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Contagions, Frontiers, and Encounters: Articulating Analytical Cisgender Experience/Perspective through Ethnographic Accounts in Prison Investigations*

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Abstract

This article proposes a dialogue between two researchers who deal with related topics: the experiences of *travestis*[1] and transsexuals in the deprivation of freedom. Starting from the formulations of Donna Haraway (1995), we intend to discuss the particularity and embodiment of ethnographic vision through an axis of central differentiation of our distinct experiences in the field: gender identity. While Céu Cavalcanti discusses ethnographic encounters and the development of their research as a trans person, Vanessa Sander does the same in debating the ways she undertakes her research as a cisgender person, i.e. non-trans. Thus, crossed by the notion of experience, as discussed by Joan Scott (1995), we understand this proposition as fundamental to critically analyze our positions as researchers in the insertion of our respective fields. The dialogues and resonances between the two voices that are here allow a flow of connections, where the intersectional plots surrounding our visions are initial objects of reflection. The proposal of a theoretical-methodological analysis of the research makes a meeting point possible with our perspectives, which encourages us to discuss the central element of this text: the implications and tensions of the identifications of cisgender experience/perspective and transgender experience/perspective in the ethnographic and textual production of researchers who propose to produce knowledge from the plurality of trans experiences.

Keywords: Transgender, Cisgender, Prison, Ethnography.

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[1] *Travesti* is not translated here as it is an emic term in reference to what we might understand as trans women or even a third gender.

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Embodying Ethnographic Research

This article dialogues with two recent ethnographic experiences, both related to gender and prison institutions. The text was born from a "non-innocent conversation" between two researchers who share a common theme in their research – the process of criminalizing and incarcerating travestis and transsexuals – in addition to other shared theoretical and political affinities. From this, we intend to debate the particularity and the embodiment of the ethnographic view, through an axis of central differentiation of our distinct experiences in the field: gender identity. While Céu Cavalcanti reflects on encounters within her research as a trans person, Vanessa Sander analyzes the paths of her investigation as a cisgender person. The idea of a "non-innocent conversation", formulated by Donna Haraway (1995), signifies that the cognoscente subject is sensitive to power dynamics, explaining them and making this knowledge open to dispute. In this sense we seek to construct an analysis of the ethnographic field with trans people, thinking about cisgenerity as an analytical category and as a marker that composes alterity in ethnographic encounters. In addition, we observe how any analysis of gender identity needs to take into account its specific and contingent articulation with race and class in the context of prison.

Derived from Latin, the word *trans* means *across* or *cross* while the prefix cis signifies "the same side". Therefore, a cisgender woman is someone born with a vagina/vulva and expresses and identifies with the gender that she was designated: with what is socially understood as something inherent to women, even though this is not something easily delimitated.[2] In this sense, the *travesti* and transsexual movement engage in a fight against

[2] Marilyn Strathern (1997) discusses how western women derive their experience from a body not completely encompassed by cultural categories and positioned in complex relational networks. In this sense, the author discusses the difficulty of the feminist task of constructing feminine self-determination in view of constant rediscovery that women are "the other" to the masculine gaze.

cissexism, which is any discrimination based on the notion that there is only one type of morphology. The basis of this morphology is that one must be aligned with ones gender designated at birth, and/or that are only two genders (binary: male/female), and that a person must be aligned with one or the other.

In the 90's, the international trans movements, especially people from the United States, started gradually using the term *cisgender* for non-trans people. Therefore, the term was translated and incorporated (not without particularities and rifts) in Brazilian movements. According to Viviane Vergueiro (2014), cisgenerity is a concept that operates under the possibility of destabilizing the naturalizations that permeate the historically established relationships between the production of academic knowledge and trans people. Relations marked by the formulation of pathologizing psychiatric nosography's and medical intervention. The flourishing of a medical discourse surrounding *travestis* and transsexuals also brought contestations and normative resistance, important in the consolidation of de-pathologization movements and the counter-narratives that critiqued of the scientific activity that loomed over the subject.[3]

From this scenario we can see how certain debates born within the *travesti* and transsexual movement have generated impacts on our views in the field, and have ethically and politically informed our relationships with our interlocutors and the unfolding of our research. We also point out that we have produced knowledge not only from relational crossings, configured with trans and cisgenerity, but also from different fields of knowledge: psychology and anthropology. As a way to find resonances between the two investigations, we elaborated reflections that depart from formulations, uses and disputes involving the notion of cisgenerity, a theoretical-political artifact that has proved its

[3] See "Our Bodies Also Change" (2011), a work in which Jorge Leite Jr. analyzes the origin and development of the scientific concepts of "*travesti*" and "transsexual".

importance to both trans academics and activists in order to test and evaluate the academic work produced by cisgender researchers, or rather, non-trans people. This concept is also brokered to strengthen the production of critical knowledge, from an emic point of view, which disputes the unambiguous position of trans people as a "research object".

