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Histories and Narratives of the First Generation of Travestis in Rio de Janeiro: Friendship as Power-Resistance

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Abstract:

This article investigates and problematizes the emergence of friendship networks that empowered trans experiences, specifically among those historically identified as travestis, in the city of Rio de Janeiro in the 1960s. Based on the narratives of Aloma Divina, Suzy Parker, and Yeda Brown, we analyze how friendship, with its fractures, dilemmas, and affections, potentiated subjectivation, ways of life, exchanges, and resignifications of self among gender-sex dissidents of cisheteronormativity.

Keywords: Friendships; Travesti Identities; Rio de Janeiro; Trans Experiences; Subjectivities

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Introduction

This article has two main objectives. First, to give visibility to the experiences, narratives, and self-images of some ‘travestis’ from the “first generation”,³ those who, throughout the

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³ For this reflection, ‘generation’ does not exclusively refer to age groups or age cohorts. Unfortunately, the use of this category is not common in historiographical analyses that articulate gender identities, subjectivation, and ways of life. Therefore, the main references were found mainly in other areas of knowledge, such as Anthropology. For this article, “generation1” broadens the focus of analysis, allowing inquiry into the ways of periodizing life, its forms of sociability, networks of friendship and affection, as well as the production of subjectivities. They are considered members of the so-called ‘first generation’ because as early as the 1960s, they invested, sought, and experienced a set of bodily and subjective changes and interventions, forging other possibilities of subjectivation. For more on the category of generation, see especially: Debert 2012; Machado and Barros 2009.

1960s, in the city of Rio de Janeiro, invested in bodily and subjective interventions, new ways of life, and new possibilities of self-determination and self-expression.⁴

In these opening lines, we highlight the existence of a rich Brazilian scientific production, from various fields of knowledge, on ‘travestilidades’ and transgender identities. In many of these works, the medicalization of identities and trans experiences have been thematized and explored. Jorge Leite Júnior (2011 and 2012), for example, focuses on the emergence of the categories ‘travesti’ and ‘transexual’ in scientific discourse, analyzing the pathologization of identities and ways of life of those considered to be ‘sexual deviants’, especially ‘travestis’ and ‘transexuais’. Our reflection, however, is the result and effect of problematizing approaches from transfeminist movements, Queer Theories, and Gender Studies. We assume an epistemological stance that has as its starting point the historicity of subjectivation processes, ways of life, narratives, and images of self.

Still by way of introduction, we agree with the propositions presented by historian Marina Duarte (2018) regarding “identidade travesti”. According to that researcher, there is no single transnational and universal possibility for naming and addressing individuals who challenge binary gender norms and cisgenderity. Beyond social differences, the variety of uses of terms also reflects generational differences. In Brazil, for example, people from the so-called ‘first generation’ who did not identify with the gender socially determined and assigned to them, especially those focused on here, generally perceived themselves as ‘travestis’, and not as transformists or ‘transexuais’. Still in resonance with the abovementioned researcher, in the 1970s and 1980s, the term ‘transexual’ was not so popular in Brazil, while the words ‘transgender’ and ‘trans’ practically did not exist in everyday use. In its specificity, the second generation of ‘travestis’ brings new variations to this mode of existence and subjectivities, while new words are emerging in discourses about ‘identidades travestis’. In this article, as mentioned earlier, ‘identidade travesti’ is addressed in its historicity and cultural particularities. We will respect the self-determination presented by our interlocutors. Thus, the words ‘travesti’ and ‘transexual,’ in Portuguese, will be used as they were mobilized in the analyzed narratives as we recognize the impossibility of translating them into any other language since that process would erase the historical and cultural specificities that we intend to highlight.

The main documentary corpus for reflection was constituted by interviews, understood here as self-narratives and self-writings.⁵ In dialogue with Arfuch (2007), Michel Foucault (2006), Lejeune (2008) and Rago (2013), we understand that these narratives are constitutive of historical subjectivities. From this material, we can inquire into how they constituted themselves as ‘travesti’ subjects. It is important to underline the analytical effort that made it possible to explore what was articulated, woven, and signified in and through the self-narratives. Narratives undoubtedly denaturalize lived and narrated experiences because we start from the historical and historiographical principle that nothing is self-evident. Narratives, therefore, serve as endowments of meaning and significance. Regarding methodological aspects, the research is qualitative, articulated with the references and propositions of Oral History. The latter helps to establish and organize the procedures of this work such as the various types of interviews and their implications for our reflection, the various possibilities of transcribing testimonies, and the different ways in which the historian relates to his or her interviewees.

