Desire-cities:

a transgender ethnography in the urban boundaries

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Abstract

This paper discusses the concepts of borders and urbanities based on individuals and collectivities that circulate in the margins of cities and form the fabric of the so-called sex market; they may identify themselves (but not necessarily) as *travestis* and transsexual women. This reflection is part of an ongoing survey linked to the Urban Anthropology Center of the University of São Paulo, whose purpose is to establish a multi-sited ethnography in two regions of Brazil: the metropolitan area of João Pessoa, in the state of Paraíba, and the triple frontier in the Amazon region between Brazil, Peru and Colombia. Based on the circulation of transgender people in the margins of cities, this study is an attempt to understand the kind of urban models that emerge from these liminal experiences, which shift between spatial, physical and symbolic boundaries. This investigation suggests the need to rethink the field of city anthropology in Brazil by taking as its basis the models of urban forms that allow for intersections between countryside and city, forest and metropolis, outskirts and downtown.

Key-words: transsexuals, cities, borders, sex, urban.

Cidades-desejo:
uma etnografia trans nas fronteiras do urbano

Resumo

Este texto problematiza as noções de fronteiras e urbanidades a partir de pessoas e coletivos que se movimentam nas bordas das cidades e tecem os chamados mercados do sexo e podem se identificar (mas não necessariamente) como travestis e mulheres transexuais. Esta reflexão faz parte de uma pesquisa em andamento, vinculada ao Núcleo de Antropologia Urbana da Universidade de São Paulo, e pretende elaborar uma etnografia multisituada em duas regiões do país: na Paraíba, compreendendo a Região Metropolitana de João Pessoa, e no Alto Solimões, na tríplice fronteira amazônica, entre Brasil, Peru e Colômbia, em Tabatinga, Letícia, Santa Rosa. A partir da circulação de pessoas trans nas bordas das cidades busca-se compreender quais modelos urbanos emergem dessas experiências liminares, que transitam entre fronteiras espaciais, corporais e simbólicas. A investigação sugere repensar o campo da antropologia da cidade no Brasil a partir de formas do urbano que permitem cruzamentos entre campo e cidade, floresta e metrópole, periferia e centro.

Palavras-chave: travestis, cidades, fronteiras, sexo, urbanidade.

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Introduction

On the margins of the Brazilian cities located outside the country's major economic regions, nor located in the core metropolitan areas, there is an intensive circulation of people through affective, material and symbolic exchanges that constitute the flows of the sex markets and sexual economies. On one hand, these are the places that public security and human rights policies include in the so-called routes of sexual exploitation and the trafficking in persons; on the other, they are spaces of resistance and of ample exchange networks that open up space for modes of existence excluded from traditional familiar models, hosting *travestis*,[1] transsexual women and gay men who engage in various activities, such as hair and beauty services, prostitution and other forms of paid sex.[2] Such flows, moved by material, sexual and affective forces, delineate a peculiar trajectory within the peripheral spaces of these cities, involving urbanity regimes that are not defined *a priori* in the landscape of any given town. Such regimes are detached from any city in itself and shaped by an urban network that comprehends small, medium and large-sized cities. Nevertheless, they are first of all built from the circulation and occupation of the city dwellers.

The proposal in this text, therefore, is to reflect on urbanity regimes related to the trans women universe in two regions of the country: in Paraíba state, located in Brazil's Northeastern Region (North Coast and Metropolitan Area), and in Alto Solimões, part of Amazonas state in the Northern Region (the triple Amazonian border between Brazil, Peru and Colombia).[3] 'Trans women universe' here means an analytical category referring to persons and collectivities that may identify themselves – though not necessarily – as *travestis*, as transsexual women or again as homosexual persons going through processes to transform themselves from the 'male' to 'female' gender. Such a universe involves a wide range of categories, definitions and classifications, some of which are mobile, others fixed. These categories – being or having been a *travesti* or a transsexual woman – depend chiefly on self-identification and community recognition (from a group of sociability or political movement). They shape gender identities, lifestyles, forms of sociability, bodily constructions. Over and above identarian and sexual constructs, this work intends to think about new possibilities of the urban that are not directly associated with specific cities: urbanity in the margins, defined by spatial mobility and bodily transformation.

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1   This is a Brazilian Portuguese word that means literally "transvestite", but does not have a perfect translation into English. The existence of *travestis* is of long tradition in Brazil. They are male-designated persons who assume a female identity and do not necessarily undergo sex reassignment surgery. In this sense, therefore, they do not identify with those who are usually called crossdressers. The only word in English that get close to the meaning of *travesti* is informal and rather aggressive, "she-male". The informality and aggressiveness of the English word somehow correspond to the Brazilian Portuguese similar, for the *travestis* are a highly segregated group of people, usually living in the outskirts of cities and often earning their lives by prostitution. The strict differentiation between *travestis* and transsexuals has been the subject of controversy, since it may echo discriminations and prejudices deeply rooted in Brazilian society. (N.T.)

2   Here prostitution and other forms of paid sex include activities that can be undertaken informally or professionally, involving sexual exchanges for money or other goods. They may be assumed by the interlocutors as a profession, recognizing themselves as sex workers, or lived as secondary activities to supplement income, and may even be related to affective relationships with men, in a non-monogamous way, in which the encounters are permeated by affective, sexual and material exchanges.

3   Research funded by Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP).

Both regions have an urban complexity that directs the anthropological gaze to different city scales. Shifting between rural, indigenous and riverine universes, they allow for the elaboration of theoretical-methodological perspectives favorable to the understanding of this urban fabric that is at once distant and close to the models of metropolitan urbanity. This proposal is inspired in part by Henri Léfèbvre's (2006) notion of urban fabric, defined as a "a kind of [...] net of uneven mesh, allowing more or less extended sectors to escape: hamlets or villages, entire regions" (Léfèbvre, 1996: 3; pp. 71-72).[4] Such a net can be thought as an ecosystem, a coherent unity surrounding one or many cities. It is not just a morphological unity, but a way of life that expands into rural zones and builds its own system of values.

