

GENDER, EMBODIMENTS

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Bertha Lutz (1894-1976) – Brazilian feminist and scientist

The aim of this project was to analyze from the perspective of gender studies how supposedly male and female characteristics pervade conventions of the body and permeate the scientific and common-sense knowledge and practices that inform these conventions. Our intention was to examine body techniques and transformations with special emphasis on the materialization of these conventions in social relations, particularly in sexual orientation and erotic practices, age and life-course, medical interventions on the body, and social imprints in cultural and scientific arenas. One of the main points of this project was to interrogate or question the shared social view of bodies and their particular configurations and embodiments, particularly the disseminated view of the body as an eminently plastic material that can elude or postpone the restrictions of its materiality, finitude and frailty and that can be adapted or amalgamated to any culturally established convention.

Another issue in this project was to understand the implications of conventions on embodiment for social identities. These general questions were approached through three main axes of investigation: (1) body practices, sexuality and eroticism; (2) sex, gender and body plasticity; and (3) body, names and distinction marks.

All three axes were addressed through a qualitative methodological approach – that is, through ethnographic research, interviews and analyses of iconographic and written records. Central to each of the axes was a

comparative and historical dimension of analysis. Although Brazilian social practices and Brazilian views were privileged, this project explored specific forms through which transnational trends were locally translated and re-elaborated in the Brazilian context and in foreign contexts.

Research on axis (1), for instance, aimed to investigate the relationships between old age and sexuality in gay communities, the effect of the commodification of erotic implements on middle-class sociability or the influence of race, color and nationality on the transits of Brazilian girls in the transnational sex industry, both in Brazilian sexual tourism circuits and in the Spanish sex market. Research on axis (2) focused on medical conventions that define practices of bodily intervention on intersexed children or those that call into question the absolute polarity between the sexes or the dimorphic conventions of sexuality that are paradigmatic in our society. We also examined the technological interventions oriented toward the production of 'new' bodies (plastic surgeries, new reproductive technologies, new bodily languages, diets, and body performances aimed at third-age groups). Finally, in axis (3), we asked how name, body and gender were articulated toward authorship and authority – cultural, intellectual, and scientific – in the fields of artistic and scientific production, particularly in terms of intellectual history and theatrical production.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS TO DATE AND PERSPECTIVES

The outcomes of this research can be found in some of the papers that were produced by the researchers. Due to limitations of space, we had to present here only one-third of the total production of the project. Significant findings include a new vision of the 'traffic of women' between 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries, the international traffic of ideas about the need to consider politics aimed at third-age groups or to the sexuality of gays, medical orientations designed for 'central' countries for the 'redefinition' of intersexed children, the circulation of erotic implements from central markets to the 'periphery' of the capitalist economies and the role of culturally imported technologies in the constitution of the medical, theatrical, or scientific histories of Brazil in recent years. All of these networks of ideas and bodies that circulate in our country demonstrate many local inflections of the global economy as well as the input of our ideas, and our bodies, into the 'global' economy.



Figure 2. Fisherman's boat at the Mucupire Port in Fortaleza, used to welcome the increasing flow of foreign tourists in the summer of 2002 (photo by Adriana Piscitelli)

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