

Igniting the Pleasures of Peer-Review and Revolution from Putaria: A Reflection on “*Andando entre cabarés: conhecendo os saberes da putaria*”

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Abstract

Brazilian sex workers are increasingly publishing about their lives and fights, raising central questions about the powers, “truths” and interests that crosscut knowledge production processes in contexts of prostitution. In this text, I discuss the manuscript, “*Andando entre cabarés: conhecendo os saberes da putaria*” (Clarindo; Zamboni; Martins. 2022), highlighting its valuable conceptual and theoretical contributions to this emerging field and reflecting on the peer review process. Clarindo, Zamboni e Martins’ rich ethnography instigates us to explore the complexities of the relationships between feminism, prostitution and the academy and understand that the knowledge produced in prostitution contexts is not just about prostitution: it is also about how to resist and survive in increasingly unequal and unjust times.

Keywords: Prostitution, Putafeminismo, Feminism Knowledge.

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Pleasure is rarely associated with receiving an invitation to review a manuscript for an academic journal. The peer review process is important, but I admit that I often accept to review more out of a sense of solidarity with the exhausted journal editors and authors than of feeling a deep interest or drive to review. This was not the case with the invitation from *cadernos pagu* to review “Andando entre cabarés: conhecendo os saberes da putaria.” In reading the abstract, I was immediately drawn to the manuscript and anxious to read it. Thinking and learning about the knowledge, power and politics of *putas* is something that has instigated and inspired me for decades now, and in particular, perspectives that question and move beyond victimization. I accepted, quite literally and happily, with pleasure.

In this short critical commentary, I reflect on the review process and what I see to be the key contributions of this important article. At its core, the paper shines an important light on two – at times overlapping - relationships that historically have been ones of contention in zonas of prostitution and knowledge production: the academy and feminism. It adds to a growing and absolutely fundamental body of work of Brazilian sex workers publishing about their lives and fights (Leite, 1992; 2008; Moira, 2016; Prada, 2018), raising central questions about the powers and truths of knowledge production and prostitution itself (Lopes, in press).

Drawing on Walter Benjamin’s politics of narrativity (1987), Clarindo, Zamboni and Martins deconstruct historiographies about prostitution and complicate what is known, what is “true” and how such knowledge about prostitution is produced. They leave no doubt that sex workers are producers of knowledge about their own lives and push beyond questions of “how” in the sense of methodologies to looking at the subjectivities, relationships and contexts through which narratives about prostitution are produced. In doing so, they reinforce the relational nature of the knowledge production processes among sex workers, highlighting how competition and solidarity are woven throughout.

The careful and rich ethnography of feminism in the zona serves as a window into the complexities and depths of these relationships. In the first version of the manuscript, the discussion surrounding relationships between sex workers was constructed more around the concept of sorority. In the review process, this discussion was expanded to contemplate the non-binary, fluid and contradictory nature of agency in the context of prostitution and highlight how this goes against some feminist principles about relationships between women and the nature of power. In the revision, they also expanded and wove the discussion of *putafeminismo* throughout the ethnography of the zona. The juxtaposition of the narratives with *putafeminismo* was extremely effective to achieve their goal of interrupting dominant discourses about prostitution and, as they state, “permit inscribing an anti-history that makes it possible to open up a crack in the knowledge and perspectives that are produced about *putas* and not with them” [*permite a inscrição de uma anti-história que possibilita abrir uma fenda nos saberes e perspectivas que são produzidos sobre as putas, e não com elas*] (p.3).