⁴ Regarding the first-generation “travestis”, see: Souza, Paulo Vitor Guedes 2022; Lopes, Fábio Henrique 2019; Lopes, Fábio Henrique and Duarte, Marina 2021; Lopes, Fábio Henrique 2018; Lopes, Fábio Henrique 2016; Lopes, Fábio Henrique and Souza, Paulo Vitor Guedes 2020.

⁵ ‘Writing of the self’ according to the notion of Michel Foucault (2006) involves assuming control of one’s own life, becoming the subject of oneself through the work of reinventing subjectivity. See also: Rago (2013, 52).

In relation to the selection of interviewees, emphasis was given primarily to those who lived in the city of Rio de Janeiro throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. In a text like this, it is impossible to focus on the stories and memories of all the ‘travestis’ from the first generation in Rio de Janeiro. Therefore, among those willing to participate in this reflective work, we highlight the narratives of three of them: Aloma, Suzy Parker, and Yeda Brown. Through their narratives, we learned to recognize, appreciate, and develop critical reflections on the role and importance of friends with whom they shared experiences, defined dreams and projects, attributed meaning to life, and managed dreams, projects, secrets, affections, pains, insecurities, and fears within a relational network.

At the same time, and as the second objective of this article, we aim to reflect on friendship, understood here as (1) a device, strategy, and condition for historical processes of self-determination and self-identification, shaping unique subjectivities and life possibilities; (2) power, resistance, and confrontation against the cisheterocentric norm and the ‘gender cultural program’ (Preciado 2018, 441). The central issue to be investigated is how friendships could have aided in the construction of an ‘identidade travesti’ and in the processes of (re)invention of the feminine.

Regarding the highlighted issue above, as well argued by Pelúcio (2009, 50), historically, ‘travestis’ considered as ‘mothers’ and ‘godmothers’, that is, the older and more experienced ones, have been and are prominent and important in processes of subjectivation and in the production of femininities. They teach and pass on to the younger ones their knowledge and techniques of body transformation, gender materialization and performances, as well as health and beauty tips. Our argument is that throughout the 1960s, as we will see, friends are the ones who empower and enable new subjectivities, new self-relations.

To begin with, we will reflect on friendship, and then we will highlight the stories, narratives, and memories of Aloma, Suzy Parker, and Yeda Brown about friendships and their early experiences in the production of bodily diversities, their self-identifications, and experiences of feminine and ‘travesti’ genders. To initiate our reflection, we ask: What sense and importance can there be in thinking about the theme of friendship linked to historical ‘travestilidades’ and to ‘travestis’, qualified subjects, described, and historically named/considered as abject?

Friendships: Strategies to Make Life Possible in Hostile Times

Throughout time, friendship has been used as a means of connection, as a representation of an almost familial bond, as a political pact between peoples or leaders. Similarly, throughout history, we can perceive that denaturalizing friendship means seeing it as a relationship that goes beyond solidarity, fraternity, and/or brotherhood; it is necessary to explore its creative, political, and historical potential. From Antiquity to the Middle Ages, from the modern period to the present day, the relationships between friends have been transformed over time and space, giving new and different meanings to intimacy, politics, and the very idea of what should be public and private. They have also served as devices for the construction of subjectivities. A product of certain specific historical contexts, friendships are marked by time, filled with discontinuities, ruptures, and socially and culturally forged changes.

