GENDER, SEXUALITY AND AGING: 
POETICS FROM THE PAST IN (NEW OLD) TIMES OF AIDS

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ABSTRACT
This paper reflects a cartographic approach to gender and sexuality micro-politics from linguistic elements and figurations, narrated in the documentary My time Has Not Stopped, performed and produced in Porto Alegre (southern Brazil), by the non-governmental organization Nuances - which stands for a free sexual expression. In a “trip” queering discourses-flows, dissidents sexualities and genders, I aim at finding a way of experimenting life marked by a performing figure: old age. Dissident trials in Porto Alegre city and its space-times of sociability since the second half of the last century weaves this cartographic composition, which assumes discourses and experience in times of AIDS - defining contemporary bio-politics along the movements, pleasure and citizenship practices. I intend here to question contemporary subjectivity processes in gender, sexuality and aging roles of political memory elements.

KEYWORDS
Gender; Sexuality; Aging; AIDS; Memory.

Initial Problematizations
Since the 1960s, aging has been the concern of systematic investment in studies, research, and interventions in the Brazilian context. Due to the population longevity indexes revealed by global demographics and by the evidence of Brazilian indicators, scholars, civil society and governments have been interested in the impact of the increasing of the ‘third age generation’ (a term used to refer to old people in Brazil) in different regions of the country. These indicators echoes the countries from the global north, suggesting that this is also a reality for nations considered to be underdeveloped or developing countries.

Given this context, a question is usually asked: “who pays the bill of the social security” (as if the elderly had not already paid). In addition, we are also introduced to a broad menu of how to live well into old age or, in other words, to coercive refuse old ways of getting old. New and emerging representations about the older people coexist with old dilemmas of a stage of life consideredas a social and family problem. Many public managers still relate old age to possible health costs and a poorly life planning, or to supposed misfortunes that intergenerational crisis would bring.

Facing a new generational and demographic scenario that will present population rates higher than the birth rates (and higher than the rates of young people in Brazilian society as well as in other developing countries), the emergence of elderly not only would exposes the structural effects of a gap in the relationship between productive system and social security (pension) system, but it would also silence the bodies and the lives that are already considered to be abject, positioning them as more undesirable.

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2 Project financed by CNPq and FAPERJ funding of research.
Among the new cultural and political demands of the agonistic of the bodies, and among the social dispute for meanings assigned to places and spaces-times regulated by the dispositif of age, we are constantly interpellated by discourses that prescribe what an old age person might or might not do. Another understanding is the one that puts the body at the center of an unprecedented cultural and political dispute in Brazilian culture.

Thus, in the wake of the games of truth that define new social places for the elderly, a new bio-politics complex is drawn, repositioning and redefining a 'supposed' new population to be managed. Sexuality and health become ‘lovers’ of a cultural process to be learned in new political and social terms. And, therefore, lives remain in the margins of social, political and cultural recognition.

Given the social and cultural flows involving the new generation of older people, we are called to think about the educational processes and cultural practices involved in the contemporary productions of subjectivities. Likewise, we are questioned by the challenges that arise from regulatory ideals of gender and sexuality. According to Doll and collaborators (2015)

The educational work can deconstruct the stereotype of old age as something necessarily linked to fragility, poverty and vulnerability, producing new images and new knowledge related to old age people. Currently, gender identities, sexuality and ethnicity are central themes in the education field. In a rapid aging society, where up to five generations may live in the same family, the constitution of generational identities are essential problematization that have to be in the agenda of the educational debate. (P. 10-11)

Linked to the above questioning, we realize that sexuality is taking special attention in the process of managing the life of older people. Often related to the idea of “quality of life”, the exercise of sexuality coexists between the tutelage and encouragement of the old bodies. That is to say, if we are invited to live sexuality as an expression and a reflection of a healthy life, this experience is, at the same time, followed by many moral “ghosts” that surround the pleasures and the autonomy of the desire of the elderly. Thus, many unsolvable contradictions are exposed, although experienced on dissidents experiences and new repertoires of intersectional possibilities.

