

artigos

tríade
comunicação, cultura e mídia

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Mass culture and the (re)presentation of queer subjectivities during the dictatorship years in Brazil

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Resumo: Este artigo lança um olhar histórico e político no contexto das produções culturais no Brasil, durante os anos da ditadura militar. Especificamente, propõe-se uma leitura atenta do trabalho da escritora lésbica Cassandra Rios e as formas que ela incorporou elementos da cultura pop e dos meios de comunicação de massa como um artifício literário para criar um diferente, novo, a visão da subjetividade Queer entre as pessoas, apesar do regime institucionalizado conservador e repressivo da censura do Estado.

Palavras-chave: Cultura de Massa. Subjetividade Queer. Cassandra Rios. Literatura.

Abstract: This article takes a historical and political look at the context of cultural productions in Brazil during the years of the military dictatorship regime. Specifically, we propose a close reading of the work of lesbian writer Cassandra Rios and the ways she incorporated elements of pop culture and means of mass communication as a literary device to create a different, new, vision of Queer subjectivity among the people in spite of the conservative and repressive institutionalized regime of state censorship.

Keywords: Mass culture. Queer subjectivities. Cassandra Rios. Politics. Literature.

After 1968, with the consolidation of the Institutional Act # 5 and institutionalization of an elaborate system of censorship, nothing could circulate publicly, whether in writing recording, video, or in any other format, without the regime's official seal of approval from the military regime that overruled the democratically elected government and established a repressive and bloody dictatorship in Brazil. The absurdity of the harshness and absurdity imposed by the military censors was well captured by Laurita de Araújo, a secondary teacher in the 60's. According to Araújo, local-school teachers had to get federal government official approval permits before putting on end-of-year school plays, or else they risked being framed as agitadoras—trouble-makers (2008). Punitive actions for agitadoras ranged from suspension without pay and/or dismissal from the job to “disappearance,” jail, and even torture/death. However, far from annihilating national cultural productions, censorship stimulated creativity, artistic consciousness-raising and political/cultural defiance. In general, during this period, most cultural productions attempted to move beyond the point of “speaking of” the people, i.e., the adoption of popular themes and language in order to make literature and art simplified and relatable to a middle-class audience. As a response to the repressive political, socio-cultural values imposed by the repressive regime, the intellectual elite realized that no longer could they afford to exist apart from society. With the official system of censorship in place, literature took on a privileged role for political consciousness raising of the people (*conscientização*).

In the 60's and 70's, many artists took on a paternalistic cultural missionary task of politicizing the people with their art. In spite of the insertion into some truly popular location by the left sects of the Brazilian “cultural elite” and the establishment of some connections with the labor unions, by and large the cultural mission of this era was unsuccessful in its politicizing mission: the people simply did not understand and/or resisted the message disseminated by a largely middle-class “cultural elite.” Soon, it became clear to the intellectual elite that in order to politicize the people, it would be necessary to include them in them in their education process, not simply feed the masses with counter-ideological ideas/positions from above. It was precisely in the midst of this context that the lesbian writer Cassandra Rios overtook the project of (re)Presenting queer subjectivities in a liberatory manner that reveals their humanity and rescues their existence from the fixed objectified position fixed heteronormativity without any pretension to exhaust or unveil the “ethnographical Truth” about the topic for an elite group of enlightened intellectual elite.

With the absence of a significant literary market in Brazil, as Renato Ortiz pointed out that directly or indirectly, for the most part, there has been a close relationship between “high literary culture” and the means of mass communication, since many of the greatest writers in Brazil have made their living as journalists. However, in spite of the creation of many newspapers and magazines by leftist intellectuals, such as *O Pasquim*, after the AI-5’s creation the sanctions and imposition demanded and imposed by the government gradually increased, which led to a “war” between intellectuals and the media. The result of this “war,” that was easily won by the government-controlled media, could be summarized as the co-optation of some intellectuals and the separation of those more “radically inclined.” In summary, the revolutionary dream to politicize the masses through culture never came true: the great economically oppressed masses preferred to what *chanchadas* and talk shows, like *Chacrinha* and *Silvio Santos*, while dreaming of the military promises of economic boom and social mobility. That dream actually translated into the acquisition of a t.v. set and a small apartment in the projects financed by the government bank, BNH.

