

Revisiting Female Sexual Honor and Femininity during the Brazilian Dictatorship (1964-85) in Leilah Assunção's *Fala Baixo Senão Eu Grito* and Nelson Rodrigues' *Toda Nudez Será Castigada*

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ABSTRACT: This article presents an analysis of two female characters on Rodrigues' and Assunção's plays, Geni (*Toda Nudez Será Castigada*) and Mariazinha (*Fala Baixo Senão Eu Grito*). It looks at the ways the characters' expose their literal silences (half sentences, unspoken gestures, desire to speak) into obsessions with body parts and objects. Their sexuality and being is often seen as a type of "monstrous feminine" (to quote Barbara Creed's term), not just by others, but even to themselves, which is often subtly revealed or disguised. I aim to forge a dialogue between Nelson Rodrigues's character and the new dramaturgy writer to explore how both brought to the fore questions surrounding the position of women in this society and their particular "feminine" response to the dictatorship as a performative inquiry.

KEYWORDS: Brazilian Theater, Theater, Latin American Theater, Dictatorship, Feminism, Woman, Body, Psychoanalysis, Literature, Drama, Nelson Rodrigues, Leilah Assunção, monstrous feminine, performative, theatricality, History, Brazil

Yan Michalski, a renowned Brazilian theater critic, authored a number of books on theater during the dictatorship in Brazil (1964-85). When comparing his point of view regarding the impact of this period on theater production, we see a change in his writing from originally pessimistic in 1979 to fairly optimistic in 1985. For instance, in 1979, he wrote: "Para além, e muito além, das proibições propriamente ditas, o mal causado pela censura ao recente teatro brasileiro prende-se também ao generalizado processo de autocensura que se implantou na sua esteira" (48). However, Michalski, when reflecting back on his initial assumptions, demonstrated a change in his point of view on how censorship affected artistic expression from 1979 to 1985 (gradual liberalization of the dictatorship): "A 20 anos de distância, parece-me que o equívoco que cometi na época ao atribuir uma 'mediocridade generalizada', a uma temporada tão repleta de bom teatro devia-se, em parte, a uma insatisfação, ainda que não conscientizada, diante da falta de um rumo mais definido por parte do nosso teatro" (23).

Though seemingly paradoxical, during the dictatorship in question (1964-1989) and in light of a long history of repressive political regimes (particularly censorship regardless of type of government in power), there was an effervescence of original plays and theatrical productions. In fact, playwrights seemed to experience an urgent need to express a particular type of social unease while inventing creative ways to disguise any obvious political messages, as Mostaçõ points out below:

Chegou um momento em que a classe teatral,

percebendo os métodos dos censores, começou a burlá-los: escreviam o que sabiam que seria aprovado, e encenavam a proposta que pretendia mostrar suas opiniões, visões políticas, ou abrir espaços ao debate e a estimular a consciência, usando táticas como as metáforas. (6)

This article presents an analysis of two female characters, one named Geni in Nelson Rodrigues' *Toda Nudez Será Castigada* (1965) and another called Mariazinha in *Fala Baixo Senão Eu Grito* (1969) by Leilah Assunção. It examines the ways the characters transform their literal silences (whether in half sentences, unspoken gestures, or mere attempts to speak) into obsessions with body parts and objects that, at least at first, appear as simply "madness" or psychic disturbances. Their sexuality and very existence are often seen as a type of "monstrous feminine" (to quote Barbara Creed's term) or a sexuality that every character is loath to directly address, so that, as a result, these conditions are often disguised or only subtly revealed. My objective is to forge a dialogue between Geni in the Rodrigues play and Mariazinha created by the *new dramaturgy* writer Leilah Assunção to explore how both brought to the fore questions surrounding the position of women in society and their particular "feminine" responses to the dictatorship, as a praxis of performative inquiry.