The observation of a colleague who “seems shocked with the good reputation that prostitutes are achieving” [*parece chocada diante da boa fama que as prostitutas estão conquistando*] (p.4) and is interested in learning more about Monique Prada’s book, *Putafeminismo* after seeing it in a post by Cléo Pires is especially illustrative of feminisms place in the zona. It also reminded me of contemporary critiques within feminism regarding tendencies towards neoliberal and marketing values of being associated with a “good reputation” and as a product that can be possessed/consumed (Arruzza; Bhattacharya; Fraser, 2019). And at the same time, the authors show throughout the text that the fissures and contradictions present in the zona open up spaces for solidarity and affinity that complicate feminist teachings about sorority. In this sense, Clarindo, Zamboni and Martins argue that prostitutes creatively bring together the commandments of putaria (which reinforce distrust, competition, and consequences) and feminist practices (which reinforce solidarity, trust and flourishing). It is in this hybrid space that what the authors call, “saberes burlativos” – or knowledge of how to outwit or mock are propagated.

The concept of “saberes burlativos” is fantastic, and I estimate what will most be cited from this article. Through the review process, the authors expanded their discussion of the concept and connected it to Jose Miguel Olivar’s theoretical work in which he also notes the ability to alternate

between subjectivities and agencies generally considered as opposites and contradictories as an integral part of the *devoir puta* (2013). At the center of both discussions is the potentiality of difference for connection and emergent affinities. Drawing on Donna Haraway (2009) and Glória Anzaldúa's concept of *consciência mestiça* (2019), the authors affirm: "when faced with conflicting points of view, contradictions, culture clashes and difference, affinities unexpectedly emerge" [*"diante de pontos de vista conflitantes, contradições, choques culturais e diferenças entre si, emergem inesperadamente as afinidades"*] (p.10). Conflict and difference produce relationships, which as the authors note, are not always harmonious and without difficulty. Yet what is key to their argument is that rigidity of rules – be it of the commandments of putaria or feminist practices – are not useful or productive in contexts of prostitution. Rather flexibility, diversity and creativity are key.

This is the point that most relates to my own research and thinking about what I call "puta politics", or the way in which puta activists in Brazil do politics in a way that both comes from and strategically produces contradictions, often to expose deeply entrenched hypocrisies surrounding gender and sexuality in Brazil (Murray, 2015; in press). Just as the authors note that knowledges and politics of putaria do not fit into feminist teachings of the subject, in my dissertation, I also concluded that social movement theory and studies of activism fall short to capture the dynamic and complex nature of prostitute activism in Brazil. The movement's politics were constructed by matriarchs Gabriela Leite and Lourdes Barreto who dedicated their lives to constantly alternating between zonas of prostitution and zonas of public policy and government funded public health and human rights programs. The fluid, flexible and at times contradictory nature of their activism broke (and continues to break) with normative paradigms of sexuality and activism, and prioritize the formation and maintenance of alliances (more often than not constructed through conflict, and at times even in spite of political differences). I look forward to exploring more connections between the idea of "saberes burlativos" and "puta politics", as I think that there is much to be unpacked and learned around ideas of conflict, alliance, partnership and how to do politics and research in environments of extreme constraints and inequality.

As Penelope Saunders observes (2022), knowledge produced in sex work contexts is not just about prostitution: it is also about how to resist and survive in increasingly unequal and unjust times. Noting the precarity of academic work and calling on researchers to acknowledge "that the academic enterprise is as much part of the capitalistic extractive project as anything else" (Saunders, 2022:3), she argues that sex workers can (and do) lead the way in teaching how to creatively use systems of power. As she states, "In order to be successful in sex work, sex workers observe the flows of power involved in these transactions, using this to leverage payment and ensure safety. Sex workers may not have been privy to all the machinations involved in institutional research projects but will always have observed that powerful people wanted something from them and the terms were bad" (Saunders, 2022:3). Strategically reworking and outwitting such terms and power imbalances is also at the core of the "saberes burlativos", and Clarindo, Zamboni and Martins remind us throughout the text about the transformative potential of knowledge produced in zonas. As trans and puta activist Indianarae Siqueira stated in a text widely circulated in social media, "Brothels are schools of insubordination for those who are willing to learn an orgasmic and ecstatic freedom."