So, in Brazil, the intellectual literary left, disappointed by the people’s lack of “commitment to the revolution.” For the most part distanced itself from the people (*do povão*) and gradually formed its own elitist, or hegemonic, circles, as Luiz Claudio Carvalho puts it:

... especially in the 70’s, we can observe the formation of a sort of “hegemony” of thought of the left. It was a kind of loose “hegemony” which never took on any kind of concrete social action. Maybe Gramsci’s term, “hegemony,” is not quite appropriate in out [Brazilian] case: what actually happened was a “trend,” a “left fad.” During the 70’s it was “chic,” in social occasions or in bars, particularly in big metropolises as Rio and São Paulo, to speak of Chico Buarque’s new song, or to ask about the “disappeared” *Geraldo Vandré*, or to carry with you the thick copy of *Antonio Callado’s Quarup*, a high caliber classic of political literature, which had almost been censored (CARVALHO, 1996: 29).

As a result of the unhappy marriage between some leftist intellectuals and the media, a “left rhetoric,” in the social context of the 70’s, slowly gained value as a cultural product—especially in the cultural market aimed at the “more educated” middle class public. The “new counter-culture” of resistance combined a mix of traditional left symbols and icons of a “pop counter-culture” disseminated by mass media. It was not uncommon to find in most middle class teenagers’ rooms a “political kitsch” mosaic display, which included picture of *Che Guevara*,

John Lennon, Rita Lee, peace symbols, etc. This commodification of leftist discourse contributed to increase the gap between the “politicized literary left” and the “uncultured people” with less formal education. While the elite went to the theater and read books, the lower class watched soap operas and read magazines.

Unlike elitist academics, Rios understood that besides the great importance given to educational projects—much valued by leftist writers—as a tool for social change, it would be necessary to truly incorporate other elements of pop culture and means of mass communication in order to really achieve political consciousness-raising among the people. During the decades of the 60’s and 70’s, she managed to publish over forty novels that cultivated the ground and laid the foundation for the emergence of a specific gay and lesbian literature in Brazil in the 80’s and 90’s. While she was not the first to depict gays and lesbians in Brazilian literature, unlike her predecessors and contemporaries, Rios was the first author who did not portray homosexuality as pathology or a moral vice. In her novel, although not immune to prejudice, suffering, and human character flaws, Queer subjects are portrayed positively:

... Aprendam a fazer a distinção entre os maus elementos e o comportamento da pessoa de bom caráter seja ela ou não homosexual. Não procurem na exaltação do amor ... entre duas criaturas do mesmo credo, os sinais da demência ou os arroubos do vício e da corrupção ... apenas tentem entender e respeitar o problema de cada um que luta por seus direitos (sejão estes quais forem), sob a pressão do temor inculcado pela hipocrisia que encapa a sociedade (RIOS, 1972: 12).

For this Rios was, indeed, a pioneer in creating and keeping alive a different, new, vision of Queer subjectivity in the Brazilian context. She took into considerations institutionalized forms of oppression, as well as the multiplicity and specificities of gender, sex, race, class—their interdependence —and their the complexity of resistant negotiations on a daily basis. Historically, her writings took on a heightened transgressive significance in the face of the strong prohibitions imposed by the dictatorial regime. On the one hand the dominant system strongly pushed “family values,” while on the other, it severely and violently punished and erased all forms of transgressions—including non-conformity to pre-established sexual roles. In this context, the only possible, “approved” and publicly acknowledged (re)presentation for Queer subjects was the stereotyped, caricatured image perpetrated for/during Carnival. On the few occasions when it was necessary to refer to Queer subjects in “family” places (as to warn the

young, for example), Queers were described much similarly to “The Big Bad Wolf” in cautionary tales, as abject figures. In the media and other vehicles of mass communication/socialization, Queer subjects were portrayed as moral degenerates fit only for scorn.

Rather than disregarding this oppressive, imposed image (which was indeed the popular public vision of Queer subjects) and, unlike the literary writers of the left who positioned themselves apart from the people (*do povão*) directing their writings to a specific elite public, Cassandra Rios took on the oppressor’s gaze while keeping in mind another vision of self and Others, which he could not see (and by extension control or censor). Because she could see from both positions, Rios was able, through the use of simulacrum and farce, to displace her oppressor’s gaze, while inscribing resistant and complex meanings where the dominant eye would bury them.