Michel Foucault’s inquiries into friendship and the constitution of subjectivities are often seen as the beginning of a more detailed debate on the subject. In several texts, the philosopher highlighted his interest in the question of friendship and even suggested that it could constitute a way of life. In his own words:

Throughout the centuries that followed antiquity, friendship emerged as a highly significant social relationship: a social bond within which individuals had a certain degree of freedom, a form of choice (albeit limited), allowing them to experience very intense emotional connections. Friendship also had economic and social implications - individuals were expected to assist their friends, etc. (Foucault 2004, 272)

For our current purposes, we envision friendships in their full political potency, as a kind of affective tissue (Rosa 2013, 78), capable of ensuring the continuity of the lives of individuals who have confronted gender norms, challenged compulsory heterosexuality standards, and invented subjectivities historically named as 'travestis'. We recognize that it is insufficient to think of friendship only as a synonym for solidarity, bonds of affection, and fraternity, as we acknowledge that affection is political and capable of instigating true, everyday revolutions. Therefore, we do not aim to idealize a perfect model of friendship. Instead, we seek the creative possibilities of self-invention, the practices of creating and maintaining ways of life, of subjectivities invented in the in-between spaces of gender, race/ethnicity, and geographical regions. Hence, some friendships, such as those to be highlighted, are not necessarily the best, the truest, the most relevant. They are, in their historicities, forms of friendship, they are devices that function as a life force for individuals who have inhabited hostile regions.

It is within this space of micro-relationships, of micro-affectations, that we see individually forged collectivities emerge. Thus, contrary to readings that would tend to observe individualism, selfishness, and isolation, we perceive the tightening of bonds, the collective production of the self, challenges to gender norms, and ruptures in rules that are deemed eternal/natural. In the wake of those lives made possible with, for, and by friends, we find the creation of historical ways of life that resist the assaults of contemporary cisheteronormativity.

Thus, despite the existence of biopolitical exercises aimed at capturing bodies and subjectivities, and the commercialization of friendship pills (Mizoguchi 2016, 179), it is still possible to glimpse friendships' political potency, particularly when what is at stake are gender and sexuality norms. It is, therefore, through this lens that we analyze the historical formations of friendships in the processes of 'travesti' subjectivation; understanding that, even though the language of the familial such as sister, mother, goddaughter (all in the feminine) may compose friendships among transgender individuals today, it was not always so. For the 'travestis' focused on here, those who lived in the 1960s, this repertoire was not given and they needed to invent themselves differently. Nonetheless, we observe that whether with recent language, which connects friendship and family, or in the 1960s, friendships cannot be identified only as symptomatic of what is experienced exclusively in the realm of the private. After all, most of the time, these same relationships are woven as a means of entering the public stage, as a way to move out of the private sphere, to participate in the artistic-cultural scene of the city, recreating gender spaces, such as theaters and nightclubs in Rio de Janeiro throughout the 1960s.

In this everyday and micropolitical practice of inventing life, subjects were created, subjectivities forged, lives became possible. In that sense, Foucault does not consider this subject as sovereign and universal, as it is situated in time and space:

First and foremost, I do believe that there is no sovereign, founding subject, no universal form of subject that we could find everywhere. I am very skeptical and hostile towards this conception of the subject. I think, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection or, in a more autonomous manner, through practices of liberation, of freedom, as in Antiquity - based, obviously, on a certain number of rules, styles, conventions that we can find within the cultural milieu. (Foucault 2004b, 288)

When attempting to qualify/define these experiences with the concepts of gender, arguing, for example, that ‘travestis’ simply reinforce, reiterate, and reproduce already projected femininities, the lived experience, the process, the (dis) paths taken to confront cisheteronormativity escape notice. As Whittle aptly suggested:

It’s all well and good not to have a theoretical place within the current gender world, but that’s not the daily lived experience. Real life offers trans people constant stigma and oppression, based on the seemingly unreal concept of gender. This is one of the most significant issues that trans people have brought to feminism and queer theory. (Whittle 2006, XII)

It is the exercise of being understood by friends that sets the tone for friendship relations in ‘travestis’ experiences. As Jeffrey Weeks (2007, 154) observes, there is an ethics of friendship, a commitment that involves various elements to maintain the unity of the relationship; unlike other bonds that involve affection and relational protocols, in the friendships recounted by Aloma, Suzy, and Yeda, this ethics involves care for the body, emotional and/or financial support, and the complicity of gender experience. In this construction of an aesthetics of existence, ‘each individual must form their own ethics; [and] the ethics of friendship paves the way for the creation of forms of life, without prescribing a correct mode of existence’. (Ortega 1999, 167).

