “gay” and “lesbian” (now understood under the “homosexual” umbrella). *Travestis* would form their own institutionalized social movement years later, in the early 90s, being incorporated in the “LGBT” acronym, together with transsexuals, by the 2000s¹⁷⁴.

¹⁷² Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “Turma OK” fond,

¹⁷³ In the original: “*O travestismo (...) é recriminado por muitos homossexuais que tentam ser aceitos normalmente pela sociedade, sem criar maiores conflito (...) A bicha louca, o travesti e o sapatão são deturpações fora do próprio movimento (...) O travesti, recriminado pela família, e sociedade como um todo, acaba muitas vezes sendo recriminado também pelo próprio homossexual e se torna uma pessoa muito sozinha, sem condições de manter um relacionamento mais efetivo e duradouro (...) O homossexual (...) não quer ser importunado e não incomoda ninguém*”.

¹⁷⁴ As further stated in the **Introduction**.

An April 87 report on the “International Day of Gay Pride” [*Dia Internacional do Orgulho Gay*]¹⁷⁵ states that the use of the term “gay”/“guêi” is also a shift from what is deemed as a medical term – “homosexual”, dating back to the later 19th century – to a term, originally seen as a slur, re/discovered and empowered by activists across the world. Therefore, it further establishes international connections in the movement – and follows the steps towards depathologization, in the alliances with the scientific community, particularly important to the international homosexual/gay movement at the time¹⁷⁶.

Historically, the early 80s saw a noticeable advancement in the homosexual movement and its demands, including in such efforts. The documents collected by Mascarenhas include even early demands for same-sex marriage and more radical takes on the nature and nuances of human sexuality. This also includes a noticeable shift to more contemporary terminologies – such as “homophobia” and “sexual orientation” – which would have more amplified cultural reach only after the peak of the AIDS crisis, indicating an early development that was cut by a noticeable historical backlash.

With so, homosexual/gay activists had to complexly navigate the relations between being back in the “ghettos”, and maintain certain visibility, after the “gay boom” (VERAS, 2015), in an extremely harsh period. The democratic transition further complexifies this, with possibilities to State recognition, on one hand, but lack of any State support in this early stage – as it is indicated by documents emphasizing guerrilla-like research and self-defense practices. At the same time, the change in the political regime does not necessarily moves at the same pace as cultural shifts – in fact, the AIDS crisis, and the moral panics surrounding it, revived radical discourses that existed at least since the 30s and 40s, here mixed with a certain medical and scientific discourse developed later in history, amid, in the opposite direction, efforts into depathologization.

The AIDS crisis is deemed by the activists at the time as one of the main reasons for the “failure” – a term used in the documents – of the inclusion of “sexual orientation” in the 1988 Constitution, besides specific challenges faced in the voting circumstances¹⁷⁷. In general, the documents analyzed, particularly the private letters, show a disappointment and somewhat confused feeling associated with this final failure after a series of advancements. “Triângulo

¹⁷⁵ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond,

¹⁷⁶ As stated in the **Introduction**, this includes the removal of “homosexuality” as a mental disorder by APA, in 1973, and by WHO, in 1990.

¹⁷⁷ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond.

Rosa”, led by Mascarenhas, as many other homosexual organizations at the time, would end in 1988.

Un/learning history, re/making connections

Therefore, the efforts for “social respectability” ended up falling short, for MHB activists, in their goal to inclusion, amid the democratic transition. “Homosexuals” as a whole, including gay men, were directly affected by ongoing moral panics and increased discrimination and persecution at the time, amid the AIDS crisis, in a strong backlash to a previous opening in cultural and political terms. Even though negative stereotypes existed prior to this period, there is a noticeable shift, in radicalization, with the AIDS crisis period.

This understanding would affect those deemed “men” in general, although many gay men, especially those in a position of racial and class privilege, as well as those more masculine presenting, could dodge themselves more easily from direct forms of violence, such as the case of hate crimes. These takes on social cleansing ideals, and eugenics, would be later directed towards *travestis*, in particular, as they were visible targets and historically stigmatized as being necessarily connected to criminality and sex work¹⁷⁸.

Additionally, the cases collected by GGB also indicate the rise of violent hate crimes, particularly after “male-male” intercourse. Here, it is important to remark that “honor killing” [*crime de honra*] was still a legal justification in the Brazilian judiciary system. Mostly used to justify cases of femicide and domestic violence, it could be used as well to protect one’s “masculinity” that was deemed “violated” in male-male interactions¹⁷⁹.

This also goes into a specific history of legal justification in “gay panic defense”, which is not fully banned across the world to the present-day, in several countries. This includes “trans panic defense” cases, noticeably the infamous murder of Gwen Araujo in the US, in 2002, after an attempted rape¹⁸⁰ (BETTCHER, 2007). This analysis, again, emphasize the specific nature of violence in such crimes, in what I previously described as neuroticism and a type of “self-killing”, leading to a re/placement in hegemonic masculinity, in such violent acts.

The moral panic attached to the AIDS crisis led to the embodiment of a series of negative categories historically associated with the “homosexual” population. Therefore, in fact, they

¹⁷⁸ This connection is further analyzed in the **Second Chapter**.

¹⁷⁹ Although outdated in practice, the defense of “honor” to justify crimes was only officially banned in Brazilian legislation only in 2023. Source: STF / <https://portal.stf.jus.br/noticias/verNoticiaDetalhe.asp?idConteudo=503655&ori=1>.

¹⁸⁰ Judicially, the “panic” caused by the “discovery” that Araújo was trans, with her genitalia, was used as a legal justification for her murder – in this legal justification, the murderers would have “lost control” of their actions.

became not simply a matter of sexual and affective practices, but a body that is deemed as inherently dangerous to society in general. Therefore, gay men became closer to the image of *travestis* – many of the things being told by homosexuals about *travestis* were, in fact, what society, in general, was saying about themselves, with internal differences becoming blurred in culture. Dehumanization, as a process, became broader and deeper – with gay men, as well, being compared to animals, under open propositions of social cleansing. The identity itself became moralized in this process, challenging the inclusion of sexual orientation in the 1988 Constitution. On the other direction, the homosexual/gay movement had to navigate complex differentiation processes, and to re/structure their goals in terms of “leaving the ghettos”, reaching visibility and being recognized in terms of “social respectability”, in what I previously describe as a process both attached to certain strategic essentialism, but also to a specific place of privilege in the intersectional crossings of race, gender, and class.

In retrospect, we can argue that the absence of the look upon the concrete reality of *travestis* was, in a symbolic way, what possibly led the movement to fail in its advocacy efforts. The expanded division between the reality of the streets (including its extreme forms of violence) and the sought “respectability” of the institutional – in its connections to the scientific community, international networks, State officials... – tended to underestimate the slow change in culture on a ground level, particularly with the backlash during the AIDS crisis, as well as the need to undergo deeper self-criticism in differences and inequalities. In a way, knowledge became detached from the reality of the “community” itself – “majority” and “minority” became reversed.

In fact, clearer takes on eugenics policies were already being made against the trans population at the time, concurrent to depathologization efforts for homosexuality, within the scientific and medical community, in its intersections with State policies. Radi (2020) emphasizes a broader history of eugenics related to the trans population, materialized in the necessity of sterilization to change one’s name and sex in legal documents, a process that started in the 80s to the 90s, with the entry of “transsexualism” in international medical manuals¹⁸¹. Therefore, not so long after countries, such as in Northern Europe, where deeming that “homosexuality” was not a disease or mental disorder, trans people started to be subjected to coerced sterilization policies in those same places. Not by chance, this is what I tend to call “in/distinctions”, as such differentiation processes can historically shift, with differences and

¹⁸¹ As stated in the **Introduction**, forced sterilization practices on trans people, in order to get state recognition, exist to the present-day across the world. In certain countries, policies have recently shift, as the case in Northern Europe, in the past decade.

inequalities being not only set apart, but also blurred and merged in other posterior movements – categories like “MSM” included all these groups.

The later State recognition period, in the 90s, has a duality in these processes. While, on one hand, this led to certain forms of “embodiments” of “AIDS” in the form of so-called “risk groups”, such notions were central to the entry in directed policies, being as well a strategy used by social movements to be formally recognized, including having official records, directories, offices, and so on (FACCHINI, 2003). Still, the experience of reading the reports chronologically is impactful, as early reports of the democratic transition tended to be optimistic with the creation of a vaccine and early eradication of transmission. In fact, such “revival” would only happen years later, with the costs of thousands of deaths and a noticeable backlash in ongoing political and cultural gains. The self-proclaimed “failure” at the 1988 Constitution is described in pain and disappointment, and we can hypothesize that its outcome would be at least less extreme than it was (in terms of the noticeable voting against it) if it was not by the impacts of the AIDS crisis in public perception.

Saying this today is surely easier than it was decades ago. Still, I believe we can learn, from this critical analysis, about notions of visibility and representation – as proposed by Snorton (2017), when it comes to race and intersectional analysis – as well as a politics of respectability. Similarly, Koyama (2006) argues for a transfeminist effort that does not seek a “feminine” respectability, and that questions sexism both in the dominance of men over women in society, and in the foundation of sex/gender as strictly binary categories, emphasizing notions of body autonomy and self-determination. In fact, these demands exist at least since the 80s, within trans movements across the world, which were more skeptical to State recognition and inclusion efforts (STONE, 2006). Therefore, comprehending an intersectional analysis is also emphasizing the “tolds and untolds” in history and in archival sources, and how differences and inequalities shape, and can shape, as well, alternative historicities and temporalities less grounded on notions of success and progress (HALBERSTAM, 2005).

Another take we can learn from these stories is that when it comes to public perception and “acceptance”, there is not a clear and linear “progress” – as we can observe across the 80s. This is particular truth given the backlash we are facing today¹⁸², which includes, as well, increasing radical discourses, particularly against trans people, and the decrease in the number of LGBTI+ grassroots organizations and funding opportunities across the world.

¹⁸² As stated in the **Introduction**, the present-day has seen the rise and expansion of so-called anti-gender movements, where trans people are at the center of public controversies and moral panics.

This learning is also relevant to public history, in the ways public historians can include communities in their theory/practice efforts, and, particularly in backlash historical periods, take responsibility and stand ground on certain notions and perceptions that will necessarily be opposed viciously, as the “public” itself is always multiple and contested, and knowledge-making always involves undergoing specific “world-building” ethical and political projects¹⁸³.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that broader cultural transformations do not necessarily follow advancements in legal grounds, or even the expansion of social movements. In fact, as we can observe to this day, the advance of legal rights tends to lead to later backlash periods – including in the expansion of hate crimes (in what we may argue as a result of a broader individual/collective repression). Stigmas and stereotypes still exist, even in more “positive” historical periods, and can be quickly re/inserted and re/configured back into the public sphere, under certain periods, including its more extreme forms, such as social cleansing and dehumanizing discourses and practices. Market and government interests can quickly shift back to more traditional notions of the “family” and the “nation-sense”, particularly under periods of social, health and economic unrest, as well as shifts in technology.

Such unrest is often attached to concerns about “security” and shared neuroticism in an “us” versus “them” logic, which can lead to forms of authoritarianism and militarism even in so-called democratic regimes. Related to this is a call to “order” – a divine and/or natural order – with strict gender roles and sex definitions. The notion of the “public” – from “public health” to “public security” – can become, yet again, a weapon to marginalize and exclude certain groups from public life itself. A specific target group affected by a series of stigmas and stereotypes – in this historical period, *travestis* – can be the first of several others, in the spreading of such “images and imaginaries”¹⁸⁴ to ever-expanding groups outside hegemonic masculinity. Relying excessively on certain strategies, including in public history, may prove limited to the necessary profound changes on a cultural level.

With so, in the rhymes of history – from the AIDS crisis to COVID-19 (GOSSETT & HAYWARD, 2022); from the fear of nuclear holocaust in the Cold War to the ecological crisis; from the quick industrialization and urbanization in Brazil to the current digitalization era, including the fears and angsts of new technologies; and the *de facto* worsening in social and economic inequality, housing crisis and hyperinflation – we may continue to struggle to open space for alternative futures.

¹⁸³ This segment is mostly inspired by Haraway (2016) and her concept of “response-ability”.

¹⁸⁴ This concept is further developed in the **Second Chapter**.

Second Chapter: Razor blades

“My travesti body always comes before me (...) like a wall, an *outdoor* or a flashing neon sign, independent from who I am or what I do”

O meu corpo travesti sempre chega antes (...) como um muro, um outdoor ou um letreiro piscante, independentemente de quem eu seja ou do que eu faça

CARVALHO (2022)

Living in frontiers: Condessa, the “old travesti”

A SUA VE CONDESSA, O DECANO DOS TRAVESTIS.

Joana Rodrigues e Tarcísio Motta (Fotos)

Ao assumir definitivamente seu lado feminino, Clóvis Vieira, mineiro, pianista e estudante do terceiro ano de Direito da Faculdade do Largo São Francisco, não poderia escolher outro nome de guerra. Transformando-se em Condessa, mal sabia o que sua nova identidade viria a representar para a comunidade gay brasileira.

Como por magia e muito encanto, sua casa noturna, localizada na rua da Consolação, 2.554, passou a ser desde 1973 a fortaleza dos homossexuais de todo o País – que, em busca de proteção e guarda, encontraram a liberdade de viver sua opção sexual da maneira mais natural possível.

O começo da vida noturna e artística de Condessa, coincidiu exatamente com seu ingresso no 1º Tribunal de Alçada da capital, há 12 anos. Tudo aconteceu com um desafio lançado por um amigo, que sugeriu a Clóvis que, em vez de aparecer os shows da boate vestido de homem, passasse a usar roupas femininas. No primeiro dia, tudo deu certo e Clóvis se realizou completamente. Dali em diante, aqueles homens bem afeitados, tristes e solitários deixaram de existir e substituíram uma mulher alegre, comunicativa e muito carinhosa, conscientemente chamada Condessa.

“A transformação para mim foi uma realização, pois até os 21 anos eu não me conformava em ser homem. Eu achava permissivo demais sentir atração física por outro homem. Era triste; não frequentava a vida noturna, não ia nem a cinema, minha mãe nunca me dava liberdade. E foi exatamente nesta época que Condessa passou a ingerir hormônios femininos, para ela “fazer uma coisa tão natural que me adaptei tanto a eles, e hoje em dia não consigo viver sem hormônios, a falta deles me deixa sem sono, irritada e nervosa”.

Embora a mudança não tenha sido de imediato, sempre incomodou o seu ambiente familiar e profissional. A família, principalmente a mãe, dona Francisca, não queria saber de seu filho com cabelos compridos, joia de mulher. “No fundo, conta Condessa, ela queria um homem, o que eu alista nunca fui. E aí a pressão aumentou demais.”

Se sou feliz? Claro, felicíssima...

Inspicionalmente desde o quadro de luz até o estogo de maquiagem dos artistas, ela vive intensamente sua boate, que abriga diariamente cerca de 100 pessoas, geralmente homossexuais masculinos, que dançam, bebem e se deliciam com os shows de travestis que acontecem durante toda a semana, mais as matins dominicais.

Mas curtir a casa também está incluído na vida de Condessa. Ela faz isso, às segundas e terças, quando a boate não funciona. Arrumar a casa, cuidar das roupas, cozinhar, lavar a correspondência em dia, é parte do que ela faz quando fica no lar. Pois, mais que uma morada, Condessa construiu um lar, onde, ao lado do marido, Artur, de 28 anos, desfruta dos prazeres existenciais de uma pessoa bem amada.

– Entre eu e ele existe muito fervor. Nos nos completamos social e sexualmente, apesar de que alguma vez, como acontece com todos os casais, passamos alguns dias. Eu gosto muito dele e, depois de seis anos de convivência, dia a dia, vou confirmando isso. Quanto a ele, eu acho que também me quer e me compreende, tanto que está comigo.

– É sim, o pessoal me chama de “mãe”. É um apelido amigo, mas que curto pra valer. Talvez tenha vindo porque sou uma pessoa que trata todos com carinho e com cuidado. Isso também funciona com o público, eu me preocupo em oferecer o que há de melhor para ele. De mãe para filho.

É para o palco que Condessa dirige sua vida. De quarta a domingo ela chega às sete da noite na boate e só vai para casa depois que o último cliente vai embora.

Clientes para Condessa significam as verdadeiras amigas. Em sua boate Nostromondo, a maioria absoluta dos frequentadores de sua casa, tornam-se seus amigos. Tanto é verdade, que nos cantinhos, no palco ou na bilheteria, onde fica supervisionando de perto o andamento da casa, sempre se encontra bastante carinhosa e por vezes até estranha.

– É sim, o pessoal me chama de “mãe”. É um apelido amigo, mas que curto pra valer. Talvez tenha vindo porque sou uma pessoa que trata todos com carinho e com cuidado. Isso também funciona com o público, eu me preocupo em oferecer o que há de melhor para ele. De mãe para filho.

É para o palco que Condessa dirige sua vida. De quarta a domingo ela chega às sete da noite na boate e só vai para casa depois que o último cliente vai embora.

CONDESSA ERA CLÓVIS VIEIRA.

Sensual, sofisticada...

Apesar de não se considerar a operação que retira o órgão sexual masculino, Condessa particularmente não pensa em fazer-la. Consciente do seu papel sexual mesmo vestido como outro homem, ela declara que o pênis não é motivo de discordância nem para sua cabeça nem para o seu corpo, hoje totalmente feminilizado.

Quando ao praxe sexual, ela concorda plenamente que “o gosto vem da cabeça”. E admite que seu comportamento feminino já se incorporou em seu modo de agir e no seu desempenho sexual também.

Diante de sua completa transformação, ser confundida com uma mulher já vivia rotina. Na rua, os homens sempre notam alguma coisa diferente em sua pessoa. Isso já foi motivo de artigos com o marido, que segundo ela “é muito ciumento”.

Mas a confusão não acontece somente na rua, conta ela. “Uma vez ao passar pelo pronto-socorro do Hospital das Clínicas, devido a um ferimento na testa, os médicos pediram uma radiografia da minha cabeça. Ao trazer o resultado, o médico, meio sem graça, perguntou-me se eu usava muito anticoncepcional. Isso porque, o cretório das pessoas que tomam muito hormônio fica com um aspecto diferente. E, no final, ele me aconselhou a ter filhos, e parou de evitá-los.”

E, para solucionar situações desagradáveis, do tipo verificação de documentos, pagamento de cheques, apresentação de carteira de identidade, Condessa resolveu adotar o seguinte sistema: depois ou antes de fazer as compras, explica à vendedora que seu “marido Clóvis”, detém-lhe um cheque assinado e depois de exibir a carteira de oficial, judiciário da própria, a vendedora não tem dúvidas e o pagamento é feito normalmente.

Agosto/16 – 19/10/84



Figures 8: “Condessa: The charm of the old travesti”.

In the original, “Condessa: O charme do velho travesti” [use of male pronouns]. The page itself reads: “The gentle Condessa, the chairperson of travestis”. In the original: “A suave Condessa, o decano dos travestis” [use of female and male pronouns].

Agora! Magazine, October 1984. Digitalized in August 2022. Available at the AEL archive (physical copy only).

Published in October 19, 1984, the one-page report “Condessa: The charm of the old travesti” [“Condessa: O charme do velho travesti”, use of male pronouns] was published in the magazine Agora!¹⁸⁵. It depicts the story of Condessa, already at the time a prominent figure in São Paulo’s¹⁸⁶ travesti nightlife – to this day, still referred to as one of the main names in Brazilian travesti and trans history.

Condessa worked as a lawyer before adventuring into the nightlife world. Starting to “dress up” as a woman for nightclub performances in her early 20s, this eventually became her whole life, taking female hormones and living fully as a woman, something she describes in the report as “natural” and the reason for her change from a “sad and lonely man” to a “happy, communicative and loving woman”. Condessa describes a scene where she went to a doctor

¹⁸⁵ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “Turma OK” fond,

¹⁸⁶ São Paulo is Brazil’s largest city, today with about 13 million people, followed by Rio de Janeiro, with about 9 million people. At the time, in the 80s, São Paulo had about 8 million people, and was still in great expansion, growing almost 50% compared to 10 years later.

due to headaches. After examining her head, the doctor said to her she was taking “too many contraceptive pills” and should, as a woman, embrace “her gift of being able to give birth”.

