

Aging, life trajectories and female homosexuality

Envelhecimento, trajetórias e homossexualidade feminina

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RESUMO

A literatura das ciências sociais sobre o tema da homossexualidade feminina tem crescido recentemente no Brasil, mostrando o interesse despertado pelo assunto. A partir dos anos 1990, trabalhos acadêmicos discutem a homossexualidade feminina: seu significado e impacto sobre as questões de gênero, sua relação com os movimentos sociais vinculados às reivindicações sobre direitos sexuais e reprodutivos no Brasil. Grande parte desses trabalhos concentra-se sobre uma faixa etária jovem, em torno dos 20 anos de idade, e outros abordam mulheres um pouco mais velhas, entre 30 e 40 anos. No entanto, nota-se a ausência de trabalhos que discutam a homossexualidade vivida por mulheres idosas. Este artigo pretende começar a preencher essa lacuna e traz à discussão o olhar das lésbicas mais velhas e suas percepções sobre o que significa a homossexualidade feminina e o lugar que ela ocupa na trajetória de vida dessas mulheres.

Palavras-chave: gênero, homossexualidade feminina, trajetórias individuais, velhice.

ABSTRACT

The social science's literature about female homosexuality has recently grown in Brazil, showing the awakened interest in this issue. Since the 1990's, academic works have discussed female homosexuality: its meanings and its impact on gender issues, its relationships with social movements, specially the ones concerned with sexual rights in Brazil. Great part of these works focus on a young age rate, and some of them are dedicated to middle age women. However, there aren't works concerned with old age women and lesbianity. This article starts to fill this gap and takes into account old age lesbians and their perceptions about homosexuality and its place in their life trajectories.

Keywords: female homosexuality, gender, individual trajectory, old age.

Introduction

The social science literature on female homosexuality has grown recently in Brazil, showing the interest aroused by the subject. Academic works discussing female homosexuality first emerged in the 1990s, exploring questions such as its meaning, its impact on gender issues and its relation to social movements campaigning for sexual and reproductive rights in Brazil (Almeida 2005, Facchini 2008, Heilborn 1996, and 2004, Lacombe 2006, Muniz 1992). Most of these works focused on a young age group in their early twenties, while others discussed slightly older women, aged between 30 and 40 years. However there is a notable absence of works on homosexuality among senior women.¹ This article aims to start making up for this gap through an exploration of the views of older lesbians, their perceptions of what female homosexuality means and its place in their life trajectories.

The text's central argument is that the different generations configure distinct 'fields of possibilities' (Velho 1994) for the construction of being homosexual. In the case of female homosexuality, the generational viewpoint allows us to reassess the place occupied by sexuality in the construction of female life trajectories.

The research material includes interviews using the life history model with four women, one born in 1934 and the other three between 1943 and 1947. The interviews were conducted in Rio de Janeiro in 2007 when the women concerned were aged between 60 and 73 years old. All the interviews were held separately in the homes of the women and involved scripted questions on themes relating to their affective-sexual lives: sexual initiation, flirts, dating and love affairs, formal and informal conjugal relations, separations and widowhood, and their sexual experiences, whether or not accompanied by stable relationships. The idea behind the interview was to stimulate the informant to provide an account of their histories of love and sex over the course of their lives, beginning with their first flirts and romances, their first sexual experiences and moving onto the affective and sexual experiences as mature adults. In this article, the histories of the women's sexual experiences are highlighted as the 'first time,' the setting for the encounters, and the lesbian couple's maintenance of their sex life. The women's accounts are explored as affective-sexual scripts (Gagnon 2004), primarily looking to identify in these scripts how the women attribute meanings to the sexual and affective encounters experienced over their lifetime.

A brief description of the interviewees

The four interviewed women engaged in paid work throughout adult life. Just one of them has still to retire and currently runs her own small business. Among the three who have already retired, one was a human resources manager for a large supermarket chain, one worked as an economist for a public sector company and the third is a drama teacher in a private school where still performs this activity. The latter is the only one without a higher education degree, the rest graduated in the areas of economics, social communication and administration. All four women are white. Three reside in the southern zone of Rio de Janeiro and one in the city centre. The four women own the properties where they live. One of them lives alone, another lives with her sister, another with a 'girlfriend' and the last one with her three adopted children. All of them were in stable affective-sexual

¹ Simões (2004) undertook research on old age and male homosexuality, while Siqueira (2009) produced a doctoral thesis on elderly transvestites and their life trajectories.