The reflection presented here results from research studies undertaken by several researchers at different academic stages.[5] The present interest in the female-trans universe began in 2008 with an inquiry carried out in the northern coastal region of Paraíba, aimed at understanding the configuration of urban dynamics in small and medium-sized cities. Further investigations were subsequently effectuated in cities belonging to the region of Brejo Paraibano, namely Guarabira, Sapé and Mari. These latter studies focused specifically on cisgender women who work as prostitutes or in activities linked to paid sex.[6]

Both sets of research showed that *travestis* and women working as prostitutes in Paraíba's countryside have a way of life that is lived on the road, either literally and metaphorically – an interstitial space within the borders of metropolitan areas. In territorial terms, such spaces are located around small and medium-scale cities, reasonably close to the capitals. Their strategic situation allows for a great circulation of people, vehicles, information and relationship networks. What makes this circulation possible is the presence of highways, such as the BR 101, on which there is a constant flow of truck drivers, workers and other travelers (Nascimento, 2014a; Nascimento 2014b; Garcia & Nascimento, 2014).

The research conducted in Paraíba between 2008 and 2012 was intensive, involving fieldwork carried out either by small groups or individually, with recorded interviews and photographic documentation. As the basis of our theoretical reflections, the ethnographic perspective is conceived as living knowledge, built from experience and capable of acquiring a certain kind of totality.

> An ethnographic theory has the objective of elaborating a model for understanding any social subject (language, magic, politics) that, even though produced in and for a particular context, is capable of functioning as a matrix of intelligibility for other contexts (...). An ethnographic theory works somewhat like the savage mind: it employs the very concrete elements collected in the fieldwork and by other means in order to articulate them into somewhat more abstract propositions capable of rendering intelligibility to events and to the world. (Goldman, 2003, p.460)

Resembling an intricate piece of jewelry (Magnani, 2002), constructed from unique fragments of different sources and materials, ethnography develops through its own making, alternating the point of view of the observer and the perspective of the observed. According to Peirano, "the (good) ethnography of

anthropological inspiration is not only a methodology and/or a research practice, *but the lived theory itself*" (Peirano, 2008). The theory, then, is the inseparable double of ethnography, or rather, ethnography is theory and creates the conditions for a singular way of seeing, hearing and interpreting.

Based on this previous experience in Paraíba, my objective now is to develop a comparison with another region in the Brazilian North, which, despite presenting its own dynamics and characteristics, constitutes an urban complex (Olivar, 2014) of small and medium-sized cities in which the trans female universe is strongly present, constituted by flows and circulations between cities, but also along rivers, traversing the borders of Brazil, Peru and Colombia.

Trans-cities

Brazilian academic production on *travestis* and transsexualism in anthropology and in the human sciences in general is recent and began to develop in the late 1980s. Much of the research is focused on capitals and metropolitan regions, as though this lifestyle or identity manifestation were something 'typically urban.' My hypothesis, however, is that this urban lifestyle is not necessarily located in large metropolises. Or better, it is as if there were an urban model that crossed the metropolitan borders and allowed a circulation between secondary and capital cities, countryside and town, rivers and seas.

Between the late 1980s and the early 1990s, with the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, several research studies were developed on homosexuality, and the *travesti* issue gained scientific legitimacy.[7] It is this moment of which Hélio Silva (1993, 1996, 2007) writes. He began his anthropological research precisely to provide academic support to the policy for combating AIDS in Rio de Janeiro. Silva's investigations open up a dialogical perspective and present a rich ethnographic description of the *travestis* working as prostitutes in the Lapa neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro. He was concerned to understand the relation between the *travestis* and wider society and sought to unveil their social identity, showing that metropolitan life provided visibility for the *travestis*, who no longer needed to hide themselves in the streets of big cities.[8]

In the 1990s surveys carried out mostly in large-scale cities – Salvador, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Paris, Porto Alegre – appeared that confirmed Hélio Silva's thesis that *travestis* are the 'asphalt offspring' of the large metropolises. It becomes, then, clear that research on *travestis* takes as a given fact, *a priori*, the relations between *travestis*, prostitution and metropolises, as if these were elements specific to large urban agglomerations. It is important to note that these works contain a rich discussion on the process of the *travesti* identity and its affective and family relationships (Oliveira, 1997, Pirani, 1997, Jayme 2001 Kulick 2008, Florentino 1998). In a way, the investigations of this period share a concern to humanize the *travestis*, showing that they have an occupation, a family, marital relations, etc.[9]

Since the 2000s, research on *travestis* and transsexuals has significantly increased in different areas of the human sciences in Brazil, exploring the subject on various questions involving the processes of bodily, identity and sexuality constructions; generational differences; transnationalism and migration; forms of

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7   However, as early as 1959, Roger Bastide wrote a pioneering article, "The Man Disguised as a Woman" in the book *Sociology of Brazilian Folklore*, in which he describes the rituals of transvestism and gender inversion during carnival. In 1983, Neuza de Oliveira conducted research in Salvador and presented a psychoanalytic view based on the idea that *travestis* are sexually 'inverted.'. Her work was published in 1994. Still in the 1980s, Luiz Mott showed that gender transformations in Brazil have existed since the colonial period and presented reports on the "first Brazilian *travesti*," a slave from the Congo called 'Victoria' (Mott, 1988).

8   During this period, a number of *travestis* gained visibility in the media, such as Thelma Lipp, Rogeria, Roberta Close, Patrícia Bisso and Laura de Vison. Several films dealing with this subject appeared, such as *Tootsie, Victor/Victoria, La Cage aux Folles, Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, among others. This visibility in the media and in the cultural field also permitted the emergence of drag queens in nightclubs and rave parties (Palomino, 1999).]