Old age is also a shadow in the experience of the so-called sexual minorities. One example is underlined by Simões (2004), The author points out the political tensions within the “experiences of the borders”, especially those ones located within the margins established by such “peripheral” experiences/lifestyles in a heterosexist society. The author states: “if on one hand identities constructed within the ‘gay culture’ can be seen as a way of learning and developing bodily lifestyles, [...] on the other hand, they also can stress the contrasts between the bright youth and the dark old age” (2004, p. 419).

In front of the efforts to understand and provide better live conditions for new generations of Brazilian living the new forms and ways of aging, the perspective of gender and sexuality is still very shy, or even haunted by religious, political or scientific fundamentalisms. The different life expectancies related to men and women, are somehow discussed, informing the limits of the body as gender’s screen, but connected to binary and hetero(cis)normatives representations. We know nothing, or almost nothing, about dissident experiences from heteronormativity. Furthermore, scarcely studies have been produced focusing on the ways
of life of transgender or lesbian communities. The few existing productions in the field of gender and sexuality studies are still focused on the experiences of (cis) gay or bisexual men. Thus, it is necessary to understand the challenges and the forms of social and cultural interpellation that drive contemporary subjetification processes within the Brazilian plural context, taking into account those lives that are silenced by hetero (cis) normativity.

Considering these challenges, I bet on mapping lifestyles circulating in cultural artifacts, in a research admittedly biased by the contribution of Cultural Studies in Education and in Gender and Sexuality Studies in a foucauldian perspective. This essay is a test in which problematizations activated in the field of education, provide a privileged background in understanding ways of producing cultural significance of processes and pedagogical practices, for learning and teaching new and old ways of being an elderly, especially when considering culture as a central element in the experiences and epistemological experimentations that are put in motion:

“It is important to remember that the issue of pedagogy is also related to cultural discussions. Today you can think of a range of learning places, such as the media, popular culture, film, advertising, mass communications and organizations political and religious (Giroux, 1995). These spheres produce images and knowledge about aging operating as educational dispositifs (Fischer, 1997), subjctivating subjects and producing ways of self identification and self understanding. The images guide expectations, values, perceptions and behaviors, producing knowledge and identities through the discourses that they put into circulation “(p. 10)

Far beyond poEthics: Practice of self (re)significance in the era of AIDS

The 1980s can be considered a rupture for the experiences of sexuality and for gender conventions, especially those regarded as marginal and/or minority. The centrality occupied by the emergence of AIDS reallocated the discourses on the body and pleasure, bringing a new dimension to the “identity politics.” In the popular imaginary of those who lived that times as a dark and gloomy political time, locked in a dark scene, the 80s could be represented as a “sad euphoria” projected on the video clip language, the vertiginous product of pop music that takes the scene in this period.

In a certain way, that was a time disturbed by echoes from the bustle of the movements for political opening in Brazil, the impact of feminist movements and other “new social movements” whose agenda were presenting fundamental social problems such as social exclusion, citizenship, democratization, culture and autonomy (Scherer-Warren, 1999) - all of them experienced in a frightened body with the dangers that sex pleasure had come to announce.

In the early 80s, cultural changes came dressed in the best unisex fashion style. In Porto Alegre, for example, the Bom Fim neighborhood closed the dark scene of the flock of the damned with a certain passion by the chances, even without the fears of meetings with an outbreak, one could see that:

“at Fernandes Vieira opened the Esperança which also became a bar and had a more casual ‘cushion alternative style’, in a little more liberating way. And so far everybody was so happy, it was a real community that Osvaldo Aranha, you know? People circulated as well as those
on Rua da Praia and very peaceful, everyone loving each other, I always say that in those
days everyone wanted someone, loved someone and everyone respected that, because just
by the fact you were in Aranha, it meant you were different, right? The fact that you were
at Ocidente was already different, you had a more liberal head, right?” (Edna’s testimony).
(SHADIES, 2008)