In her books, Rios developed a chronicle-like style that resembled newspaper and popular writings. Thus, she made her literature appealing to the lower class (the naïf) reader, who, in general, was not used to reading books. Always aiming to (re)present “new signification” for/among the popular reader, Rios intentionally avoided “dense” language. She employed, instead, an apparently simplistic dialogue and a “rising suspense” formula similar to that of *Romance de Folhetim* in order to present her public with interwoven questions of gender, sexuality, race and class as they pertain to the formation of subjectivities. The, apparently simplistic, text/picture Rios created seemed, at face value, to reproduce the same ideologies and values of the dominant, white, patriarchal class; but, in fact, it only seemed to be a copy of the hetero-patriarchal Father’s text, just like the suspended grin seemed to belong to Alice’s cat in Lewis Carroll’s novel (1960). However, upon closer scrutiny, both cat’s and Father’s real pictures are nothing but holograms, a tactical “trick” of resistance in a context of institutionalized oppression. As we read Rios’s text with an eye for positive/creative transgression, for example, we are able to see a “hidden transcript” that deconstructs the mainstream narrative to reveal a hidden story of resistance to oppression. This “floating picture/text” Rios creates requires that readers learn how to read the difference and transgression inscribed in it: how do we hear Cassandra Rios’s voice? Does the voice of the patriarchal hetero-Father echo in her, or has she occupied the male heterosexist voice and, by doing so, inscribed herself into hetero-patriarchal language? However, since that mode of speaking does not allow for an active subject place for a lesbian, even as Rios is “into” that voice,

is she not, also, outside of it? What happens, then, with the excess that cannot be absorbed? What does it mean to be something that, by definition, does not exist?

By appropriating and playing with stereotypes, Rios creates a multilayered discourse that disturbs and challenges monolithic notions of binary gender identities, thus, giving voice to a multiplicity of "invisible" and "nonexistent" Others. Her fiction is highly complex and artfully created in a way that establishes dialogue and intertextuality with the mass culture industry of the "Chanchadas" (Brazilian vaudevilles), "teatro de revista" (Brazilian burlesque theater), and the, then, recently introduced television. In other words, Rios's work incorporated and dialogued with mass media in order to speak (in a coded language, of course) to the people/o povo. Her palimpsestic texts of simulacrum create a complex picture that combines fragments of all these mediums in order to form a "literary kitsch." In *Patuá* (1979 a), for example, Rios combines elements of canonical literature (Don Quixote), Brazilian history (Tiradentes), pop culture (James Bond) and Brazilian soap opera stars (Francisco Cuoco) in order to postulate her "trick," that challenges the distinction between literature and pop culture/art:

Minha irmã Carolina levou um coice de um cavalo e nunca mais ficou boa da cabeça. É completamente lelé. Às vezes cisma que eu sou a Lady Godiva se estou com os cabelos soltos; outras me chama de Scheharazade e me pede que lhe conte mais uma estória se não vai mandar matar-me, logo ao amanhecer; persegue a minha avó chamando-a de Joaquim Silverio dos Reis, que por causa dela Tiradentes foi enforcado, e chama a caçula Mágda de tartaruga que não sai da sua carapuça.

Acho que ela nos vê assim mesmo. O Juca é o Conde de Monte Cristo, o James Bond, o Francisco Cuoco, o Don Quixote E eu, quando não sou a desgraça e a desonra da família, a Ofélia que casou com Otelo, o rei negro, sou a rainha Elizabeth, ou a dona da Copenhagen porque graças a mim ela todos os dias devora seus chocolates recheados de fruta e licor (RIOS, 1979a, p. 31)

Carolina is evidently part of the cultures elite group that displays a familiarity and thorough knowledge of "high culture." Her distorted perception, however, blends "high" and "mundane" visions in a manner that obliterates the distinction. Her mad vision poses a challenge to the dominant construction and monopoly over meaning. While forced to conform to the world around her, Carolina is also a subject who contributes to the shaping of the world. Lenina and other people are also "forced" to recognize and acknowledge Carolina's alternative world/ways of sense making: "I think she really sees us that way."