Even though, in her interview to the report, Condessa argues that she was “never a man”, she also states she is often “mistaken as a woman” in her daily life. The report refers to her with female pronouns, even though the title uses male pronouns. This mixture is particularly noticeable when it comes to relationships and sexuality – at the time, Condessa was in a stable relationship with a man – providing curious gendered constructions in the text (*translated from Portuguese*¹⁸⁷):

Although she does not oppose the surgery to remove the male sexual organ¹⁸⁸, Condessa does not think particularly on taking it. Conscious of the sexual role in a relationship with another man, she declares that the penis is not reason for discord not for her head neither for her body, now totally feminized.¹⁸⁹

These gender frontiers also appear in her daily life. At the time, changing legal documents was not possible for *travestis* and other trans people – meaning that Condessa’s documents still had her former, male, name, Clóvis, in her documents, independent from her female social reading. In a period where male partners often paid for the expenses of the family, including of the wife, Condessa’s way to navigate her daily life – buying groceries or going to the bank, for example – was to argue that the one paying for her expenses was her husband Clóvis, a lawyer. Whenever necessary, she showed the documents of “her husband” – herself, “dressed up as a man”.

Although privileged in her education and work position when compared to other *travestis* and other trans people at the time, Condessa was still excluded from her family after affirming her gender identity and expression, in adulthood. The report mentions her family prohibited her from meeting her young nephews “after she *travestied*” [*depois que se travestiu*], under the chance of possibly “influencing them”. As many others, she found community and family, and moments of joy and love, in the queer nightlife.

Eventually, after living a “double life”, Condessa fully abandoned her duties as a lawyer to become the manager of a nightclub in the center of São Paulo – Nostromundo, founded in 1971. She became an important figure, often being called a “mother” by those around, deemed

¹⁸⁷ In the original: “Apesar de não ser contrária a operação que retira o órgão sexual masculino, Condessa particularmente não pensa em fazê-la. Consciente do seu papel sexual numa relação com outro homem, ela declara que o pênis não é motivo de discórdia nem para sua cabeça nem para o seu corpo, hoje totalmente feminizado”.

¹⁸⁸ This is possibly referring to GRS, at the time often called “sex change” surgery.

¹⁸⁹ The somewhat odd construction of the phrase, in terms of pronouns and terminologies, follows the Portuguese original.

a powerful, yet generous, person in this sociability circle. At the time of report, she was 42. The report mentions a public of about 700 people each night at Nostromundo, with concerts happening five times a week.

Condessa's story is a glimpse into how *travestis* could navigate their daily lives, in the interconnections between gender, race and class, and the possibilities to live their lives as they wish – to name themselves, and form community – even in precarious conditions. Unlike others, she had a strong educational background and found economic success with her club, which shaped a specific set of possibilities in agency. Versed with law knowledge, and with a strong support network, she was able to dodge her club [*boate*] from the persecution of the military forces during the Civic-Military Dictatorship and across the democratic transition, including the AIDS crisis.

Condessa's story is a story of frontiers – firstly, of gender frontiers, in the interconnected layers between gender identity, expression and sexuality, as well as society's expectations on gender roles, as exemplified in the act of pretending to be her own husband. These roles are embedded into patriarchal expectations, which not only create differences, but also inequalities – hence, the possibilities for mobility in these structures are unequally distributed. This is also a story of agency, reflexivity and creativity, navigating identities and embodiments in the circulation between different spaces.

Condessa's story is also one that crosses state, legal elements – such as in the case with her documents stating a male name, and the broader context of operating a so-called “gay nightclub” in a militarized and authoritarian political regime¹⁹⁰. Finally, it crosses nuances of body modification and its intersections with science – taking hormones, with its neurochemical and physical changes, and undergoing or not gender reassignment surgery (GRS). It is also a life, in many ways, marked by dualities and colliding worlds – the traditional nuclear family, and the role as a male lawyer family provider, on one hand, and the sociability and economic possibilities that emerged in the nightlife as a *travesti* performer and nightclub owner in the São Paulo's queer scene, on another.

Finally, it is a story that, in many ways, exceeds contemporary terminologies. By Condessa's description, we might say, more contemporarily, that she “passed” as a cisgender woman¹⁹¹ – for example, by her story in a medical appointment. However, the social readings of her body and identity, between femininity and masculinity, womanhood and being a *travesti*,

¹⁹⁰ Discourses and practices of the Military regime are further described in the **First Chapter**.

¹⁹¹ As mentioned in the **Introduction**, categories such as “cisgender” should be historicized, but still taken into consideration in historical analysis, particularly when used as concepts and analytical tools.

were in fact more complex and nuanced than a strict binary, or even a contemporary notion of gender identity and expression – it travels as well between medicine and science (as in her consultation with a doctor), state (as the case of her documents) and society (in the different sociability circles she traveled, such as in her club).

Nostromundo was kept open even after Condessa passed away, in 1989, a remarkable achievement given the opening amid the Civic-Military Dictatorship and AIDS crisis just after. Nostromundo eventually closed in 2014, being the longest-lasting known LGBTI nightclub in Brazilian history. With the emergence of the AIDS crisis in the mid to late 80s, Condessa was a leading figure in donations and promotions of supportive initiatives. At 47 years old, she underwent GRS surgery, but passed away in the same year, as a victim of HIV/AIDS complications herself.

“Bionic fags” in the time of hormones: The centrality of body modifications

“Brazil: world champion of travestis”

Published in 1981, the *Lampião da Esquina*¹⁹²’s report “Brazil: world champion¹⁹³ of *travestis*” [*Brasil: Campeão mundial de travestis*] is one of the most well researched documents within the studies on the history of *travestis*¹⁹⁴. It is also one of the rare historical records where *travestis* are depicted more positively and openly, even within the Brazilian homosexual movement (MHB)¹⁹⁵, and is one of the few written ones, known today, where we can access *travestis*’ first-person reports by their interviews at the time, particularly in more extensive takes.

The full report – that includes a long interview with Rogéria, known at the time as the “queen of *travestis*” – takes almost 10 pages, half of the full magazine. The report starts reflexively, in the dilemma that so-called “transvestism” puts to the homosexual movement, to feminism, and to the question of self-identity. The *travesti* is described as both the embodiment of sexist values, and as a revolutionary figure of liberty¹⁹⁶, depending on the point of the view – namely, described as a “mystery”, an “enigma”, and a “fascination” – a “sphinx”. The full

¹⁹² As stated in the **First Chapter**, AEL is the main archival source for this research. It includes the original records of *Lampião da Esquina*, published from 1978 to 1981, amid the Dictatorship.

¹⁹³ “World champion” is possibly referring to the FIFA World Cup, won by Brazil three times by this period, at 1958, 1962 and 1970.

¹⁹⁴ As other editions of the journal, it is available freely and digitally, facilitating researcher’s access from different parts of the country and the Portuguese-speaking world. Available at: Grupo Dignidade / <https://www.grupodignidade.org.br/projetos/lampiao-da-esquina/>.

¹⁹⁵ As stated in the **First Chapter**, the Brazilian Homosexual Movement (MHB) at the time had conflicting views on *travestis* and their place in the social movement, in the complex connections between both terms (“homosexual” versus “travesti”).

¹⁹⁶ Such dual construction is similar to what was observed in the **First Chapter**, with MHB.

report includes different homosexual authors, some with more skeptical takes on *travestis*, understanding them as an “anomaly” of homosexuality (*translated from Portuguese*)¹⁹⁷:

Without option, (...) some homosexuals, unconscious victims of this claustrophobia of pre-conceived roles (...) start to ‘occupy’ the roles delimited by the [heterosexual] System, by the book. With that, the crazy fag [*bicha louca*] and the dyke [*sapatão*] appear (not to be confused with the homosexuals out of the closet [*assumidos*]) (...) The *travesti* is the fetish of a heterosexual vision of homosexuality (...) The *travesti* believes to be a woman. And there are cases that this believe comes to the realms of physical castration, in a definitive acceptance to give up of one’s empiric sexuality (the penis”).

Travestis are described in pain, suffering, and strength, in their efforts to “become closer”, or to “resemble”, women. The report, which was not written by *travestis* themselves, even with different authors, mostly uses male pronouns to refer to them. At the same time, by their first-person reports, it is possible to observe that some of those interviewed identify themselves as women and use female pronouns, even if followed or not by the identity as homosexuals as well – an apparent clash between reports of the self and the other that appeared unedited in the final text. At the same time, GRS, in most cases – both for *travestis* and *homosexuals* – is deemed a synonym of “becoming a woman”, in a complex entanglement of womanhood, femininity, homosexuality and travestility, amid a range of body modifications, and questions on autonomy, identity and self-determination.

Although the opening segment mentions *travesti* as a type of performance – “being in *travesti*” [*estar em travesti*] – it also mentions “the first generation of bionic or experimental fags [*bichas biônicas ou experimentais*]”, including a series of body modifications. Namely, “taking hormones, implanting breasts, doing electrolysis, cutting the Adam’s apple, raising or lowering the forehead, injecting silicone in the cheekbones, lips, and hips”¹⁹⁸. Being a *travesti* is also understood, in the report, in a variety of behaviors and personalities – from the “*pintosas*”, known for their extravagance and excessiveness, to the “discrete”, “delicate” ones¹⁹⁹ – in

¹⁹⁷ In the original: “*Sem outra opção (...) alguns homossexuais, vítimas inconscientes dessa claustrofobia de papéis pré-conceituais (...) passam a ‘ocupar’ os espaços delimitados pelo Sistema seguindo à risca o que manda o figurino. Aí surge a bicha louca e o sapatão (não confundir com os homossexuais assumidos) (...) O travesti é o fetiche de uma visão heterossexual da homossexualidade.(...) O travesti acredita ser mulher. E há casos em que essa crença chega às raias da castração física, numa aceitação definitiva de abrir mão da sua sexualidade empírica (o pênis)*”.

¹⁹⁸ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond. Also Available at Grupo Dignidade / <https://www.grupodignidade.org.br/projetos/lampiao-da-esquina/>.

¹⁹⁹ What is particularly unusual about the report is that being more discrete or extravagant are not inserted into forms of typology, but simply as varied ways of being. In that sense, there is a somewhat contemporary feeling to the report in its emphasis to identity, in a sense of self-determination.

blurred lines with so-called “transsexualism”, a more strict medical definition growing popular beyond scientific and medical debates, during the same period²⁰⁰.



²⁰⁰ This will be further developed throughout the chapter.

Brasil: campeão mundial de travestis

Acredito que todo o homossexual, num momento ou outro de sua vida, sente a tentação de se travestir. É o que o fazem, atitudes, com certeza, o termo de uma questão fundamental para o homossexualismo, que é onde coloco o travestimento no contexto homossexual. Há diversos enfoques. Por exemplo, numa sociedade em que predomina os valores machistas, o travestimento representa a negação absoluta desses valores, e espelha toda uma sociedade contrária a si mesma. Mas que dizer também, dentro de um universo feminino, a estranheza dos valores machistas, já que o travesti quer dar, pretende dar ao homem tudo aquilo que a mulher emancipada moderna procura apagar de seu corpo, que é a imagem da mulher-bonoca, da mulher-objeto, passiva e vadia.

Do ponto de vista homossexual propriamente dito, a coisa tem de ser vista por um ângulo diferente. Não falo da vida do homossexual preconceituoso, do "revolucionário", para aquele o travesti é o espelho para uma vida tranquila e sem vergonha, e para estes alguém que os impede de pagar mais um degrau em direção ao poder. Falo aqui do homossexual que, um dia, encontra-se na mais completa condição vital e se pergunta o que está. Para este homossexual em busca do entendimento, o fenômeno do travestimento é mais um mistério fundamental entre os mistérios de sua vida a ser decifrado. Sim, procure para ele o travesti, além de um amigo é uma fascinante a ser desvendada, uma tentação a ser vencida. Eu, por exemplo, nunca me travesti, nem como gatinho, como era o costume entre os homossexuais, há alguns anos, e acho que hoje interpretaria um objetivado não vendido, uma etapa não cumprida de minha vida. Confesso que nunca consegui deixar de sentir uma ponta de inveja de todos os meus amigos de sociedade que, num momento ou outro de suas existências, se travestiram.

É há sempre detalhes significativos no caso de cada um deles. Um, por exemplo, ao vestir de mulher pela primeira vez, teve uma reação. Diante do espelho. Outra, reproduzida durante os três dias de carnaval tudo o que de sobra ter sido em casa e que seus pais não de-

permiram a imagem de uma jovem tão bela e simples. Usava vestidos muito simples e discretos, embora caros, e pequenas chapéus que o transformavam na eterna debutante de 15 anos, lindíssima, muito cortês.

Travestir-se, aliás, nada tem a ver com poder. É de fato mais para ele que muitos contêm que se travestem regularmente. Dos desses contêmidos, os melhores amigos, são pessoas que eu nunca poderia imaginar vestidos de mulher. Pois num baile de gala, anos atrás, às vésperas do carnaval, eles receberam os travestis com roupas de amigos e brincararam muito à vontade à noite inteira, tendo por "cavalheiros" uma colega travestida.

«Não falo do hetero que se traveste: mas o que seria homossexual a sentir-se de mulher? Ser mulher, sob os aspectos, é muito mais complicado do que ser homem. O homem é simples moral, se sente como pai e lhe dá as ordens, a barba precisa fazer, se não quer. A mulher transporta consigo toda uma personalidade complexa, quase inapreensível. Assim, a opção do travesti é uma opção de sacrifício e quase sempre de muita ambiguidade. Isso sem falar na dor e no sofrimento dos que temem homossexual, impõem-lhes, fazem identificados, cortam o ponto de Adão, aumentam ou reduzem a testa, insistem silicone nos mamilos do peito, nos lábios e nos quadris. São as verdadeiras cirurgias marciais do mundo, ainda em primeira mão, as mãos hábeis não experimentadas, de quem não se sabe o que adora.

A meu ver, porém, há fortes que são capazes de resistir das lacerações e que se impõem, tornando mais homogêneo e admirável ainda, mas não são eles, nem os chamados travestidos, os que mais me interessam no mesmo espírito do homossexualismo. Era aqui ainda está se fazendo. Para mim, a verdadeira esfinge é aquela das intuições e desejos que nunca se realizam, ou que se contentam com a semi-escurelido dos quartos, onde, possivelmente e a esta hora, milhares de criaturas estão experimentando a modo de vestidos das trindades para conquistar sua primeira opção, pois são lá os verdadeiros, produtores do estigma. (Francisco Bittencourt)



Jane e Elaine na transformação levada aos extremos do repulso, já na primeira geração de filhos híbridos. Na foto acima, uma das damas da noite.



gento de quem passa uma noitada à altura da virilha.

Libélulas, mariposas, vampiras, damas da noite...

«Ela suspirava tanto eu a vagar? (Trase ovidé de Li Rimocher, uma bicha cubana que atava no cabaré Casanova, e que morreu em meados da década de 70. Detalhe: Li não era operária — no contrário de todos os meus amigos).

Sáb de dezembro, 23h30min. Na Rua Pedro I, que desemboca na Praça Tardes. A multidão habitual — putas, bichas, questiona em busca de um divertimento de sábado, polidas, cortinas. De repente, no térreo salda da Polícia Militar correm apressadamente para a multidão. Dois deles correm sem dar e podem documentar-se primeiros homossexuais. O travesti para diante de um travesti e se segura pelo pulso. Temo atordoado na praia — me vem à cabeça aquela libélula de estalido que parava todos e olhava em terra, adiantando o inchado que ainda sou consigo no furo. Citeiros de pares de olhos se fixam no PM e no travesti, e a tensão geral, parece, é a que impulsiona uma dilatação com um saltaão, o travesti avança o pulso da mão do soldado, depois, olha ao torso, e o soldado a uma dilatação de seu torso, e, em um momento, se de cabeça contra ele. A libélula do choque faz o travesti sair do pulso, e é de olhos que de-

continua a bater com a cabeça no corpo, até que o sangue começa a lhe manchar o cabelo, a testa, o decote, a blusa. Procura o PM de imediato. Ninguém chega perto do travesti, até que este se levanta e desaparece, entre um bar, todo mansuamente.

«Como é seu nome? "Watusi." — da me diz, e a noite é gerando outro, duas cochilhas chocalam lá no alto do seu metro e oitenta. Um carro passa pela Augusto Severo, bem devagar, e ela não se faz de rogada: abre o vestido de uma só vez, e mostra o corpo bem torcido. O carro vai embora e ela fala para o travesti mais próximo numa linguagem muito cifrada, mas eu consigo entender o final de uma frase: "...o orgulho do rapaz". Watusi tem 22 anos, é negra e faz parte do cadastro do Instituto Histórico e Geográfico há seis meses. Cabelos mol e cílios curvados por macho, e diz que fazeta até nove mil por noite — "depende da disposição". Nunca viu o gâmbio, conseguiu, há dois meses, quando atacou a glândula em seu corpo que não quis lhe pagar o preço. Foi salva porque, levada para o distrito, este teve que ser estavado porque "não receber a visita de

Doze de dezembro, 23h30min. Em frente ao Cinema Ilo. Muita gente parada sob a marquise. Cai uma chuva enfiada, há água empoeirada no meio-fio. Os dois travestis estão bem quietinhos, como se apenas passassem e chegassem. O parafuso se aproxima cambaleando, "tudo de algum hotelzinho do centro de cidade. Ao passar por eles, o primeiro encosta a cabeça e lhe dá uma risada. O parafuso cai, e a segunda libélula lança sobre eles o sangue e o sangue o homem, que está bilibido demais pra entender o que lhe acontece. A primeira, rapidamente, faz a língua — tira o relógio, a carteira, tudo o que o homem tem no bolso, e vai embora, cambaleando com cuidado por sob as marquises para não se molhar. A segunda cochilha a seguir o parafuso, este cai na poça d'água, e o travesti, segurando pelo cabelo, faz com que ele mergulhe a cabeça dentro da lama e lize a sugestão. O parafuso bruxa lentamente, está se alongando. Vêjo, na cara da bicha, uma firme, oca, reativa determinação — da vai macho. Logo o carro, avança em linha e para de momento nos dois — para a mesma altura centímetros. A libélula se volta, olha para não como se estivesse chegando de muito longe, volta-se para o parafuso — a quem continua segurando —, solta o, levanta-se e vai embora, também sem pressa. O parafuso levanta-se e, às vezes, mel correm.

— Al de páro o carro, fica sobra do pra mim. Al eu chego perto dele e digo — vamos fazer um filhinho, nem? Al pogo na mala dele — tá lá, bem escondida. Nota o chego dentro do carro, deixo ele pagar no meu peito. Al a mala começa a mandar pra Fraço: vou mandar cortar" — e faz o

Figure 9: "Brazil: World champion of travestis"

In the original: "Brasil, campeão de travestis". Cover and first page of the report, on the 32th edition of Lampião da Esquina, January 1981. Digitalized at "Grupo Dignidade", originals consulted at the AEL Archive.

The following segment is centered on *travesti* sex workers, in an ethnographic-style effort, in a text mixing fear and curiosity of the male homosexual explorer, who appears to enter a kind of wild savanna in his description. The report mentions a series of stories, throughout different days, from police attacks and death squads, to stealing and attempted killings by the *travestis*. The description is sometimes animalistic and monstrous – *travestis* are “dragonflies, butterflies, vampires”. They have “the eyes of a lynx and the legs of an ostrich”²⁰¹. The savanna becomes mixed with fantasy and mythical elements – a kind of otherworld that is as violent as it is fascinating. Between the lines, the report includes nuances of the violence against *travestis*

²⁰¹ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond. Also available at: Grupo Dignidade / <https://www.grupodignidade.org.br/projetos/lampiao-da-esquina/>.

at the time, from police repression to forms of conversion therapy²⁰², for example, in the story of Tatiana. Unlike other reports, however, this one also opens space for agency and reflexivity, with the use of interviews (*translated from Portuguese*):

On Christmas' Eve, we penetrated the jungle to talk with the most daring travestis – the ones that insist on doing their *trottoir* at the [Rio de Janeiro's city] Center (...) We found a huge human diversity – prostitutes, beggars, idlers [*vadios*], medium-class people filling the stores to buy gifts, and cops: tens, hundreds of them, unceasingly roaming the Center²⁰³ (...)

With attentive eyes between the possible clients [*bofes*] that pass by car and the street avenue, suddenly the two [*travestis*, use of male pronouns], followed by two [female] prostitutes, quickly ran away in the opposite direction: they saw the police van [*bote/camburão*] three blocks away (...)