relationships at the time of the interview. One had been in a relationship for two years, another for three years, the third for five years and the fourth for one year. In relation to the conjugal experiences over their lifetime: one of them had never lived with anyone until recently (at the time of the interview she had been cohabiting with her girlfriend for two years), while another was married to a man with whom she had two children and today is a grandmother to two grandchildren (the only interviewee to mention experiences of pregnancy and abortion); she and her husband separated after two years of married life. Today she has a girlfriend, but they live in separate homes without any plan to cohabit. One of the women lost her female partner in an accident: they had lived together for 20 years, living in the same house, and had adopted three children. This woman was also in a relationship at the time of the interview, but the two women lived separately in their own homes. They had plans to live together soon. Another woman had three experiences of cohabitation: the first experience lasted four years, the second seven years and the third fifteen years. She had been in a relationship for a year, but without any plans to live under the same roof. This woman said that she had never had any sexual relations with men.

The research material also included a set of interviews with five lesbian women aged between 37 and 49. Four are white and one is black. Their professions are: a public sector worker, two advisors for an NGO, an architect and a journalist. Three reside in the southern zone of the city, one in the northern zone and another in a municipality located in the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro. Four were in affective relationships at the time of the interview, three of them presenting themselves as 'married' and one as 'single.' One of the five women had biological children from an earlier heterosexual marriage. The accounts provided by these women are used here as a counterpoint to the experience of the older group, as a way of highlighting the generational differences. The central discussion of the article is the homosexual life trajectory of the older group of lesbians.

The women making up the two interviewed groups were initially approached following suggestions from acquaintances from my own different networks of contacts. They do not know each other. Selection of the interviewees was based on age group, educational level (higher education) and sexual orientation.

Old age, histories of love and female homosexuality

It has become a common belief that aged bodies have no space in the erotic marketplace and this disadvantage severely hinders elderly people from pursuing sexual adventures. This idea is even more deep-rooted where women are concerned. As they age, women are seen and see themselves as sexually unattractive. The bodily marks of aging, such as wrinkles and white hair, are devalued from the aesthetic viewpoint and are seen to diminish the seductive potential of the body in question (Goldenberg, 2008). It is also claimed that this aesthetic devaluation of the older body is especially widespread in Brazil, a fact reflected in the large number of people who undertake (or wish to) a variety of cosmetic procedures, including surgical, that promise physical rejuvenation. In response to this cultural denial of old age, older women can frequently be heard complaining of the invisibility of their bodies and the consequent loss of their powers of sexual attraction.

All of these claims can be nuanced, though. This feeling of invisibility is not shared by all older women in all situations. Distinct aesthetic patterns exist within Brazilian society and what appears to be a symbol of aging in one context may not have the same meaning in another.

Similarly what is deemed sexually attractive can vary considerably. Among the women who I interviewed for this study, age was not described as an obstacle to their love lives. Contrary to what might be expected of women aged over 60, the interviewees continue to have affective-sexual relations and cohabit with their partners, and do not refer to old age as an impediment to their amorous encounters with other women.

The partners of the four senior interviewees were an average of ten to fifteen years younger than them, inverting a pattern which the women had experienced earlier in their lives: when they were younger and having their first sexual encounters, their first female partners were older than them. Now they are the ones who meet younger women to have relationships, sometimes including women from more modest social backgrounds with lower levels of schooling and income.

The new path cited for encountering sexual partners is the internet. The chat rooms on GLS² sites are used for socialization and flirting. According to Heilborn (2009, p. 83):

The internet makes it easier to meet people from distant social worlds and, accordingly, a pattern has emerged once almost unknown to the middle-class lesbian world in Rio de Janeiro: contact between subjects with very different social origins, a model heavily documented for the gay male world.

This new circuit has combined with traditional means of interaction: the fan clubs of singers like Zélia Duncan, Ana Carolina and Cássia Eller, as well as older singers like Maysa³ for example. In Rio de Janeiro, the interviewed women all had fond memories of Bar Gaivota,⁴ a retreat heavily frequented by them in the 1980s and the setting for romantic dates. Today they complain of the lack of such spaces. The public spaces used by homosexuals to socialize are perceived to be aimed at a younger public, leading them to feel out of place: they dislike the kind of music played, the clientele is considered too young (around 20/30 years old) and the opening hours are seen to be prohibitive. Consequently the social activities of these women primarily involve frequenting each other's houses and configuring a network of friendships based on affective, material and sexual exchanges.