In that regard, Hines (2007, 154) emphasizes friendship networks as a means of obtaining social, emotional, and material support, agreeing that comfort and understanding are fundamental aspects in the selection of close friends, as with them, the sharing of successful knowledge and practices of body transformation is authorized without the need to explain and justify each action, since the lived experiences are similar (Hines 2007, 156-7).

This convergence of experiences fosters a certain complicity, an empathy. As reported by several ‘travestis’, one of the stages of sharing these experiences occurs at the beginning of the transformation, when clothing, accessories, mannerisms, and gestures considered feminine are taught and incorporated into gender performances. In the highlighted friendships, one can perceive how friendship, in its political potency, enables and enhances the invention of subjectivity, as it creates a ‘discovery of oneself in the other’ (Lonta 2007, 63).

In Rio de Janeiro, throughout the 1960s, the houses of friends, theaters such as João Caetano, República, Recreio, Dulcina, and Rival, and nightclubs like Stop, Alcatraz, Fred’s, and Lido were heterotopic spaces where gender performances and bodily interventions took shape, materiality, meaning, and presence. Lurking cisheteronormativity was provoked and often fractured. Bodily diversities, tips on which hormones to ingest, glamorous clothing, and a particular vocabulary were forged and shared in these spaces. Friends became accomplices in the clandestine experience of the early ‘transformations’ and were partners in confronting the hostility experienced in public scenes. These same friends integrated practices of the self (Foucault 1985, 43-73), understood as a collective activity, and enabled the pursuit of forms of freedom; they contributed to the construction of a way to exercise freedom.⁶

Considering that Foucaultian freedom is not of the order of liberation, but rather of the constitution of subjects, the relationships that enable, potentiate, and guarantee the realization of existence projects constituted in networks, even if normative, entail possible practices of freedom. This is what Foucault would call ethical freedom, considering that ethics is the work through which the subject constitutes itself (Castro 2016, 247). It is, therefore, a freedom that allows ‘feminines’ and femininities to be elaborated in bodies culturally defined and socialized as masculine. Although certain gender and sexuality norms are re-actualized in these experiences, it is performances that produce them, thus creating new and different meanings; they produce historical effects, many of them unpredictable, proliferating subjectivities.

Aloma Divina

Born in Salvador, Bahia, Aloma fled her home at the age of 9 in 1958, with the city of Rio de Janeiro as her destination. Brave and unafraid of the unknown, at the bus station in her city, the young black boy asked for help from an elderly lady he had just met, ‘a mulata,’ in Aloma’s words, who also aimed to reach the capital city of Rio de Janeiro. Both boarded the bus and set off for their planned destination, without the legal requirement of presenting documents proving family ties and/or parental relationships.

Upon arriving at their destination, still at the bus station in Rio de Janeiro, Aloma left behind the gazes and care of the unknown woman, and once again, ventured into new experiences. At the age of 9, she made the street her new home. Over the next four years, as she herself states,⁷ she lives among beggars, moving between Tiradentes Square in the city center and the Flamengo neighborhood.

As highlighted in a previous work, ‘without dramatizing her choices, [Aloma] refuses to cast herself in the role and place of a victim for having lived on the streets, which could imprison her critical thinking and impoverish her actions’ (Lopes 2018, 60-61). Instead of producing a narrative filled with regrets, bitterness, and repentance, she identifies the struggles and difficulties of being homeless. At the same time, she acknowledges that several friendships became possible because of her time living on the streets, especially the one intimately forged with her friend Joca. She remembers that while living on the benches of Carlos Gomes Square in downtown Rio de Janeiro, she noticed that every day a ‘bicha’ passed by, strutting, speaking loudly, and marking her presence. Over time, sharing the same space, one living there and the other passing through to get to her home, brought the young black boy from Salvador and Joca, the aforementioned ‘bicha’ who cheerfully crossed the square, closer together. From the initial contact, an unexpected invitation arose. Joca invited the young boy to live with him. At first, there was immediate and certain refusal. Perhaps due to distrust, maybe because of being on the streets, the young boy did not accept the invitation. However, Joca’s insistence and concern convinced the young boy, facilitating acceptance and inaugurating a new phase in his life.