– They want to reduce the fags [*bichas*] to zero – Tatiana grizzles, seating in a bar in Maior Sertório's street – I moved from Radial Leste to here about one year ago, it was getting impossible there (...) I also spent some time missing. Since I'm a minor – 17 years old – they took me to UI-3, from FEBEM [juvenile detention center], where they cut my hair and gave me masculine hormones to become a man. Can you imagine, me? Not even dead! And, after that, they are a bunch of motherfuckers (...) Another guy, "Ceará", a police officer, when he likes the faggot [*bicha*], after she's released, comes to find her here, in the zone [*pedaço*], to go out with her. Can you believe it?²⁰⁴

These first-person reports, enmeshed with descriptive characteristics, appear to be here inserted to emphasize an almost supernatural set of abilities of *travestis* in sex work, particularly street prostitution, in order to survive and navigate an extremely harsh reality – the report was written just after an ostensive police operation in the Rio de Janeiro's city center, in 1981. In that sense, there is, in many moments of the report, a kind of ode to their strength, mobilized in such metaphors – here, the comparison with the “other-than-human” creatures is not set as a moral weakness, although it may still lean into a, even if subtle, form of dehumanization.

²⁰² This is often an untold history of *travestis* and other trans people in Brazil, which can also be observed in other archival sources, although rarely, and more often in the case of trans men and other transmasculines. More extensive research can be made on this topic in the future, with an entry into mental asylum archives.

²⁰³ In the original: “Às vésperas do Natal, penetramos nessa selva para conversar com os travestis mais audazes - os que insistem em fazer seu *trottoir* no Centro. (...) Nos deparamos com uma diversidade humana imensa - prostitutas, mendigos, vadios, gente de classe média enchendo as lojas para comprar presentes e policia: dezenas, centenas deles, percorrendo incessantemente todo o Centro”.

²⁰⁴ In the original: “Com olhos sempre divididos, entre os bofes que passam de carro e a avenida, de repente os dois, seguidos das duas prostitutas, desembestaram numa carreira louca pela contramão: tinham percebido a barca a três quarteirões de distância - Eles querem reduzir as bichas a zero - desabafa Tatiana -, sentada num bar da Rua Maior Sertório. -- Me transferi da Radial Leste para cá faz coisa de um ano, pois lá não tava dando mais. (...) Eu também passei um tempo sumida. Como sou de menor - 17 anos -, me levaram para a UI-3 da FEBEM, onde cortaram meu cabelo e me deram hormônios masculinos para eu ser homem - imagina, eu hein? Nem morta! E depois, eles são uns filhos da puta (...) Outro cara, "Ceará", policial, quando gosta da bicha, depois que ela é solta, vem procurá-la aqui, no pedaço, para sair com ela. Pode?”.

In that sense, it is important to note that the full report, in fact, hardly has the voice of *travestis* themselves, and is mostly focused on cases of extreme violence, where *travestis* are both the victims and the perpetrators²⁰⁵. The violence of *travestis* is understood as the embodiment of the violence perpetrated against them: the *travesti* is one in revolt, “the men who refuses to be a men, even knowing they will never be a women, even knowing there is no such thing as men and women”²⁰⁶.

Still, in the unedited interview segments, we can observe a variety of ways of being, and a room for dreams, desires and affections in the lives of *travestis*. Watusi uses female hormones and dreams of doing GRS in Europe one day. Fará was married and has a child, and part of the money gained in sex work goes to them. Gisele loves to talk about her experiences in Paris and advocates for the legality of sex work. A scene where all of them sit down to lunch together is also described, where they exchange their experiences in relationships, in a rare archival access to *travestis* daily lives in the period, exploring affects and sexualities on a personal level – a room for internal differences in perceptions and perspectives (*translated from Portuguese*²⁰⁷):

Sandra mentions that she [use of neither pronouns, with a few moments of use of female pronouns] started to use too much hormones at first, but that she didn’t like it because of the side effects (...) Four months ago, when she was in France, she did a silicone injection in the face, and, after returning to Brazil, did another injection in the breasts (...) But the party was in Gisele’s account, who did not stop to talk for one single moment (...) She mentions her season in Paris and remembers the emotion of entering the airport (...) But what she truly demands is that the Brazilian government legalizes prostitution because, according to her, the police are more and more violent (...)

- Which country is this? The police take our money, and they do not want peanuts [*mixaria*] no! (...) When the fags [*bichas*] don’t give to them, they forge a red-handed arrest by weed possession, or take us to Corcovado, where they tie us with one another, want to fuck us and everything. We need to legalize this

²⁰⁵ As stated in the **First Chapter**, *travestis* were constructed in such a set of discourses and practices as both the “perfect victim”, and as an aggressive subject.

²⁰⁶ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond. Also available at: Grupo Dignidade / <https://www.grupodignidade.org.br/projetos/lampiao-da-esquina/>.

²⁰⁷ In the original: “*Sandra fala que quando começou usava muito hormônio, mas que nunca gostou por causa dos efeitos colaterais (...) Há quatro meses, quando estive na França, fez uma aplicação de silicone no rosto e ao retornar ao Brasil fez outra aplicação nos seios (...) Mas a festa ficou por conta de Gisele, que não parou de falar um só instante (...) Fala de sua temporada em Paris e lembra-se da emoção que teve ao embarcar no Aeroporto (...) Mas o que reivindica mesmo é que o Governo brasileiro legalize de vez a prostituição, porque segundo ela, os policiais estão cada vez mais violentos com quem faz vida. (...) Que país é esse? A polícia quando apanha dinheiro da gente, não quer mixaria (...) Quando as bichas não dão, eles forjam flagrante de maconha ou levam pro Corcovado, amarram uma na outra, querem foder a gente e tudo. Tem mais é que legalizar a putaria para acabar com essa sacanagem. Já que eles gostam tanto de dinheiro, vamos dar pro país e não pra eles*”.

whoring [*putaria*] to end this mess [*sacanagem*]. Since they like money so much, we better fuck the country than fuck them!²⁰⁸”

The report presents us, in the present-day, with a brief but precious introduction to the daily lives of *travestis* outside sex work at the time – their day-to-day living together, often in pensions rented by elderly women, in a female sociability also hardly mentioned in other reports. Such descriptions open space for agency, creativity, and reflexivity, even in extremely harsh circumstances. Tatiana seeks the safest spots to continue in sex work, while Sandra navigates different body modifications in her migration. Gisele states a political demand while denouncing police violence, with the use of witty humor. The report also includes instances of entry into sociability circles, including exchanges in experience and knowledge. Today, we can look at these reports in the proximities of travestilities and womanhood – between *travestis* and other female sex workers, but also the differentiation in body modifications – the embodied distinctions between being a *travesti* as a performance and a permanently modified body, as well as glimpses of their lives outside the recurring framings that, already at the time, *travestis* themselves saw as limited and insufficient.

Here, it is important to mention that the interest of the journalists is seen with suspicion by many *travestis* being interrogated and photographed for the report. As mentioned by one of them, Cláudia, “I cannot say anything, this is the law here. Many reporters came here, they did not resolve anything and gave us problems (...) People here do not like to be photographed and snooped on”²⁰⁹. This indicates a certain type of scientific and journalistic “external curiosity”, already at the time, that did not take into account the demands of *travesti* and was not produced ethically and responsibly in attention to the needs of those being “researched”²¹⁰. Saying this is both acknowledging the harsh circumstances of the time (here, still in the Dictatorship period), the internal complexity of the homosexual movement, but also taking into account that such criticism is historically situated – although it may seem contemporary at first, it already existed at the time, even if an earlier form, by *travestis*²¹¹.

²⁰⁸ In the original, “dar” has a double meaning, both meaning “to provide” and “to fuck” – I opted for the second translation, to maintain the witty humor of the original phrase. The previous phrase also has a double meaning, as “putaria” and “sacanagem” are both words with sexual innuendos, and can refer to something that is messy or uncontrolled. However, “sacanagem” also denotes something that is unfair – with so, Gisele contrasts her place in sex work (“putaria”) with the role of the police (“sacanagem”), at the same time that both of them are sexualized.

²⁰⁹ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond. Also available at: Grupo Dignidade / <https://www.grupodignidade.org.br/projetos/lampiao-da-esquina/>.

²¹⁰ As mentioned later in this chapter, this goes into ongoing discussions on epistemology, including takes on scientific “extractivism”, also emphasized in decolonial writings – which has been influencing transfeminist writings in Brazil, namely Vergueiro (2016).

²¹¹ A similar argument is made in the **First Chapter**, in the case of the inclusion of “sexual orientation” in the 1988 Constitution.

Transforming bodies, shaping identities

Authors such as Ocanha (2014) and Lopes (2016) have argued that there is an important shift between the 70s and 80s in the history of *travestis*, where the term shifts from an art form – associated with carnivals and nightclub performances – and becomes more strictly attached to sex work and criminality. This includes the first ostensive police operations against so-called homosexuals in São Paulo, by 1976, where *travestis* were already the main target of State violence and persecution (OCANHA, 2014). This period also includes ostensive police operations against female sex workers under the realms of “public safety” and “public health” – which shape, already by the early 80s, the first grassroots organizations led by female sex workers, including *travestis* (SILVA, 2021). However, the institutionalization of the movement of *travestis* – at the time, the *travestis* and *liberados* movement – would happen only in 1992, growly attached to HIV/AIDS prevention policies, later leading to the present-day “*travesti* and transsexual” movement within the LGBTI acronym (COACCI, 2018)²¹².

In a thesis at the city of Fortaleza, Veras (2015) argues that the change from the 70s to the 80s is also one from a “time of wigs” to a “time of hormones”. Therefore, being a *travesti* moves from an eventual performance, restricted to certain spaces, to a new “sexual subject”. *Travesti* becomes an identity marked in the body by a set of body modifications by “hormones and silicone” (VERAS, 2015, p.85). In this shift, the media plays an important role as well, in a complex entanglement between images of the other and the self, re/shaping subjectivities and senses of belonging.

Veras (2015) points out a shift from “semipublic” appearances to what we can define as the public sphere. Before, *travestis* meant a performance in certain restricted spaces, taking “semipublic” appearances on carnival festivals – not by chance, historically attached to the first instances of police persecution, with their appearances being described as disruptions of the “public”²¹³. Therefore, the insertion in the public sphere can be also connected to this later, embodied, period of the *travesti* identity in the making. The author states, as well, that early reports on “being on *travesti*” on popular media were more positive, often referring to these figures as fun and courageous – although restricted to the carnival. The entry into the public sphere, particularly after a moment of sexual freedom, under the democratic transition – in what the author calls the “opening-arousal” of the political regime – now under the effects of the AIDS crisis in public perception, also meant more openly stigmatization takes.

²¹² This is further described in the **Introduction**.

²¹³ As stated later on in this chapter, this shift, according to the author, comes namely with the circulations of the figure of Roberta Close by the mid to late 80s, particularly in her participation as a Playboy cover in 1984.

In terms of body modifications, it is important to remark that contraceptive pills became widely commercialized in Brazil from the 60s to 70s, starting in 1962. Through oral history reports, we know these were the first form of self-taken HRT by *travestis* and trans women in Brazil – which was later facilitated by easier forms of commercialization (VERAS, 2015). In fact, reports show circulations of this practical knowledge of (bio)technology²¹⁴ – including the circulation of the hormones themselves – amid *travesti* performers in Brazil and abroad, just before the start of the Dictatorship, in the early 60s²¹⁵. With so, such circulations make the subjects themselves – they re/shape embodiments and identities, in the connections between temporalities, materialities and spacialities (M’CHAREK, 2017)²¹⁶.

Veras (2015) points out that taking hormones was a point of differentiation of *travestis* also in bodily experience. Hormones changed not only the “body”, but also the “mind”, in their personality and how they experienced thoughts, feelings and emotions. As there were no medical protocols, this was a matter of self-experimentation, including dealing with unexpected and often unpleasant side effects. Such intense transformation of the body and the self as a whole also built a sense of shared experience and community for this emerging identity, which found in certain spaces, such as carnivals, clubs and beauty contents, sociability networks.

Another important technology, including in symbolic terms, were breast implants. Throughout the years, after the use of female hormones, the presence of noticeable breasts became an important statement of *travesti* femininity – to the point where Rogéria, the “queen of *travestis*”, stated, later in life that “a *travesti* is only a *travesti* with breasts”²¹⁷. Breast implants (in Portuguese, “*silicone*”²¹⁸) began to be available by the 40s, with important developments in the 60s, with the current gel-based formula, and later rise in popularity by the late 70s and early 80s. *Travestis*, however, could rarely access such procedures at the time, opting for cheaper, industrial silicone applications, in so-called “*bombaço*”²¹⁹, a material used in civil construction.

²¹⁴ The use of “bio” here, refers to the fact that such technologies change definitions of what is deemed “biological”, particularly in its associations with “nature” and the contraposition with notions of “artificiality”.

²¹⁵ This information was also gathered by conversations with Brazilian scholars, based in oral history reports, in ongoing historiographical research. This story refers to the travel of Coccinelle to Brazil, in 1963.

²¹⁶ This concept is further mentioned in the **Introduction**, and in fact crosses the whole thesis, in the underlined inspired of the field of FSTS.

²¹⁷ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “Turma OK” fond.

²¹⁸ As other nouns in Portuguese, “silicone” can be easily transformed into verbs and adjectives, which is used in *travesti* sociability circles – for example, in the expression “siliconada” [*siliconed*, use of female pronouns].

²¹⁹ “Bomba”, in Portuguese, can mean, besides “bomb”, a “pump”, referring to the method of pumping silicone injections. Again, as in the case of other nouns, the term can be transformed into verbs and adjectives, such as “bombar” [*to pump*] or “bombada” [*pumped*, use of female pronouns]

These applications were often held in home clinics by so-called “*bombadeiras*”, with reports on these practices existing at least since the 1980s, but possibly dating even back in time (VERAS, 2015). Places for application also include the hips and thighs, as well as the face, in order to feminize features permanently. Throughout the years, this in fact became an internal economy market – in the travels of knowledge, technologies, money, and prestige, including internal power structures, in new sets of difference and inequality (the youngest versus the oldest, the “*bombadas*” versus the ones without body modifications, and so on). Such circulations include those inside Brazil, with *travestis* traveling between different cities and states, during the 80s, to access such body modifications. Already at the time, many *travestis* were also traveling amid global sex work networks as well. “*Bombaço*” was kept with high secrecy, at the margins of legality, as such procedures were (and still are) deemed illegal.

Although extremely risky for health, such procedures were often used by *travestis*, particularly sex workers, who saw in these surgeries, as well, an opportunity for quicker body modifications and a spot at the sex work market. The marginality to the formal healthcare system was as large as, even in cases of medical emergency, *travestis* “knew better” how to deal with industrial silicones than registered doctors, including its interactions with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), ways to properly extract the silicone out of the body when necessary, and even how to deal with cases of infection (VERAS, 2015).

Therefore, there is a growly internal distinction between “*liberados*”, those who simply “dressed up as women” in certain moments of the day – or to “travesty” themselves to do sex work – and *travestis*, who underwent such body modifications and lived fully as such. *Travesti* moves from a verb to a noun. Originally, the social movement of *travestis*, emerging in sex work, included both categories, but quickly shifted to only *travestis*.

As mentioned in the 32th edition of the *Lampião da Esquina*, although hormones and breast augmentation were the most known and visible, they could also include a series of cosmetic surgeries – the 80s also saw a rise in the numbers of rhinoplasties and facelifts, later accessed by *travestis* and transsexuals – and beautification procedures, such as electrolysis for body hair removal²²⁰, which were already common practice for *travesti* performers.

There was, in this historical process, amid these bio(technologies) and their performative circulations, an embodiment of travestility in the flesh, shaping distinct bodily and corporeal experiences, senses of identity and community, as well as cultural perceptions, in the double-way path on the “image and imaginari”y of being a *travesti*. In sex work, besides shared

²²⁰ Electrolysis is possibly the oldest procedure mentioned in this list, dating back at least to the late 19th century.

struggles, like in the case of ostensive police operations, and political demands, this includes complex internal networks and circulations involving such body modifications. Therefore, it is possible to state that such body modifications are particularly important in *travesti* history, in fact the starting point of what would be, later in history, defined as a gender identity.

Bodily matters, fleshly visions

Emphasizing the centrality of the body and the corporeal experience also demands deeper analysis in theoretical terms. At least since the 80s, feminist theory has sought to question the division between gender as a social construct, and sex as a biological truth. One of the most prominent authors in this discussion is Haraway (2004), in what the author calls material-semiotic relations. For the author, beings do not exist prior to their relations – and beings are never detached from the stories about them (HARAWAY, 2016). This means a complex connection between nature/nurture, reality/fiction, form/content, where these categories, although strategic and powerful, such not be taken for granted as pre-existing truth.

The debate about de-essentializing womanhood was not exclusively to the author. A similar debate was being held in black feminist thought, namely under the concept, tool, and perspective of intersectionality. Although the term itself was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 (2007), the debates on the interconnectedness between sex/gender and other differences and inequalities, namely race, class, and sexuality, have a long history in black feminist theory, including authors such as Audre Lorde (2012) and Angela Davis (1983), combining discussions on subjectivity and political struggle.

Recent years have seen the emergence of academic efforts to connect both discussions²²¹. Throughout the decades, these discussions went from the question of womanhood strictly, to a complex analysis of processes of subjectivity, materialization, and embodiment. In trans studies, this has led to discussions on the co-constitution of “blackness” and “trans-ness”, the racialization of trans bodies, and how the act of trans-ing itself, attached to the mutability of the body, is crossed by the im/possibilities of racialized bodies to cross these frontiers in societies marked by colonialism, slavery and white supremacy (SNORTON, 2017).

One of the most prominent authors on such crossings has been Spillers (1987), who inspires Snorton in his own readings. “Flesh” is a concept coined by Spillers to emphasize the crossing of multiple forms of oppression, referring to the lived experience of the body and the social meanings attached to it. The flesh is physical, as well as symbolic and cultural, in the

²²¹ As further described in the **Introduction**.

blurred lines between individuality and collective experience. “Flesh” is a site of violence and trauma, but also a site for collective resistance and struggle against oppression.

As stated throughout this section, from the 70s to the 80s, *travesti* moved from a temporary state (“being *in* travesti”) to a permanent one (“being *a* travesti”). This is attached to a set of body modifications but, inspired by the readings here mentioned, should not be understood as intrinsic to them. A similar argument can be made about the crossings of intersectional differences and inequalities – they are an important part of what means to be a *travesti*, but they, as womanhood, are not defining characteristics in an ontological sense.

Therefore, travestilities are set in multi-layered and often entangled meanings – there are historical foundations, but the elements themselves, in their (performative) circulations, can be re/arranged and further transformed, as the case today, where *travesti* is widely understood as a gender identity first and foremost. This is related to what I call “image and imaginary”, as the *travesti* body as a site is not detached from the stories told about *travestis* – they are mutually entangled, as the concept of the flesh proposes. Embodiments are not excluded from forms of representation, and vice-versa – they are mutually re/produced, re/imagined, re/presented.

Also inspired by this reading, we can move to more grounded discussions on *travesti* embodiment, or “flesh-ness”. If, in the **First Chapter**, the emphasis was on how this flesh is the site of violence, persecution, and discrimination (as in the scars in Martinha), in this second moment there is more space for resistance and struggle (as in the case of Condessa) – in other words, space to contest such “images and imaginaries”, and to complexly navigate extremely harsh circumstances. Therefore, this reading also involves addressing the complexity of *travesti* subjectivity, as the embodied experience and the social meanings attached to it can create dissonances and tensions between self-image and the image re/produced by others, as will be further developed in this chapter.

Saying this means a critical analysis of the set of forces that re/produce and re/shape the “material-semiotic” body as such, and how this is navigated by different individuals in their subjectivity. In this particular context, this is important to address, as public media played a key role, as well, in *travesti* history (VERAS, 2015). Namely, saying so means crossings discussions on representation and the broader discussions on vision and embodiment, as being a *travesti* is both deemed visible and an embodied experience²²².

Haraway’s work has emphasized how “visuality” has taken centrality in Western culture, particularly in the constructions and understandings of gender and sexuality (HARAWAY,

²²² These are also important discussions for public history, which, often, not only engage in academic historical debates, but also projects outside scholarly debates, from activism to efforts in public media.