During the height of the dictatorship, a series of plays were written and performed that experimented with different types of family units (or lack thereof) in contrast to the traditional patriar-

chal family¹ while also exploring issues of gender boundaries and sexual expression. At the same time, a series of female characters were created that reflected the new female ideologies proliferating in the American and European feminist movements of the time (in opposition to the highly moralistic stance on the family and gender roles upheld by the dictatorship). These movements defended the rights of single women that had no desire to marry or particularly valued married life; strong independent women who worked as prostitutes; sexually free women; and women who remained single for lack of sexual pleasure.

In the context of Brazilian literature, however, the depiction of these types of female characters is not new. There are numerous examples of fluid depictions of the patriarchal family versus its antitheses and the eroding gender boundaries in texts dating from the 19th century onward. Nonetheless, specifically in the circumstances surrounding the dictatorship and the theater, the visceral reality of these female characters gains a new vitality. In Rodrigues and Assunção, for example, half-naked female bodies are exposed on stage together with their bodily fluids and other "improprieties", though in many cases, they might be only alluded to (in words) in a highly descriptive manner.

The split and simultaneously concomitant presence of *public* morality as espoused by the nation state and the so-called *private* morality espoused by the individual are evidenced in the two plays via the juxtaposition of contradictory moral codes. The first represents a conservative patriarchalism, determined by the existing Catholic moral code, while the second is indicative of a skeptical morality as inspired by individual desire and influenced by the existential meanderings of the characters. Godoy describes this split in Rodrigues as a "failure of the Brazilian project of modernity" (47) whereas DaMatta sees it as an intrinsic part of the Brazilian social structure². This new group of dramaturges, which includes Assunção, would later be denominated as belonging to a movement called *Nova Dramaturgia*. At the same time, Nelson Rodrigues, already a renowned author, spearheaded a new cycle of plays, later called *Tragédias Cariocas*³. *Toda Nudez Será Castigada* is one of the last plays penned by Rodrigues prior to an eleven-year hiatus.

Perhaps due to Rodrigues' unique style, his work has not customarily been analyzed in contrast to or in comparison with other Brazilian authors of the same period, though I argue he has been highly influential. Rodrigues' characters included the on-stage exposition of their different planes of consciousness as well as their extreme self-consciousness through the process of their being clearly aware of portraying real-life performances. Thus, this radical new approach to dramaturgy paved the way for the emergence of a new group of writers, such as Leilah Assunção, who used similar approaches of distancing and looking critically at her performance on stage.

In fact, its first phase of development, *Nova Dramaturgia* plays often had very few characters who typically portrayed chance encounters by two or more individuals with disparate personalities,

gender and/or social classes engaging in intimate conversation. A prime example can be found in the supposedly chance encounter depicted in *Fala Baixo* in which Mariazinha acts out a variety of sexual fantasies and explores her most intimate desires. She comes to terms with the theatricality of her life and how she had been controlling everything including her social class. She also realizes that her own prejudices were identical to those of the society she is part of, slowly helping her detach from it. During an encounter with an unnamed "marginal" or "criminal" character, both of the characters play out different dream-like scenarios, in addition to questioning the specific gender roles they each perform. This encounter, although a revision of the gender performative prerogative, is also dependent on their positions within the social scale. Mariazinha has a special relationship with the objects around her and often talks or mumbles to herself. Similarly to Geni, the Rodrigues character, Mariazinha has a number of fetishized objects with which she converses on a regular basis. Towards the end of the play, both her, and the unnamed man, end up literally destroying her spotlessly clean, organized bedroom.

In turn, the character of Geni records her personal story (subsequent to their marriage) in her own words on a tape to be listened to after her death. She works as a prostitute until she meets Herculano, a widower, who will eventually become her extremely jealous husband. She is obsessed with the fear of dying of breast cancer and often talks about this "lyrical" aspect of her upcoming death, which mentally has been transformed into a type of fetish. While her gender is well defined at the outset, it slowly undergoes metamorphosis as the plot unfolds. Female and male roles are reversed, played out, and put on display as farcical. As with many of Rodrigues' plays, the typical patriarchal family is dissolved and the repressive aspect of societal appearances is explored through Herculano's sisters and son, Serginho, especially after his mother's death. Much of Serginho's anger and anxiety is somewhat resolved when he escapes with a Bolivian robber and exposes his homosexuality. Geni, however, is the only character in the play who does not repress either her sexuality or sexual desires, as opposed to Mariazinha, who until she meets the Man, pretends she experiences no sexual desire whatsoever.