To this end, the text is divided into three sections: two that present fragments of the investigations and reflections done each researcher, written in the first person, and a third that ties in the two research experiences followed by a reflection about the complex joining of body, gender, and ethnographic experience. In the first part, entitled *"Of the Body and Authorization: Being in the Field and Being the Field",* Céu Cavalcanti discusses the power relations that permeate discursive authorizations that stabilize antagonistic places between cis gender researchers and trans people as objects of study. It analyzes a possible confusion between these frontiers, when trans people begin to pierce the normative enclosures and occupy a place of knowledge production, subverting the logic of research about research with and by trans people. In the second part, titled "*Amapô in the Pavilion: from the place of cisgenerity*", Vanessa Sander discusses how the notion of cisgenerity, brokered with native criticism, reveals possible relationships with some recurring and important anthropological dilemmas and conflicts within the discipline. This is found in the construction of the "other" in acts of naming difference and the necessity to reflect on the power dynamics that mark an ethnographic encounter (and, consequently, are also in this text).

Finally, the last part presents a reflection on the active contrast generated between the two sections that put into relation the experiences of a trans researcher versus the experiences of a cis researcher. Seeking resonances among these reflections, we intend to think of these demarcations, referring to gender identity not as essentialist categories that determine the ethnographic bearings, but rather as fields of contention inscribed within processes, discursive practices, and materials. Thus, cisgenerity is

understood in a multifaceted way: as an object of social discourse, an analytical category, and of political mobilization, without making assumptions about its permanence or stability over space and time (Brah, 2006).

From the Body and Authorization: of being in the field and being the field

Contardo Calligaris, a renowned Italian psychoanalyst based in Brazil, wrote a text on topics that could help people training to become therapists. At a certain point in the writing, when someone wondered about the existence of some extreme marker impeding clinical practice, he questions the possibility of *travestis* being psychoanalysts. Published almost 25 years ago, the questions are worked over quickly and always from a certain "pyschologism" that understands the *travesti* experience as a sort of "eccentric sexual preference." Aside from treating *travestis* and trans women with masculine pronouns and observing the subject through a pathologizing lens, the author questions the reader, saying that if there is any judgment to be made in this position, it stems solely from the fantasies of non-trans people over trans bodies. The author finishes the essay in an ironic tone, saying that it would not help, to whom it interested, to ask for the telephone and address of "this" travesti therapist, because he did not know if there were *travesti* therapists (Calligaris, 2004).

What draws attention in this essay is the fact that what we are facing today is written between the lines of the original text. What is put into analysis is whether the trans body[4] can occupy a place of analysis, reflection, production of thought, and intervention. The question marked in the space of the psychoanalytic clinic [5]can be expanded to other spaces of

[4] Trans is also thought of as an umbrella term that encompasses the different denominations of non-cisgender people, such as transsexuals, *travestis*, transgender, etc.

[5] Here it is emphasized that we understand psychoanalysis as a heterogeneous field, traversed by several discourse. In this sense, as Butler (2003) points out,

knowledge-power production. Moreover, the very existence of such questioning obliges us to think about the complex dynamics of inequality established between bodies and cis and trans experiences.

Shortly before entering my PhD in psychology, I was working in social assistance[6], where accompanied people who are homeless and crack users. Among these people, there were several *travestis* who utilized social assistance and when they understood that I was trans, they modified their relationship with the space and with the team. It is worth noticing that, by not completely *passing*[7] when I started work, it was obvious to people – users or members of other times – that there was a "*travesti*" psychologist. This discovery generated various displacements, which ranged from joyful surprise to poorly disguised discomfort in having to report to me as the person responsible for the program.

In this context, I frequently heard a certain type of amazement from some of them when they discovered that one of the psychologists responsible for the service was also trans. "It's just that, I didn't know someone like me could be a psychologist, I've never seen it before," said one of the *users*. This phrase, not said in vain, marks a dubious sentiment, because far from the innocent precursory presumption, I heard a shadow of radical exclusion within her statement, imprinted in the subjectivity of these women. It was imprinted that being a psychologist, with a

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although psychoanalysis commonly relies on a presumed heterosexual kinship to theorize the subjects sexual formation, there are formulations of the psychoanalytic theory that reject this scheme, allowing several pathways of rearticulating the Oedipus complex. Therefore, what we point out here is should not be read as a generalizing criticism of a complex field of knowledge, but rather as a possible reflection on the specific and dated Calligaris arguments.

[6] I refer to the program ATTITUDE – Social Assistance for Users of Crack and other Drugs, in the State of Pernambuco.

[7] Passing is a term that designates the acting of "passing for" a cisgender man or woman. Tiago Duque (2013) discuss the notion of *passing*, characterizing it as a regime of visibility/knowledge that reveals norms and social conventions that require performances of femininity and masculinity, giving them recognition.

formal job in public service, while being trans, is something impossible and unimaginable.

Likewise, the astonishment towards my trans body has permeated my work relations in my research up until today. The fact that a trans person is a doctoral student also causes similar emotions as finding that a trans person could be a psychologist. In this case, the reactions also varied between surprises and discomforts, sometimes even questioning why and how "someone like me" occupies the position of researcher.[8]

To help us think about the naming process of authorization policies and the confirmation of discourses, we use the constructions of feminist epistemologies to observe the intersections of our voice and writing, which is particularly useful when we turn to materialization in academic productions. Gloria Anzaldúa (2000) lends us the metaphor of "speaking in tongues". For her, women outside of the confines of "normality" – black, indigenous, poor, trans – would not be allowed to speak by the dominant culture. As a result, our productions would be understood as lesser, as "tongues" or "dialects". Thus, Anzaldúa sees writing as a space of resistance and analyzes the deconstruction of powers that these points of view possess when disrupting white, masculine, and "first-world" hegemonies.