The sex life of lesbian partners have been treated in the specialist literature as a sub-factor in the configuration of the couple. According to this literature, the lesbian couple is constituted by a strong feeling of conjugality, allied to an awareness of their distinct individualities. The two women share projects, tasks and obligations without diluting their own personalities. Sexual practice is obscured as a determining element in the couple's union. The doctoral thesis of Maria Luiza Heilborn, published in 2004, presents these conclusions based on a study conducted at the start of the 1990s centred on middle-class women aged between 35 and 45.⁵ The middle-class women interviewed by myself are in another phase of their life-cycle (between 60 and 73 years old), have already experienced some long-term relationships, including cohabitation, and at the time of interview were all in relationships with women younger than themselves. In their interviews, sexual practice is seen as an element fundamental to the existence of the lesbian couple. While the motive for the union is love and friendship, not sex, the maintenance of the bond depends on feeding sexual attraction and self-esteem.

² An acronym standing for *Gays, Lesbicas e Simpatizantes* (Gays, Lesbians, and Sympathizers), referring to spaces where gays and lesbians meet to socialize.

³ Successful Brazilian singers, also known for attracting a large lesbian following among their fanbases.

⁴ The interviewees state that this bar was located in Barra da Tijuca, a region of the city that was less populous in the 1980s than it is today. The bar was also a venue for live music and was identified by the women as a 'free territory' for the gay public, including lesbians.

⁵ The research script used by Heilborn (2004) does not contain any questions on sexual practices. This undoubtedly also contributed to the absence of the theme in the accounts given by the interviewees.

Sex is very important for me, I can't go for more than a week without sex, I've always been like that and it remains the same today. In the day-to-day of the relationship, physical attraction matters greatly. I would say that it's 70% sex and 30% the rest. (Roberta, 60 years old.)

However when asked what exactly they did to sustain the sexual attraction between the couple, the replies were very vague. By comparison, the younger lesbian women (aged between 35 and 45) interviewed elsewhere in this research were much more explicit in naming the erotic resources used by the couple, such as the purchase of items from sex shops. The younger women also engage in a more varied sexual repertoire, emphasizing the transitory nature of the attitudes and positions adopted by each partner during the sexual act. Hence while the senior women affirm the importance of maintaining sex as an element that moulds the lesbian couple, it is the younger women who openly name the practices and resources used to 'break the routine' of the couple's sex life.

Another point worth highlighting in this exploration of the relation between old age and female homosexuality is the way in which older women produce an affective-sexual history of their lives. This history provides us with a valuable insight into the relations between the interviewed women and their social contexts, the networks of social contacts that enabled them in the past (and still enable them today) to obtain the experience of female homosexuality in Rio de Janeiro. In the phase of life in which they now find themselves, the opportunity to tell the history of their sex lives – a history that remained in the shadows for years – is seen as a chance to give meaning to this trajectory and locate themselves as the subjects of this history.

The act of narrating her history, her experiences over time, allows the interviewee to construct a self-presentation, a biography in the sense Bourdieu (1996) gives to the term. The events and actors either placed at the centre of the scene, or pushed to its margins, indicate the relations that the narrator herself finds significant. As Plummer argues (1995), when we record 'sexual histories,' we need to keep in mind the context in which they are produced and with which they are interrelated. In the case of my own research, the context of the narration includes the interaction between a younger, heterosexual interviewer and a narrator who is at least 20 years older and homosexual. The histories told to me presume a listener who does not share the same codes. Moreover the testimonies are addressed to someone whose age difference prevents sharing of the same temporal reference points. The city was different in the past, as were the forms of circulating between the spaces identified as open to practices and interactions between homosexuals. Since we are dealing here with female homosexuality, the spaces for which have always been fewer than those frequented by their male counterparts, it becomes comprehensible how often these narratives mention the almost complete absence of such places. A perfect metaphor for the invisibility of female homosexuality. Nonetheless, the women lived homosexual lives, spaces were constructed for this experience and today they form the raw material for the narrative.

The memories put into play in these accounts are individual constructions based on contextual references. Like any memory, they are connected to the future insofar as what is mobilized concerning the past is linked to the present and to the future projects of these narrators.