In her texts, as illustrated in the passage above, Rios precipitates a meaning explosion by creating a “literary kitsch.” Her meaning saturated texts overfills the readers’ senses and produce an “excess,” that cannot be controlled by the dominant paradigm. These multilayered mosaic texts conceal resistance in the face of oppression while, simultaneously, provide space for infra-resistance to flow. As she attempts to give visibility and sociality to Queer subjectivities in a social context where discourse has been monopolized by the fascist regime, Rios faced a hard dilemma. Her writings needed to make sense and be understandable to the popular reader; however, they also required a high level of complexity to disguise the resistant aspects from those in power. Instead of ignoring the oppressive vision, Rios’s trick consisted in embracing and (re)producing oppressive discourse “with a slant.” Rather than taking over the position of oppressive discourse, the “slanted re-production” reworked its internal logic and exposed it as an ideological one, thus subverting the hetero-patriarchal dominant culture’s monopoly over representation. For example, instead of dismissing the stereotyped Carnavalesca caricatures of Queer subjects, Rios often times adopts them as a starting point to introduce Queer realities as part of the everyday life in a way that was both “new” to her hetero public, as well as affirming for her non-hetero readers. By embracing the caricatured representations disseminated by the media-controlled oppressive regime, Rios negotiated censorship while managing to bring these “imagined figures” out of the ghettos of Carnaval (the section of public sphere to which gender transgression has traditionally been confined/exiled) into everyday life sphere. Rios defamiliarize the familiar and, by doing so, specifically reinscribed resistant meaning to it right under the oppressor’s surveilling eyes. Let us look at one scene of *Eu Sou Uma Lésbica* (1979 b) as an example. Here Rios (re)presents, through the eyes of her main character Flávia—a young, semi-closed lesbian—the “typical” bashing of a butch woman and her effeminate gay friend, as they attempt to pass as a heterosexual couple in order to gain admittance to a Carnaval ball from which Queers had been warned to stay away from:

O pau preto desceu na sua cabeça e as pernas da machona dobraram. Comprimi os peitos com as, sentindo algo estranho e violento. Revolta. Pena. Lástima, e acima de tudo vergonha.

Meu carnaval estava acabado. Virou quaresma. O espetáculo era triste demais para mim. A bicha, gritando com sua voz esguichando coisas que eu nunca ouvira antes, sendo posta para fora; a machona, carregada pelos guardas escada abaixo. Manville (o segurança), medindo a jovem (a namorada da machona) que se encolhera num canto, medrosa e disfarçando não estar com a machona, toda fresca no seu “sarong”, cheia de

colares e olhares de fêmea acuada, disse, estufando o peito que não estufou, ao contrario, ficou sumido sob a camisa rasgada:

“Você pode entrar...”

Pensei que a moça fosse fazer meia volta e seguir os guardas que levavam a machona desfalecida. Quatro deles carregavam o seu fardo, e a sua bunda ia batendo nos degraus, enquanto os saltinhos da sua linda companheira seguiram tlac-tlaqueando para o salão regurgitante.

Acho que só não vomitei porque engoli demais as palavras que me subiam a pela garganta, querendo xingar a cadela que, sem pestanejar, preferia o baile de carnaval a saber para onde estariam levando a sua machona (RIOS, 1979 b: 78-79).

Here Rios's text can be read in several different ways: 1) through the monolithic vision of the oppressor, it is mere reproduction of his vision of the world—those who break the rules of patriarchal traditions suffer for their insubordination; 2) the average citizen is presented with a familiar picture which evokes empathy; 3) homosexual readers, particularly young ones like the narrator of the passage, are presented with a cautionary tale, warning them against the dangers and traps Queer folks are subjected to in a homophobic society. "[This] bleak picture Rios paints of homosexuality in Brazil" (Duncan, 1994:361), as critic Cynthia Duncan puts it, would not be a surprise for most Brazilians in the 60's and 70's. However, what is interesting about the way Rios re-presents Queer subjects in her work is her rejection of the "victim's role" imposed by the dominant vision. Rios's characters are not just helpless victims of a homophobic society; they are resistant subjects making choices under oppression. It is precisely at points like this that Rios distinguishes herself from authors like Adelaide Carraro and Carlos Zéfiro, whose works are solely produced as cultural objects to be consumed uncritically in exchange for money.