Observing the historically circumscriptive hegemonies in scientific spaces, we can perceive how the production of knowledge often aims to sustain epistemological assumptions of the un-embodied and disconnected objectivities of the elements that enable production alongside the legitimation of these knowledges (Haraway, 1995). From this reflection, it is necessary to

[8] It is worth remembering that there is a movement within psychology that calls itself Christian psychology, which questions the impossibility of freely offering "sexual reversion therapy" and attacks the Federal Councils norms that prohibit and denounce such practices. This group also argues that the existence of trans people occupying places of power in psychology would contribute to the propagation of the fallacy that they call "gender ideology". View https://visaocrista.com/resolucao-proibe-psicologos-de-se-oporem-a-ideologia-de-genero/-Access on 01/03/2019.

pay attention to the politics of the vision that introduce dichotomous systems, where incorporeal and ethereal gazes observe and produce "scientific truth" about historically marked bodies. They underlie this strange relationship with power dynamics, in which some are given the possibility of "seeing without being seen, representing while escaping representation" (Haraway, 1995:18). Thus both Anzaldúa and Haraway can find an intersection through the proposal that there are, in the legitimization of writing and science, subtle plays that machinate hiearchization between observers and "natives," among people who hold dominion over the records and the "other" which are found in the records.

Frantz Fanon (2008) analyzes how a certain psychoanalytic discourse, elaborated on colonial relations, seems to corroborate with the ideals of alleged European superiority. The author points out that from an analysis of the alleged inferiority complex of colonized subjects, the sources of power update and re-elaborate inequalities, including naturalizing them. The supposedly "natural" inferior psyche of colonized people would create profound epistemological cuts, marking some as legitimate producers of knowledge and others as "naturally" distant from this position (Fanon, 2008).

However, if there is a dynamic of legitimization of the dichotomy imposed by the alteration processes, which *a priori* delimitates what is a "field" and what is the habitat of the person who researches, Kilomba (2010) helps us to observe the colonial intersections that are also present in regimes of speech and silence. In the text "The Mask", the author starts from the image of an object commonly used in rural colonial spaces to analyze symbolic elements that still seem present today.

> Officially, the mask was used by the white master to prevent enslaved Africans from eating sugarcane or cocoa while working on plantations, but their main function was to implement a sense of muteness and fear, since the mouth

> was as much a place of muteness as it was of torture (Kilomba, 2010:172).

Rather, a double movement is operated from this object in the relationship with colonial domination. At the same time that the practical effect and the function of feeding oneself was an end in itself, the sense of imposed muteness appears as an element that enables compositions of subjectivity and understandings of oneself, marked by the impossibility before the other: the white master, the owner, the "truly human". The mask as a representation of the colonial system would symbolize brutal regimes of silence of differences, including physically marking who can speak and what can happen when unauthorized people dare to do so (Kilomba, 2010).

Something like an authorization policy permeates the systems of speech and silences, composing discursive fields, versions, and effects of truth produced in them. Alongside this, the demarcation of the boundaries between "us" and "others" finds anchorage here. Thereby:

> Speaking becomes practically impossible, because when we speak, our discourse is often interpreted as a dubious version of reality, not imperative enough to be spoken, nor heard. Such impossibility illustrates how speaking and silencing emerge as an analogous project (…) Hearing is, in this sense, an act of authorization for the speaker. Someone can speak (only) when their voice is heard. In this dialectic, those who are heard are also those who "belong". And those who are not heard, become those who "do not belong". The mask re-creates this process of silencing, it controls the possibility that the colonized may one day be heard, and consequently may belong (Kilomba, 2010:178).

Returning to the reflections of Cláudia Rodriguez (2016), it is possible to take the reflections of Kilomba (2010) to analyze the relationships that the academy historically traces with trans people. Rodriguez points out how in Latin America, trans people are

expelled from all formal education systems from a very early age, creating an almost complete absence of this population in academic spaces. In her essay on *travesti* writing, the author points out that one of the perverse effects of this dynamic of radical exclusion is what it defines as an inability of self-defense. The creation and proliferation of critical reflections on our own lives and contexts would be for her, a way of defending our right to remain alive and access different spaces. In this way, our widespread expulsion from education systems – associated with the impossibility of accessing the academic discourse that are always produced "about" us becomes another violation of rights that seeks to keep us in subaltern places (Rodriguez, 2016).

There is a perverse game in play between the production and proliferation of systems of speech authorization, which of course trans people have been understood as the "field", almost never as peers, and much less as researchers. Therefore, the question posed here concerns the way in which the fields that hegemonically write about us are positioned. In a succinct way, we can think of two distinct operations with two distinct purposes. We have found an academy, which although is completely cisgender, is interested in opening gaps so that we can occupy the spaces as equals and understand that the systematic access to a formal education system enables us, in an unequal country, a chance of real survival (Mayogra; Souza, 2012). In a counterpoint, there are traces of the colonized model of sciences persisting in the academy, which sees trans people as exotic objects that, when they contradict the expectations of the researcher or point out violence in the research process, are marked as "angry" and "*barraqueira* (troublemakers)".

Once again, the considerations of Anzaldúa (2000) prove to be inspiring, stating that:

> Many have skills with words. They call themselves visionaries, but they don't see. Many have the gift of language, but with nothing to say. Don't listen. Many who

> have words and tongues, have no ears. They cannot hear and will not know how (Anzaldúa, 2000:235).