2004). Saying so means addressing how certain bodies are objectified and localized, in opposition to an “eye” that sees all from an un-localized, deemed objective, sight, in knowledge-making. This includes the “clinical eye”, as similarly written by Stone (2006), but also questions on the “male gaze”, particularly in visual media – a concept coined by Laura Mulvey (1989). Therefore, vision is connected to a notion of (male) desire, in the unequal, and entangled, binary distinctions between object/subject, observing/observed, universal/local, public/private, male/female, body/mind, rational/emotional, and part/whole. This is opposed by what Haraway (2004) coins as an emphasis on “partial knowledge” and her concept of “cyborg vision” – which has long inspired authors like Halberstam (2017) on more recent works on trans representation, and which here inspires takes on (public) history.

Again, a similar debate was, and has been made, within black feminist thought, like in the work of bell hooks on race and representation (hooks, 2015). Here, representation is set as a form of power that re/produces racial and sexist stereotypes, often in objectifying and marginalizing takes. The author’s counter-proposal is to reclaim such images and voices, advocating for more complex and nuanced takes on black women’s experience that take into account notions of agency, creativity, and resilience. In other words, blackness, as in the case of travestility, is in a way defined by these stigmas and stereotypes, but is not intrinsically defined by them – in fact, there are complex navigations and insurgent takes that re/assemble these elements in order to produce different outcomes – in historical terms, opening space for alternative, possible, futures. As with Haraway, “Western culture” is not a monolith, and the proposal here is not to dismiss such media, but indeed to reclaim it, in forms of resistance, intervention, and subversion of structuring power forces through such media formats, in its internal complexity. As a result, this means analyzing them critically – as it is proposed in the next section.

Respectable transsexuals, despicable travestis?

“Homosexuality”, “transvestism” and “transsexualism” between science, state, and society

As stated in **Chapter One**, combined efforts of activists, academics, and medical practitioners can be observed in the documents by the homosexual movement, at the AEL Archive²²³, across the democratic transition. They are entangled with the ongoing demands for depathologization within the international homosexual movement at the time, seeking to detach

²²³ The archival research in AEL, and the Mascarenhas’ fond, is further described in the **First Chapter**.

“homosexuality”, later “homosexuality”, from the realm of mental disorder and notions of disease, contagion, and perversion – the change of the term itself being an important shift, in such demand²²⁴. In this context, the alliance with scientific and medical circles was crucial to efforts to State recognition and attempting positive changes in public opinion.

One of the documents attached to the folder organized by Mascarenhas for Triângulo Rosa is the publication “The psychiatric question of homosexuality” [*A questão psiquiátrica da homossexualidade*], from 1984. His collection shows a noticeable effort to collect studies on this subject at the time, mainly in the heated discussions of the origins of sexuality variation in human beings, in the connections between the genetic, the psychological and the sociological.

Although widespread in the public sphere only in recent years, many terms and distinctions used today date back to this earlier period, within scientific and medical circles. This includes the term “gender identity”, for example, dating back to the 1960s, in the work of psychiatrist Robert Stoller, later popularized by John Money²²⁵. Furthermore, there are noticeable distinctions from the present-day definition, which is attached to notions of self-determination, including State recognition and access to healthcare, and a particular idea of identity connected not only to the formation of the self, but also, or even mainly, as a form of political positionality (HALL, 2019).

Therefore, such terminologies are also enmeshed in activists’ re/definitions and re/interpretations, forms of State recognition, or even in popular culture, throughout history – scientific and medical classifications are not detached from these other spheres, even if under disputes and tensions, in certain moments. A complex example is the separation between “cisgender” and “transgender”, which can be traced back to both medical and trans activist writings in the 90s, with no clear origin – the origin itself is set also as a political dispute.

In Mascarenhas’ referenced text, the depathologization of homosexuality – in the sense of its removal as a mental disorder from national medical protocols – is defended within a constellation of scientific and medical terms and definitions, such as the distinction between sex and gender, and the multi-causality of both “sexuality” and “gender identity”. At the same time, given its political context, in the efforts to “social respectability”²²⁶, it states core

²²⁴ The suffix “-ism” tends, in such reading, to denote a disease, or disorder, while “-ility” tends to denote a condition of existence.

²²⁵ Robert Stoller, a psychiatrist and researcher at the UCLA Gender Clinic, first coined the term in 1984, referring to dynamics of sexual excitement. The term was later developed by John Money, at the Gender Identity Clinic at Johns Hopkins University, in its connections to other prominent terms such as gender role, sexual orientation, and paraphilia.

²²⁶ This is further debated in the **First Chapter**.

differences between the two in somewhat hierarchized terms – or, in fact, between the three, with “transvestism” further complexifying this differentiation (*translated from Portuguese*²²⁷):

The transsexual is characterized by having an intense desire of sexual transformation through surgical and hormonal means, based on a complete identification with the role of the opposite sex. This identification is so strong that the transsexual (...) does not recognize oneself as a homosexual and experiences their genitalia with aversion. The biological sex is annulated. The predominant feeling is of being an error in nature (...) In transvestism, although the person unequivocally knows their sex, they wish to have one or another attribute of the opposite sex. The pleasure is produced by the fact the person dresses up in clothes from the opposite sex (...)

As with homosexuality, in transvestism, the alteration does not occur on the level of essential gender identity. (...)

Homosexuals (...) experience their genitalia as a source of pleasure, not wishing, by any chance, to sacrifice it. They know to which sex they belong, although having desires for individuals of the same sex.

The wording in this segment shows the notion of a strict binary division between the male and the female sex – deemed opposites²²⁸ – and a somewhat heavy-toned vocabulary to state the distinctions between the third categories. Homosexuals are deemed not pathological – “normal”, “natural” – they “know where they belong”, while transsexuals – those, here, still pathological – are connected with “genital aversion”, “annulation of biological sex” and “feeling of an error in nature”. “Transvestism” is set in a blurred frontier – they know their “essential gender identity”, but have the desire to incorporate attributes of the “opposite sex” as a site of pleasure.

Historically, the term “transvestite” in fact exists before “transsexual”. The term dates back to Magnus Hirschfeld’s writings and his work at the German Institute for Sexual Research [*Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*] in the 1910s²²⁹. We can state that “transsexualism” is a

²²⁷ In the original: “*O transsexual caracteriza-se pelo intenso desejo de transformação sexual por meios cirúrgicas ou hormonais, baseado numa completa identificação com o papel do sexo oposto. Essa identificação é tão forte que o transsexual (...) não se reconhece homossexual e vivencia sua genitália de modo aversivo. O sexo biológico é anulado. O sentimento predominante é de ser um dos erros da natureza (...). Já no travestismo, embora a pessoa saiba inequivocamente o seu sexo, desejará ter um ou outro atributo do sexo oposto. Aí o prazer é produzido pelo fato da pessoa vestir-se com roupas do sexo oposto (...). Assim como no homossexualismo, no travestismo, a alteração não se dá ao nível da identidade de gênero essencial. (...) Homossexuais (...) vivenciam a sua genitália como fonte de prazer, não desejando, de modo algum sacrificá-lo. Sabem a qual sexo pertencem, porem alimentam desejo por indivíduos do mesmo sexo*”

²²⁸ At the same time, works on “hermaphroditism”, later “intersex”, exist at least since the 18th century in medical writing. The current term was coined in the early 20th century, and the organizations and demands of the intersex population, including the end of non-consensual and non-life threatening surgeries in babies and children, is still outgoing across the world.

²²⁹ This medical history was mostly studied, for this thesis, by secondary bibliography readings, including Stone (2006) and Velocci (2021). The translated texts, in their latest edition, were also consulted, although their nuances and specificities will be not emphasized in this research.

development of “transvestism” as a diagnostics and medical (here, in sexology) typology. At the time, the sexologist made distinctions between those who felt sexual pleasure while dressing with “clothes of the opposite sex” – the now classical definition of transvestism – and those with so-called “contra-sexual” feelings, who had intense genital and bodily distress, and sought medical interventions in that regard. We can argue that “contra-sexual” is a precursor of the later “transsexual” identity but, at least more strictly, in terms of category and naming, the term “transvestism” was still the sole one.

It was at the German Institute for Sexual Research that the first GRS surgeries were held in what would be deemed, later on, as “female transsexual patients”²³⁰, namely Dorchen Richter and Lily Elbe²³¹ – including orchiectomies, penectomies, vaginoplasties and a failed ovarian and uterine transplants (technologies to this day not fully developed). With the Nazi invasion of the Institute, many historical records were lost – and research is still ongoing on this earlier period of trans history, and the possible paths of scientific and medical history since then.

The later understanding of “transsexualism”, at least in this intermediary historical period, comes mostly from Harry Benjamin and his book “The Transsexual Phenomenon”, published in 1966²³², jokingly referred as “The Transsexual Bible” within trans sociability circles at the time (STONE, 2006). Benjamin understood transvestites and transsexuals in a continuum – grouped in six types, from “pseudo-transvestite” (I) to “transsexual, high intensity” (VI). The treatments included not only surgical interventions but, inspired by the work of Hirschfeld in Germany, also hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and psychological counseling²³³.

Although not strictly binary in Benjamin’s typology, a clear-cut distinction between “transvestism” and “transsexualism” emerged throughout the decades, sometimes combined with more conservative takes on American psychiatry, namely in Ray Blanchard’s²³⁴ writings

²³⁰ There were also “male transsexual” patients at the time, although with particularities that will not be developed in this thesis. In Benjamin’s writings, these terms are reversed – the current “male transsexual” was the then “female transsexual”, and vice-versa (the emphasis before, then, was in the sex assigned at birth, unlike the more contemporary emphasis on self-identification).

²³¹ Although Dorchen Richter was the first recorded case of GRS, Lili Elbe became the most popular – known as the “Danish girl”. Elbe passed away due to complications after an attempted uterus transplant at the Clinic. Little is known about Richter, but scholars have considered she was possibly killed in the Nazi invasion of Austria.

²³² There are several nuances with other works in American psychiatry and psychology at the same time, including in the centrality, or not, of self-identification and genital distress. Such specific nuances, and their set of disputes and tensions, will not be developed in this thesis.

²³³ Benjamin is also known for developing the diagnostic and general characteristics of “gender dysphoria”, used in medical protocols until the late 2010s, and still relevant today.

²³⁴ Blanchard’s transsexualism typology homosexual transsexuals who are attracted exclusively to men and are feminine in both behavior and appearance; and autogynephilic transsexuals who experience sexual arousal at the idea of having a female body (autogynephilia). Such views have been widely contested by scholars, clinicians and trans activists, including, more recently, Serano (2007).

in the 80s and 90s. Even if such writings were not as influential in Brazil when compared to English-speaking countries, they still played an important role in international medical protocols used and referred to in the country – which, as stated by Barbosa (2015), emerged during the 80s in both ICD and DSM (international medical manuals²³⁵). Therefore, there are heated debates during the period on readings on so-called “transsexualism”, in a complex non-linear historicity – Benjamin was more inclined to his European antecessors, with Hirschfeld’s writings being closer to what is contemporarily understood as “self-determination” than more conservative takes from the 80s and 90s, which still play a role in the anti-gender movement today, worldwide.

“Travesti” and “transsexual” as medical categories in Brazil

Specifically in Brazil, as written by Leite Júnior (2008), Benjamin was the main influence of the clinician Roberto Farina, doing, in 1971, in São Paulo, the first gender reassignment surgery (GRS) surgery in the country, in Waldirene Nogueira, after 2 years of medical following. This surgery was held during the harsher years of the Dictatorship, the so-called “years of lead” [*anos de chumbo*]²³⁶, with Farina being eventually condemned to prison, after Nogueira requested the State to change her legal documents and be recognized as a woman, in 1975. After 4 years of a disputed legal process, Farina was eventually released, with the support of the international medical community. Nogueira had to undergo a series of invasive medical exams to prove or not she was indeed a woman, just to be denied of her request and be deemed mentally ill, even after Farina was judicially absolved.

Interestingly, the case of Nogueira also points out the complexity of what defined a woman, in medical and legal terms, during the period, with the entry of the new technology of GRS in Brazil. Originally, in her first examination made by the Legal Medical Institute (IMS, *Instituto Médico Legal*), Nogueira was deemed a woman based on her post-operation genitalia.

The story later, however, is much denser. A legal supervisor, Luiz de Mello Kujawski, later in the process, affirmed that Nogueira was not in fact a woman, and decided to condemn Farina of body lesion [*lesão corporal*]. Nogueira was deemed “mentally ill” and a “victim” of Farina – she is described in the legal documents as a “stylized eunuch”, “unreasonable”, “mutilated”, a “monster”, and a victim of her “sexual perversions”. Her surgery is described as a “way to prostitute” and Nogueira as “a homosexual” that could threaten the nuclear family. Kujawski further states this would be a processor of “families having to accept homosexuality

²³⁵ More about these manuals is stated in the **Introduction**.

²³⁶ The historical periodization of the Dictatorship is further described in the **Introduction**.

– and now mutilation”, in the neurotic interconnectedness between notions of sexual perversion, the danger of influencing youth, and the destruction of the nuclear family²³⁷.

This series of harsh wordings indicate how a previous notion of what it means to be a *travesti* was brought into the legal process, including connections with sex work already at 1976 (amid the shift between the 70s and 80s, previously mentioned). Even more complex, this was mixed with the notion of “homosexuality” as a mental disorder, and as inherently subversive, with Nogueira also being deemed “mentally ill” and a passive “victim” of a dangerous doctor – resulting in a “monster”, in Kujawski’s words ²³⁸.

The case is an important example of the interactions between science, state and society, in Brazilian *travesti* and trans history. Stating against bodily autonomy, the State’s defense argued that the sexual organs of Nogueira were a “physical property fostered by the State”. Even with the eventual absolution of the doctor, the judicial arguments are noticeable: although deemed legal, the procedure was authorized based on the previous sterilization of the patient by the use of female hormones, and the surgery was understood as a way to “heal” the patient (LEITE JÚNIOR, 2008).

At the same time, this was an extremely important legal mark for gender-affirming surgeries for trans patients, which kept being held in the country – estimations indicate about 270 GRS surgeries, held both in male and female patients, between 1972 and 1997. It was only in 1998 that GRS surgeries were regulated by the Brazilian Federal Medicine Council (CFM), starting a gradual incorporation into the public health system, ten years later, in 2008. Nogueira’s surgery also marked the symbolic emergence of “transsexual” as a category also outside science and medicine, gaining further strength in social movements by the early 90s as well.

As stated in the **Introduction**, already in the 90s, and particularly across the 2000s (in what would be later the current “*travesti* and transsexual movement”), disputes and tensions between “*travestis*” and “transsexuals” emerged in social movements – *travestis* were deemed “whores” by transsexuals, while transsexuals were deemed “freaks” by *travestis*, given the medical origins of the term. Even so, transsexuals often inserted themselves as superior to *travestis*, by their belonging to womanhood, and by their distance from the sex work and criminality stereotypes culturally associated with them (BARBOSA, 2015; COACCI, 2018).

²³⁷ Such connected “neuroticism” is further analyzed in the **First Chapter**.

²³⁸ The comparison with non-human creatures appears often in archival sources – in the **First Chapter**, these go from cattle to vampires, while, in this second moment, it crosses an almost mythological fauna from dragonflies to chimeras. Such comparisons are not alien to works on gender studies, including Haraway (1992) and Halberstam (1995), who work with those creatures in their studies on frontier-crossing, particularly in queerness.

As a whole, what occurs during the 80s, in particular, is the construction of a notion of “transsexualism” strictly based on bodily, and particularly genital, distress, in so-called “gender dysphoria” (STONE, 2006). This is explicit in the archival quotes previously mentioned, where GRS is taken as the “peak” of madness, on some accounts, or the final crossing between manhood and womanhood, on others. GRS emerged as central, as well, in culture, entering the public sphere in the re/definitions of gender frontiers and their possible crossings²³⁹.

In the Brazilian context, this complex medical and scientific history has led to distinctions between “*travestis*” and “transsexuals” being defined as the wish or not to undergo GRS. In such reading, *travesti* becomes connected to a previous, “classical”, definition of “transvestite”, in “transvestism”, including its core connections with certain notions of sexuality, if not also mixed with Blanchard’s theory of autogynephilia and later notions of *paraphilia*, coined by John Money.

This has been to this day contested by activists, scholars, and specialized clinicians, that understand that such readings dismiss the cultural particularities of the *travesti* identity, “importing” a foreign medical category without the necessary adaptations and translations. Such international circulations date back to Farina and Benjamin, already by the 70s, but create tensions during the 90s, within the *travesti* and trans social movement, in a clash of “local” and universalizing categories that, in fact, originate from the Anglophone Global North (BARBOSA, 2015).

Such entanglement of medical definitions shape a complex history in trans subjectivity as well, as emphasized by Stone (2006) in the US context, with similar accounts in Brazil (LEITE JÚNIOR, 2008). Already by the late 80s, trans patients would read Benjamin’s book in advance knowing what doctors expected to hear. Stone states that certain gender performances were expected— in the case of “transsexual women”, a delicate and soft-speaking voice and gestures, and a mandatory discrete, heteronormative, enunciated sexuality. This meant a complex game of “hide and seek” – the “tolds and untolds” on reports that were necessary to access certain body modifications, in an unequal system of knowledge and power.

This historicity also shapes a particular form of speaking about oneself necessarily attached to pain and suffering – reporting one’s distress about your body was a central part of the “transsexual diagnostics” – in what I call “the clinician’s eye”. This was already contested by authors such as Stone (2006), by the 80s, leading to what transfeminist author Talia Mae Bettcher (2014) later called a clash between the “wrong body” model and the “beyond the

²³⁹ This will be further analyzed in this chapter, with 1984 as an important year in such in/distinctions, with Roberta Close as the cover of Playboy, in Brazil.

binary” model, which emerged in international trans activism by the 90s. To this day, such framings have been contested in works on trans representation (HALBERSTAM, 2017), as such narratives are still repeated across public media – symbolized by the trans person sadly staring at their own reflection in the mirror.

Additionally, authors such as Latham (2019) have sought to re/vitalize notions of sexuality, desire, and pleasure in trans studies writings in recent years. If on one hand, medical diagnostics were centralizing a certain form of normative sexuality, discourses about *travestis* and trans people as inherently immoral – “degenerates”, “subversives”... – emphasized such figures as hypersexual and threatening to the “youth”, in the neurotic image/imaginary of the “sexual predator”. As stated in the **First Chapter**, this is further complicated by the impacts of the AIDS crisis, in both Brazil and the US (where Latham writes), in a backlash of the sexual revolution.

When it comes to the history of the “transsexualism” diagnostics, this has historically shaped constraints on first-person expression of sexuality, desire, and pleasure, on the reports of *travesti* and other trans people, as such reports could define or not the recognition of one’s identity, or even the access to desired body modifications. In fact, such body modifications – namely GRS – become the fundamental element of the “trans identity” itself, in such discourses and practices²⁴⁰.

To this day, a distinction between *travestis* and transsexuals persists as the desire or not to undergo GRS – in other words, in the relations of the patients with their genitalia. This vision is common not only in medical protocols and practice, but in culture as a whole, with a key placement of sexuality in this differentiation. In this reading, “transvestism” becomes the “secondary transsexual” (LEITE JÚNIOR, 2008) – being, in the Brazilian context, attached to the “*travesti*” identity, a kind of “less than”-transsexual, and never fully a man or a woman²⁴¹.

Somewhat unintentionally, this distinction often ends up “applicable” in the medical system, as the access to GRS is crossed by racial and class inequalities to the present-day (KOYAMA, 2006). Archival research – such as the 1981 report in Lampião da Esquina – also explicit that even if *travesti* sex workers wished to undergo GRS, doing so would mean losing clientele and, thus, their source of income. This was already recognized by them at the time, in

²⁴⁰ As stated in the **Introduction**, depathologization efforts on trans issues are recent in history – although they are historically connected to earlier efforts on depathologizing homosexuality in the 80s, there are specific nuances in the case of the trans population, particularly in the centrality of body modifications.

²⁴¹ As stated previously, this involves disputes and tensions in what defines a “woman”, amid feminist movements, in the 80s and 90s, and, in the case of the *travesti*/trans movements, disputes and tensions between the *travesti* and transsexual categories from the 90s to the 2000s, in complex navigations with the (politicized) category of womanhood.

complex negotiations about their own desires and the need to fulfill economic needs amid unequal opportunities, an element that also tended to be ignored in such medical typologies, which separated these desires from the social, the political and the economical²⁴². Additionally, the distinction itself between “transsexual” and “travesti” is set as different “images and imaginaries” of what it means to be a “woman”, and its entanglements with a notion of “femininity”, which is itself racialized and set into specific notions of sexuality.