However, the rapid spinning caused by AIDS, emerging in this scene - spacetime - not
only rearranged the Brazilian homosexual movement agenda newly structured, but also the
daily life of many gays, lesbians and transvestites. The epidemic popularly called aunt or
damned becomes a matter of marginal lives and also the record of a social and/or physical
pre-announced death. Sex workers, drug users and gay men and transvestites occupy the
scene in fear’s shadow. The “coming out” slogan echoed as an exposure signal to the risk of
violence and an even more perverse social isolation, producing a political turning point in
the liberation movement of sexual minorities:

“The advent of AIDS in the early 80s, further complicated these relations and served as the
reason for the resurgence of prejudice against homosexuals, and the very male homosexuality
has become an AIDS synonym. At the beginning, the association has reached the point
that the disease, newly discovered, came to be called GRID (Gay Related Immunedeficiency)
in scientific circles and gay cancer, gay plague or pink plague by the press and public opinion

With the epidemic, certainly a setback. Many gay men and transvestites, challenged as
causing and propagating the ‘plague’ that threatened human life, retreated astonished. Llama
apud Sáez (2005) point out that each ‘body’ with AIDS became a homosexual body, or, in
any case, a soulless body (woman’s body, the drug addict, poor, black or immigrant bodies).
So, the closet came back as part of the repertoire of many, astonished at the gay cancer and
its stigmas:

“[..] Me and Crazy Paula, who is a 68 years old friend of mine, we have been stoned, down a
street in the Ipê neighborhood, where we lived. We were going to a street market to buy some-
thing, because it was cheap, all right, there we go to buy some onions? Let’s go. When we
were going down the street, we had to go back because a lot of kid thrown some bricks on us
and shouted: oh the bastards, kill them, gay plague, these have to be killed, and some more
bricks... “(Testimony by Luiz Carlos De Martins Da Veiga, Dheyser Veiga). “ (NUANCES, 2008)

LGBT activists were then engaging in the fight against AIDS in a move that amalgamated
two fronts. The epidemic and homosexuality come to be seen almost inseparably. It took strength
and courage to fight amidst the terrible loss of friends and comrades and still survive the constant
threats and interpellations. The testimony of a survivor of this pandemic is hard-hitting and re-
veals the pain of a community at imminent risk of social, political and physical death:

“Ah Cury died, Leo died, Ney died... the next, me ... Ney died, the next me? There has been
... a thing, like this. Ah one died of cancer, lung cancer, heart failure, or was ran over by a
motorcycle, died. No, the person was there, normal, cool with us. Oh there was, had an
exam.. oh you are HIV positive. And that in those words ‘you are HIV positive’, was beginning
to annihilate, that I have no hope of life, is a disease that kills, is the gay plague. “(Testimony of Luiz Carlos De Martins Da Veiga, Dheyser Veiga)” (NUANCES, 2008)

In the wake of this struggle, the feeling of solidarity that was present at LGBT networks in the underground times, had then a magnification of senses: the terror of cuts in many biographies, the loss of friends, companions and lovers. One might think that was part of this solidarity and establishment of friendship as politics, as a way of life (Foucault, 2001) that sustained the clashes of these first terrible years of the AIDS spread, since the state neglected the issue of the epidemic that every day reached or took someone close.

In one of the letters written by Caio Fernando Abreu (an openly gay character in the literary scene, hit by the disease) to a writer and friend, Mario Prata, we read the hardship of a still open wound: “I’ve been good, but at little leaps. As I say, one day on high heels, some others on flip flop sandal. It takes a lot of patience with this virus from hell. And faith in God. And a phalanx of guardian angels on the overtime schedule. And especially friends like you and many others, thank God, who are better than AZT. “(2006, p. 271)

Possibly one of the meanings of solidarity that emerged from the fight against AIDS was the possibility of (re)inventing networks of new subjectivities, pointing out new sexually representations, since many LGBT subjects produced, constrained and contingent by constant questioning rules and their injury acts, an even stronger alliance around the communities and ‘alternative’ lifestyles.