Fig 1: Joca
Source: Aloma’s personal collection



Fig 2: Aloma
Source: Aloma’s personal collection

⁶ Freedom here is not conceived as a universal norm or a final state to be achieved, not as the absence of explicit forces or unjust laws, not as outside of power relations, but as practice, as exercise. See: FOUCAULT 2006; MCLAREN 2016.

⁷ Interview with Aloma on 07/25/2017.

The friendship with Joca, also known in some circles and relationships as Úrsula Monroe, opened up new directions and unprecedented experiences, becoming a life force for Aloma as she faced the difficulties of the streets. With the help of her friend, she left the streets, learned to sew, began to earn her own money, shared affections, and the process of self-identification with a feminine aspect, the ‘travesti’, gestated in and through performances, always in relation to and with her friend, indicating that gender is an ongoing process (Salih 2012, 67). Aloma also invented herself, with and from Joca, just as he was constituted in other ways through his interaction with Aloma. The alliance with her friend enabled the confrontation of cisheteronormativity.

The paths taken towards the unknown are not devoid of tensions, many of which are present in Aloma’s narratives, in her memories of the early hormones and self-recognition and self-definition, initially as Lili and later as Aloma. It was Joca who offered the first hormones (Lopes 2018, 61), indispensable for the new identifications and performances, potentiators of a new and desired corporeality. Without the need for authorization or concession, the young woman and her friend forged new relationships, including subjective ones, expanding from then on the possibilities of a more creative and self-managed life, thereafter self-defined and self-determined in and through the feminine.

At the same time, the friendship with Joca opened up new professional perspectives beyond sewing, as the network of personal and professional contacts became more extensive. If initially she learned a trade, she could also invest in bodily, subjective, and existential interventions. Then, when the effects of the first hormones were already noticeable, she managed to work at the Carlos Gomes Theater. From that theater, important for the scene and homoerotic culture of the city, she gained a foothold in another, much more significant and widely known venue, the famous Rival Theater. The latter is remembered as a space and a condition for new friendships and subjectivities. For example, it was at the Rival where Aloma emerged, replacing Lili, the name used until that moment; the new theater also intensified new and unexpected tensions and differences. In the late 1960s, in an environment dominated by white ‘travestis’ and white drag queens, the fact of being black and already very feminine heightened rivalries, hierarchies, and hostilities (Lopes 2018, 62-63).

All the constraints and challenges faced throughout the 1960s in the city of Rio de Janeiro are viewed positively by Aloma. Blending courage and audacity, she confronted hierarchies, forged her space, and solidified her credibility as an artist, not only on the stages of Rio de Janeiro theaters that enchanted the city with drag shows but also later in São Paulo, other regions of Brazil, and international cities. It is worth noting that the partnership and friendship with Joca were conditions and strategies to produce and/or facilitate new femininities, such as the ‘travesti’, first as a sewing assistant, then as an assistant in theaters, and finally as an artiste.

Suzy Parker

While Aloma had to leave her hometown to forge new networks of friendship, other gender performances, and unprecedented subjectivities, the carioca Suzy Parker⁸ took advantage of living in the bustling surroundings of Praça Tiradentes to colorize her stories and memories, her friendships, and her processes of subjectivation.

Suzy was born on January 15, 1945, in Rio de Janeiro. She spent her entire childhood and adolescence in the city center, experiencing the effervescence of gay balls and carnival,

⁸ The excerpts below are from interviews given by Suzy Parker on 10/10/2016, 11/21/2016, 04/24/2017, and 02/15/2019.

the exuberance, colors, and audacity of the ‘men dressed as women’ who enchanted and indelibly marked her earliest memories in the mid-1950s.

In a process of self-determination and self-perception, she declared her refusal of what had been socially naturalized as masculine, virile, and inherent to those who had been culturally marked as men because they were born with a sex socially called masculine. A frequent visitor to Copacabana beach, especially in front of the Copacabana Palace, an area known at the time as the ‘Bolsa de Valores,’ a meeting point for Rio’s homosexuals, she was able to take advantage of the city’s vibrant cultural life to forge networks of friendship, some of which are remembered in the present as fundamental to her stories.