The past is therefore discontinuous. The consistency and meaning of this past and of memory are interconnected with the elaboration of projects that give meaning and establish continuities between these different moments and situations (Velho 1994, p. 103). Memory puts in motion the individual trajectories of these women, providing a space for them to appropriate places that had been 'almost forgotten,' moments that became significant in the present. These are

significant moments precisely because they construct a perception of what constitutes them as subjects with an affective-sexual life, with histories of love that can be told in the present and that give meaning to their life courses. Old age is seen as an ideal opportunity for remembering and weaving the threads of this history. Old age is simultaneously the time in which this history is maintained and is connected to future projects: it is thus a moment of creation (Lins de Barros 1998).

Memories of lesbianism: the first time

I must have been 19 or 20, thereabouts. It was by correspondence. At that time chat rooms didn't exist, not even computers. You need to go back 40 years or so. We used to read a lot of magazines, they featured a readers' corner where readers could correspond with each other. One day I was feeling really down and I placed an advert saying that I wanted to correspond with fans of Maysa. I adored Maysa.⁶ I received a lot of letters. But by the time I got the letters, I was in a different mood, I was already feeling better, it was a different me to the one who had written. I thought it was all hugely funny and threw the letters in the bin. But one of them caught my attention, and I decided to put it aside and respond. So I replied and the girl wrote back to me and we started to swap letters. Until one day – up until then I hadn't had anyone – I thought that I was starting to like her in a different way. We continued writing to each other. Then one fine day, I sent a letter to her explaining that I wouldn't be sending anymore because I was feeling something different, I liked her. [I told her] there was a song that reminded me of her a lot and so on, and that I couldn't write to her any more. Coincidentally she sent a letter to me that very same day, saying the same things. Like something out of a film. But we started to... We felt that we liked each other, the letters became more frequent. Only we had never spoken to each other, what we were like physically, nothing... Then one day we started to telephone each other and she came to Rio... No, I went to São Paulo, I went to meet her. It was a shock, because she was ten years older than me. I was 20 and she was 30. Except her hair was dyed almost completely white and I looked like a boy. So the first impact was a real shock, but we already liked each other. The first impression wasn't what mattered. Three months went by, I left home and rented an apartment. And so we ended up living together. (Roberta, 60 years old.)

Understood as processes, having sex and assuming a sexual identity are not sequential stages forming a smoothly organized life course. Hearing the narratives on the women's first sexual encounters allows us to understand which elements are used by the narrators to 'make sense' of their lives, providing us with material that can reveal

the interplay between social meanings and social interactions deemed relevant for the representation of the narrator's subjectivity – and if we take into account the fact that every narrative is also constructed by the person listening, its analysis can provide us with important elements to understanding the role played by the elaboration of the experiences of

⁶ Maysa was a famous Brazilian singer. She died in a car accident in 1977. A major commercial success in the 1960s, her trajectory is seen as an example of a woman who broke the rules of her time, since she abandoned a marriage to embrace an artistic career (Lira Netto 2007).

a generational group in learning and transmitting master-narratives on the origin of sexual desire. (Simões 2004, p. 432.)

In the interviews on their trajectories, the women were asked about the beginning of their sex lives. In response, the women who have sexual relations with other women asked me: “Which beginning do you want to know about? With men or with women?” I replied: “I want to know about what you think is your beginning.” This was the cue for me to hear about at least two beginnings to their sexual lives and a temporality very often difficult to follow. This separation of scripts, one ‘hetero’ and the other ‘homo,’ is an artifice used to ‘make sense’ and, like any artifice, should be interpreted in the way Simões tells us in the above citation: an important element to “understanding the role played by the elaboration of the experiences of a generational group in learning and transmitting master-narratives on the origin of sexual desire.”

All the women were sexually initiated with women older than themselves by a fairly significant amount: between ten and fifteen years. The only exception was the woman who had her first homosexual relation at the age of 57, whose younger partner was 45 at the time. However the latter was more experienced since she had already had various affective and sexual relations with women previously. This large age difference for the first homosexual relation is not found in the accounts given by younger lesbians. Among the latter group, the first sexual partnerships took place in settings such as school and university where people from similar age ranges tend to group. In the case of the older group of women, the contexts of the first encounter are different: their first relations were with women met in more exclusive social environments where homosexuality was not condemned. Two women met their partners through the fan clubs of famous Brazilian singers, another met her first partner in a gay bar at the end of the 1970s. This difference in the settings for the first sexual encounter helps explain, I think, the reduction in the age difference between the sexual partners over time. The contexts for homoerotic encounters are more abundant and diverse today than they were in the past.