9   In this same period a biography was published – *A Princesa: Depoimentos de um travesti brasileiro a um líder das Brigadas Vermelhas* (Princess: Testimonies of a Brazilian transvestite to a leader of the Red Brigades) that served as plot for the 1999 film of the same name, directed by Henrique Goldman, an Italian and German production. The protagonist of this story is Fernanda, whom by coincidence is from Paraíba, originally from Remígio, the same hometown of Fernanda Benvenutty, currently an important *travesti* activist in Paraíba.

violence, etc. (Benedetti, 2005; Carrara & Vianna, 2006; Pelúcio, 2005 Bento, 2006 Teixeira, 2011; Duque, 2011; Siqueira, 2009; Lima, 2009; Leite Jr., 2011). Although there is still a greater emphasis on research carried out in big cities, new works have begun to appear focusing on capitals in the Northeast of the country, such as Fortaleza (Vale, 2005) and Recife (Maia, 2006; Patrício, 2008), as well as small and medium-sized cities, such as Campina Grande / PB (Patrício, 2008), São Carlos / SP (Pelúcio, 2005) and Vale das Passagens (Cardozo, 2009), in southern Brazil, among others.[10]

It is important to note that during the 2000s the social movements fighting for the transgender cause began to grow in strength. In 2000, ANTRA (National Association of *Travestis*, Transsexuals and Transgenders) was formed in Porto Alegre. In 2008, the 1st LGBT National Conference took place, with the subsequent elaboration of the National LGBT Plan for the Promotion of Citizenship and Human Rights. In 2002, prompted by ANTRA and by the strong performance of the *Movimento do Espírito Lilás* (Movement of the Lilac Spirit), Paraíba saw the foundation of ASTRAPA (Association of *Travestis* and Transsexuals in Paraíba). Tabatinga, in the Alto Solimões region, also saw the constitution of an LGBT association in the mid-2000s, the vast majority of whose associates are transsexual women and *travestis*.

This brief cartography is simply intended to demonstrate that academic research on transsexuality has generally focused on capitals and metropolitan areas. It is worth questioning whether the invisibility of transsexuals and *travestis* in the research conducted in small and medium-sized Brazilian cities is related to a concrete invisibility in these localities, or whether this should be attributed rather to the researcher's way of looking, accustomed to seeking 'dissident' models of sexuality in metropolitan places, associating other universes, such as the rural one, with an image of moralizing and traditionalist places.

Adopting a new perspective, without abandoning the importance of the centrality of big cities in the circulation of the transgender universe, I present my reflections based on research in Paraíba, where the ideas are a little more shaped, and a number of hypotheses still in the process of elaboration, based on recent investigations in Alto Solimões, which deserve further study. I shall examine these two locations, therefore, in order to unpack the meanings of the urban for my research interlocutors and how cities are felt and lived during their transits and stops. I begin with the Amazonian context.

The purpose of bringing a northern region of Brazil into the study is to follow the general guidelines of USP's Laboratory of Urban Anthropology (LabNAU), especially the Urban Ethnology Study Group (GEU). The GEU began its research in 2009 with the intention of observing the indigenous presence in Amazonian cities. The initial research area covered the urban settlements of the Sateré-Mawé people in Manaus. The subsequent study observed that they moved between different settlements, the forest and several cities like Manaus, Parintins, Maués, Itaituba and Aveiro (Magnani, 2012). This circulation showed that the Sateré-Mawé were not limited to living in urban spaces, marked by precarious living conditions, but moved between different scenarios without confining themselves to spatial limits such as the geopolitical borders.

In 2014, a group of researchers from the Laboratory of Urban Anthropology (LabNAU) visited the twin cities of Tabatinga (Brazil) and Leticia (Colombia) – an Amazonian frontier-region bordering the Solimões/ Amazon river – at the invitation of the Colombian Institute of Anthropology and History (ICANH).

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10   Other studies can be mentioned. Daniela Murta Amaral (2007) analyzes the effects of psychiatry and the pathologization of transsexuality in health policies in Rio de Janeiro; in Paraná, Elias (2008) investigates the processes of transgenitalization from a psychoanalytic perspective; Jorge Leite Jr. (2011)] pursues a historical-conceptual analysis of how the categories *travesti* and 'transsexual' have changed in scientific discourse; in Campinas (São Paulo), Thiago Duque (2011) presents research on 'transvestibility' in adolescence and discusses the categories of shame and stigma; Monica Siqueira (2009) elaborates an ethnography of memory and sociability among 'old time *travestis*" in Rio de Janeiro; Aline Soares Lima (2009) carries out a study in the area of visual communication on *travestis*' self-representations in the virtual environment; Fernanda Cardozo (2009) examines morals, socialities and conflicts among *travestis* in a medium-sized city in southern Brazil. In recent years, a new field of research has emerged that deserves to be investigated, namely that of transsexual men (female to male: FTM), questioning many of the theories on transsexuality.

Under the coordination of Margarita Chaves Chamorro, an ICANH researcher, we undertook a number of brief ethnographic trips to cities and towns in the surrounding areas (Islândia and Benjamin Constant in Brazil, Santa Rosa in Peru and Puerto Nariño in Colombia) as well as Letícia and Tabatinga themselves.

At the beginning of 2015, a LabNAU team under the coordination of José Guilherme Magnani carried out another research trip to the city of Tabatinga where they were able to map the urban dynamics relating to leisure, religiosity, circulation and transport, commerce and work, modes of dwelling and housing.[11]

Dialoging with these two experiences, in 2016 I began my own investigations on the triple border and carried out fieldwork in February. Later, Thiago Oliveira[12] spent another period immersed in the field in July. This enabled us to present the ethnographic reflections that follow below, before proceeding to a comparison between them and the ethnography produced in Paraíba.

Lives on the border: Alto Solimões

Disembarking from a canoe, boat or launch in the port of Tabatinga and walking toward Amizade Av., Santos Dumont Street, our attention is drawn to dozens of small beauty salons that are grouped in two blocks, interspersed with small restaurants, a headquarters of the Church Assembly of God, and two large shoe stores. In practically all the salons, the presence of gay boys stands out – trans *niños* and *chicas*, especially Peruvians. Some are in charge of the salons, others work temporarily, others just stop by to chat. The centrality of this street – between the port and the main avenue – leads to a high circulation of pedestrians and motorcycles. Nonetheless we could refer to it as a Peruvian gay-trans 'turf'[13] in Tabatinga.