In the early 1960s, even without envisioning the possibility of an artistic life, she was encouraged by her friends to have a feminine name. The meeting place with friends became a historical condition of possibility for the creation of subjectivity. In a vote by the group of friends who gathered in front of the Copacabana Palace, Suzy was the chosen name. Then, she was thrown into the sea at Copacabana beach as a ritual of initiation, like a baptism, always in the presence of friends. Baptized, known, and recognized by friends, Suzy was not alone; she was a collective, everyone was always more than one, and they resisted the attempts of power to erase them.

In the 1960s, Suzy began taking the first hormones, an experience that enhanced her career, her performances on stage, and her self-affirmation. For her, self-recognition as a woman, leaving behind experiences, roles, and the masculine virile identity, expanded the possibilities of being a woman 24 hours a day, as she herself states. She had thus ceased to be a drag queen, producing feminine self-identification as a ‘travesti’.

Taking the first step with the same courage and audacity as Aloma, she made her presence known and brightened the artistic life of the city. In 1964, she made her debut at the Alcatraz Nightclub⁹ with the show ‘Rio by Night.’ She shared the stage with other drag queens and ‘travestis’, some of whom were friends and confidantes, such as Vera Gray and Ira Velásquez.



Fig. 3 – Suzy Parker
Source: Suzy Parker’s personal collection

⁹ The Alcatraz nightclub was inaugurated in 1964, located at number 51 Miguel Lemos Street, in the Copacabana neighborhood. It was one of the first venues to host drag shows in the city of Rio de Janeiro, following the example of the Stop nightclub, which was located in the Alaska gallery, in the same neighborhood.



Fig. 4 – Vera Gray
Suzy Parker's personal collection



Fig. 5 – Ira Velásquez
Suzy Parker's personal collection

Regarding her friends, Suzy Parker highlights the importance of Bijou Blanche, Ira Velásquez, Lorena D'Orleac, Marquesa, Vera Gray, and Carlos Gil. Among them, Bijou was the one who helped her in her first experience of becoming a 'travesti', in 1963, by lending her two lace dresses. Among them, there was not only complicity but also generosity and mutual help, favoring new ways of living. Vera Gray and Ira Velásquez were particularly highlighted in her narratives and were very much remembered. Vera Gray was remembered as an 'artistic mother'. They met when Vera auditioned to perform at the Alcatraz nightclub in 1964. The friendship with Vera not only potentiated a new way of being. With her friend, Suzy left her hometown, ventured into other landscapes and customs. With her, she was encouraged to test herself, to break free from the familiar, to deepen her artistic performance, and to seek new relationships with herself.

With a smile on her lips and tenderness in her voice, Suzy Parker acknowledges that Ira Velásquez was responsible for encouraging and contributing to her friend's artistic career. If Suzy had been helped by Vera Gray, she could then help Ira. About her friend, she recalls a day at the beach when Ira Velásquez suddenly appeared 'with beautiful, but hairy legs'. With Ira, she shared stages, success stories, fears, and many confidences. In one story of complicity, Suzy recalls when Ira was hit by a revolver bullet on Avenida Atlântica, in Copacabana. As a partner and confidante, it was Suzy who helped Ira hide the incident from her family. Friendship as a life force ensured Ira's survival; without the help of her friend, the gunshot might have been fatal. In this case, it is evident how care and affection in the sharing of trans experiences are part of a survival strategy. Friendship, without a recipe or formula, gains prominence over affectionate ties already institutionalized, such as those of family.

Unlike the experiences of 'travestis' who performed at the Rival Theater, where competition and hostility were greater, Suzy moved and performed on other stages and spaces. Perhaps because of this, she was able to establish a network of friendships and affections, with ruptures and new possibilities, that persists to the present day. Living with

friends who shared the same spaces and who, like her, began to invest in a new subjectivity, the ‘travesti’, singularized and activated the processes of self-constitution, which, as we see, occur collectively. One ‘travesti’ is many at the same time.