By going beyond mere re-presentation of victimization, Rios and her work take on a pioneer role and unparalleled significance for the field of Gay and Lesbian Studies in Brazilian literature. After what seems to be a reproduction of the same alienating and sensationalistic techniques used by the cultural industry to avoid censorship and "catch" her readers, Rios clearly moves on beyond it to reveal her political project of depicting Queer subjects in a different manner. After painting the familiar picture, which even naïf readers would have no problem identifying, Rios would go further, challenging them to re-think the "obvious." As Flávia continues her narrative, a community of gender transgressors and resistance to heteronormativity and homophobia comes alive.

Nesse interim, olhando para o palanque, deliciando-me com o nervosismo de Manville, que nos seguia com seu olhar em brasa, vi, por trás dele, uma jovem de sarong subindo as escadas do palanque.

Ela estava com algo na mão e sua atitude era suspeita, pois se esgueirava enquanto os foliões tentavam encobri-la, pulando em volta dela. Era um grupo estranho de machonas e bichas.

Ouvi a gritaria contrastando com o corre-corre. Vi de relance o corpo de Manville tombando, os foliões descendo as escadas aos saltos e gritos.

A moça de sarong desferira a garrafa de cerveja sobre a cabeça de Manville. A cara dele estava uma pasta de sangue, que esguichava como um suíno em dia de matança.

A gritaria e o corre-corre eram provocados pela turma da machona, que lhe dera cobertura, fazendo-a escapar sem que os guardas ficassem sabendo quem deferira o golpe na cabeça do branquelo despeitado... (RIOS, 1979b, p. 85).

In this passage, it becomes clear that the young femme's apparent acceptance and resignation to the bouncer's (and dominant society's) rules are simply a survival strategy that allowed her to get on with life in spite of oppression. It is significant to notice that resistance is constructed and carried out here, not as an individual act of heroism, but as a communal set of moves negotiate collectively. Writing from location, as a Brazilian lesbian who, like her characters, had to negotiate oppression, identity, class and sexuality on a daily basis, Rios managed/dared to write explicitly, not just of isolated individuals, but of whole communities of genders transgressors. While she did not restrict her writings to a specific gay and lesbian public, Rios most definitely paid close attention to viados/faggots, putas, transvestites, and particularly sapatonas/dykes.

Decades before the "Occupy Wall street" activists showed the importance of taking over public spaces collectively, genders transgressors "occupied" a central role and were given a special subject-role in Rios's literature. In her works, Rios gave voice and visibility to the existence of an underground community of resistance. In the words of the Brazilian lesbian activist and high school history teacher, Sônia Peixoto, Cassandra Rios's work spread a sense of community among Queer subjects during a time when one could not speak openly about "these thing." Peixoto says: "I remember reading her [Rios] in secrecy. It was a really cool feeling seeing written on paper, in a printed book, those feelings I thought no one else besides me felt" (Peixoto, 1998). For this transgressive mode of speaking, which gave visibility to the Sapatona as subject of enunciation while questioning the distinction between "high" and "low" modes of narrative, Cassandra Rios's works were marked and dismissed as pornographic by the elitist and

heterocentric groups (critics, academics, censors, etc.), who controlled the “literary field” during the dictatorship years—anos de chumbo—in Brazil.

In one of the earliest studies on Brazilian gay literature, Sapê Grootendorst observed that “in Brazil ‘gay literature’ is in general considered to be something forbidden, pornographic, in bad taste and of poor quality. Occasionally, it may serve emancipatory purposes, but in general, it belongs to the ghettos of a forbidden world” (GROOTENDORST, 1993, p. 52). However, in a country where those who hold power (editors, critics, military censors, members of the academy, reviewers and media entrepreneurs, etc.) to make the separation between “Art” and “mass culture” (read, “quality” and “trash” respectively) are highly heterosexist, misogynist, classist and Eurocentric, the very distinction between “quality” and “trash” is a political stance which has to be questioned and understood in relation to its social-political and literary context.

For when we take into consideration the socio-political and historical context of her writings, Rios’s work stands out as a monument (re)Presenting Queer subjectivities in a liberatory manner that reveals their humanity and rescues their existence from the fixed objectified position fixed heteronormativity. It was during the “dark years” of repression (nos anos de chumbo) that Cassandra Rios laid the foundation upon which, much later during the re-democratization of country and the “loosening” of the government institutionalized censorship (abertura) of media, would blossom the contemporary Brazilian “Queer wave” of post Stonewall and “AIDS-era” intellectuals.

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