The older women’s accounts of their first sexual encounter with another woman tend to emphasize the affective dimension rather than erotic pleasure. The relationship developed with the sexual partner is slow, beginning as a relation of friendship and complicity that, at a certain moment, absorbs sexual intercourse into its repertoire. These relations are fairly durable and are described as the ‘first great love.’ The language of sentiments comes strongly to the fore in these narratives and turns sex into the corollary of what is primarily an emotional trajectory. The bond of affect is seen to require no explanation and, once established, clears the way for another process: the woman’s self-construction as a homosexual.

For the women presenting themselves as homosexual, the first relation is depicted as a discovery of something that had always been there. The first sexual encounter is the gateway to a universe of meanings that are at once strange and familiar. The first time with a woman appears as a spontaneous encounter with affect. The interviewees’ accounts stress the idea of the authenticity and uniqueness of the relations. Although some degree of internal conflict exists, along with the fear of discovery and negative reaction from their families, all the women identify the first sexual relation with another woman as a moment of self-realization.

The women with earlier heterosexual experiences, one of whom had even married and raised two children, insist on establishing a sharp divide between ‘sex with a man’ and ‘love with a woman.’ Physical pleasure is present in the sexual relations with men, but the feeling of ‘completeness’ and ‘fulfilment’ only appears in the accounts of sexual experiences with women.

Ah! It was marvellous! [the first sexual encounter with a woman] Wow! I had already had relations with men and it's completely different! Everything, absolutely everything is different. Why is it different? Because the energy was there, the chemistry too was much better. The act in itself is much more complete. I had been engaged, I'd had [male] lovers. I had as many lovers as my address book could take. But it was just something physical. My relations with men were always physical, I had orgasms with men too, but it's something else entirely. (Alba, 60 years).

Making oneself lesbian: a contrast between generations

There was an entire culture of the period, a mind-set. At the time when I was beginning to come out, when I began to go to night clubs and all that, there was a huge difference between being a dyke [*sapatão*] and being the girlfriend of a dyke. Today you don't see that... Today you come across 'in the know' people and you can't identify them physically. The posture, the way of dressing was completely different then. During that period, you had to use heavy clothing.

[Question: "You mention during that period ..."]

Forty years ago. To give an idea of the mind-set: my mother, when she learnt, said that she would prefer me to go with a divorced man. "I'd prefer her to go with a divorced man than with a woman!" That gives you some idea of the mentality at the time. The divorced man was a nightmare. It was terrible for someone to go with a married or divorced man. So you can imagine the culture, can't you? At that time, there were two classes of people that had to remain distinct. So when I knew what side I was on, I had to assume that side. So I assumed the side of the dykes. I had always had that posture. I was always a real tomboy, a street kid, ready to fight, to... I always behaved in a more masculine way, even as a child, so it was something that came naturally to me. It wasn't forced, I did it because... I dressed like that because I liked it. Obviously when I started to work I had to use high heels, I couldn't just wear trousers, I had to wear a skirt, tights, makeup. It didn't bother me, it wasn't any great sacrifice. But when I could remove that fancy dress, it was great. So, there was that entire culture during the period. But as time passed, things evolved, everything changed. When I go out today with this one [her current girlfriend], she says: "Put a bit of lipstick on." I have to put some on, I already use some, it's not so forced anymore. I've got more used to it. So there was a change too. [...] My behaviour in bed also began to change. I had relations before, but I had all those old preconceptions. I would never accept someone doing something just for the sake of it. They did it to me, they gave me pleasure, so I had to do it too [...] I always assumed the position of giving pleasure. Today it's no longer like that, there's been a change in posture, in everything.

The history of the 60-year old Roberta contains some important elements. Firstly the division she makes between the past, where there were 'old preconceptions' and a very clear demarcation of boundaries between the women themselves, the 'dykes' [*sapatões*] and 'their girlfriends,' and the present where these boundaries are blurred, a time where all lesbian women are, to use her own term, *entendidas*, 'in the know.'⁷ Secondly, the evolution of her own identity is depicted to coincide

⁷ Carmen Dora Guimarães (2004), in her work *O homossexual visto por entendidos*, provides an analysis of the category 'entendido' (someone 'in the know'). The study examines male homosexuality in Rio's southern zone in the 1970s. The native category 'entendido' is used in this context to distinguish a specific type of male homosexual, different from the 'bicha' or queer. The 'bicha' uses more feminine gestures and clothing, while the 'entendido' does not share this same gender performance. This differentiation is reflected in a hierarchization of the male gay world. In the case of my interviewee, the term 'entendida' is used generically as a synonym of lesbian, irrespective of the woman's gender performance.