It might be a bit of a stretch, but I also see connections between Saunders' arguments and this new section of *cadernos pagu*. As I state in the first paragraph, pleasure is rare in the peer review process. Not only due to our lack of time, or feeling overburdened and burned out by institutional obligations, but also perhaps due to the pressure to critique and uncomfortableness with conflict. In this sense, again, there are precious lessons to be learned from putaria, which in many ways, as a place where "disputes, competition and solidarity and affinity" [*"disputas, concorrência e solidariedade, afinidades"*] exist in the same space (p.5) could also describe many academic departments. In addition, peer review as a process has been unpaid and underrecognized. The *Comentário Crítico* – as a publication in one of Brazil's highest rated academic journals –has "real" value, and is an innovative way to recognize the time and effort of reviewers, and, perhaps in some senses, outwit the system. It is also a way to reframe the critical aspect of peer review and facilitate

conversations and collaborations between authors as the dialog established through peer review is also part of the knowledge production process.

In the spirit of future collaborations and conversations, I want to close discussing the authors' discussion of the "power of the false" (Deleuze, 1976) and connections I see with Natânia Lopes' auto-ethnography of luxury prostitution in Rio de Janeiro (Lopes, 2016, in press). Clarindo, Zamboni and Martins argue that the power of the false in the zona is showing and unveiling the "the world as an error" [*"mundo enquanto erro"*] (p.9). The power of the false as a concept is inspired by Nietzsche's analysis of art as a counterpoint to science and the only possible way to successfully challenge the ascetic ideal (Nietzsche, 1988). In their article, Clarindo, Zamboni and Martins brilliantly place *saberes burlativos* as art, capable of challenging the dominant forms of knowledge production (i.e. "science") about prostitution and creating new modes of relating, being and living. The power of the false in the zona is not about a dichotomy of truth x lies, but rather (and consistent with Deleuze's analysis of Nietzsche), creating other, new truths.

In her work, Lopes blurs the lines between ethnography and literature, fact and fiction. Drawing in part on Evans-Prichard's (1972) conception of ethnography as art, she created a fictional character, Giovanna, as a narrator for her ethnography of a luxury brothel as a way to mitigate the diverse stigmas surrounding prostitution and female anthropologists' sexuality in the field. Giovanna is a plural and hybrid mixture of the subjectivities and bodies of Lopes and the sex workers she met in the field. Her creation and role in Lopes' work directly confronts the entrenched moralities that continue pervade the social sciences which, contrary to their progressive varnish, often have more in common with the scientists and philosophers that Nietzsche critiqued in the XIXth century when it comes to topics like prostitution and pornography. While she theoretically locates her strategy within the canons of anthropology, Lopes states, "Giovana does not want to be a scientific method or sovereign ethical instance" [*"O que Giovana não quer ser é um método científico ou uma instância ética soberana"*] (in press, p.9). In this sense, I see Lopes, through Giovanna, as also operating the power of the false, creating new possibilities for being and narrating ethnography, while also unmasking academia as an error.

Clarindo, Zamboni and Martins' work opens infinite and exciting avenues to discuss the relationship between art, science, truth and prostitution. Like Lopes, they show how prostitution is a space where alternative truths are produced and where the hypocrisies of the world are unveiled. This is why, as Gabriela Leite also frequently said, society did not want prostitutes to talk; their voices and denouncements dismantle institutionalized moralities that sustain and reproduce inequalities. Gabriela, like all the sex work authors I've cited in this piece, truly understood and operated the power of the false, of *saberes burlativos*, of puta politics and of putaria. And as I write this inspired by their work and wisdom, I realize how far we anthropologists remain from achieving and understanding what sex workers have been trying to teach us for decades. Perhaps we need to focus more on the power of the false, and less on defending our truths. I am not sure exactly what this would look like, but am confident that it would be a more just, pleasurable and liberating path than the current one.

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