Yeda Brown

Daughter of a military father, she was born in Bagé, Rio Grande do Sul, in 1947.¹⁰ The narratives about her childhood and adolescence are imbued with emotion, smiles, and tears. Memories serve to bring together and interweave experiences of complicity, violence, and affection with her nuclear family (father, mother, older sister, and younger brother) and with her friends.

Within the family circle, she fought many battles with her military father, defined as authoritarian, a model of the macho-gaúcho-provider. The relationship with her father was very difficult. With him, she faced and, several times, submitted to the force of virile, masculine, and cisgender oppression. Her relationship with her mother was different, perhaps because she received more care and attention than her siblings, but it was also marked by constant vigilance.

Among her childhood friends, one is remembered with affection and emotion, Eber. In an interview, with tears in her eyes, she emphasizes that he was her ‘first gay little friend’, with whom she shared family conflicts, dreams, and projects. As confidants, they both received and could give help, strength, words of support and courage, always in mutual aid, even if not symmetrical. After all, the notion of symmetry in friendships becomes something in the realm of relativity. Since there are no pre-established scripts or positions, the relational game remains open-ended, and the position of each piece on the board is always imprecise.

In 1965, unexpectedly, she moved to Rio de Janeiro with her family. Her military father, still in Bagé, had been notified of his transfer, with the opportunity to choose his destination, either Ponta Porã (MS) or Rio de Janeiro (RJ). The chosen city was Rio de Janeiro. In addition to the change of address, arriving in Rio de Janeiro provided another experience: military service, a time remembered as one of struggle and creativity, especially to ensure that her desires and dreams continued, as she herself says, ‘in the closet’.

Alongside the challenges imposed on young men who do not fit into the traditional model of virile masculinity but are obliged to enlist in military service, the young man from Rio Grande do Sul was captivated by the real possibility of wandering the streets of downtown Rio de Janeiro, especially in the Cinelândia area. At a time when there were no cell phones, internet, or all the virtual social networks available today, wandering the streets was a way to create encounters, weave networks, and ultimately constitute oneself as a subject. From this moment, two encounters stand out in his memories: the friendship with Mônica and the relationship with Joaquim Carvalho. During the comings and goings of the typing course in Bonsucesso, a neighborhood in the North Zone of the city, a friend who lived in the neighborhood, named Mônica, described by Yeda as ‘a very flamboyant little gay,’ introduced her to a Portuguese gentleman named Joaquim Carvalho, 65 years old, affectionate, and very protective, as Yeda recalls. While the friend introduced new spaces and enhanced chance encounters, Joaquim was able to offer care, affection, and security.

¹⁰ The excerpts below are from interviews given by Yeda Brown on 10/10/2016, 11/21/2016, 04/24/2017, and 02/15/2019.



Fig. 6 – Yeda, on the occasion of her debut at the Rival Theater.
Personal archive of Suzy Parker

However, the unexpected knocked on the door. Just when she was feeling at home in Rio de Janeiro, she was forced to accompany her family back to the South, for her father to finally retire. About eight months later, with the end of military service, she announced to her family her desire to return to Rio de Janeiro, leaving her relatives surprised by the decision. Shortly after, with the same boldness as Aloma and Suzy, she left her family behind and returned to Rio de Janeiro.

Upon arriving in the city, she resumed the previously forged friendships and, with Joaquim's help, began a course to learn makeup and hairstyling. Remembering the time of her return, she emphasizes the importance of some friends, such as Jorge Simoni, a known drag queen, makeup artist, and hairstylist who sold wigs, and who helped her greatly, especially in personal matters, such as finding a place to live.

Returning to Rio was also a moment of investment in bodily and subjective change, without worrying about family surveillance anymore. From then on, following the advice of several friends, she learned where to buy the first hormones, especially Lindiol 0.5, which, for her, didn't have much effect. Yeda says that the 2.5 was faster and more effective. She also highlights using injections of Primodos 50 and Proginow depot 100 ml. Information was always shared with her friends. At that point, due to the hormones, she already noticed small breasts forming.