with this temporality. In the past she was forced to take 'one side' and chose the side of the 'dykes.' Today she sees herself as a 'woman.' One era is not necessarily any better than the other. Roberta does not feel she was violated by wearing 'heavy clothing' or having a sex life in which she was responsible for 'giving pleasure' to her partner; the change simply brought new habits to her sex life and her self-presentation. The partners with whom she relates today are women who ask her to 'use a bit of lipstick.' Roberta's structuring of her sex life is an example of the way in which the women try to make sense of their trajectories for themselves and for others. Roberta situates the history of her sex life in a context involving a transformation in the visibility of homosexual relations. The past to which she refers, '40 years ago,' is seen as a time in which a lesbian woman had to choose one of two sides to be homosexual: a side that mimicked the male, both externally, in appearance, and in sexual posture. Today the female image has been revived and sexual relations have become a terrain for exchanges between partners where the rule is to act as one feels.

Alba, also 60 years old, speaks of her current partner, who is ten years younger than herself and had never had sexual relations with a woman before. They consider themselves married, though they do not live in the same home for 'operational reasons': Alba has three children and her partner too, "it's difficult to have six young people living under the same roof." Alba tells me about her partner's process of sexual initiation:

I said to her: "You just need to have a direct relation with the spots that give you pleasure. Discover these on your own body, it will be exactly the same on mine because our bodies are identical."

This equality in bodily identification is seen as the key to pleasure. The same interviewee told me how she felt an enormous 'compassion' for transgender individuals and transvestites because they "are unable to see themselves in their own bodies." The body recognized as the same becomes the basis for sexual experience.

In the interviews with younger lesbian women, also from Rio's urban middle classes – collected in another phase of this research – the discourse takes on another tone. Comparing these statements provides a clearer idea of the differences in how older lesbians look back on their life courses. Hence the experiences of the younger women are used here as a contrast to those of the older group.

Joana, 41 years old, fell in love with a school colleague at the age of 17. She describes it as a marvellous period since she and her girlfriend belonged to a group of friends, "all gay and highly creative, rebellious, crazy, artists." For her it was a 'private universe' where nobody had to define themselves: "we knew we were gay, but we didn't need to pronounce the name." Some of these people still belong to Joana's circle of friends, some are still gay today, others not, "they are married [to someone of the opposite sex] and have children," as she says. During this period of adolescence, Joana was simultaneously in love with a boy and her girlfriend. It was when she went to college that she began to have relations exclusively with women. These relations were extremely intense and dramatic with scenes of jealousy and relations with women who wanted her to be "the guy in the relationship." During this period, Joana had an unstable professional life, stopped and restarted her studies numerous times, depended on her parents' money to live and became addicted to cocaine. The end of this 'rougher' period, as she defines it, coincided with meeting her current partner, with whom she has lived for 13 years, someone who helped her to grow and to liberate herself.

It's not the same as today; the homosexual girls and boys who begin to experiment now have more information than I had. So, in fact, you brought to your relationship a very heterosexual idea of sexuality, the role played by each partner, what each person does. I think it took me a while to get this out of my system, I think it really was a period of maturity, of becoming more mature and saying: "I like this." It means I like it, not because it's active or passive. That was very common at the time, I lived through that, we experienced that a lot during the period, someone had to assume a particular role. I think the mark of change is there: each person does what they want, you don't have to have pre-defined roles. This is something I found a lot with R. [her previous partner], I had to be very active, because she had a very passive profile, one of those women who comes from relations with men, and she didn't like women. She was fundamental for me, because she taught me who I wasn't. O. [her current partner: silence as she thinks for a few moments] I still can't explain this, I don't know how to explain. R. was fundamental, it wasn't the relationship I wanted. I wanted a relationship in which I could be whatever I wanted, what I wanted. With O. it's precisely that. It was a discovery, we could be anything. But there was always something extra, though I didn't understand what it was. Today I know, it wasn't anything, it's natural, you're free, you're liberated, which doesn't mean passive or active, that's not the issue. Perhaps one woman likes one thing more and the other woman something else, but it's not pre-defined, it just happens. But R. marked me because she brought a very strong heterosexual history with her and asked me to perform a role that was very... she asked me or I made myself do it, I don't know, but it wasn't good. With O. we can, we live everything, we play with this. We say: "You're lazy today, aren't you?" and the other one becomes more [active]... and that's really good, we can talk about our desires. So, nobody is forcing anyone to be anything. There are no pre-defined roles.