Tabatinga is an Amazonian town located in the extreme southwest of the state of Amazonas, and forms part of the mesoregion of Alto Solimões, comprising nine municipalities along the Solimões River (Amaturá, Atalaia do Norte, Benjamin Constant, Santo Antônio do Içá, São Paulo de Olivença, Tabatinga, Tonantins, Fonte Boa and Jutaí). Some 1,200 km (745 mi.) in distance from the state capital of Manaus, Tabatinga borders the towns of Letícia (Colombia), Islândia and Santa Rosa (Peru), and all of their inhabitants circulate among them freely.

The area as a whole forms an urban network difficult for the outsider to apprehend and understand. Within the mesoregion, Tabatinga is the city with the largest population, about 62,300 inhabitants, followed by Benjamin Constant, with 40,417 and São Paulo de Olivença, with 37,300 inhabitants. The city's economy is based on small and medium-sized trades, with an intense Peruvian presence, mainly focused on foodstuffs and clothing, in addition to the income generated through the work of public servants.[14] There is a strong presence of Peruvians living on the Brazilian side, coming from regions like Iquitos and Caballococha. According to Jakob (2011), about 30% of Peruvian migration to Brazil is to the Brazilian Amazon, mainly to the cities of Tabatinga, Benjamin Constant and São Paulo de Olivença.

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11 This expedition was part of a research project run in partnership with the Center for City Studies in the Brazilian Amazon (NEPECAB) of the Federal University of Amazonas. The following LabNAU researchers participated in the team: Dr. José Guilherme Cantor Magnani (coordinator), Ana Letícia Fiori, José Agnello A. D. de Andrade and Tiemi Kayamori Lobato da Costa. Blanca Yagüe also took part in the research.

12 Graduate student in Social Anthropology by the University of São Paulo under my supervision.

13 My use of 'turf' is taken from the categories proposed by José Guilherme Magnani (2002/2005) to think of a delimited space in which people know each other, have ties of friendship and perform the same function. In this case, the space concerned can probably more accurately located somewhere between a 'turf' and a 'patch.'

14 Most public servants are members of the armed forces, mainly male, besides a few other civil servants (professors and technicians) who work at the Federal University of Amazonas (UFAM), Amazonas State University (UEA) and the Federal Institute of Amazon (IFAM).

Continuing on from the urban zone of Tabatinga,[15] running along the Amizade Avenue in the opposite direction to the river Solimões, is the city of Letícia, located 683 miles away from Bogota, access to which is only possible by air. Though known as 'twin cities,' they present different economic, political and cultural characteristics. Letícia has a political centrality in the Amazon region as the capital of the Department of Amazonas in Colombia and is central to a project of constructing Colombian nationality. It has better urban infrastructure, comprises a regional center for the sale of imported products, and receives tourists attracted by a range of different activities geared towards ecotourism and ethnic tourism.[16] Tabatinga, by contrast, is composed of areas for exclusive use by the armed forces and has several neighborhoods with unpaved streets, precarious water and electricity supplies, and no sewage treatment network. On the triple border, we also find Santa Rosa, located on the Peruvian side, a small settlement on an island on the Solimões River that becomes flooded during the rainy season. Santa Rosa belongs to the district of Yavarí, with a population of approximately 1,000 people. In this region of the border, the presence of the Ticuna indigenous people, as well as other ethnic groups, is clearly evident.

> The metaphor of the mosaic may not be the most appropriate to express the social diversity making up the city of Tabatinga. It is inadequate because the mosaic composes, out of a diverse jumble of pieces, a coherent whole whose parts are harmonically juxtaposed. The image of a network whose wires are shuffled and whose constant movement stresses one or other knot, compressing one or other gap, may perhaps more adequately express how the social relations and the use and disuse of resources (human, state, natural) – continuously sought, claimed or denied in this hybrid / complex / contradictory context – become formed. It would be equally arbitrary to limit such a scenario to the geopolitical borders of the cities, Brazilian or otherwise. (Cunha, 2016: 10)[17]

On our field trips, we were able to meet Peruvians living in Brazil for some time, who had already circulated in some nearby cities or other regions, and who worked in Tabatinga as hairdressers, in addition to performing sex for monetary exchanges in their free time, or vice-versa. We also approached Colombians who live in Leticia and Brazilians who had already circulated through different cities in other regions of Brazil. Between Peruvian, Colombian and Brazilian interlocutors,[18] there is a polysemy of lifestyles, forms of corporal construction and subjectivities, which depend on nationality or origin. There is, however, a strong relationship between processes of feminization and beauty that can be observed in all of them. As far as the spatial shifts go, though, they depend on other markers of difference, such as generation and nationality. We can see that Colombians – *chicas trans* – are less mobile and come from the city of Letícia itself, maintaining daily relations with the Brazilian side, despite the existence of tensions, especially during gay parades and beauty contests organized by the Peruvians living in Brazil, such as Frontier Miss Gay.

Unlike Brazilian *travestis* in both Tabatinga and the Northeast, their Peruvian peers seem to have a less categorical identity classification and also do not undergo such intensive bodily modifications through hormone therapies and plastic surgeries. Some have female names but identify as *niños*, others as *trans*.

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15   Until 1981, the city of Tabatinga was part of the municipality of Benjamin Constant. It originated in the town of San Francisco Xavier de Tabatinga, founded in 1766 to install a military detachment to guard the borders between Portugal and Spain. Until the end of the XIX century its territory belonged to the city of São Paulo de Olivença / AM and in 1898 it became part of the municipality of Benjamin Constant. In 1867, less than six miles away from Tabatinga, Leticia emerged, the result of a navigation agreement between Brazil and Peru. At that time Leticia was no more than a small customs house, whose purpose was to regulate the Amazon River rubber trade, carried on between Iquitos in Peru and Manaus in Brazil. In 1927, as a result from a controversial agreement between Peru and Colombia, Leticia was ceded to the latter and Peru gained the territory of the southern zone of the Putumayo River. Peruvian popular dissatisfaction led to a war between the two governments, which ended in 1934, through intervention by the United Nations (Aponte Motta, 2011).