In this sense, eyes and ears appear as powerful metaphors in the production of science. While eyes refer to a politic of vision and transparency, in which the myth of neutrality is the very myth of seeing while unseen (Haraway, 1995), ears seem to be complementary to tongues, and the "gift of speech" only takes and understands the body when it is associated with the gift of listening. Listening refers to a certain sensibility that re-humanizes lives marked by the tone of abjection (Kristeva, 1989), paying attention to its diversity and agency (Mahmood, 2006).

Although my research and fieldwork are in the early stages, the context of criminalization and incarceration of *travestis* within my research is inscribed with inescapable markings of race and class. If on the one hand, my gender identity is a rare element of approximation and immediate identification, between my interlocutors and I, on the other hand, my whiteness and being a doctorate student invoke a certain power that manifests in the relationships that are established. These two characteristics in my life often "mitigate" the perception of people about my non-cisgenerity and guarantee me some security and access to elements prohibited to other trans experiences.

In this sense, analyzing the data of INFOPEN 2016, we can observe the joint action of race and class composing arrangements of penal selectivity. The incarcerated population in Brazil today is mainly young, black, and with a low-level of schooling. We do not have specific statistical data on the LGBT people incarcerated, but observing the general graphs we can infer from the intersections of previously mentioned markers. In this way, in relation to trans people, thinking about incarceration requires observing different elements that surround and materialize the process of criminalization-incrimination (Misse, 1999). There we can perceive this as a culturally collective hatred directed towards trans bodies – which we might name here as abjection (Kristeva, 1989) – permeate relationships between trans people and justice systems.

Thus, in the complex dynamic of identifications, the dynamics of equalities and differences is something that requires attention. The tension between the singular and collective identifications is political when it is crossed by contingency. Paradoxically we can think that equality and difference are not opposing elements, but rather a complex management of inequalities (Scott, 2005). By "composing" a field with trans interlocutors, I perceive simultaneously operating dynamics of equality and difference, since the duality of my body stems from an ambiguous identification, from a non-constant place that always refers to the other side of the line.

The metaphor *"la mestiza*[9]*"*, proposed by Anzaldúa (2005), helps to contemplate the place of being on the frontier and the double movements that intersect my two positions, placing it in parallel with the experience of constructing research that dialogues issues that intersect the trans experience, while being a trans person[10]. For the author, ambivalence is not a risk, rather on the contrary, it can be an element that invites one to be suspicious of too much rigidity in maintaining stable locations, inserting ambivalence and displacement at the heart of identity construction. Thus,

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[9] In the words of the author: "Born in a culture, positioned between two cultures, extending over all three cultures and their systems of values, La Mestiza faces a fight of flesh, a fight of frontiers, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others who live in more than one culture, we receive multiple messages, often contradictory. The encounter of two consistent but generally incompatible referential structures causes a shock, a cultural collision" (Anzaldúa, 2005:705).

[10] Remembering Donna Haraway (1995), while neutrality and invisibility are a scientific paradigm for some people, for those who have historically inhabited the other side, it is simply not possible to be unmarked, or being intangible. So that, not uncommon in my entire academic trajectory, my productions are quickly captured inside and outside of the academy as being productions "of that trans that inhabits that graduate program". I consider this element ambiguous, because while there is, for certain, some level of re-objectification, in a context of radical exclusion in which we are constantly rejected, infantilized, and ultimately murdered precociously, is an important political position to note that there are trans people doing doctoral work outside the country.

> the work of the *mestiza consciousness* is to dismantle the duality object of the subject that holds it captive, and show in the flesh, through images of their work, that duality can be transcended (Anzaldúa, 2005:707).

Therefore, the junction of different elements that produce other subjects, which run beyond predefined taxonomies in the perception of frontiers, can provide clues in an attempt to dismantle the subject-object relationships that permeate the relationships of different researchers and investigators with trans people.

Amapô in the Pavilion: the place of cisgenerity

I began researching *travesti* and transsexual experiences in 2011, while in my undergraduate, exploring their experiences in prostitution. The development of my research took place in a moment of the visible strengthening of *travesti* and transsexual social movements in Brazil, alongside the amplification of the public debate on the subject. This scenario brought out specific tensions and contours for the development of the work. The possibility of personally debating with numerous activists and accessing their bibliographical productions, helped to outline my interests and choices while taking into account the seriousness of certain interpellations of my interlocutors in the field. Thus, although the *travestis* with whom I spent time with daily during my field research had little familiarity with the language used by the trans movements, the literature and discussions promoted by these movements supported my reflections and practices. Moreover, we see how the status of the anthropologist does not assure the researcher an exemption from relationships: as part of a historical and political context, we must position ourselves before the questions we analyze, to redefine ourselves before the other.