The “transsexual” in intersectional crossings (or, travesti as what remains of femininity)

To this day, accessing surgeries such as GRS is mostly cut by class. Accessing it through the Brazilian public health system (SUS) is noticeably more bureaucratic, and cues often take many years, if not about a decade – which is not much different from the reality of other public health systems across the world²⁴³. Besides this, there are many gender-affirming procedures that are often not covered by public health systems, and sometimes even private insurance. This is even harsher in a context like the late 80s, under the democratic transition, where international medical protocols on “transsexualism” were still being established, research was even scarcer, and the number of specialized clinicians for such a complex surgery was even rarer.

For the few spaces available, patients have had to undergo psychiatric evaluations based on a strict notion of “transsexualism”. As it was mentioned, sexuality played a central role in this diagnostics, as genital and bodily distress were at the center of the distinctions between “transvestites” and “transsexuals” – besides a continuum in (cis)heterosexual desires, which by definition excluded lesbian and bisexual trans women, if not also straight trans women that did fit well such parameters of “normal” female sexuality, with “evaluations” often including a range of preliminary questions on sexual performance and preferences, particularly focused on the (female) patient’s relation with their genitalia.

In a way, the diagnostics itself was also cut by class in a more symbolic manner, as Stone (2006) jokingly recalls, the “female transsexual” was somewhat of a 40s Hollywood ideal of a woman. This ideal, besides a notion of its time, might be even a consequence of the early notions of “transvestism”, dating back to this earlier period, where such figures (from Grace Kelley to Elizabeth Taylor and Marylyn Monroe) were deemed the supreme of feminine beauty and womanhood, such in the case of “transvestite” beauty pageants, both in Brazil and abroad.

²⁴² This involves a deeper epistemic/ontological understanding of the self that are contrasted, in this thesis, by concepts such as the “flesh”, the “Other”, and material-semiotic connections.

²⁴³ Extremely long queues have been an ongoing issue in gender-affirming medical centers across the world. In some countries, the entry into the public health system can take years – which makes many trans people seek alternative circulation networks of hormones in those countries.

Therefore, there is an interesting game of both gender performance and performativity (BUTLER, 2011), or a cyborg-like mixture of fiction and reality (HARAWAY, 2004), in this historicity. The ideal of womanhood is, by definition, always unreachable. Not by chance, with all odds against them, *travesti* sex workers were often left out of the access to formal healthcare, often accessing desired body modifications in internal networks²⁴⁴.

The crossing of class already indicates, in its nuances, another important element in such distinctions, particularly in the Brazilian context – race. From the ideal feminine beauty of the *travesti* performances to the delicate, fragile and passive transsexual women, what we have at stake is an idealized white woman as the sole point of reference. Therefore, this often excluded black trans women and *travestis* from their access to formal healthcare as well. This perspective goes in connection with a wide range of studies, from black trans scholars, that emphasized how the definition of “transsexuality” itself is rooted in whiteness. As mentioned by Vidal-Ortiz (2014):

Constructions of whiteness are geopolitical, hierarchically placed, and structured around class and status. To insert the study of whiteness into trans studies means to develop a critical lens of seemingly disparate elements, like beauty, access, visibility, and acceptance within, for instance, the history of transgender people seeking services and gaining access to them (in the mid-twentieth century) and leadership and activism (at the present time). Furthermore, to think of it on a global scale demands a recognition that gendered attributes of maleness or femaleness are intercepted by whiteness. In many instances, constructions of gender are about being white, being perceived to be white, or sometimes they are deeply ingrained in perceptions of beauty as white. We can see this in cosmetic interventions for trans women, for instance.

Often, such studies are entangled with a broader bibliography that emphasizes how Western medical research and practice are historically attached to white bodies as the “universal”, “normal” or “standard” reference, creating racialized distinctions – even in somewhat subtle distinctions like the “ideal” feminine nose, or the “discrete” idealized size of the hips and breasts. In Brazil, with a history of 388 years of slavery, eugenic policies across

²⁴⁴ In fact, the lack of specific research, and proper healthcare access, exists to the present day, particularly in such intersections. Oliveira (2021), for example, points out how there are no in-depth studies of the possible intersections between HRT and retroviral treatments for HIV/AIDS. Still to the present day, trans people are often excluded from prevention campaigns, and their gender identity is not respected.

the post-abolition period²⁴⁵, and without effective reparative policies until recently in history²⁴⁶, race and class are strongly entangled. Added to this there are also specific hypersexualized notions – images and imaginaries – of both black masculinity and femininity in Brazil – such as the “*mulata*”, deeply studied by Gonzalez (GONZALEZ & HASENBALG, 2022), a figure of a mixed woman, with darker skin, known for her sensuality and trickster-like qualities.

Such interconnected inequalities were also noticeable in archival research. In my inquiry into AEL and reports on the growing homosexual movement, I was able to access files from Adé Dudu²⁴⁷. Adé Dudu was a grassroots movement organization created in Salvador²⁴⁸, in 1981, organized by and targeted to “black homosexuals”. As stated in the **First Chapter**, such groups tended to have more positive views on the participation of *travestis*, similarly feeling like outsiders within the broader Brazilian homosexual movement (MHB), especially in the ongoing efforts on “social respectability”, intensified with the democratic transition.

In a March 1981 report encountered in AEL, Adé Dudu conducted a guerilla research in homosexual bars and clubs in Salvador. Firstly, they noticed a double oppression (we could say intersectional), both within the black movement and the homosexual movement. On one hand, black homosexuals were excluded from homosexual sociability and activist circles and, on the other, from similar black circles. There are also nuances in terms of classification²⁴⁹. This goes in the image of the “black fag” [*bicha preta*] – with many interviewed identifying themselves as “*entendidos*”, thus avoiding the “homosexual” identity altogether, differentiating themselves for those “*fechativos*”²⁵⁰ and “*desmunhecados*”²⁵¹ – those with extravagant, effeminate gestures.

One relevant case mentioned in Adé Dudu’s research comes from beauty pageants, which explicits the incorporation of a white female ideal of beauty – with the (homosexual/*entendido*) public and judges valuing attributes like “being blonde” and having

²⁴⁵ Race is an extremely complex subject, in Brazilian history. For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to emphasize the long history of miscegenation in the country, which crosses a broader historicity of attempts of “whitening” the population through flows of European immigration, under eugenics policies. Contemporarily, race is often attached to phenotypical characteristics, unlike countries such as US, which has a specific historicity of laws such as “one-drop rule” and segregation laws. Finally, it is important to emphasize the reality of racism in the country, even if the discourse of Brazil being a “racial democracy” (today understood as a myth) is still present, particularly in readings from other countries.

²⁴⁶ The first instances of anti-discrimination laws occur only in the 1950s, although in specific cases. More extensive policies would only occur only in the late 90s and early 2000s.

²⁴⁷ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “Turma OK” fond.

²⁴⁸ Salvador is Brazil’s fourth largest city today, with almost 3 million people. It is the first capital in Brazil, still under the Portuguese colonial administration, founded in the 16th century.

²⁴⁹ More about the complexity of classifications in queer history is stated in the **Introduction**.

²⁵⁰ “*Fechação*”, “*carão*” and “*close*” are Portuguese expressions associated with a “diva”-like attitude of extravagance. Again, “*fechação*” can also be transformed into an adjective – in this case, “*fechativa/o*”.

²⁵¹ “*Desmunhecado*” is similar to the English expression “broken wrist”, here used as an adjective.

“green or blue eyes”, as well as “discreteness” and “delicacy”²⁵² – ideals attached to female whiteness. One black *travesti* performer states one situation where the public shouted to her that “her place was in the kitchen”, and not the stages, implicitly referring to her as a (female) house slave. Another, also interviewed by Adé Dudu, was told that this type of performance was “white people’s business”, also excluding them from this space associated with beauty and elegance.

Even if instances of State recognition and the inclusion of GRS and other body modifications in SUS are later in history (the first, by the 90s, and the second, by the 2000s), notions of “transsexualism”, “tranvestism”, “homosexuality”, and its attached discourses and practices, were already extensively circulating in earlier periods, and actively re/shaping *travesti* subjectivities, with the 80s being a core period, amid the democratic transition and the rise of the AIDS crisis.

Saying so means, analytically, focusing on a critical analysis, in the following section, of celebrity figures in popular media (which are all white), in their navigations with the *travesti* category. Again, as here travestilities are defined as multi-layered, in the sense of a possibly re/assembled set of elements, it is important to nuance this in terms of axes of difference and inequality, particularly race and class. Even if they ought to do so, sex workers, as well as black people, had less space in terms of agency to navigate such identifications – for example, defining themselves as transsexuals, and not *travestis*. As it is stated by the authors here mentioned, this differentiation necessarily means entering an “ideal” of femininity embedded in whiteness, and in particular notions of gender performance and sexuality.

All this, as mentioned previously, was under a historical context where body modifications, initially with the use of female hormones, were done by *travestis* at least since the late 60s in Brazil, with the 80s already having the presence of internal networks which included even homemade silicone implants, in the case of “*bombadeiras*”. Such circulations crossed complex in/distinctions of “fleshly” individual and political identities, and sets of body modifications and technologies, under an intersectional perspective, including in the crossing of class and race of womanhood and femininity ideals. This includes, particularly, the centrality that GRS has in such definitions, starting by the 80s – in a way, the entry into “proper” womanhood, under the strict “transsexualism” definition, crosses clear axes of race and class that end up gatekeeping such subjects from womanhood itself.

²⁵² Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “Turma OK” fond.

This distinction is set as the “transvestite” versus the “transsexual” – the “*travesti*” versus the “transsexual”, in the Brazilian context, which itself produces a division in race and class axes. This creates a vicious cycle and further solidifies that being a *travesti* is a synonym for sex work, not wishing to undergo GRS, and being, in the case of Brazil, black. Stereotypes and stigmas about both travestis and black people become enmeshed, if not blurred, including notions of hypersexuality and “natural criminality”²⁵³ – with both groups, and its intersection, being left out of a (new) notion of womanhood and ideal femininity that emerges with such (bio)technology. *Travestis* become the “excess”, the “extravagance”, the “aggressive”, the “sexual” – the “abnormal” and the “outsider” of womanhood itself. In the enmeshments of gender, sexuality, race, and class, *travestis* become what remains of femininity.

The “public eye”: Cultural images and imaginaries, and *travesti* subjectivity

Travesti stars and generational clashes

The celebrity status of gender-crossing figures has long existed in history – by the late 19th century, figures such as Alma de Paradedda, a prominent figure in Weimar Republic’s “uranist”²⁵⁴ balls, were already in the “public eye”, as media sensations, drawing fascination and curiosity in the crossing of sex/gender frontiers (LINGE, 2023). However, in the 1950s, figures such as Christine Jorgensen moved this history of gender-crossing figures in popular media to another direction, with the centrality of gender-reassignment surgery (GRS) and the entanglement with the medical definition of “transsexualism”.

Known as the first trans woman to undergo gender reassignment surgery (GRS) in the U.S., Jorgensen was an actress and nightclub singer, known for her wit responses and Hollywood-like beauty. Her autobiography, released in 1967, became a bestseller in the country. Her popularity was such that she became a type of “ideal [female] transsexual” model, including in what would be, decades later, particularly by the 80s²⁵⁵, a defined international protocol of “transsexualism” based on a notion of “gender dysphoria” (SKIDMORE, 2011, for an analysis on race; STONE, 2006).

In Western Europe, a similar story came with Coccinelle (FOERSTER, 2013), in France. Coccinelle was a media sensation and sex symbol, becoming an international celebrity in the

²⁵³ As stated previously, with Cavalcanti (2018), operations such as Tarantula also were entangled with specific scientific readings on “natural criminality”, which were highly crossed by (if not actively producing) racial inequalities.

²⁵⁴ Uranism is a 19th century term to refer to what would be later deemed “homosexual masculinity”. However, already at the time, the term was being re/appropriated and re/imagined by self-claimed “uranists”, as reminded by Preciado (2020).

²⁵⁵ This is further mentioned in the **Introduction**, and early in this chapter.

60s, working as an actress and entertainer. Undergoing GRS in 1958, she would also publish her autobiography later in life, in 1987 (STONE, 2006, for critical analysis on trans autobiographies at this period). As Jorgensen, Coccinelle’s popularity crossed broader cultural discussions on GRS and re/definitions of notions of sex and gender, manhood and womanhood, based on this now more culturally known, and somewhat more available²⁵⁶, (bio)technology.

In Brazil, early reports of *travesti* celebrities in visual media²⁵⁷, such as newspapers and popular magazines, can be traced back to a first generation of carnival and nightclub performers, already by the early 60s. As emphasized by Veras (2015), the role of photography was central in such media – “image”, here in a literal sense, took a key role in re/shaping imaginaries. This is later combined with the television and the centrality of video, in the context of the Brazilian “economic miracle”²⁵⁸

Early popular names include figures such as Miss Biá, today known as the first “Brazil’s drag queen” (BRAGANÇA, 2019) – at the time, known as a “transvestite” performer [*transformistas*]. The popularity of these figures, initially more locally, increased further with names such as Rogéria, known as the “queen of *travestis*”, who by the late 70s and early 80s was a national celebrity, making regular appearances on television. Important to remark, this was amid the Civic-Military Dictatorship (1964-1985), where gender-crossing performances, even under the democratic transition, could be directly targeted by censorship as inherently “subversive”, in a complex tightrope of possible forms of representation²⁵⁹.

Such tensions in queer representation are not exclusively to Brazil and to authoritarian regimes, as the Hays Code (Motion Picture Production Code) was active as a form of (self-)censorship in Hollywood between 1934 and 1968, in opposition to so-called “crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin” (VAUGHN, 1990). Therefore, queer representation was limited to forms of innuendo. In addition, as specifically the “promoting” of certain sexual practices was banned, (self-)censorship did not include representations that were tragic and which, in that sense, could “teach a lesson” to the audience that such practices were not incentivized nor promoted. Although dating earlier in time, such history led to a broad set of ongoing tropes and

²⁵⁶ GRS is an extremely complex surgery. At the time, such surgeries were concentrated in Casablanca, Morocco, with the re/discovery of early techniques used in the Weimar Republic. Today, the known “center” of these surgeries, in terms of both technology and cultural symbolism, although in practice available across the world, is in Thailand.

²⁵⁷ As emphasized by Veras, the role of photography is central in such media (VERAS, 2015) – “image”, here in a literal sense, takes a key role in re/shaping imaginaries.

²⁵⁸ The “economic miracle” in Brazil is a period between 1968 to 1973, marked by intense and quick economic growth, as with other regions of the world. At the same time, there is also increased inequality in this period, later followed by a peak in inflation and an ongoing economic crisis during the 80s.

²⁵⁹ As stated in the **First Chapter**, the censorship during the Dictatorship was multi-layered, and enmeshed between state policies, in a techno-bureaucratic state, and demands of the civil population.

a specific notion of what is or is not visible to the “popular audience” in such media formats – what images and stories were deemed political, controversial, improper or not to minors, and so on – more generally, shaping specific forms of “visibility” and “representation”²⁶⁰.

Even with nuances and constraints, by the late 70s to early 80s, there is in Brazil the first images of widely known *travesti* figures – at the time also referred to as transvestites [*transformistas*] – in popular media. As with other figures during the period²⁶¹, Rogéria described herself as a performer and artist, up and foremost, and was reserved about her personal life. She did not seek GRS in her lifetime, presented herself daily in female clothes, but identified, throughout her life – even in later periods (she passed away in 2017) – as a “homosexual”.

In the author’s interview with Rogéria, close to her death, she retrospectively points out that, although practices of “men dressing up as women” in carnivals have existed since at least the 1940s, a new groups of subjects – deemed, as well, “homosexuals” – emerged as such in “glamorous and beautiful performances” of femininity by the mid to late 70s (VERAS, 2015). At the time, Rogéria, together with other *travestis*, was already taking female hormones (a practice that dates back at least to the mid-60s). Their figures were already in “fleshly” frontiers of gender, and they already formed a type of sociability bound by their shared experience. *Travesti* started to move from a synonym of cross-dressing (“*transformismo*”) – to a type of embodied, “fleshly”, experience, from the 70s to 80s.

Although identification processes were developing, being a *travesti* was set in complex relations with other categories and identifications, such as “women”, “transsexual” and “homosexual”. In my own inquiry into AEL, I was able to access an interview with Rogéria, from September 1981 in the newspaper “A Gazeta”, where the questions of gender and sexuality took a central place. There, she states (*translated from Portuguese*²⁶²):

I never felt like a woman. Now, as I am a homosexual and I do not owe anything to nobody, because my life, my space, belongs to me, so I dress up as a woman. Because dressing up as a woman, besides finding women the most sensational and glamorous, I could make a name: Rogéria. (...) I like to wear plumes, dress up with *Saint Laurent*, use a *Guerlain*²⁶³ (...). Since I was not born a woman, I make my women’s costume.

²⁶⁰ This argument will be further developed in the final part of this section.

²⁶¹ The “first generation” of *travesti* performers is featured in the movie “Divinas Divas”, released in 2016.

²⁶² In the original: “*Eu nunca me senti uma mulher. Agora, como sou homossexual e não devo nada a ninguém, porque a minha vida, meu espaço me pertence, eu me visto de mulher. Porque vestido de mulher, além de achar a mulher muito mais sensacional e glamorosa, consegui fazer um nome: Rogéria (...) Se eu gosto tanto de me vestir de mulher, usar plumas, me vestir com Saint Laurent, usar um Chalminar de Guerlain (...) Já que não nasci mulher, faço a minha fantasia de mulher*”.

²⁶³ *Saint Laurent* is a French luxury fashion brand, while *Guerlain* is a luxury French perfume brand.

Interestingly, Rogéria reinforces that *travesti* is a costume, inserting *travesti* within “homosexuality”/“homosexuality”. *Travesti* is not here a gender identity, and is set outside womanhood (its “nature” is, in this sense, preserved). Even so, her trajectory indicates an embodied notion of travestility, including in early forms of sociability, as well as complex negotiations with such categories, in their “images and imaginaries”, in her subjectivity.

In the same interview, in a period where speaking more freely about the political context became more feasible, amid the “opening-arousal” (VERAS, 2015) of the regime, Rogéria states she “prefers to live in a place where homosexuality is repressed”, arguing (*translated from Portuguese*²⁶⁴):

Every place that represses one thing, foments it (...) Since I can't have relationships with gays, I have to live in a country that represses homosexuality. Because, truly, men repress themselves in front of women. Because, behind the scenes, is folklore. (...) Because the gays are the ones that earn more on the street corners, where they are prostitutes.

This segment adds even further complexity to this constellation of categories. “Homosexuality” is deemed a broader term than “gay” (a new term, at the time, in the Brazilia context²⁶⁵) – in fact, “gays” are not attracted to Rogéria, in her report, but simply “men”, even though she is not a woman.

Another important element in this segment is the association with “prostitution”. The historical passage between the 70s and 80s also saw increasing cultural connection between “dressing up as a woman” – being a *travesti* – and prostitution. Not by chance, this is also the period where *travestis* start to appear as sensational figures in criminal reports – their crossing of sex/gender is deemed dangerous and suspicious. Therefore, this period also defines sets of stigmas and stereotypes about *travestis* – their image as hypersexual, manipulative and aggressive²⁶⁶ (VERAS, 2015).

In another interview, also from the early 80s – analyzed by Tanganelli (2019) – Rogéria directly addresses *travestis*, in a complex self-identification with the category. She argues that the aggressiveness of *travestis* in prostitution is “masculine”, yet sometimes necessary, when it comes to self-defense. Still, she opposes what she describes as “unnecessary forms” of violence, such as stealing, stating both that it is “necessary to defend the [*travesti*] category” and that

²⁶⁴ In the original: “*Todo o lugar onde você reprime alguma coisa, fomenta. (...) Como eu não consigo ter relacionamento com gays, eu tenho que viver num país que reprime o homossexualismo. Porque, na verdade, os homens são reprimem na frente das mulheres. Porque, por atrás, é folclore (...) Porque os gays são os que mais faturam nas esquinas, quando são prostitutas*”.

²⁶⁵ This term, and its equivalent in Portuguese, “guêi”, is further mentioned in the **First Chapter**.

²⁶⁶ As will be further mentioned, this reaches extremes amid the impacts of the AIDS crisis moral panics, already by the mid-80s

those in “prostitution” have “low IQ”, thus constantly differentiating herself by her artistry, compared to *travestis* in sex work.