16   The municipality of Leticia has a population of approximately 70,400 inhabitants, of which 26,700 are in the urban area.

17   Text originally written in Portuguese. Author's translation.

18   All the interlocutors have female social names, even those who do not identify themselves as transsexuals or *travestis*.

Gilda, for example, a 45-year-old native of Iquitos, presents herself as a "*niño* who crossdresses" and has lived in Brazil for at least 30 years. Before working as a hairdresser, she also worked as a prostitute. First she went to Benjamin Constant before moving to Tabatinga. She says she likes 'whorgy' and on Sundays and days off from the salon she crossdresses: she uses high heels, wears wigs, miniskirts and goes out "like a whore." Even though she likes Brazil, she says she wants to leave Tabatinga because she is 'old' and all her friends are already living in other parts of the country or the world. At the same time she speaks with sadness of having been abandoned by her family when she was young, and of having few friends in Tabatinga, since there are few of her age who remain in the city. She rents a small room in the same street where she works, where there are other rooms rented by other Peruvians, both *niños* and trans. Marcela, 28, also Peruvian, has been in Tabatinga for 11 years but has already circulated in several countries and regions of Brazil. "With my body I have already traveled to Italy, Buenos Aires, Santiago de Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala." She also says that she wants to leave the city or set up her own salon with her friend Gilda, "that bitch," she jokes.

According to Flávia Cunha, José Miguel Olivar and Patrícia Rosa (2015), the popular imaginary concerning Peruvians on the borders reproduces inequalities and prejudices. "The view of Peruvians as poor, underdeveloped and illegal does not seem to represent piety, identity or solidarity, but rather to be closer to repulsion, rejection and repression, which reasserts the notion of a dispute over the supposed scarcity of public resources that characterizes the region in question according to many social and political agents" (Cunha, Olivar & Rosa, 2015: 20, author's translation). It is no wonder that the location where sexual transactions with the lowest monetary value take place in Tabatinga is the market area, near the port and the beauty salons that we visited.

> The region where less expensive sexual transactions take place in Tabatinga is the market, conceived as an urban space that articulates Peruvianness, illegality, poverty and indigeneity. The cheapest brothels in Tabatinga are located in this market area, they are described and produced as Peruvians (the managers, music, women and regular customers are all of this nationality) and as relatively more dangerous, meaning that, performatively and discursively, the women who work there occupy the position of *Peruvians* (Cunha, Olivar & Rosa, 2015: 10).

This region of the market, classified as Peruvian territory, is also frequented by Brazilian *travestis* like Gisela. Only 20 years old, she has already lived in several other places, such as Campinas, Ribeirão Preto (cities in São Paulo), Mato Grosso (a Brazilian state) and Manaus (capital of Amazonas state). She alternates temporary jobs in salons with 'cathousing.' Like many young Brazilian *travestis*, she intends to 'add breast' as soon as she makes more money "working the night." Currently, she is in Manaus "to make money." Through the little that we could follow, the lifestyle of Gisela involves a constant mobility enabled by material and affective networks not consolidated in any single place.

The triple border can be analyzed as an urban complex (Olivar, 2014), not defined by each administrative unit separately, but instead by the relations that these small cities establish between themselves and by the ways in which people and collectivities circulate within and classify them. From the perspective of *travestis* and transsexuals, urban spaces are traced by the corporeal, affective and economic demands that locate them in the landscape of neighborhoods in the border towns of Upper Solimões, especially where large numbers of people circulate, such as riverbanks and avenues. In these neighborhoods, there is a concentration of beauty salons, where they receive clients, can readily observe who comes and goes, exchange and receive information and build affective relationships – which may be mediated by material relationships too. They sell products, hair and also their own bodies, which, in the afternoon, move from the salons to the squares and bars and the famous Scandalus nightclub as they search of sex and money.

These cities located on and belonging to the borders can be thought of, therefore, as strategic places where circulation and mobility are present in the constitution of a certain trans urbanity, which takes place precisely in the impermanence and movement between cities on the urban margins.

Inspired by Michel Agier, we can think of invisible, unofficial cities found both in metropolises and in rural or quasi-rural regions. This allows us to begin to observe cities as a hologram built by the cities dwellers. New possibilities can be anticipated, therefore, for thinking beyond geopolitical limits and expanding the range of research contexts in the area of urban anthropology.

Lives on the road: Paraíba

Every night, young *travestis* from Areal and Planalto, districts of Mamanguape city, on the northern coast of Paraíba, head to the BR 101 highway and from there hitchhike to the truck checkpoint. Located on the border between the states of Paraíba and Rio Grande do Norte, the checkpoint is where they work as prostitutes, mainly serving truck drivers. In the morning, they return to their small houses or rented rooms.

Mamanguape, one of the oldest cities in the state of Paraíba, is bisected by the BR 101 federal highway, place of passage between two capitals, João Pessoa and Natal. Built in the 1970s, there is an intense movement of people and vehicles on the road, separating the city into two poles. On the left-hand side (direction João Pessoa - Natal) are the neighborhoods of Cidade Nova, Planalto and Areal, places of recent occupation, with few paved streets, inhabited by sugarcane mill workers, agrarian reform settlers and poor populations. On the righthand side is the economic and political center of Mamanguape, occupied by traditional families, banks, public offices, markets, shops, universities, etc. All along the left side of the road there are motels, bars, gas stations, restaurants and so on where women and *travestis* offer prostitution services to both workers and truck drivers.

The roadside of the BR 101 highway, which at first sight might be seen as no more than a temporary place of passage for travelers, features a variety of economic activities – various garages, gas stations, motels, bars, restaurants, cashew nut hawkers, prostitutes, and so on. It is also a place for children and youth from the districts of Areal and Planalto to socialize, using the roadside to play football and fly kites.