In this way, I start by saying that I discovered I was cis while researching trans people. That's because I have never been interrogated (or questioned) about the formation of my gender identity, that is, about the fact that I identify myself – albeit with

certain conflicts – with the gender that was assigned to me at birth, as a result of certain anatomical markers. This was an important issue during the first ethnographic contacts I established in my fieldwork, since I was quickly identified by my interlocutors as amapô[11] or an "original woman straight from the factory", as they used to say:

> You don't know men deeply because you are a real woman, straight from the factory. We know the other side that you will never know.
>
> *Amapô*, the first time I was arrested they shaved my head completely. You with this picumã (hair) know how important hair is for people who are feminine

These are, among many others, some statements that highlight the dynamics of de-stability or proximity that being cisgender and sharing femininity brought. Although they were used less as designations for my place as a researcher, the term "cisgender" or "cis" depart from the assumptions similar to the placements made both on the streets (where the *travestis* offered sex work) and in the LGBT Ward of the male penitentiary. Therefore, the discussion of these concepts, in the production of trans academics and debates born from social movements, was important in circumscribing the position that I occupied in the field. However, the field is not limited to ethnographic encounters nor does it serve as a place to prove hypotheses. On the contrary, the most interesting reflections seem to be produced in the confrontations that emerge from academic theories, political tensions, and inter-subjective perceptions.

Although subjective or reflexive considerations have long been considered sterile or convenient extravasation, it is known that one's access to ethnographic knowledge is deeply attributed to the singularities of interpersonal relationships and the imponderables of an inner destabilization (Albert, 2015). However, I

[11] *Amapô* is a term from pajubá (a dialect used by the *travestis*) to designate cisgender women.

realized that much of the academics engaged with gender and sexuality had little familiarity and even resistance to the use and notion of cisgender. To a large extent, this is derived from the fear that such a notion will incur new essentialisms and dichotomies of cis people and trans people. In this sense, transgenerities or cisgenerities could refer to the experience as uncontestable and as an origin story, taking the identities of those whose experiences are being analyzed as self-evident and naturalizing their differences.

As Joan Scott (1998) states, the visibility of the experience ultimately becomes evidence of the difference, instead of becoming a way of exploring the way that the difference is established, how it operates, and how it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world. According to the author, history is a chronology that makes experiences visible, but where categories appear historical: homosexuality, heterosexuality, femininity, masculinity, and in this case, categories of gender identity, they become fixed entities, experienced through time, but are not historicized in themselves. Thus, this way of presenting the story would leave aside the interrelationship between the historical changeability of the concepts of "transgender" and "cisgender", the way that they constitute themselves reciprocally and the changing disputable nature of the space they share.

However, I found that the construction of the notion of cisgenerity, while a theoretical-political artifact of the trans movements, goes far beyond a conception of a metaphor of visibility that takes the categories as transparent and naturally opposed. It operates more as a mechanism of interpellation on the knowledge produced about trans people and their political effects. In the same way that the term "transgender" marks the person as an object to be observed and studied – for which there is a body of descriptive knowledge (produced by cisgender people) –, "cisgender" also suggests for a trans person to observe, listen, and recognize those positions as "normal" by society (Dumaresq, 2016). The notion of normality employed here is strongly anchored in the fact that *travestis* and transsexuals are, until very recently,

considered to be mentally ill by the main international psychiatric manuals. According to the author:

> Cisgender is a category much like white is for race, neurotypical is for neurodiversity, or heterosexual for sexual orientation. Something that does not pose a social problem for that person, does not lead the individual to identify with the question. For individuals in these categories, the problem is not that it is different from the other, but that the other is not equal to it (Dumaresq, 2016:7).

In a similar sense, for Vergueiro, cisgenerity is a subjective perspective that is taken as natural, essential, and standard (Vergueiro, 2014). Therefore, the naming of this pattern precisely questions its naturalness, its truth, and even "biology". This raises not only the notion of difference, but of hierarchy and inequality, which places cisgenerity as a natural and expected situation of all people, while being transgender is seen as an unfit choice or a pathology. For this reason the regime of the production of truth is criticized, advocating the need to constitute trans subjectivities beyond these systems of subjective verdiction, which presupposes bad and thoughtless choices that force the creation of justifications for lives considered unlivable, absurd, and exaggerated (Basagli, 2016). Thus, this dynamic of naming and the visibilization of an "other" is described as a way of "turning the tables" and defining words that describe non-trans people, rather than being continually defined and described by them. By shifting this position, of subject and object, both could reciprocally predicate each other (Dumaresq, 2016): a horizontal epistemic relationship, in which both can be equally subjects and objects of knowledge.

It is important to highlight that a significant production of academic production by trans academics, such as Helena Viera and Sofia Favero, present concerns about the possible fixative uses that identity binarism can present, proposing flexible uses and contextual concepts of the notion of cisgender. The authors affirm that it is important to think about the concept of cisgender not only as a scope of identification with the gender designated at birth – a

central characteristic that defines cis and trans – but to also take it as an analytical category, an interpretive key. It is not about insisting on the idea of "trans protagonism", singular and encompassing, when trans people themselves are not identical in their experiences and positions. Nor is it to take cisgender as a monolith. In Favero's propositions, it is to think of less irreconcilable bonds, those which are not opposed, starting from exchanged between trans and cis subjects guided by proximity: bonds that through relationships and dialogues, shift and mix pains and narratives. From this perspective, the fictional dimension of cisgenerity as a normative paradigm of gender is assumed, establishing the idea of a "typical" man or woman. This proposition dialogues with the formulations of Judith Butler (2003), for whom the "naturalness" of gender is constituted by discursively compelled performative acts, which produce the body within the categories of sex and through them. In this way, every gender is always a profoundly real form of construction, for both cis and trans people. However, it is necessary to think: which constructions of gender are more or less legitimate in determined contexts? Which one is built in marginal or precarious spaces? How does gender articulate the forceful and reiterative practices of other regulatory regimes and other axes of differentiation?