Joana fits her process of learning about sex into her relations with other women. Maturity and the love of one particular woman are responsible for a change that she considers to have been for the better, leaving behind a fixed and masculinized position in favour of a relationship based on symmetrical exchange and mutual learning. This change in her sexual practices coincides with abandoning the unruly and stressful life she had been leading until then. Joana constructs a more psychological reading of the change and situates herself in a position where she could make a choice. It is no coincidence that the entire process of change was accompanied by sessions of Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Generational affiliation has a major influence, then, on the women's perceptions of the flow of sexual identifications and practices. In the case of older women we can identify a process marked by a strong dualism and a persistent view of the 'naturalness' of sexual relations. Dualism is expressed in the idea that the women had to make a choice, as if a social pressure existed to assume a place and a role within the universe of female homosexuality: be the dyke or the girlfriend of a dyke. This era of dualism is contrasted with the present time where the boundaries evaporate and where it becomes more difficult to tell who is and who is not *entendida* or 'in the know.' Today the only thing seen to guide sexual practice is 'spontaneity.' Roberta only lets someone 'give her pleasure' if she 'feels' that the person 'really wants this.' Alba also speaks of a supposed naturalness where women coincide sexually because their bodies are identical. In the younger generation, the discourse marks an apparently more conscious flight from the mechanisms that generate fixity, a reflexive process determined more by the idea of a search for oneself, a self-improvement.

This reflexive process of improvement takes place when women manage to dialogue among themselves: conversation is something highly valued by this younger generation of lesbians. In Joana's testimony, this learning through dialogue denotes the achievement of personal autonomy in

the affective and personal field, what she calls 'maturity.' A learning process that culminates in the experimentation of a sexuality without pre-defined roles. This absorption of the idea of self-determination in the construction of the homosexual trajectory can be traced to a change in the social context in which sexual relations are experienced in general and the relations between people of the same sex in particular. The younger women produce a set of meanings about sexuality in which the latter is seen as a relational practice that supposes an individual awareness of one's own acts and choices. These women not only reflect on their sexual trajectory, as the older women do too, they also believe their sex lives can be improved through the accumulation of relations over the course of life.

While this belief in improvement is not confined to lesbians, it was these women, particularly the younger ones, who spoke explicitly about enhancing sexual interaction as a vital part of their lives, including mentioning the use of erotic products as one of the elements in this improvement. This younger generation has experienced homoerotic relations in a context where the opportunities for encounters, though scrutinized and discriminated in the wider social universe, can be found in particular social niches (like groups of friends, or other spaces of sociability) and where these relations can be expressed in some form. This is also the generation that witnessed the emergence of the first signs of the gay and lesbian political movements within Brazil and internationally, and the generation that was targeted by a new consumer and entertainment market, especially among the urban middle class, which legitimized the public presentation of homosexuality, albeit tinged with 'politically correct' stereotypes, such as the virile gay man or the feminine lesbian.

Future generations will perhaps have another conception of their own sexual trajectory, since their affective-sexual relations unfold in a universe in which the experience of sexuality is both accentuated and blurred with what Eugenio (2006) describes as a kind of hedonistic consumption, particularly notable among some middle-class youth sectors. Female homosexuality among today's younger generations is lived and narrated in a context where there seems to be more tolerance and more spaces available for encountering partners compared to previous generations. At the same time this 'visibility' is accompanied by a profusion of discourses for explaining the self. It is not enough to like other women: there is an entire generational vocabulary explaining this desire, a vocabulary that affirms this position vis-à-vis others and thus differentiates itself from other positions – heterosexual, bisexual – at the same time as it foments the conditions for ambiguities. An entire universe of classifications that imposes itself on the reflexive gaze of the subjects. These classifications are produced in the present and affirm various contemporary possibilities for 'being lesbian.'

In a study on the trajectories of feminist lesbians in the US from the baby boom generation – that is, those born after the Second World War – Arlene Stein (1997, p. 200) reflects on the paths open to the new generations:

Many younger women coming of age and coming out today are also reconstituting lesbian identity, in ways that tolerate inconsistency and ambiguity. They simultaneously locate themselves inside and outside the dominant culture as they pursue a wide range of projects. Their strategic deployment of lesbian/gay identities is balanced against their recognition of the limits of such identities.