Mamanguape is an obligatory route point for those traveling to Rio Tinto, just 3 miles away, and to Baía da Traição, where there are beautiful tourist beaches and a considerable portion of the Potiguara indigenous population lives. Rio Tinto, with approximately 22,000 inhabitants, was built in the early twentieth century to receive the facilities and workers village of Companhia de Tecidos Rio Tinto (belonging to the Lundgren family, the same owners as Companhia de Tecidos Paulista, located in Paulista,[19] Pernambuco). The factory has been closed for over 20 years and most of the city's residents are retired workers. Recent years have seen the emergence and strengthening of the Potiguara indigenous peoples, and their success in achieving demarcation of their lands, some of which are located within the urban perimeter.[20]

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19   Companhia de Tecidos Rio Tinto / Companhia de Tecidos Paulista: Two huge textile manufacturing plants (N.T.).

20   The indigenous population has begun to emerge as actors in an urban setting, leading to conflicts, albeit subtle, with the city's residents who consider themselves 'non-Indians' and bringing to light the ambiguities of Rio Tinto's history and memory. On one hand, the city went into economic decline due to the closure of the aforementioned company. On the other, this opened up possibilities for the ethnic emergence of indigenous people who until then had suffered discrimination and violence from city dwellers, the mills owners – who still occupy vast areas within the indigenous reservations – and the Lundgren family. A large part of the indigenous peoples are located in the municipalities of Rio Tinto, Marcação and Baía da Traição, with 8,012 residents (Census 2010, IBGE), distributed in 32 indigenous villages with a population of approximately 19,000 people (data from FUNAI, 2012).

According to data provided by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) in its most recent census, 2010, the municipality of Mamanguape presents one of the state's worst set of indexes in relation to schooling, life expectancy and income. The average life expectancy is 58 years and the illiteracy rate of the population over 15 years is 46%. In relation to income, 41.3% of the population over 10 years old do not have any income and 43% live on up to one minimum wage. This means that out of a population of 42,000 people, 34% live without any income and 35% live on up to one minimum wage.

Mamanguape has a considerable importance in the history of the formation of Paraíba state, and since 1979 has been classified as Historical and Artistic Patrimony of the State of Paraíba (IPHAEP). [21] Today, though, occupation of the city is chaotic and its historical monuments deteriorated. A large portion of the low-income population works temporarily in sugarcane processing factories (producing alcohol and sugar), located in the vicinity of the urban area.

The families of Marta and Raiany, young *travestis* and our interlocutors in this research, are part of this context of poverty. During our fieldwork between 2008 and 2009, they were aged 19 and 17, respectively. They contributed to the domestic budget through their work "on the road." When we met, Marta was living with Raiany's family: her husband, her father, her mother, her sister, and two nephews. Raiany's mother had worked for many years as a sugarcane harvester and no longer worked because of her age and health problems. The father, a blacksmith, did autonomous and intermittent work, and often found himself intoxicated, which would lead to rows and physical aggression.

Marta and Raiany worked at night and slept most of the day. On weekends, Marta would visit her parents, tillers at the Uruba site in the rural area of Mataraca, a municipality near Mamanguape.[22] During our fieldwork (which we used to do preferably in the afternoon, when they were home), we were able to follow Raiany's transformation process, a cyclical movement of comings and goings in prostitution, terminations and reconciliations with her boyfriend, and breaks and renewals with her friend Marta. Raiany started in prostitution at the age of twelve. By the time we met her, she had begun ingesting hormones and we were able to observe how her body grew more feminine as time went on and she obtained more money from prostitution work. Little by little, she started to buy new clothes, cosmetics, jewelry, accessories, hair care, etc.

The care and transformation of the body, as well as the dealings and tricks of the business and the relationships with clients, are all things learned among friends, who exchange information, knowledge and strategies. Body construction, in the researched contexts, accompanies territorial displacements. To modify their bodies, receive silicone implants, undergo plastic surgeries that increase or shrink buttocks, noses, lips, waists and cheekbones, buy wigs or use *mega hair* techniques, buy heeled shoes in the right sizes and sexy clothes, make use of healthier hormone therapies, and so on, they need to travel to the major cities and, in order to do that, they need to make money in the sex markets.

Throughout the research we met *travestis* from different parts of Brazil, some of whom had even spent a season in Europe, in countries such as Italy and Spain. The main state capitals in the interlocutors' circuit were Recife and Natal, in the Northeast, and São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in the Southeast. Among the

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21 Mamanguape was the second municipality founded in the province in 1635, located in the lowland area of the river of the same name. From there, and following the course of the river, occupation moved inland until reaching the 'Agreste' (an intermediate zone between the semi-arid region and the Atlantic Rainforest) and the 'Brejo' (wetlands). The first village in Paraíba was Felipéia de Nossa Senhora das Neves, founded in 1585, initial mark of the municipality of João Pessoa. The area of the municipality extended itself to the extreme south of the state, to the border with Pernambuco (Andrade, 2005). Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, it had economic centrality due to the presence of sugar mills. It then gradually lost its position due to the growth of cotton and livestock production in the Brejo region, located in the wetlands of Serra da Borborema (the Borborema Plateau). The economy of the latter region became based on the production of cachaça and *rapadura*(blocks of raw sugar), besides subsistence farming goods and tobacco. The connection between the 'brejo' zones and the 'sertão' (the semi-arid deep interior) was, in turn, through Campina Grande, which was at the intersection of the routes and quickly progressed.

22 Paraíba's Northern Coast comprises eleven municipalities: Mamanguape, Rio Tinto, Baía da Traição, Marcação, Itapororoca, Jacaraú, Pedro Régis, Curral de Cima, Capim, Cuité de Mamanguape and Mataraca. All of them belonged to Mamanguape until the mid-nineteenth century.

younger *travestis*, especially those who have not yet been able to travel to other cities, there is a desire to leave their place of origin and go to a city that gives them greater financial returns and greater social value. There is a certain world view that accompanies a *folk-urban continuum* (Redfield, 1949), which runs from the rural to the metropolitan environment, the latter represented especially by Europe. However, it is notable that this migration often does not either finish or halt in the middle of the road, but suffers some mishaps, and there is always the possibility of returning to their town of origin, which they call 'home.' In this way, even the 'European'[23] *travestis*, who mainly go to Italy and Spain, return to their small towns.