It has been some time since anthropologists have argued that ethnography is fiction, in the sense of its textual construction and the inescapable result of knowledge negotiated between the researcher and their interlocutors. This negotiation of knowledge according to Roy Wagner (1975) is where anthropology seizes its relative character through the concrete formulation of another. This also implies the fact that fieldwork is always permeated by power dynamics. As Evelyn Blackwood (1994) points out, the use of the subjective experience is extremely relevant in challenging the distances inscribed in ethnographic work. The author states that the development of a reflexive anthropology was essential for the discipline, but still carries many limitations, since many of its defenders are not willing to situate themselves as gendered or racialized subjects. The author insists on a discussion of

"anthropological privilege" (i.e., about how it is not enough for the anthropologist to be visible just asking questions): it is necessary to recognize the position from which the questions are enunciated. Blackwood relies on the formulations of Donna Haraway (1995) and advocates for the particularity and embodiment of every ethnographic vision. The embodiment does not mean a fixation of a place, but also the constant curiosity of differential positions in the researchers networks. Thus, the objectivity reveals itself as something that relates to a specific and particular embodiment, not merely as a vision that promises transcendence of all limits and responsibilities. Its partial perspective promises the objective vision, precisely because it deals with limited location and localized knowledge, not with transcendence and the division of the subject and object.

The Wagnerian analytical key of this invention can be articulated with the formulations of Gayle Rubin (1984) on the system of sex-gender, so as to produce an interlocution with conventional thought and call on *mainstream* anthropology and gender-sexuality studies, situated as white and Euro-American. According to the author, in this context, such a system would be centered on a normative and compulsory appreciation of heterosexual, matrimonial, and reproductive sexuality. In turn, for Wagner, the invention is not a purely inventive process, but a process of obviation, that is, of articulation or combination of two modes of symbolization (conventional or differential) on which the symbolizer, depending on the situation or culture and always in a cotangential manner, will forcibly concentrate its action. Rubin also supports a paradigm based on contingent thinking about sexuality, defending that sexual terms should stick to the historical and social contexts that they emerged. For the author, contemporary sexual policies should be re-conceptualized based on the emergence and continuous development of the sex-gender system, its social relations, the ideologies with which it is interpreted, and its characteristic modes of conflict.

In the first moments of contact in my field research in the LGBT ward of a male penitentiary in Belo Horizonte, based on a

certain degree of mutual estrangement, my interlocutors quickly mobilized their classifications to recognize me, which involved a large part of my presence in the pavilion as young, white, cisgender, "from the university" as they said. As most of them had little access to university spaces and formal jobs, the contact in the field, in a way, (re) produced these asymmetries. As soon as I arrived to the cells, they asked their husbands to put their shirts on. Many of them called me "doctor", which I discouraged cordially. Over time, the distance shortened and the differences were found in new ways, since with the passing weeks, our common contacts from outside the prison (from the street) indicated me as someone trustworthy: "who ran with them". The approximation of the established relationships brought more intimacy. I came to be someone with who to "chat with" and not only to monitor their cases on the Internet. I came to be called "Blondie", "Galician", and "Vá", which demonstrates affection and approximation but also a process of racialization[12] involved in those encounters.

At first, my interlocutors used a shared femininity to exchange experiences and ask for tips on beauty care. Although I knew little about the subject, my opinion on makeup and hairstyles was questioned and valued. Being a "woman straight from the factory" legitimized my "hunches" to a great extent. Ironically, with a few months of being in the field, I considerably improved my knowledge of beauty techniques, which before were precarious and clumsy. I started to worry about which clothes I would use on my visits. These were not the same worries I had in the beginning, over safety standards: I had to always wear long pants, my shoulders and chest covered, and no red articles of clothing. I started worrying about being well-dressed, already imagining the "evaluation of the look" that they gave me when I arrived in the hallway. "This is the runway" they joked. At the same time, they

[12] According to the information from Infopen (2016), 67% of the prison population is black. The racial composition of the unit that I did my fieldwork seems to reflect this data, making it so that my whiteness emerges as a contrasting and easily visible relational attribute. For a reflection on the connections between the criminal justice system and racism, see Juliana Borges (2018).

proudly showed me their hairstyles, fingernails, and makeups. We exchanged compliments and I admired how they could be so beautiful, despite the scarcity of cosmetics. Even those who didn't receive cosmetics from their families turned to DIY methods: I saw seasoning turn into blush, whiteout turn into nail polish, and underwear customized into a top. Thus, being cisgender, white, and an academic woman sometimes distanced me from the interlocutors – since being "a university girl" engendered dynamics of differentiation and tension – which assured me access to information that would not be easily provided to male researchers – since sharing practices, tricks, and narratives associate with femininity generated welcoming and approximation.

The multiple positions, in which I found myself, obviously marked the relationships and the paths of my research. In the ethnographic encounters, these differences were not suspended but rather found several trajectories. Only with some time, other subjects were subtly appearing and adjusting new interest focuses in the research. The cyclical and procedural nature of anthropological investigations revealed how it is necessary to rethink and reorder questions and priorities during the course of the work. As Lisa Malkki (2007) affirms, there are many improvised dimensions in the production of knowledge and writing in general, but for ethnography, improvisation is indispensable. Improvisation involves an intense sense of time and process. In this way, empirical fieldwork is simultaneously a critical theoretical practice, an ethical daily practice, and a practice of improvisation. Therefore, ethnography houses a profoundly important methodological possibility: to be surprised. This element often transforms the issues frames and promotes displacements in previous understandings and theoretical knowledge.