Conclusion

One aspect that calls attention when we compare the positions of these different age groups – the women over 60 and the women aged around 40 – is the subtle transition that begins to take place in their discourse in terms of the possibilities for practicing lesbianism. In the interview with the 60-year old Roberta, the transition from a sexuality shaped by the idea of pre-defined roles to a more ‘spontaneous’ sexuality is recalled as a passage marking social evolution in general, the overcoming of wider social prejudices that allows a different experience of female homosexuality today. Among the other older interviewees, references to changes in homosexual relations are marked by the women’s recollection of how difficult it was to recognize their own homosexuality in their youth. They lacked the means to do so, since it was something that was neither considered nor spoken about. The process of constituting a homosexual trajectory was lengthy and involved forming a closed network of female friends that provided the space to engage in homosexuality and distance themselves from their families of origin. In their opinion, young women today have many more opportunities than they had.

Among the interviewees aged around 40, who also think that today’s young women benefit from greater social acceptance of female homosexuality, the process of constituting a homosexual trajectory depended less on the formation of an exclusive network of female friends. Their relations very often traversed mixed networks of friendships, while sexual experimentation is experienced as a process over which they pay particular attention, focusing on the search to improve their sexual relations. The dualism of ‘being a dyke’ or ‘being a dyke’s girlfriend’ harks back to an older context. This dualism seems to have begun to be questioned around the time when the interviewees in their early 40s began their own sexual trajectories. I would argue that the feminist discourse in Brazil at the end of the 1970s and the start of the 1980s played an important role in allowing women to escape the rigid boundaries found in relation to sexual behaviour, including those among lesbians. But although overcoming the rigidity of being a dyke or being feminine can be seen as one of the prominent changes in the social landscape of the 1970s and 80s, it should again be stressed that this novelty did not spread equally to all social sectors.

Another point worth emphasizing is the value attributed to maturity. In both of the interviewed age groups, there is a widespread belief that the accumulation of affective and sexual experiences over the course of life is important to the process of self-affirmation. The meaning of this affirmation changes in tone according to the generation. Among the older women, self-affirmation emerges at the moment when they can look back on the obstacles they overcame so that today, at the age of 60, they have an independent and autonomous life. A life that includes a return to family relations. Some of the women are busy looking after their parents, now very old and infirm, who had remained distant from them for much of their lives. In the case of the 40-year old women, maturity is seen as a recent achievement or something still in the process of being acquired. Maturity is seen as an opportunity to reflect on their choices, including sexual, and merges with the process of seeking to enhance the quality of relations. In both generations, there is a valorization of stable, long-term partnerships and a condemnation (made with respect to younger generations) of momentary and fleeting sexual interactions.

In this sense, these women are similar to the heterosexual women of their generations who also value maturity as a synonym of life experience (Alves 2004) – though, as we saw at the start of the article, these straight women also refer negatively to the passage of time insofar as it represents a decline in their power of sexual attraction in the heterosexual erotic marketplace. This sexual

devalorization does not appear in the discourse of the homosexual women interviewed in this research.

Simões (2004) argues that the image of the *coroa*, or 'old geezer,' the elderly male homosexual, should not necessarily be seen in a negative way. Old age acquires different tones among male homosexuals according to the individual trajectories constructed by particular age groups. Male homosexuals now reaching middle age have different trajectories to previous generations and this fact will also directly influence the way in which they will experience old age.

This is the group which possesses a wider range of choices in the field of sensory experiences, ranging from non-alcoholic drugs to more relaxed attitudes towards sex. This is what promoted the explicit recognition of homosexuality as a legitimate life-style, founded the movement for homosexual rights, and transformed resistance to the police at the Stonewall Inn into a powerful symbol, the anniversary date for the large public 'gay pride' parades. By tragic irony, it also the group that has most suffered from the devastating effects of the HIV-AIDS epidemic. The group will begin to reach its senior period of life with its own history of paths and confrontations, which will lead to new conceptions of aging and homosexuality. (Simões, 2004, p. 434.)

Exploring the relations between old age and homosexuality does not mean searching for something specific to the aging process of homosexuals. The senior phase of life does not acquire unique traits because the old people in question are gay or lesbian. It is their life trajectories, marked by the shared experiences of particular age groups, that potentially lends distinctive features to aging.

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