Accompanying the circuit of sex markets, esthetic-corporal production becomes more visible, and exalted, in beauty contests like Miss Gay, Miss Trans and Top Drag, among others.[24] The contests bestow legitimacy and visibility to the frontier bodies, which are present in the urban landscape in an ephemeral way and forever changing from one place to another. In Paraíba, we noticed that contests, especially Top Drag contests, offer space to young persons who are experimenting feminization processes: they are starting to wear high heels, low-cut tight sexy clothes, use wigs and makeup, and dub their favorite singers: Madonna, Beyoncé, Shakira. Being on stage allows them to begin to fortify their female souls, backed by the cheering crowds. Some of them, as they begin to stand out, also begin to work "on the track," – that is, they also start out in prostitution and are gradually able to earn money and transform their bodies, an arduous and costly task. In this sense, a close relationship exists between the production of beauty, body transformation, sexual economies and spatial displacements. Body and space are embedded in a permanent game of desire, consumption and mobility. And so, between body and space, subjectivities and affectivities are produced.

A year after we met her in Mamanguape, Marta moved to Recife at the invitation of an older *travesti*, a sort of godmother who receives young *travestis* from this region to work in prostitution on the outskirts of Pernambuco's capital. After fifteen days in the capital, when she was "working the sidewalk" – a situation very different from that experienced at BR 101's checkpoints – she was murdered. Her case did not even generate a police report and adding to the list of so many other unpunished crimes against *travestis* and transsexuals that occur daily in Brazil. Rumors are that she was trying to help another *travesti* who was being beaten on the street and that her corpse was found some distance from the city. From an anthropological perspective, Marta's vulnerability in this episode resided in the inability of a young *travesti* from Paraíba's interior to deal with the territorialities, conflicts and power relations in the spaces of prostitution. She had not yet mastered the local logic, permeated by a complex network of relationships and groups, in a city of metropolitan dimensions, with more than 1,500,000 inhabitants.

Even after the murder of Marta, Raiany kept maturing the idea of leaving Mamanguape. Finally she went to risk her luck in Rio de Janeiro. From then on, we lost contact with her. The tragic episode with her friend did not stop her from dreaming of a more glamorous life in a capital city and leaving the small Mamanguape.

On the margins and on the edges: desire-cities

The complex configuration of urban spaces in the contemporary world, the discussions on global cities and world cities (Sassen, 1991), the post-urban (Mongin, 2009), transits and transnational networks (Piscitelli, 2013), flows and mobilities (Hannerz, 1997; Agier, 2011), circuits and paths (Magnani, 2012) and invisible cities (Latour, 2007) incite us to elaborate new ethnographic perspectives in the field of urban

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23 'European' is the label given to those who have already travelled to Europe by others.

24 The contests take place in different Brazilian cities, in varied scales and proportions. The most important of them is Miss Gay Brazil, annually held in Juiz de Fora, Minas Gerais state.

anthropology in Brazil. In general terms, this research area has mainly focused on large-scale cities, exploring the diversity of populations and their growth, migratory processes, spaces of segregation, forms of violence, and so forth. Little attention has been given so far, though, to processes that cross interurban boundaries and mobilize distinct scales that allow mobility between large, medium and small cities, between the forest and the capital, between the coast and the inland. Here it is a question of mobilities, not migrations, a flux in which there is not a single place of arrival, nor one point of origin – movements of people who prostitute themselves, cisgender and transgender women and *travestis*, agents who participate in sexual economies, travelers who find their own permanence in the movement and the journey. They move between cities and model themselves in the fabric of temporary experiences in places that offer them the possibilities for social and economic ascension and that, at the same time, are more likely to accept their ways of being, past and present, usually considered abject. This research is pursued not just in cities located on political-administrative maps, but in territorialities that are made and remade by urban experiences materialized both inside and outside official cities, which take shape in their mobility and their heterogeneity (Delgado, 1999).

In this sense, the proposal is reflect on the idea of borders not only as demarcations between what is inside and outside urban limits, but especially what is between them – people and collectivities that constitute themselves in their liminal existence, on the edges of the urban and the non-urban. "Re-bordering states means the re-bordering of cities, which also means the re-bordering of society. It is apparent that urban anthropology and the anthropology of borders should continually re-border themselves to keep apace" (Wilson, 2014, p. 118).

Border studies, to a large degree, refer to the idea of territory and territoriality and are focused on discussions of nation states, nationalisms and governance (Wilson, 2014). Territories, governed by states, are seen as agents of integration and differentiation, union and belonging. They refer, therefore, to an inside and an outside (Balibar, 2009; Zaiotti, 2011) that constitute national sovereignty. These political demarcations are questioned, for example, by the case of binational cities, located between two or more countries. In them, the border itself constitutes a condition for their existence (Buursink, 2001) and questions the authority of national sovereignty. The case of Tabatinga and Letícia, on the Brazil/Colombia border, offers an interesting scenario to reflect on the ambiguities of urban spaces that thrown into question the political-administrative delimitations.

> The triple Brazil-Colombia-Peru border has its social and territorial nucleus in the intimate relationship of three very different urban groups. On the right bank, upstream of the Solimões-Amazonas river, are Tabatinga (BR) and Leticia (COL), 'twin cities' (Brasil, 2010), cities of *conurbación* (Aponte, 2011) between which there is no significant geographical separation today, nor any significant blocks or controls to mobility (Olivar, 2014, p. 89).

In this way, our collective research proposal is to explore different notions of the border. First, we propose to think of the border as a region and not just as a line that demarcates one side and the other of a certain territory (Hannerz, 1997). Second, we aim to understand it as a way of life,[25] which allows the construction of people and bodies living on the road, on the track,[26] at the market, between cities and worlds. Third, we consider it to be a theoretical-methodological proposal interconnecting two areas: urban studies and transsexuality theories.