With me it was no different: I came to the field in the prison, contaminated by a series of discourses that I had heard on the outside, in spaces of the states and in social movements. Discourses that justified the spatial segregation policy of *travestis* and transsexuals in prisons – the LGBT wards – as the main solution in protecting them from sexual violence. In this sense,

their relationships with other prisoners and the general prison population was strongly treated by a prism of the imminent danger of abuse: the wards inmates were treated as "provocative" feminized bodies and victims of a racialized prison mass, with uncontrollable male desires. Thus, the experiences of *travestis* and transsexuals in the deprivation of liberty were always narrated through suffering and violence[13].

I was taken by surprise when I realized that, after a certain degree of intimacy, the subject that most came with me and in my presence was the possibility of romantic flings, loves, and marriages during the period of their incarceration. Their romantic/sexual relationships, fights, and romantic history with their husbands were their preferred theme in our conversations. This scenario destabilized the image that I had when I first entered the field – centered on the risk of sexual violence[14] and ready to interpret relationships and experiences under an all encompassing paradigm of suffering – and brought adjustments to my ethnographic focus. As Padovani (2015) demonstrates, if romantic relationships and desire within prison can be a fundamental tool in managing the population, they can also be tools of articulation and agency in the maintenance of life.

In reflecting on these relationships, I sought to deal with a certain discomfort that I felt in transforming "flesh and blood" people that I met during my time in the field, with who I spend time and maintained relationships of friendship and trust, into

[13] It is important to point out that both regional state policies and the local dynamics of organized crime are articulators of the processes of imprisonment of trans people. In this paper, I briefly describe a specific context, considering its private relations in order to avoid the productions of "imprisoned *travestis*" as a new generic subject. Works from different regions of the country, such as Nascimento (2018) in Ceará and Zamboni (2017) in São Paulo, show other local dynamics and specificities in incarceration policies and security devices.

[14] My interlocutors emphasized the discomfort they felt with scientific representations and, above all, media, both on *travestis* and transsexuals, as well as other people in prison. Representations in the style of the "Discovery Chanel": dehumanizing exotifiers, treating their daily lives as bizarre and abnormal." Looks like an nature documentary, you know?" they told me.

"generic personas" defined by suffering and violence. Bagagli (2018) warns about the political risks with associating trans experiences with underlying suffering. This does not mean disregarding the suffering or violence to which these people are subjected. Rather, it is not to take the suffering as a cause and absolute justification of being transgender, and not to allude to violence as something presumed and abstract. This process ends up making violence invisible as something ordinary and crystalizing specific moral ideas and compositions of what we understand as violence, victim, and aggressor (Das, 2007).

For this reason, I imagined that it would be productive to approach the productive dimension and resistance present in affection and sexuality, since this could nullify the discomfort generated by academic writing and its encompassing potential, which would be especially costly to speak on trans peoples experiences – since there is a growing criticism of their relations as participants or "objects" of academic research. Spending time with *travestis* and transsexuals, reading their academic production, showed the idea that these identities are fixed or are representations of a homogeneous group, is dangerously exotifying and simplifying, as it blots out the singularities of each trajectory and the specificities of each context. Therefore, to paraphrase Roy Wagner (2010), I learned the relative character of being cisgender through the concrete formulation of being transgender. Thus, it is through this contrast experienced in fieldwork and writing, the fictional character of gender becomes visible.

Final Considerations of a "Non-Innocent Conversation"

It can be said that discussions surrounding objectivity and subjectivity in anthropological knowledge production have always permeated the history of the discipline and are quite present in the reflections of alterity, de-stability, and ethnographic research. Paul Rabinow and George Marcus (2008) affirm that, from the 80's onwards, the critical examination of the ethnographers place in

fieldwork and in ones narrative, has led to an almost dogmatic practice of putting oneself in the textual narrative. For the authors, to put oneself in the text became synonymous with being reflective, and even though done in creative ways, this practice began to respond to a very limited set of rationalities and justifications. "Where are you in this?" became the central issue. Thus the inclusion of oneself became canonized, a tendency that, in some moments, led to extremely self-centered research and overly egocentric texts, which ended up problematizing the place of the anthropologist in detriment to descriptions and dense conceptual analysis. However, it is evident that without the "aesthetic work of the self" it is impossible to advance in the discipline; but also it is also essential to take the theoretical and conceptual work and make it function in fieldwork, without the place of the ethnographer being the central question, but rather being a point of tension and reflection.

It is interesting to think that the main "productive tension" of ethnography lies precisely in the close co-existence and the impossibility of separating the "object of knowledge" from that which observes. As Jean and John Comaroff claim (2010):

> It is possible to argue that the greatest weakness of ethnography is also its strongest point, its paradox is a productive tension, because it refuses to deposit its confidence in the techniques that give most scientific methods its illusory objectivity; their commitment to standardized units of analysis, defined a priori, for example, when they value a depersonalized look that separates subject and object (Comaroff; Comaroff, 2010:10).

Thus, for these authors, the relativism of ethnography would bring a legacy of the perception of their own limitation, of their own irony of claiming themselves as a scientific method, while confessing a concomitant sensation of hope and despair, which seems intrinsic in doing anthropology. It is as though the impossibility of describing an ethnographic encounter in its fullness, without any mediation, condemned it to lesser truths.