As mentioned in the **First Chapter**, the 70s to 80s had an important cultural shift in the association of *travestis* with “prostitution” and “criminality”, including the first known ostensive police operations against homosexuals, mainly directed towards *travestis*, in the late 70s (LOPES, 2016; COACCI, 2018). By the early 80s, these associations were more settled, and figures such as Rogéria started to have a nuanced take on their individual insertion in this category and, we could say, some sense of community and shared identity that had previously emerged in these earlier art forms and sociability circles.

Concurrently, Rogéria knew about the existence of figures such as Jorgensen and Coccinelle – Coccinelle, for example, had a widely known visit in Brazil already in 1963, just before the 1964’s *coup d’état*, attended by who would be later the “first-generation” of *travesti* performers in Brazil (LUNA & BARROS, 2023). Knowing this further complexifies her sense of self and the way Rogéria describes and differentiates herself – for example, for emphasizing not undergoing “surgeries”. Here, GRS in specific is implied, in the complexity of the emergence of the “transsexual” category between medical and scientific discourses, particularly across the 60s and 70s, and popular media, in the re/constructions and re/imaginings of the meanings of sex and gender, with figures such as Jorgensen and Coccinelle.

Therefore, we have, across the 80s, a period where such definitions are still blurred and left with open ends, but already with a noticeable set of tensions and disputes, attached to different, even if still entangled, cultural images and imaginaries. This is further complexified in a broader political and economic context of more intense circulations between Brazil and foreign countries, amid the democratic transition²⁶⁷. These shifts are, hence, noticeably quick in time, which by the 90s already have a somewhat more defined set of categories.

In fact, Rogéria, much later in life, in the 2010s, kept referring to *travestis* with male pronouns and stating they were not women. She jokingly affirmed she would just not like to “look like a man dressed as a woman” nor “a hooker”²⁶⁸. Such statements produced a generational clash between understandings of such identities, their meanings and connections with notions of womanhood and femininity – in a new historical context where they became

²⁶⁷ As stated in the **First Chapter**, it is here important to remind that the regime was mostly protectionist, including discourses on the “threats of modernization” (and, extensively, globalization). In general, however, under the notion of anti-communism, the regime was mostly attached to the US, which actively supported and funded the regime.

²⁶⁸ Source: UOL / <https://observatoriodosfamosos.uol.com.br/famosos/rogeria-causa-polemica-com-transexuais-apos-comentario-preconceituoso>.

more clearly distinguished as a set of differences, and where *travesti* was more established as a transfeminine gender identity²⁶⁹.

More than arguing about the truths or myths of these clashes, this is an interesting example of ongoing historical distinctions in the “proper” classifications and naming, in queer and trans history. As pointed out by Bettcher (2014), activist circles tend to relay on notions of “progress” and “linearity” in the definitions of terms deemed proper or not, as the author emphasizes the shift, in the 90s, between the “wrong body” and the “beyond the binary”, “transsexual” versus “transgender” models, in the US. In contrast, the historical attention should be, instead, on non-linear, often crossing, historicities, as proposed by Halberstam (2005), including the analytical potential of such clashes and frontiers: travestilities as multiple, with their in/definitions emerging in entangled and ever-changing historicities.

Saying so also means addressing the nuances and particularities of Rogéria’s subjectivity as a “non-transsexual”/”non-woman”/”homosexual”/”differentiated *travesti*”, which further complexifies the meanings of who is, after all, the *travesti*. Even though she and other *travestis* were already different from previous generations, with sets of body modification, a certain form of gender expression, and a sense of belonging and identity in a broader sense; there is yet another set of differentiations as the lack of desire to undergo GRS, on one hand, and the differentiation with the *travesti* category in its increasing connections to “prostitution” and “criminality”, on the other.

On sex/gender frontiers: From Rogéria to Roberta Close and Telma Lipp

The report of Rogéria about her identity is noticeably different from a name such as Roberta Close. In the 80s, Close became a sex symbol in Brazil – being described in 1984, in one of the most popular magazines at the time, *Manchete*, as “the most beautiful woman” in the country. In the same decade, she was featured on magazine covers in publications directed to the “male public”, such as *Playboy* and *Ele&Ela*, and worked as an actress and model, reaching international success. She was known for her beauty, delicacy, and discreteness, always dodging gracefully the often invasive questions asked to her. Concurrently, Close’s celebrity status made her personal life the subject of tabloids and media sensation, including her male affairs – another distinction to Rogéria, which was able to keep her own life more separate from the “public eye”.

²⁶⁹ As stated in the **Introduction**, this refers to the distinction between “gender identity” and “sexual orientation”.

Veras (2015) understands 1984, with Close's participation in *Playboy*, as a symbolic shift in the history of *travestis* – from what the author calls the “time of wigs” to the “time of hormones”. If, before, *travesti* was deemed a character – a “woman costume”, in Rogéria's words – the figure of Close side-by-side with other (cis)²⁷⁰ women in *Playboy* means that such strict frontiers became noticeably blurred in the public sphere. Close was both deemed a “*travesti*” and the ideal of womanhood and femininity, indicating a broader cultural shift in perceptions of sex and gender. Not by chance, Close was deemed “an enigma”²⁷¹, crossing what were before apparent unpassable gender frontiers, and re/moving them by consequence.

Veras (2015) also points out that, if by 1981 Close approximates her experience to *travestis* in her interviews, emphasizing their “human and serious” side outside of “humor” and “carnival”, just three years later, in 1984, she states a clear differentiation, affirming her experience could not be defined by an “imitation” or “carnivalization” of femininity.

In that way, the author emphasizes that, although Close was ambiguously described as a *travesti* in an earlier moment, there are, throughout the early to mid-80s, new processes of differentiation – both from Close herself, but also in popular media. The sex/gender “norm” and its frontiers (“men” versus “women”) were now re/located, re/positioned. Therefore, the approximation of Close to (cis) women ended up shaping a counterpart – *travestis* – that were deemed “aggressive” and “excessive”. Therefore, these historical crossings should be understood as entangled, as necessarily relational, in its differentiation processes.

In her participation in the 1986 TV show “Show de Calouros”²⁷² [*Freshman's Show*], Close is directed by a series of questions by the audience and the jury members, with a mixture of terms such as “living as a woman” and “becoming a woman”. The camera often gazes on her body, from the bottom up. The presenter makes constant remarks on her beauty and “impressive” femininity but refers to Close with both female and male pronouns, often expressing his confusion. Close, on the other hand, always describes herself simply as a woman – more specifically, an “elegant woman” – and gently reinforces the use of female pronouns.

At a certain moment, she jokes with a jury member saying “he should shave his mustache and also become a *travesti*”. In another, the presenter questions if she is “in fact a man or a woman”, to which she answers back: “I don't know, what I know is that you appear

²⁷⁰ As mentioned in the **Introduction**, the term “cis” here is under parentheses to indicate a term not used at this historical period, but important for historical analysis.

²⁷¹ As stated by Veras (2015), the *Playboy* edition has no “genital reveal” of Close. Therefore, the photos also play with images of secrecy and mystery. After undergoing GRS, Close appears in “male magazines” fully nude.

²⁷² Publically available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VLzFjVwXWHI>.

to have an interest in me”. In yet another, a jury member jokes she indeed “was born as a woman, but pretends she was born a man to be famous”.



*Figures 10: Roberta Close on “Freshman’s Show”.
In the original, “Show de Calouros” (SBT), December 1986. Personal archive.
Roberta would be later a regular on the same show. She was 22 years old at the time.*

Close underwent GRS in 1989 – after ten years of medical following – with the surgery causing, as well, a general media stir. By then, GRS was already described and known by the public as the “sex change” surgery – Close “became a (full, complete) woman”. Therefore, we can observe how complex definitions of being a woman shifted, throughout the period – being a woman is about “being born” as a woman (in reports such as Rogéria), self-identifying as one, dressing up as one, being socially read as one, being desired, being respectable and discrete (in certain gender expressions), undergoing certain body modifications, such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and GRS...

In this re/configuration of the frontiers of sex/gender, GRS started to be settled as a kind of final frontier between “*travesti*” and “women”. Interestingly, in this reading, which emphasizes cultural readings over medical/scientific ones, “transsexual” is the disruptive term, not “*travesti*” – with the *travesti* that seeks GRS being now the “female transsexual”, which, counterintuitively, sets womanhood itself apart. Therefore, there is a clash between sex/gender, nature/culture, in the sense of how these gender-crossing figures are seen by society in general, and their “biological” truth in transition, including forms of representation and how vocabulary is used in such in/distinctions²⁷³.

Throughout “Show de Calouros”, Close, in several moments, emphasize a kind of “naturalness”, “authenticity”, to her womanhood – stating, for example, that her breasts grew only with female hormones, not demanding invasive surgeries. Interestingly, it is possible to observe, here, as well, how different body modifications are set differently too, or even hierarchically, within the distinctions between natural/artificial, nature/nurture, normal/abnormal, setting apart Close from *travestis* in her 1986 report.

In another moment, one of the members of the jury says her voice (something, at the time, unchangeable with surgeries), being so feminine, resembles the voice of his wife. These comments entangle with the writings about Close at the time, being described as a woman that “could be presented to friends and family” (VERAS, 2015, p.133). This further differentiates her: she is a possible “wife”, thus distanced from *travestis*. The “respectable” wife versus the “dirty” prostitute.

Gender roles and sexuality take centrality in forms of classifying and hierarchizing such belongings, or not, to femininity and womanhood, in a kind of re/configuration of the binary of female sexuality and female wifeness. Saying so also means that Close was nearer the (Jorgensen) ideal of the “female transsexual”, intrinsically connected to a white woman domestic ideal (SKIDMORE, 2011) – again, in a further differentiation to *travestis*, figures of the street, and strongly racialized. In that way, *travestis* become figures of the “public”, while transsexuals are figures of the “private”, which is enmeshed with particular notions not only of sexuality, but also gender roles.

The comments of the jury members, and the movement of the camera itself, play with a sensuous image of Close – a gaze of desire and curiosity – that is never overly and explicitly sexual, always countered by “elegance” and “delicacy”, including in her noticeable ability to

²⁷³ As stated in the **Introduction**, different historical periods have different takes on notions of “sex”. In a broad portion of the anti-gender movement today, the so-called “gametes” take centrality, in an emphasis on fertility as a core definition between “men” and “women”.

dodge otherwise invasive and embarrassing questions. Here, it is important to notice that Close was skyrocketed to fame very early in her life: she was only 22 years old at the time of this show, in front of a jury consisting only of noticeably older men. This was just six years after her first carnival appearance, in 1980, when she was just 16 years old.

Like her international counterparts – Jorgensen and Coccinelle – Close would publish her autobiography later in life, in 1997, when she was already living outside Brazil. Although such biographies, in many ways, reinforce certain notions of sex/gender and a type of “spectacle” and “mysticism” of gender-crossing stories, mainly due to the impact of editor cuts and market interests (STONE, 2006), they are still remarkable as a rare space for such figures to write and be read in their personal stories, with dreams, conflicts, desires, and so on (VERAS, 2015).

Even as an international celebrity, Close was not able to change her documents legally in the country – and, thus, was not able to marry her boyfriend at the time. Eventually, she moved to Switzerland in 1993 and started to live a more reserved life as a housewife, where she lives to the present-day with her now husband. After a series of failed lawsuits in Brazil to change her legal documents in the 90s, she was only able to correct them in 2005.

During the 80s, at the peak of her fame, the success of Roberta Close was noticeable enough to raise a broader market interest. Being from Rio de Janeiro, she was met by Telma Lipp, marketed as her “rival” in São Paulo (although, in practice, they probably had not met each other at the time). Telma Lipp’s story, however, had a very different ending. Telma passed away at the age of 42, after struggling, later in life, with drug abuse and mental health issues, stressed by her life under the spotlight and eventual dismissal by popular media of her figure²⁷⁴. As with Close, she skyrocketed to fame from an early age, still in her early 20s.

With the political opening across the 80s, growing persecutions against *travestis* under the AIDS crisis, and new forms and access to video-making besides television itself, *travestis* started to appear as well in independent video productions with more sympathetic and less sensationalizing takes, compared to popular media²⁷⁵.

This includes Lipp’s participation at the 1987’s Swiss-Brazilian documentary “Love pains” [*Douleur d’Amour/Dores de amor*], which features five interviews with important

²⁷⁴ Another example of the complexity of dangers and possibilities of being a trans/travesti “celebrity”, in that sense, comes from La Veneno (Cristina Ortiz), in Spain, the subject of the television series “Veneno”, released in 2022, an adaptation of the novel “¡Digo! Ni puta ni santa. Las memorias de La Veneno”, from Valeria Vegas.

²⁷⁵ This will be further analyzed in the final parts of the section.

travesti and other transfeminine figures at the time. Faced with the question “what is a *travesti* and why are you not one?”, she replies (use of male pronouns, *translated from Portuguese*)²⁷⁶:

Travesti is a caricature of a woman, I am not a caricature, I am a woman. Travesti is extravagance, giant hips and large breasts, large cheekbones, brutish gestures of something that is not a man nor a woman – that you look and can see that is a man dressed up as a woman... that has a different mindset, goes to the street to call attention so that people know it is a travesti. I am nothing like this, I do not intend to be like this... that is the reason why people are aggressive towards travestis... travestis are also aggressive towards the people. Physically also, in the way they act and behave. They think, for example, they are better than women, so they do this extravagance in [their] body. That is the difference between a travesti and me. I want to mix with the crowd; I do not want to stand out from the crowd.

The segment is followed by a somewhat dislocated set of video images (including for the documentary as a whole) of Lipp sensuously leaving a swimming pool, in a black and yellow swimsuit – possibly for one of her photo shoots for magazines directed to the “male public” – just before glazing directly at the camera²⁷⁷. As with Close, desire and curiosity follow its movements, and the *travesti*/transfeminine body is at the gaze center.

²⁷⁶ In the original: “*O travesti é uma caricatura de uma mulher, eu não sou uma caricatura, eu sou uma mulher. Um travesti é um exagero, quadris enormes, seios muito grandes, maçãs do rosto enormes, gestos abrutalhados, de uma coisa indefinida que não é homem e não é mulher – que você olha e você vê que é um homem vestido de mulher... que tem uma cabeça completamente diferente, que sai à rua pra chamar a atenção, pra que as pessoas saibam que é um travesti. Eu não sou nada disso, não tenho a mínima intenção de ser isso... e é isso que faz as pessoas serem muito agressivas com os travestis, porque os travestis também são muito agressivos com as pessoas. Fisicamente também, na forma de agir e tratar as pessoas... se acham, por exemplo, melhores que as mulheres, então eles fazem o exagero... e isso diferencia. É isso que diferencia um travesti de mim. Eu quero me misturar na multidão, eu não quero me sobressair a multidão*”.

²⁷⁷ Curiously enough, one of the directors of the documentary would, years later, direct a movie called “Thelma”, where a cab driver falls in love with a trans woman.



Figures 11: Thelma Lipp on “Douleur d’Amour”
Documentary from 1987 directed by Matthias Kälin and Pierre-Alain Meier. Personal archive.
Thelma was 25 years old at the time.

According to Veras (2015), popular media had a central role, during the 80s in Brazil, in the shaping of what it means to be a *travesti*. The previous association with “prostitution”, combined with the desires and gazes associated with figures such as Close and Lipp, are attached to the rise of *travesti* as a pornographic subject as well. As seen throughout this section, all these entanglements emphasize the visual, the “image” and “imaginary” – in a “fleshly” sense of the “*travesti* body”.

The *travesti* body becomes here deemed “excessive” in the representations of both pornography and violent crime reports – the *travesti* becomes one with accentuated curves, large breasts and hips, yet “virile”. They preserve “masculine” features, in a type of dangerous hybridity, in such representations. This shapes, as well, the often deemed aggressive image/imaginary of the “woman with cock” [*mulher com pau*] that can “play both roles”.

This is curiously counter-narrated in the reports about Close before her GRS, where her genitalia is simply not mentioned, or described as a “small, insignificant detail” of her womanhood (VERAS, 2015). Similar reports can be found in the accounts about “female transsexuals”, where the use of female hormones is described in its effects of “impotency” or even “castration” of the “male” genitalia. Therefore, sexuality – and the genitalia in particular (STONE, 2006) – plays a key role in such differentiations and approximations between each one of these categories, although much more blurred in the experienced life of both *travestis* and transsexual women at the time²⁷⁸.

While, on one hand, such representations created stigmas, stereotypes and even informed the first instances of police persecution in Brazil, on the other, this visibility opened the possibility that certain people could identify with such bodies and stories, “attributing feelings and meanings to their own experiences” (VERAS, 2015, p.46). Therefore, the question of *travesti/trans* subjectivity, amid such “imagery and imaginary” in the “public eye”, demands further observation.

Making sense of oneself

The quote by Lipp is a clear-cut example of a series of differentiations, mentioned across the thesis, which set aside *travestilities*. Here, in particular, there is the distinction between being a “woman” and a “*travesti*” under notions of discreetness and delicacy, which includes behaviors (“extravagance”), beliefs (“different mindset”), and body modifications (“giant hips and large breasts”) – which also appear, even if more subtly, in Close’s representations, and in her own self-descriptions²⁷⁹.

In both examples – Close and Lipp – we can see how *travesti* complexly interact with notions of womanhood and femininity – more specifically, with attributes such as discreteness, delicacy, and elegance, in contrast with extravagance, excess, hypersexuality, and aggressiveness.

In the case of Close, we can further compare and analyze historical distinctions throughout the 80s. Again, it is important to remark that this was set in the context of “opening-arousal” during the democratic transition, which was later met with a “reflux” caused by the AIDS crisis, as stated in the **First Chapter**. The quickness of such shifts in distinctions – exactly

²⁷⁸ A more critical trans perspective would question the centrality of genitalia itself in understandings of sexuality and bodily experience in general – as already written by Stone, in the late 80s (2006). More contemporary takes state that this is a core element of cisnormativity (VERGUEIRO, 2016).

²⁷⁹ Interestingly, this also falls close to the medical definition of the “female transsexual” – in Brazil, differentiated to the *travesti* as a medical category enmeshed with “transvestism” [*travestismo*], as mentioned previously.

the time when AIDS cases started to appear across the world, and this became a heated subject in the public sphere in Brazil – indicates this direct impact. Although such historical processes were already in development, the AIDS crisis certainly plays a key role in the acceleration, if not shift, to such differentiations.

Therefore, it is possible to further state that the AIDS crisis shapes meanings of travestilities and their counter-parts – not only the “homosexual”²⁸⁰, but also the “woman” and the “transsexual”. Curiously, this crosses these distinctions, as a whole, in a kind of ode to discreteness, and more traditional takes on gender roles and sexuality, which can also be observed in the homosexual movement at the time²⁸¹. In the context of the AIDS crisis, this involves the complexities of embodied fears of contagion against certain subjects, on one hand, and so-called “risky sexual behaviors”, on the other.

As emphasized by Veras (2015), the expression “gay cancer” is already used in newspaper reports in Brazil in 1983, with the end of the decade having a clear-cut connection, in terms of public perception, between “AIDS” and “*travestis*”. Again, it is here important to remark that the end of the decade is also the symbolic peak in terms of moral panic – AIDS was described as “the most terrible disease of the century” and, amid the notion of “risk groups”, and particularly in their place in frontiers, *travestis* embodied such cultural fears and angsts.

Even further, these takes are also deeply connected to a sense of “nature” – countered with a deemed “artificiality” and “excessiveness” of *travesti* figures. Therefore, more than simply pre-existing, such a sense of nature is set into constant disputes and tensions, in the (new) frontiers of sex and gender, re/shaping such boundaries. Amid a period of moral panic and increased direct persecution against gender and sexuality minorities, it is also interesting to notice how *travestis* are constantly deemed “aggressive”, in a form of sought respectability that ends up casting a self’s shadow – an “Other’s Other”²⁸². The *travesti* appears to be always the Other, and never fully the self.

Following Barbosa (2013), the historical tensions between *travestis* and transsexuals, erupting across the 90s, is often set as a place in dispute on stereotypes, including a division in medical circles based on the demand or not to GRS. As stated throughout this chapter, in practice, body modifications go beyond strict identities, in a complex subjectivity that had to navigate the “public eye”, from the clinic to popular media.

²⁸⁰ As stated in the **First Chapter**, notions of “respectability” took centrality amid MHB during this period, both with the political opening of the regime and by the impacts of the AIDS crisis.

²⁸¹ This is further stated in the **First Chapter**.

²⁸² This concept is developed in the **First Chapter**.