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25 José Guilherme Magnani defines this lifestyle as "a set of codes induced by and required for the use of urban equipment, spaces and institutions, responsible for the performance of appropriate forms of sociability" (1998)**,** p. 58; author's translation). This notion also covers the set of knowledge used for certain resources, goods and services offered by the city.

26 'Track' (*pista*) is a native category used by both *travestis* and women to designate the place where they carry out prostitution: streets, sidewalks, roads, gas stations, etc.

Committed to the idea of sharing as the condition for a certain anthropological project, this research aims to contribute to the effort of rethinking borders within our discipline. It is in line, therefore, with the reflections raised by Márcio Goldman and Tania Lima (1999), which discuss the abyss that currently separates indigenous ethnology and the so-called complex societies. According to them, societies are neither simple nor complex. For Goldman and Lima, this opposition causes an 'us'/'them' split within anthropology itself, reaffirms substantialist conceptions, and creates asymmetries. Complexity lies in the way in which anthropology constructs analyses that encompass plural rather than one-sided dimensions.

> The question is whether the complexity of the societies thus designated is anything more than the consequence of the way ethnography is done (including fieldwork). By themselves, societies are neither simple nor complex, but our analyses can build uni- or multidimensional realities. (Goldman and Lima, 1999, p. 78)

In Brazil, the first studies in the area of urban anthropology took place in the 1970s and 80s. They sought to counteract research in the area of indigenous ethnology, aiming in part to legitimize a field of research – the metropolises – that could offer an understanding of the complexity of contemporary life. In a way, the dichotomy of 'complex' versus 'simple' societies reinforced a certain hierarchy of sub-areas of knowledge within anthropology, which revealed relationships of force and, as Goldman and Lima show, impeded a multidimensional view of the studied realities.

In this sense, despite the influences of community studies and research on the impacts of urbanization in small localities,[27] urban anthropology in Brazil was consolidated through research on metropolises such as São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia. The large-scale city model was considered as either a backdrop to understanding political, ethnic-racial, sexual, cultural and other problems, or as a space to think about the centrality of the urban in the configuration of social interactions and socialities. Due to the strong influence of the Chicago School, studies of minorities and deviations gained prominence in Brazilian urban anthropology, including sexual practices and dissident sexualities. Later, from the 1980s onwards, this theme became a specific area of study, straying from urban anthropology (Simões and Carrara, 2007).

As pointed out earlier, a large part of the researchers' efforts to investigate the subject of transexuality has been focused on metropolitan areas and capitals. However, contemporary experiences such as prostitution networks including transgender people, transregional flows, beauty contests, and political movements, all open up a space for us to shift the urban to a place of bordering.

The idea of circulation used here is related to the notion of network, which helps us understand cultural processes on a global scale (Hannerz, 1986), taking into account individual agency, relations between territory and culture, and extended series of social relations. For Hannerz, each individual experience results from a more or less dense network experience that can cause forms of encapsulation, segregation or integration, and translates into distinct perspectives of connection. Thus, an "ethnography of the network," according to the same author, opens up the possibility of understanding how people draw transnational or, in our case, transregional connections into their global existence and how they are involved in them.

Here the notion of network is not directly associated with the idea of a generalized urbanization of the world, which, as Marc Augé (2010) argues, reaffirms inequalities through the ideology of globalization. According to the author, the circulation of goods, people and messages in the contemporary world, on a global scale, reveals paradoxes such as the existence of a 'world-city' resulting from globalization, and 'city-worlds,' where gentrification, poverty and exclusion proliferate. Augé uses the concept of 'overmodern mobility' to think about population movements, instant communication, and the circulation of products,

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27 Candido, 1964; Harris, 1956; Hermann, 1948; Nogueira, 1962; Pierson, 1951; Wagley, 1957, Wagley, 1976 ; Willems and Mussolini, 1952; and Willems, 1947.

images and information. This mobility results from the paradox of contemporaneity, the exaltation of individualism and deterritorialization, where "we can hypothetically do everything without changing places; and nevertheless we move around" (Augé, 2010, p. 16).

Somewhere between the 'world-city' and the 'city-world' there are ways of making the city in its interstices – a city-to-become, a desire-city, to take up the suggestion of Deleuze and Guattari (1997): an unfinished, projected, desired process that is made and refashioned by the agents and their networks of relationships and interactions. "Desire constantly couples continuous flows and partial objects that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1997, p.11).

In these two research experiences in the North and Northeast of Brazil, the cities sought out by transvestites, transsexual women, trans *chicas* and *niños* are constructed on images about the cities in which they now live and those in which they wish to live in the future. These images are shaped in the concreteness of their bodies, which, through material and symbolic exchanges, can move to other territories where these same bodies may become more visible and publicly recognized – mobile urban territories that offer the possibility of consuming clothes, shoes, cosmetics and accessories, accessing health services that can facilitate their esthetic-corporal transformations, and making friendship networks.

Olivier Mongin, as a way of thinking about the urban condition in the contemporary world, emphasizing his own poetic and political experience, recuperates the idea of the refuge-city, an echo from the past, the idea of a city that receives exiles and the condemned without attaching any importance to the individual's origin or nationality. "The city is a space where you can enter and leave, a space where you can find refuge, a space of rights that is defined not only by the inside, the identity, the belonging, but by the relationship maintained between an inside and an outside. Hospitality is inseparable from migratory flows, flows of refugees and exiles who by means of the city claim their 'right to have rights' (Hannah Arendt)" (Mongin, 2009, p. 105). The author thus associates the city with the nomad and dialogues with Deleuze and Guattari's reading of the interaction between territorialization and deterritorialization – which appears in their proposal of a 'city-form,' a horizontal process of connections, as antagonic to the 'State-form.' Conceived in this way, the city can be seen as the correlate of the road, since it promotes circuits and circulations that are deterritorialized and reterritorialized in their own deterritorialization.

Are these cities, which favor in and out flows, in never ending spirals, the refuges for *travestis* and trans *chicas*? Are these their desire-cities? Or are their desires, which move fast, already co-opted by the logics of the city-worlds?

Translation by Alexandre Amaral.

Revision: David Rodgers

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