Therefore, it is essential for the discipline to make reflections complete with insecurity and incompleteness, to the extent that maintaining a fixed dichotomy between the subjective and objective is maintaining the old issues of brute empiricism and insensitivity.

Describing or making visible the experiences of marginalized people, such as *travestis* in prison, exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms and precariousness, but rarely explains their logic or internal workings. In this sense, the ethnographic encounter reveals possible differences and inequalities between cis and trans people, but in addition, it is necessary to understand that these are constituted in a mutual relationship intersected by power dynamics.

Therefore, as Scott argues (1998), it is necessary to address the process that, through discourse, position subjects and present their experiences. They are not individuals who have experience, but rather they are subjects constituted by their experiences. In this way, thinking about the experience in this way, historicizes it, as well as historicizes the identities it produces. In this sense the analytical and identity categories should not be considered as contextual, relational, contestable, and contingent, so that the discussions on identities and gender identifications do not incur the creation of fixed subjects and autonomous sources of knowledge arising from real access through experiences.

However, as many trans activists note, cisgender researchers – and the same goes when thinking about axes of differentiation, such as race and class – often seem self-identical, unmarked, intangible, non-mediated, and transcendental. Moreover, most of the time they end up analyzing the experiences of *travestis* and transsexuals through an exclusive lens of suffering and need, preventing a broader understanding of the social system that they reside, which ultimately eclipses the diversity, irrevence, and creativities that these people experience day to day. The fixation on suffering, the "exotic" or the "comical", besides constructing analyses in which the research interlocutors are devoid of agency and reflexivity, susceptible to forms of violence that explain their

intimacy to the detriment of investigations that are not concerned with their impacts and responsibilities.

We think that by building this text, making an active contrast in our research experiences and the resulting reflections, does not generate an effect of counter position, but rather of contagion. The image of the contagion speaks not only about the effects interpellations in the field, in our writings, and our paths of investigation. Rather it portrays, above all, the notion that the bodies are affected by our encounters. This contamination, which feeds on impurities, generated this "non-innocent conversation". Thus this dialogue shows a process of the production of differences and inequalities in different research contexts, but also creates resonance between them. The echoes and affinities also reveal that our investigations depart from different areas of knowledge, prison institutions, and find themselves in different stages of development. The inversion of possible systems of observations based on the analytical uses of cis genderness aim not to mark monoliths and dichotomous subjects, but to punctuate the perverse dynamics of radical exclusion that trans people face from spaces of formal education.

The reflection on our position as trans and cisgender is also tributary to the destabilization and constitutive interpellations of the category of women itself, through which we identify ourselves. Like our interlocutors who are sometimes found in and are sometimes claimants of this female enunciative locus in political struggles for recognition as political subjects with rights. As Judith Butler (2003) suggest, identity categories, such as "woman", a never merely descriptive, but always normative and as such, exclusive. As the term designates a field of un-designable differences, it is necessary to be aware of its particularities, materializations, and experiences in specific contexts.

In 1980, Monique Wittig constructed a potent reflection on how the systems of disciplines are organized around what she has named as "hetero thinking". For the author, the need to mark difference is an ontological necessity for the constitution of sciences and disciplines, in which the difference needing to be

investigated and named while always occupying a position parallel with dominant spaces.

> The discourse that above all oppress us, lesbians, women, and homosexual men, are those that take for granted that the basis of society, of any society, is heterosexuality. These discourses talk about us and claim to tell the truth on an apolitical basis, as if anything that means something could escape politics at this moment in history, and as if, in relation to us, there could be politically insignificant signs. These discourses of heterosexuality oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms. Everything you put into question is immediately put aside as elementary. Our refusal of the totalizing interpretation of psychoanalysis causes theorists to say that we are neglecting the symbolic dimension. These speeches deny us the possibility of creating our own categories. But the fiercest action is the relentless tyranny that they exert on our physical and mental beings (Witig, 1980:2).

Almost thirty years later, when some trans people were finally able to access the academic discourses and produce autonomous theoretical problematization, we could add perception of the specificities of trans experiences to Wittigs gaze. However, her still position remains valid, and along with the decolonial reflections of Kilomba (2010), critical productions of a cisgener academy would gain power when they observed themselves as necessary elements intersected by power dynamics that establish the dichotomous and hierarchical norms between subjects and objects, between researchers and "natives".

Therefore, it is not only about recognizing the political necessity of speaking as a *travesti* or transexual or of interpeling and destabilizing the identity of the "other", the cisgender; but to affirm the importance – both for academic and social movements – of a constant debate on the descriptive content of these terms, which cannot be totalized or summarized by a category of descriptive identity, becoming a place of permanent openness and

resignification. These positions are less productive for reflections if placed in the abstract, built beforehand, finished. Cis and trans, as well as "white" and "black" feminism analyzed by Avtar Brah (2006), should be treated as non-essentialist and historically contingent discursive practices. Our research experiences, analyzed under the view of gender identity, do not transparently reflect a predetermined reality; do not indicate beforehand what happens with every cis and trans researcher in prison units. Above all, they show our multiple locations at stake. Localities that are immersed in a process of signification, everyday practices of attributing meaning which are not immune to the contradictions of subjectivity and identity.

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