In fact, we can even state that the report of oneself to a strict identity is also historicized – as has been indicated in different political moments, in particular in the attempted dialogue with the State and demands for recognition, where stating one’s identity, in opposition to others, becomes strategic (in what is described in the **First Chapter** as strategic essentialism). Even so, it is important to state that these processes, amid inclusions and exclusions, also re/produce sets of historicized differences and inequalities, particularly in terms of race and class.

With that being said, the differentiation between these identities remains, not only as the names themselves but also as processes of re/making subjectivity and a sense of oneself in the world. In both reports by Lipp and Close, we can see different senses of the body and oneself amid such “images” and “imaginaries” – the “natural looking” in opposition to a “character”, the emphasis on hormones rather than surgeries, the mention of “delicacy” and “discreteness”, and so on. In a period where notions of sex/gender were in intense transformation and debate in the public sphere, both figures navigated such senses of their stories and bodies.

In critical race theory, an approximation of this debate can be derived from the concept of double consciousness, coined by Du Bois (BRUCE, 1992, for a more contemporary reading). The author describes how black people in the US live their lives amid their own identity and the identity that white Americans assign to them. Therefore, the constitution of the self also includes a constant awareness of the way they are perceived and judged by white society, in unequal power structures that constantly inferior black people. This is, as well, a psychological tool, in a sense of dissonance and alienation – of not fully being a part of public spaces, for example, and of being addressed as a figure that is deemed dangerous and hypersexualized.

This is further complexified when it comes to trans people – which, themselves, have, by definition, a set of conflicts about their assigned sex at birth (a core part of identity, in our society) and how they are perceived by other people in what Serano (2007) calls “subconscious sex”. The stereotypes surrounding both *travestis* and transsexuals, particularly for women and transfeminine people, further add layers of meanings to navigate a sense of oneself, and particularly of one’s body and sexuality. Therefore, “transition” is not simply a quest for “passing”, but also of navigating a set of stereotypes external to oneself, and of having to be set in the eyes and gazes of powerful figures, amid unequal structures.

Similarly, Bettcher (2007) argues how trans people are historically denied of their right to privacy and intimacy, particularly in what she calls an invasive insistence of reporting one’s “genital status”. Applying the author’s argument to the Brazilian context, we can further state that “revealing” one’s genital status inserts one’s body and story into a specific framework – the hypersexual *travesti*, on one hand, and the dysphoric transsexual, on the other. Both

framings are limiting and, we could say, inherently violent. This “reveal”, the author points out, is precisely the source of transphobic violence, as trans people, particularly transfeminine people, are trapped in the definition of “evil deceivers and make believers”.

Contemporarily, trans representation tends to involve the defense of certain political demands, in the form of clear statements, attached to a more consolidated defense of an identity (HALBERSTAM, 2017). From this perspective, figures like Close and Lipp would be deemed almost “apolitical”, in their presence in the public sphere. However, a different take on politics – here inspired by readings on STS – opens space for another reading on these earlier forms of representation. Politics is here understood as the “possibility to be otherwise” – a process of “world-making” (HARAWAY, 2016)²⁸³.

What we can observe, when looking at these cases, are people trying to navigate as they could under a crossing of systems that were constantly against them. In that sense, forms of agency, creativity and reflexivity²⁸⁴ should be understood into this broader unequal and often violent normative structure, including growing market interests – as ways to navigate their lives, which also crosses specific positions in not only gender and sexuality, but also race and class. Saying so means both acknowledging the limits and constraints of moving across restricting power structures, but also the structural possibilities of such transit – for example, in the place of whiteness²⁸⁵. The “norm” is not a monolith, and is, by definition, unreachable.

Furthermore, it is important to remark that both Close and Lipp, and Rogéria as well, inhabit a (cis)heterosexual continuum of sexuality, gender, and desire²⁸⁶. Close is even deemed a “possible wife” – thus inserted in a logic, even if still expanded, of a nuclear, monogamous, family. This crosses, explicitly, certain gender roles, and a specific notion of sexuality/sensuality. Interestingly, this notion goes beyond strict medical protocols on “transsexualism” – even if distinguished from paraphilia and a notion of “transvestism”. As stated by Stone (2006), the (female) trans body is the subject of meticulous observation and inspection, as well as conflicting emotions and desires expressed by the male audience. This involves a complex set of negotiations amid power structures. The “transsexual” is not asexual, as the medical protocol itself is sexualized – the “clinician’s eye” necessarily involves desire,

²⁸³ This argument will be, as well, further developed at the end of this section.

²⁸⁴ With that in mind, my view on agency/structure is not one that is calculated and premeditated, but only that arises, organically (although in different levels of self-reflection and critical perceptions) – some would say ecologically – in a specific set of possibilities that emerge in the placement of the subject in the world.

²⁸⁵ As will be emphasized later in this chapter, the frontier can also be a space for possibility and potentiality for transformation. This is mostly inspired by Patricia Hill Collins’ concept of the “outsider within” (1986).

²⁸⁶ This “continuum” is conceptualized by Butler (2011).

in the connections between knowledge and power, which are always situated, even if affirming to be strictly “neutral” and “objective” (HARAWAY, 2004)²⁸⁷.

Particularly during the AIDS crisis, inhabiting frontiers was deemed dangerous – *travestis* became the “mother of AIDS” (CARVALHO, 2022), in such discourses and practices, embodying the fear of these “un-crossable crossings”. Throughout the world, the bisexual community was also largely stigmatized given the impact of the moral panics surrounding the AIDS crisis – bisexual men, in particular, were often deemed the “cause” of the epidemic to move from gay men to women (OLIVEIRA, 2021). The passage of HIV to (cis) women was particularly at the center of moral panics because of the possibility of vertical transmission during pregnancy.

As an “Other”, *travesti* not only inhabited gender frontiers, but sexuality frontiers as well. In a 1980’s edition of the “Lampião da Esquina”²⁸⁸ the report “*Travesti – this unknown*” [“*O travesti, esse desconhecido*”, use of male pronouns] states a difference between “transvestism” and the “male transsexual” (today’s “female transsexual”). While the transsexual is referred to as delicate and feminine, the *travesti* is deemed to “travesty” and “imitate” femininity. *Travesti* is here inherently associated with sexuality – connected to “bisexualism” and “prostitution”, with “a special appeal to heterosexual men”. Therefore, the hypersexualized *travesti* is both deemed “homosexual” and “bisexual”, outside the possibilities of monogamy – amid the later AIDS crisis, materializing the fear of contagion of the “nuclear family”. In this sense, as the “Other’s Other”, the malleability of the *travesti* category²⁸⁹ appear to embody it, in such representations, to all forms of what was deemed unwanted. Categories and notions that would be otherwise unintelligible together – homosexual and bisexual, in this case – are here connected in the legitimacy of violence, amid moral panics.

Brenda Lee and Veruka: Navigating sex work and the AIDS crisis

As stated in the **First Chapter**, Operation Tarantula was held in 1987, one year before the first instances of criminalization of HIV/AIDS contagion appeared in Brazilian legislation. Therefore, the 80s have a quick political and cultural shift of attaching “*travestis*” to “AIDS”. Especially in an earlier period, there were no prevention policies from the State, HIV/AIDS had no treatment – meaning that patients were excluded from social life, when detected, often being

²⁸⁷ In a similar direction, violence should be understood in the realm of repression, as developed in the **First Chapter**.

²⁸⁸ Archival reference: AEL Archive (UNICAMP, Campinas/SP, Brazil), “João Antônio Mascarenhas” fond. Also available at: Grupo Dignidade / <https://www.grupodignidade.org.br/projetos/lampiao-da-esquina/>.

²⁸⁹ Another take on this malleability, as potentiality, appears in the conclusion of this chapter.

left to die alone in hospitals. Already from this early period, grassroots organizations countered such actions, in a type of “guerilla scientific research”, including the promotion of prevention policies and the creation of support networks for those who were seropositive (HIV positive). In *travesti* history, this crosses directly the context of sex work, the politicization of the category and the first organizations of *travestis* – from early grassroots organizations in the late 70s, with other female sex workers, to ASTRAL, in 1992. This also includes the emergence of prominent figures in *travesti* history, including Brenda Lee.

O travesti que não tem medo da Aids

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MEI O BOM DE CAMA É BOM DE TUDO

NOVA LINHA ORTOMIL

FLEXIBILIZADA ATENDIMENTO ESPECIALIZADO		ORTOMILCO AMPLIADO	
MATRADO 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20	De-Cad 20.000, Per-Cad 10.600, CASH 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20	MATRADO 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20	De-Cad 20.000, Per-Cad 17.900, CASH 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20
De-Cad 20.000, Per-Cad 10.600, CASH	De-Cad 20.000, Per-Cad 17.900, CASH		

COLCHÕES EM SUPER-OFERTAS

COLCHÃO CONVENCIONAL	ESPUMA PURA	ORTOMILCO	ORTOMILCO
MATRADO 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20	MATRADO 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20	MATRADO 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20	MATRADO 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20
De-Cad 3.000, Per-Cad 1.900, CASH	De-Cad 3.000, Per-Cad 4.680, CASH	De-Cad 3.000, Per-Cad 8.100, CASH	De-Cad 3.000, Per-Cad 6.600, CASH
MATRADO 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20	MATRADO 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20	MATRADO 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20	MATRADO 1,5 x 1,90 - 4,20
De-Cad 3.000, Per-Cad 3.600, CASH	De-Cad 3.000, Per-Cad 7.490, CASH	De-Cad 3.000, Per-Cad 13.200, CASH	De-Cad 3.000, Per-Cad 15.500, CASH

4 vezes a vista com até 40% de desconto 6 vezes a entrada

ATACADO das colchões

Figure 12: “The travesti who is not afraid of AIDS”. In the original, “O travesti que não tem medo da AIDS”. October 23, 1988, “Matutina”, O Globo. Available at the open-access O Globo’s digital archive.

1988 was already a year where “AIDS” was at the crux of cultural and political controversies. The Brazilian State was taking its first steps toward the recognition of the crisis as a matter of public health, taking necessary preventive policies, which, as with other countries

of the world, tended to be connected with already existing grassroots initiatives (COLLINS & PINCH, 2005). In São Paulo, this included the partnership of the Health Secretary with the so-called “House of Princesses”, led by Brenda Lee. Lee was one of the most noticeable *travesti* activists in Brazilian history, receiving in her house people affected by HIV/AIDS, mainly *travestis*, in a context where they were neglected by hospitals and family members. The report by “O Globo” mentions that, at the time, 40% of the *travestis* in the region were HIV-positive²⁹⁰.

In this interview, Lee points out the ongoing stigmatization and violence against *travestis*, attached to the AIDS crisis. In her words, however, “AIDS still kills a few, when compared with street violence”, mentioning that “we, the *travestis*, are victims mainly by the Police”. This understanding of political violence is shared in other interviews of the late 80s, based on archival research on newspapers – with the use of words such as “repression”, “marginalization” and “discrimination”. This is widely different from takes of the mid to late 70s, from the same sources – with *travestis* often appearing in humorous art forms – when *travestis* were described as “popular” or even “idols”, a type of social and cultural sensation, even if with their own set of controversies.

Although we know that, already at the time, forms of persecution already existed²⁹¹, this distinction points out a more noticeable politicization of the *travesti* identity, including the nuances of discrimination and specific demands. In this context, *travestis* are deemed a group that has been institutionally and culturally persecuted, which crosses the dispute, within the public sphere, particularly under the AIDS crisis, about the meanings of travestilities in its complexity. In this context, Lee was a voice of *travestis* as well.

At the same time, the report also crosses the access to complex forms of subjectivity, and individual connections to this category. Lee worked as a sex worker in Europe and was able to have the funds necessary to later open a beauty salon and buy properties in São Paulo. At the same time, she mentions in the report she has abstained from sex for over 10 years – arguing that AIDS is “God’s punishment’ against *travestis*.”

With this, although Lee recognizes herself as a *travesti*, and the violence against her community, engaging in a historical project of support and community building (she was known as the “*travesti*’s angel”), differentiates herself from other *travestis* – including those affected by HIV/AIDS – for not being a sex worker anymore, and not being sexually active. As seen

²⁹⁰ Brenda Lee’s story reached a violent end, years later, in 1996, when she was murdered by one of her employers, assisted by a police officer.

²⁹¹ Such operations are detailed in the **Introduction**, dating back to the late 60s and early 70s, although on local and smaller scales, when compared to operations such as Tarantula, in 1987.

earlier with Roberta Close, with the increasing stigmatization of *travestis* during the period, navigating this category, particularly under the “public eye”, was a complex set of negotiations, as in setting points of approximation and differentiation, namely based on gender performance and sexuality. Especially as a central political representative of *travestis* at the time, Lee was, even if in different crossings, under such sighs and gazes as well. Connected to this, we can also state that *travesti* becomes a politicized category, in the strict sense, already at the time – one that, by 1992, would become the spark of organized and institutionalized initiatives²⁹².

When it comes to the “O Globo” newspaper segment, the tensions between reports of the self and the other, amid images and imaginaries, are noticeable. As in other interviews of the period, Lee refers to herself and other *travestis* only with female pronouns – but the report tends to use male pronouns, and includes her (former) male name with no clear reason. Again, this can be contrasted with figures such as Close and Lipp, in the ways that they navigated womanhood and femininity and, particularly, how media perceived them in such categories, in alliance or contrast with their own self-identification.

A similar argument is made by Veras (2015), in what the author describes as “micro-resistances”. Even amid extremely unequal power structures in such forms of representation, *travestis* were able to use the space of the press to denounce violence, particularly police brutality, as Lee carefully does in this interview. This visibility was also impactful for the shaping of a sense of community and shared political goals, with increasing marches and structuring organizations by and for *travestis* across the country, leading to ASTRAL’s foundation in 1992. In many ways, stereotypes and stigmas came side-by-side with such statements – the author mentions a newspaper report that describes how *travestis* broke a police station and fight back cops after being forcefully arrested. This example crosses both the “aggressive” image/imaginary, but also opens space to denounce its “original violence” – police brutality²⁹³.

²⁹² ASTRAL is here referred to. ASTRAL and the origins of the Brazilian *travesti* movement are described in the **Introduction**.

²⁹³ Different readings on such “violence”, including amid MHB, are further developed in the **First Chapter**.



Figure 13: “Rome amplifies action against Brazilian travestis”.
 In the original, “Roma amplifica ação contra travestis brasileiros” [use of male pronouns]
 September 27, 1986, O Globo. Available at the open-access O Globo’s digital archive.

As seen earlier with the story of Martinha²⁹⁴, the AIDS crisis led to further persecution against *travestis*, not only by police operations and death squads, but also by society in general. This was set in an extremely harsh period, still with remains of an authoritarian military regime and its discourses and practices, in a country with increasingly alarming rates of HIV/AIDS in a short period. In fact, many reports state that the mid to late 80s is the harshest period in *travesti* history, in terms of extension and brutality of violence. Already during the Dictatorship, international migrations of *travesti* sex workers to other countries became more common, which was later intensified with the increasing violence across the 80s.

Written in 1986, the report by “O Globo” describes the “Brazilian *travestis*” as “olive-skinned, handsome, strong, and joyful” [“*morenos, bonitos, fortes e alegres*”, use of male

²⁹⁴ Martinha’s story, a survivor of the period, is described in the **First Chapter**.

pronouns], but uses female pronouns when directing to them in other moments. The main name of the report is Veruka, a *travesti* sex worker living in Rome, Italy. In her interview, Veruka states that the “Brazilian police is the most violent in the world”, in a similar denouncing tone as Lee. Migrating to different European cities in the past 15 years, she states she “became a person” abroad – thus, pointing out to a particular context of dehumanization in Brazil. She states that she and other *travestis* still faced persecution by the local police abroad, although not as harsh as in their home country, which included forms of torture and humiliation, as well as extensive persecution both by day and night.

As with the report with Lee, there are also openings to resistance. Veruka affirms that *travestis* tended to “fight back” – physically, included. To this day, when police brutality is mentioned, such nuances tend to be lost²⁹⁵. At the time, *travestis* were already actively responding to this violence, including against the operations themselves, but also politically, organizing as political unities to demand rights, and creating communities and support networks. Not by chance, the 90s had the first instances of State recognition of *travestis*, now in the “post-democratization” period.

Veruka’s report also opens space to subjectivity and individuality. Veruka states she is religious – saying the “Bible gives her strength” – and dreams of leaving sex work to build her own business back in Brazil. Although both reports are cut by violence, they also open space, in their first-person takes, for resistance, agency, and reflexivity – both Lee and Veruka have faith, dreams, and desires, and creatively manage their lives, circulate the world and engage in their communities, under extremely harsh conditions.

Finally, both reports also point out a complex connection between *travestis* and sex work, particularly street prostitution. As emphasized by Moira (2020), sex work has historically been a “trench” to *travestis* and trans women, including by modeling their bodies through body modifications, forming networks and sociability spaces, and accessing some possibility of financial growth. At the same time, this does not exclude how often sex work was²⁹⁶ the sole option for survival for *travestis* and trans women from an early age, crossed by a series of discriminations, from school to their household.

There are also important economic factors. Both reports indicate another space for *travestis* outside the “stages” [*palcos*] and the “red light districts” [*pistas*], administrating or working in beauty salons, for example as manicures or hairdressers. As emphasized by Veras (2015), the 80s is a particularly harsh period economically in Brazil, and Latin America in

²⁹⁵ The framing of the “perfect victim” is described in the **First Chapter**.

²⁹⁶ To this day, most of the *travestis* and trans women are in sex work, according to research by ANTRA (2022).

general, leading to widespread unemployment and hyperinflation, which also contributed to shifts in the place of sex work in the general economy.

Cutting and crossing, razor blades: After all, what it means to be a *travesti*?

“Razor blade” is an image that “cuts and crosses” this thesis. Given the context of violence against them, *travestis*, particularly those in sex work, need to find ways to protect themselves. This includes physical protection, as in the case of small razor blades, which can be hidden and used even they are undressed, including under their tongues. In recent years, the image of the “razor blade under the tongue” has gained strength as an image of resistance in *travestis*’ lives, used in a series of academic, artistic, and activist interventions.

The “razor blade” has gained specific nuances amid the AIDS crisis and the further increase in police violence, including Operation Tarantula, in São Paulo, in 1987. As we know from first-person reports in archival and oral history sources, cutting themselves with razor blades became a way to protect themselves, as police agents were afraid of being “contaminated with AIDS”. Therefore, inflicting such cuts upon themselves was a way to avoid being arrested, or suffering harsher violence by the police.

While the “tarantulas” opens this thesis, as a symbol of a top-down force, the image of “razor blade” is, designedly, never explicitly mentioned. Symbolically, it refers to forms of resistance against all odds. Not only physical ones, but also the resistance in joining forms in activism and demanding rights, changing and transforming one’s body at the margins of the formal healthcare system, and finding community in unbearable scenarios. This is also a resistance of joy, love, and humor²⁹⁷, as exemplified by Condessa. The “razor blade” is “hidden” here as well – as *pajubá*, it is also a resistance that knows where to keep secrecy. A recurring image about *travestis* is that they are an “enigma”, a “mystery”, – a sphinx²⁹⁸. This powerful hybridism of the mythical image of the “sphinx” refers to both a figure that can be deadly, but also protective. It is a guard that knows where and how to recognize danger.

Another image used about *travestis* – the “vampire”²⁹⁹ – can also be here twisted, transitioned, into a symbol of resistance as well. Another mythical being, the vampire is insisting on the attempts to kill them. They are almost immortal beings, existing throughout history even when faced with crowds in mass hysteria. They are “dragonflies” or “butterflies”³⁰⁰,

²⁹⁷ My take on resistance is mostly inspired by black feminist authors. See Alinia (2015), for a general take on intersectionality, oppression, resistance and empowerment.

²⁹⁸ Comparison mentioned in the **Second Chapter**, in the Lampião da Esquina’s report about “bionic fags”.

²⁹⁹ Comparison mentioned in the **First Chapter**, in the reports of MHB about *travestis*.

³⁰⁰ Comparison also mentioned in the **Second Chapter**, in the Lampião da Esquina’s report about “bionic fags”

in their acts of transformation, they have the “eyes of lynx and the legs of ostrich”, gaining almost supernatural abilities to thrive in such harsh conditions.

Still, such images used about *travestis* represent what we know today as deep roots of transphobia – notions of deception (BETTCHER, 2007), and a certain mystification of human beings that can many times lead to forms of dehumanization³⁰¹. Therefore, particularly in the Second Chapter, I sought to emphasize, including forms of representation in public history, notions of creativity, reflexivity and subjectivity, and well as provide space for conflict and contradiction, under the call of “cyborgs, not goddesses”. Metaphors can be powerful, and beings are not detached from the stories told about them (HARAWAY, 2016).