As collective re-signification strategy, becoming, living and standing out as a mona was a political act - an effect of friendship as politics, as a way of life. In the company of other members of the community, what mattered was to re-signify their lives, that was facing the isolation requirements and/or of a certain social death, announced in a diagnosis (yours or of a close friend):

“Curi, who I loved from the bottom of my heart when he learned he had HIV, he would not eat, he did not think more interesting in life, he thought nothing was worth, and he was handsome, he was strong. And he was wasting away, wasting away, and we saw him finish very little, on the bed. Leo too ... (thinks and his eyes fill with tears.) “(Testimony of Luiz Carlos De Martins Da Veiga, Dheyser Veiga).” (NUANCES, 2008)

The Dheyser’s narrative (op. Cit.) may find echoes in Eribon’s proposition (1999) that lesbians, trans and gays sociabilities could/can, first and foremost, be shaken by a practice and a policy of friendship. However, we see a turnaround in relation to experimentations of sexualities constituted as such.

What the history of AIDS may have taught us and how the current political actions have achieved these “survivors” of the struggle for life? How these actions affected their way of life? Caio Fernando Abreu in dealing with gay characters in The Legend of the Four Sisters, did not fail to represent the existential drifts of each one when facing the epidemic, which was then being a brand in many ways of life:

“Sisters are always negative. Or appear to be. Surprises happen because to be a Sister it doesn’t necessarily mean to be chaste. Irenes usually cope well with a positive test: spiritualize themselves, become vegetarian, Zen Buddhist, do yoga, seek the Holy Daime or
Thomas Green Morton. Read much Louise Hay, and even refuse to take AZT. Jaciras often deny decidedly to do The Exam: have an irrational certainty that would give positive. What it is not always true, since there is nothing stronger than Jacira’s saint. “(ABREU, 2006, p.144)

Memories-knowledge-bodies that matter? (In) conclusions

Marks of time that nowadays seems so misplaced. Small and slow gestures also, some say. Knowledge and memories from other times that seem to hold no power anymore. Calls increasingly agonizing by the mark of a youthful lifestyle and brutal interpellations from fundamentalisms of all orders (political, religious, epistemological) left perhaps too many LGBT displaced, detached from their networks of meaning and affection, their existential poEtics. The tired and melancholic narrative of Rubina, transvestite from Porto Alegre who lived the glorious sexuality enjoyment of those times, but also the terrible noise that silenced the strength of that generation, warns us about this agonistic of sexuality and gender that takes or topples down the body as a place of value and fight impeachment:

“Oh Rubina now is crestfallen... No more friends (go on pointing out the photographs..Dinorah is gone, the Lágrima already died, Eliseu already died, Zequinha died already, murdered in Rio ... Almost all caught by AIDS! ’), has no desire anymore to go out at night, ended its function. Those who are alive, as Bizantina (the famous Angela Maria, who is now in Italy, so we know), Paulinho Japonês, Veruska, are not there anymore ... Until 1992 she would go to Discretus, Claudio, Doce Vicio... from 93 on after some failed attempts of socialization that felt like an ET an “old fag ‘in the middle of so many youngsters, the veteran changed his routine to collect to privacy. But if does not give the air of his grace at night, on the other hand is hardly found at home during the day ... ‘I’m always on the street, I walk miles’ “(NUANCES, 2004, p.7)

Until here, I tried to (re)compose events with these (old) fellows, collecting memories (traces and remains of bodies-events) that allowed some narrated subjects in the political and cultural experience of the so called dissident sexualities, to leave transformed from the apprehension of abjection positions. In this paper, we have a lot in common - a collective memory of struggles, our present struggles, narrative-lives that relate to a break with the anonymous murmur of life and disqualified experimentations by normalcy discourses... we all are bodies in transit, generational, political, emotional and technological transit ... poEtics.

In this sense, thinking on education for diversity includes thinking on what has historically been considered unthinkable for us, who were constituted within gender and sexuality dissidence: old age would be a possibility in our lives, whether we like or not to grow old.

Here closes a search scene - perhaps a kind of cartographic break- with plenty of many comrades now older, perhaps as many others-in-me as lives that I care for, suffering from far reaches, I continue to wonder where they will walk. We know they are around, but maybe kept so far away:

(...) Does not have the recognition, it is very sad. It’s painful. [...] Every time I remember that I and not only , but all gay artists of my time are switched in the closet, I have wanted to die. Dionysius, 69, interlocutor in research
Bibliographical References


Filmic References