Another subjective experience forged during this time was the emergence of Yeda, initially Yeda Braunner, a choice inspired by and paying homage to the Misses from Rio Grande do Sul, Ieda Maria Vargas and Vera Maria Braunner. Thus, she chose Yeda Braunner, an important moment and step in the process of self-definition. The spelling was only changed in Belo Horizonte, in 1970, to Yeda Brown.

With the help of friends, Yeda began working at the Carlos Gomes theater on Mondays. Shortly after, she was encouraged by her friend Consuelo to audition for the famous cast of the Rival Theater in 1968. Approved, she was incorporated into the shows of drag queens, and perhaps as happened with Aloma, she also had to face a lot of rivalry and hierarchies. While she shared similarities and privileges with other white drag queens and 'travestis', bodily differences and diversities operated violently. With friends, she learned to navigate the city, to portray femininity, and to become a drag artist, but the fact that she already had breasts, was the only one with naturally long hair, as well as being from Rio Grande do Sul and naive, without malice for the art and stage tricks, was used to compose and agitate hierarchies and exclusions, many of which are remembered in her narratives.

In her narratives, in her tone of voice, and in her non-verbal language, there are references to the hostilities, hierarchies, and constraints she faced during her time at the Rival Theater. Beyond the everyday violence, she managed to forge friendships with Rogéria, Marquesa, Wanda, Eloína, Karina, and Shirley Montenegro. Thus, like Aloma, Yeda did not allow herself to be immobilized. On the contrary, those experiences participated in and enabled processes of self-determination and self-affirmation. In her travels and journeys through Brazil, she chose to be close to friends in Rio de Janeiro and away from her family of

origin. It is not just about choosing friends over family, but rather choosing the possibility of self-construction, of self-invention, a strategy and possibility to invent an existence that would be hardly possible under the guardianship of a cisheterocentric family.

Yeda continued at the Rival for two years, when she left the stage of the prestigious theater and the city of Rio de Janeiro to pursue other paths, this time in Minas Gerais. It is impossible to analyze those experiences in this article, as they forged and were permitted by other stories.

Conclusion

Friendships, affection, dreams, and experiences, with a lot of boldness and courage, shape and enable the stories and narratives of Aloma, Suzy, and Yeda. Despite certain specificities, such as racial and regional ones, it is possible to perceive a common point in what has been presented here: the role and importance of friends in the historical repertoires of self-invention. In addition to bringing visibility to the experiences and stories of three 'travestis' of the first generation, it has been possible, respecting the limits of an article-shaped text, to identify and analyze how bodily, subjective, and existential interventions were enabled, allowed, and facilitated by friends. Therefore, friendship is understood as a device, strategy, and political condition for historical processes of self-determination and self-identification, as well as a power-resistance against the cisheteronormative standard.

Thinking of friendship as practice, exercise, and procedure is a fruitful path for underlining the potentialities and dynamics present in these relationships. This historical dynamism has made friendship have a polymorphic consistency, making it difficult for social and disciplinary institutions to capture. However, this did not mean that those friendship relations were exempt from exercises of power, normalization, and hierarchies. Nevertheless, as we emphasize, such repertoires are not ready-made, given, or crystallized; they are not natural and/or neutral. In the friendships presented here, there is potency, strategy, and a means to invent new ways of relating to others, to determined and specific modes of life, including more creative ones, even in contexts of hostility, precariousness, and tension.

Thus, friendship can be perceived as dwelling in a provisional abode, filled with historical and political significances. For friendships involving transgender subjects and subjectivities, this abode has meant, among other things, comfort, sharing experiences, and creative potentials, albeit in an uncertain place. Woven into uncertainties and without any guarantee of a tranquil and eternal future, friendship is a site of proliferation of modes of existence and self-images that challenge traditional gender norms, especially cisnormativity, fissuring what has been invented as natural. At the same time, friendship was a condition of possibility for shared body transformation techniques, for gender notions and standards to be stretched and reinvented, suggesting once again that 'gender does not always constitute itself in coherent or consistent ways across different historical contexts' (Butler 2003, 20), and it is a 'process that has neither origin nor end, so it is something that 'we do', not something that 'we are' (Salih 2012, 67).

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