Writing in 2020, Stryker argues that trans people indicate “not only that ‘another world is possible’ but that another world is actual”. The author understands the act of trans-ing in unexpected and complex connections, kin-making (HARAWAY, 2016), “in anticipation of whatever else shall come” in an ever-changing, and increasingly harsher and pessimistic, political environment (STRYKER & BLACKSTON, 2022). Similarly, Angela Davis³⁰² has stated that the ongoing questioning of the gender binary opens space to what would be often unimaginable, disrupting the core of culture’s understanding of “normality” – a creative opening to possible futures less structured by inequalities of gender, race, class, and beyond.

Halberstam understands this in the work with the past – “to discover in the past human possibilities and imaginings that were suppressed or left unfulfilled but that can provide guidance in the present or creating better worlds in the future” (HALBERSTAM, 2017, p.25). At the same time, the author understands this as a trap possibly fallen by historical and historiographical work – ending up limiting such classifications in their possibilities and potentialities. In contrast, Halberstam advocates a resistance to this urge to classify, organize and create limits. In other words, to appreciate and work, including conceptually, with the open-ended (HALBERSTAM, 2017, p.7) – a kind of ode to the possibilities of the frontier.

Informed by this, I would argue that public history becomes itself a work in frontiers, if not on a tightrope. This involves taking responsibility and making decisions, especially when working with ways to actively engage in re/shaping history, within and beside our writings – taking into account possibilities and limitations, including different forms of communication, and addressing different “publics” (in whatever that may be). It involves understanding the nuances between empathy and a shared sensibility grounded in lived experience, as the quote by Lorde, at the start of this thesis, indicates.

³⁰¹ Further analyzed in the **First Chapter**, and counter-acted in the **Second Chapter**.

³⁰² Source: HoneySuckleMag (with links to the interview) / <https://honeysucklemag.com/angeladavis/>.

Still, in terms of historical writing, as well as forms of representation, it is necessary to take the principle of open-end-ness to have the necessary space to engage critically and creatively with our sources and projects, and to move from question to question, provocation to provocation, in the interactions between theory and practice, past, present, and future. In the author's words, "trans bodies represent the art of becoming, the necessity of imagining, and the fleshly insistence of transitivity" (HALBESTAM, 2017, p. 136).

Throughout this thesis, I emphasized how "*travesti*", although today understood as a transfeminine gender identity, should not be confined as such, including historically. Working with "travestilities" opens space for a complex entanglement of identity with the body and the corporeal, as embodied experiences, "flesh"; the image and imaginary in its cultural places; and the collective and shared history of this political community. "Travestilities" open space for the individual as well, and the complex subjectivities that emerge with this category "that is and that is not" trans, "that is and that is not" women. This is true historically, both in the late 80s in Brazil, to the present-day, as this category appears to resist any form of constriction – of clear historical origins, and strict definitions. *Travesti* is a category in insurgence (STENGER & DESPRET, 2015), one that always provokes us into re/thinking forms of classification, one that is insistently never fully apprehended. *Travesti* is a multi-layered meaning word, always set in its connections. It appears to often be in the shadow of other identities and terminologies – however, in its "externalization", it also reveals something about the subjects in denial, in the complexities of self and other. *Travesti* is crossed by a history of discrimination and stigmatization, in the nuances of its imagery and imaginary, but also opens space for forms of disruption and re/imagination.

In this open-end-ness, "*travesti*" became, in recent years, a crux of a shared history and "transculturality" – a way to re/interpretate and re/imagine a range of entangled stories, amid violence and resistance, agency and structure, "tarantulas" and "razor blades". A continuum of struggles – from transfeminicide to depathologization efforts – but also of ever-changing creative and imaginative efforts to be otherwise. As stated by Carvalho (2022), *travestis*, like other trans people, have birthed themselves. Looking at the past, with stories such as Condessa, also opens space for learning of ways to resist and transform forms of authoritarianism and institutionalized violence, including in so-called democratic regimes of the present. This history is ongoing, growly crossing national frontiers – from Latin America and Afro-diasporic networks in the making, to the "*sudaka*" movements in Europe.

In terms of public history, this also means critically questioning by who, to whom, how and why such history is being re/told, namely in forms of representation that tend to centralize

brutalized bodies. This goes into ongoing efforts to actively engage with the communities involved in history-making, including the centrality of first-person reports – although always with a critical eye to archival sources, methods, and the nuances of historical efforts between past, present, and future. In such efforts, the “public” is itself taken critically, in the entanglements between differences and inequalities, namely gender, race, and class. The “public” can act, as well, as a powerful force that re/produce existing power structures.

As stated in the Introduction, writing this thesis, in the present moment, has shown how contemporary many of these questions are. Many of the stigmas and stereotypes built over what it means to be a “*travesti*” in the democratic transition in Brazil can be observed, across the globe, to all trans identities. A careful look into history opens space to better understand its basis, articulations and possible consequences, as well as ways to counter-act, in a context where identity politics, cultural visibility, representation forms, technologies, scientific and medical understandings, and State recognition were otherwise. This includes ongoing struggles on bodily autonomy and efforts toward self-determination, attached to the defense of such diversity of stories and bodies inhabiting freely the public and political life.

In that sense, the right to change and alter your body as you wish, to appear in public and to access proper healthcare, education, and leisure, to not be persecuted, violated and killed for who you are – all this becomes urgently contemporary. The demand for “rights” becomes not solely ways of State recognition, but of an unfinished citizenship project (ARAÚJO, 2022), or even humanity itself (PRECIADO, 2020) – demanding an extensive transformation of culture and its embedded values, where the “public” is enmeshed between science, state, and society. This means tensioning legalist approaches, in the blurred lines between authoritarian and democratic regimes in capitalist and patriarchal societies, under an intersectional lens.

The body becomes a site of embodied knowledge – the *pajubá* cryptolect indicates, as well, a place for mysteries and secrets, in the limits of survival and of building internal, protective, spaces. Still, *travesti* history is one of connections and alliances in extremely harsh environments, where reflexivity and creativity exist in understanding the context you are inserted, and finding paths to navigate such systems, if not to break patterns of oppression and violence in the potential of frontiers. The lives of *travestis* in the borderlands (KOYAMA, 2006) – both individually and collectively – show open-end-ness as possibilities and potentials, to live otherwise, against all odds.

In a context where women, in general, are facing backlashes in rights and their entry into the public sphere, from an intersectional transfeminist perspective, *travestis* open space for a kind of insurgent femininity – one is considered “abnormal”, “unpleasant”, “improper”. One

that is limited to the “private”, in opposition to the “public”. One that is deemed so dangerous that can be the object of a series of persecutions – the “mothers of AIDS” – even to the point of extermination, but that, across generations, keeps re/learning and re/living in their transformations, birthing themselves. Like (other) “whores”, *travestis* are the hidden, constitutive, element, of the nuclear family itself. *Travesti* as what remains of femininity.

This resistance is one that is complex, contradictory, human and emotional, rather than god-like – another danger of representation, that falls short, yet again, in dehumanization. As the phrase that opens this thesis proposes – here, it is better to think about cyborgs rather than goddesses, in the sense of opening space for multiplicity and open-ended paths. In historical terms, this means looking at the possibilities to navigate the “public eye” – or, entangled systems and constructions of certain figures as sexual predators, inherently dangerous and subversive, and natural criminals. Representation and visibility become dangerous fields to navigate, particularly if the communities involved, if they have been historically marginalized and already set as outsiders, are not actively participating in decision-making.

This also means avoiding falling short into politics of respectability (KOYAMA, 2006) and in ongoing categorization efforts that build, yet again, “Others” from “Others”. In that sense, *travesti* is a category that appears to always avoid being fully “respectable”. It is hardly “hygienized” and incorporated. Open-end-ness means avoiding producing yet another exclusion, yet another Other, in a politics that recognized difference while avoiding falling into a re/constructed politics of inequality, and where the self can build self-criticism without externalizing what is deemed unpleasant to a shadowed Other.

In this symbolic reading, the open-end-ness of what it means to be a *travesti* – the complexity of travestilities – may also teach something to public history as well. The public life, particularly democratic life, may be understood in its set of historicized inclusions and exclusions – differences that are shaped as such, and become inequalities. Public history appears not simply as a way to historicize this, in the nuances of categories and periodization, but also to open space to re/imagine, re/learn, re/live, remember... in other words, to open space to be otherwise. To engage creatively with history and historiography in new ways, and with the public in its complexities. To centralize frontiers to build connections and alliances, but that resist the urge to classify, yet again, in new hierarchized binaries. To potentially build cultural understandings that are otherwise. Frontiers that remind us that there is always something beyond – that there are always possible futures. Razor blades that can cut and cross what was before impassable.

Conclusion

“It was impossible to escape, but that was precisely why we insisted on escaping”

Era impossível fugir, mas justamente por isso nós insistíamos na fuga

MOMBAÇA (2019)

This thesis was centered on the cultural formation of what it means to be a *travesti* in Brazil, understanding the democratic transition, in the late 80s, as a core period of what was conceptualized as “travestilities”. Travestilities refers to a range of elements of the meanings of the *travesti* category, which can be combined in a sense of *travesti* subjectivity. Although, contemporarily, *travesti* is understood as a gender identity, the concept of travestilities also opens space for the meanings of *travesti* as an embodied experience, a political community, and a figure in the social imaginary. One of the main arguments of the thesis is that these elements in fact trace back, historically, to the present-day definition of the category – and its connections to, for example, the standardization of the use of female pronouns and the entry into the broader “trans” umbrella.

The first chapter, “Tarantula”, emphasized the top-down, repressive, forces, which shaped some of these meanings, particularly in a set of stigmas and stereotypes. In terms of repression, Operation Tarantula, in 1987, is set as a symbolic peak of the ostensive police operations against *travestis* at the time. Similar operations, on a smaller scale, exist since the late 70s against “homosexuals” in general, across Brazil, although *travestis* were already particularly targeted in such operations. In the first chapter, the nuances and specificities of this embodied experience, and the centrality of the body in general, are emphasized by an analysis of forms of political violence. In the second chapter, it is emphasized that the 70s to the 80s passage saw the political and cultural construction of the association of *travestis* with “prostitution” and “criminality”.

Discussions on subjectivity took centrality across the thesis. In the first chapter, this was emphasized by discussions on the nature of violence and processes of dehumanization. The repressive nature of such violence shapes *travestis* as an “Other” and defines the non-*travesti* self outside such sets of stigmas and stereotypes. Initially, this discussion is held on the connections between hegemonic masculinity, the nation-state, and militarism, particularly in specific forms of torture held against *travestis* by the police during and after the Civic-Military Dictatorship (1964 – 1985). The Dictatorship plays a key role in the shaping of a neurotic

“governmentality” of the internal threat, as well as the centralization of repressive State forces, in its sets of discourses and practices, including the militarization of the police and a notion of vigilantism.

Going further, the chapter centers as well the differentiation processes between an important part of the Brazilian homosexual movement, MHB, and *travestis*. A stricter frontier is established amid the democratic transition, in a political opening that offers opportunities for State recognition and the acquiring of rights, similar to other historically marginalized groups. In these processes, notions of “social respectability” take centrality, which is further intensified with the AIDS crisis, from the mid to the late 80s. This shapes *travestis* as an “Other’s Other”. This differentiation is understood as both a form of strategic essentialism – particularly with the increasing entanglements with medical and scientific circles, in the efforts to depathologize “homosexuality”, in the 80s – and a form of privilege, in the sense that is crossed, in its intersections, with axes of race, gender, and class. This is also important to notice as counter-narratives were already being mobilized by other groups at the time – as exemplified by black homosexual movements, such as Adé Dudu, mentioned in the second chapter.

Historically, the AIDS crisis – and, more particularly, the “moral panics” associated with it, across the 80s (with 1990 as its symbolic peak) – is understood as a catalyzer of the violence against *travestis*, although not its defining characteristics. The AIDS crisis moves already existing historical discourses and practices that associate gender and sexuality dissidence to notions of “subversion” and “degeneracy”, which can be traced back at least to Estado Novo (1937 – 1945), further in radicalization. Fears and angsts of “contagion” reach the point of social cleansing discourses and practices, in this period, in the attempted elimination of the Other (and, thus, parts of the repressed self). As mentioned in the first chapter, this, contrary to the efforts made within the homosexual movement during the democratic transition, makes these groups deeply connected in the public sphere – they become “in/distinguished”, as the “homosexual” is itself an Other. This becomes particularly important in the context of the attempted inclusion of discrimination in terms of “sexual orientation” in the Brazilian 1988 Constitution, which should be understood amid the broader backlash caused by the AIDS crisis forged as a pandemic, in a broader history of the sexual revolution and the “opening-arousal” of the political regime, and the resulting backlash in public perception.

Even so, it is important to remark that *travestis*, in particular, embodied such “risks”, being deemed “mothers of AIDS” – not by chance, this period is known as the harshest in terms of political and societal violence, as exemplified by Martinha’s story in the first chapter, and Veruka, in the second chapter, including extensive flows of international migration. Saying so

means both acknowledging the crossings with a broader history on “homosexualities”, and the analytical need to address “travestilities” in its particularities and nuances.

At the same time, the aftermaths of the AIDS crisis have a key role in what later constituted the Brazilian *travesti* social movement in 1992, with ASTRAL. The demand for HIV/AIDS prevention policies is combined with the previous, long-lasting, demand for the end of police violence, with initial efforts in that regard being made by female sex workers for over a decade, since 1979. As stated in the second chapter, the mid to late 80s is also a politicization period, with *travestis* mobilizing the space provided by the press, even if under unequal forms of representation and visibility, to state their political demands and denounce violence, as well as to establish broader and institutionally structured organizations.

These political networks should be understood in a previous historicity, in terms of sociability. Historically, what we can observe is a set of steps (in the growing complexity of “travestilities”). Initial efforts into body modification, lead to, already by the early 80s, the presence of complex networks in sex work, as well as further differentiates *travestis* from other groups, such as “*liberados*”, based on such embodiments. Here, these body modifications take centrality in notions of belonging and shared experience. At the same time, this is not linear, meaning that a complex constellation of categories and understandings of travestilities is mobilized in the democratic transition, to later take stricter forms across the 90s and 2000s, eventually leading to the present-day definition as a transfeminine gender identity and the entry into the “LGBT” acronym.

Such historical processes are further analyzed in the second chapter, “Razor blades”, which emphasizes forms of resistance, and the multi-layered meanings of travestilities. The 70s to 80s is understood as a core passage, with the centrality of body modifications – mainly, silicone implants and the use of female hormones – in *travesti* subjectivity. The reports by Rogéria in the late 70s already indicate a sense of shared, embodied, experience, of *travesti* performers defined by such body modifications, in differentiation processes. The symbolic passage in 1984, with Roberta Close’s appearance as a Playboy cover, indicates an important historical movement of *travesti* as a verb, a “character” associated with art forms, to *travesti* as a noun, as a way of being and experiencing the world. What is particularly important, at this moment, is the cultural impact of the blurred lines of sex/gender, men, women and the between, embodied in figures like Roberta Close and Thelma Lipp. Conceptually, this entangled re/arrangement of elements of travestilities is set by the notion of “flesh”.

Another important passage, here, is the self-definition of both Close and Lipp as women. This connection should be understood, as developed in the chapter, in the broader historicity of

the “transsexualism” medical/scientific definition. In Brazil, this historicity traces back to the early 70s, with the first GRS surgery in the country (with Nogueira and Farina), but fully enters the public sphere with Close, in the mid-80s. Internationally, the 80s is also the period of the institutionalization of this category in international psychiatric manuals, in the opposite direction of the homosexual depathologization efforts. As a known (bio)technology, gender reassignment surgery (GRS), in particular, emerges as a “final frontier” into womanhood, for female transsexuals, and establishes *travesti*, yet again, as its counterpart, now as a medical category in Brazil attached to the definition of “transvestism” as a paraphilia. Concurrently, GRS should not be understood by itself, but in broader “sexualized” diagnostics that make certain notions of gender performance and sexuality central to such distinctions. These notions should be understood in the intersections with race and class, in particular, as the “transsexual” is set as a white feminine ideal of “womanhood”, as exemplified by the reports on Close in the realm of domesticity.

Subjectivity returns in the second chapter in the emphasis on the complexity of the identification with the *travesti* identity. Even names like Brenda Lee and Rogéria, which openly identify with the term, point out distinctions between “them” and “others”, particularly in terms of sexuality and “aggression”. Other names, like Close and Lipp, emphasize clear distinctions between them and *travestis*. While, on one hand, this crosses the historicity of stigmatization of *travestis* in the 80s, on the other, it also crosses notions of agency, creativity, and reflexivity, in a complex shaping of the self crossed by such “images and imaginaries” (in what was called a “double consciousness”), in their individualities and particularities. The figure of Condessa, which opens the chapter, is symbolically set as a cornerstone story of navigating unequal power structures in the period, setting the tone of the chapter.

Analytically, the question of (male) gazes and the primacy of vision is further developed in this chapter as well, with terms such as “public eye” and “clinician's eye”. “Images” are literal here, in visual, popular media, as well as pornography, connected to both stigmas and stereotypes about *travestis*, but also possibilities to identification. Attached to these images are “imaginaries”: notions of who a *travesti* is, but also who a *travesti* could be. Therefore, *travesti* is understood as a multi-layered, and necessarily relational category – one that is by definition “insurgent”, and that can materialize a series of crossed historicities, at least if we “un/learn” and “re/learn” biased sights to observe this non-linearity and categorical open-end-ness (in what I called “possible futures”), as stated at the end of the chapter.

Conceptually, the discussions on the “eyes” entangles notions of “framings” and “material-semiotic relations”, mobilized in both chapters. Saying so also means critically

addressing notions of representation and visibility also in the present-day, as indicated in both chapters as well. This includes the duality of “perfect victims” and “aggressive figures”, mentioned in the first chapter – if not also a certain “heroism” attached to *travestis* – and the violent nature of the emphasis on the genitalia as a defining characteristic in *travesti/trans* subjectivity, mentioned in the second chapter. Both forms of representation/visibility “traps” such images and imaginaries in the re/production of unequal power structures. Inserted here are contemporary discussions on public history, including the participation of communities, storytelling, notions of positionality and responsibility in research-making, and the centrality of intersectional and critically engaged perspectives in the frontiers of theory and practice. In this understanding of politics, such “images, and imaginaries” produce reality itself, rather than simply framing it, and representation becomes an act of “making present again” (to re/present), actively re/shaping differences and inequalities.

In that sense, the second chapter also works in counter-efforts to the first chapter, including the emphasis on characteristics of contradiction and internal conflict, in counter-narratives of discourses and practices of dehumanization, and the recognition of both resistance and internal power structures, based on first-person reports of *travestis*.

More generally, the thesis also mobilizes notions of “frontiers” and “crossings”. Amid the AIDS crisis, for example, the frontiers inhabited by *travestis* are deemed dangerous, and the malleability of the category works in a way to attach a series of “remains” to it – whatever is deemed outside of the self, particularly in (white) femininity. Connected to this is the important racialized element of travestilities (in other words, who, in terms of race and class, is deemed a *travesti* or not). Analytically, I sought to contrast this with the open-end-ness of travestilities as a form of potentiality, including in the “historical repetitions” between the Brazilian democratic transition and the present-day, as indicated at the end of the first chapter. Such segments work as provocations, in more experimental, and loose sets of writings which, implicitly, also indicate efforts into questioning forms of knowledge-making in (and beyond) public history. In particular, I sought to draw attention to the connections between public history and politics, more specifically in activism, exemplified by the theory/practice efforts of the 2014 Brazilian Truth Commission and its resulting “memory boom”, even if under a critical lens, as mentioned in the first chapter.

Attached to these discussions is, finally, the concept of the “public” itself, which is understood in the entanglements between science, state, and society. *Travestis* long inhabit public spaces, and enter the public sphere amid the democratic transition – amid internal sociability networks, but also appearances in public media, and efforts in political mobilization,

in a wide set of differentiation processes and connections with other terms and categories. Even so, a series of exclusions against *travestis*, particularly for those in sex work and/or racialized, are mobilized in defense of the “public” – from “public security” to “public health”. Again, implicitly in this discussion are also questions of the present-day, as in questioning what the “public” is or, even further, what “public” we attempt to collectively re/construct and re/imagine, and how public history can play an important role in it.

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