Contrary to the openly political theater of the time, these two authors do not overtly discuss the current repressive regime nor any political ideas *per se*. Instead, their political ideas are expressed in the types of relationships that are depicted and the hypocritical veneer accompanying them. These discordant political and social opinions are especially in evidence when the constant split between the outer world of *appearances* and the inner world of the individual is revealed and juxtaposed. Thus, this "new" theater, considered in parallel with Rodrigues' oeuvre, calls into question the existential condition of the individual members of society in light of the minutiae of class and the nefarious effects that certain political and social conditions have on the individual as shown on stage. This "new" writing came into its own during the aforementioned dictatorship,

abandoning the use of large scenic metaphors and exploring intense conflict by way of direct speech and the overt confrontation of words by using a type of Brechtian estrangement effect.

Toda Nudez sera Castigada features one more example of the labyrinthine qualities of Nelson Rodrigues' playwrighting style. While the metafictional feature found in most of his plays is heightened here, it is explored differently in *The Wedding Dress* and *Boca de Ouro* than in *Toda Nudez*. As with his other works, the content of the play and the structural elements of the narrative are of equal importance in developing the narrative arc of the play as a whole. From the start, the reader is aware that the successive scenes in the play are but functions of the narrative Geni relates in her cassette tape recordings, not necessarily the "real" events that might have taken place. However, because of the on-stage lighting used to introduce and resemble flashbacks and the fact that the first scene depicts Herculano's coming home and immediately playing the tape, it is hard to clearly see what point of view is being portrayed in all the scenes. There is a separation between the story that Geni is telling as a type of performance or a representation of memory fragments of an unreliable narrator and what is performed on stage concerning Herculano's memories (mixed in together with those of the other characters). This double destabilizing technique further complicates any hope of reaching a univocal interpretation.

In the first act, the characters follow the voice-over of the prostitute telling a story in flashback. The scenes are initiated either at the sound of Geni's recorded voice or by the voices of other characters. As is the case with many of Rodrigues' plays, truth emerges in the process of storytelling and not as a result of the "facts" themselves, which can never be recovered in a literal way. The immediate effect on the audience is that of estrangement⁴. Serginho, for example, only appears in the second act, even though Herculano makes reference to him throughout the first two. Thus, it is impossible to feel that we are actually seeing Serginho devoid of different points of view that describe and might enclose him. Patricio, Herculano's brother, is the orchestrator of the narrative by inserting Geni into the family and having a decisive role in all the dramatic changes taking place during the play. Patricio promotes the meeting between Herculano and Geni and tells Serginho about the involvement of his father with the prostitute, which supposedly leads to the Serginho's emotional imbalance, imprisonment, and the meeting with the Bolivian thief towards the end of the play. Patricio is also responsible for convincing his nephew to accept the marriage of his father with the prostitute and to subsequently seduce her for revenge. Patricio is both Machiavellian and a seer as someone who truly knows the Achilles' heel of each character, as he affirms: "Eu sou o cínico da família. E os cínicos enxergam" (165). As is common in Rodrigues' dramas, the play of appearances and his narrative style confuse our perception of all the characters. Patricio, though clearly an orchestrator, and perverse in his desire to punish his brother for not having saved a business transaction, seems to be used as a mere device to exploit the theatricality of everyday (Brazilian) moral life.

Most of Rodrigues' plays adopt a melodramatic tone when dealing with alienation effects. This unusual theatrical combination is perceived by the contradiction within each character's own assertions, as well as their strange behavior. In the first act, Geni says "caridade eu não faço!" (166). But, in the end, she asks Herculano: "Vamos fazer um amorzinho bem gostoso? [...] Só essa vez e nunca mais!" (185). And, at the same time, she melodramatically announces her own death from an imaginary cancer, which, coincidentally, also killed the late wife of Herculano's. Geni seems volatile, unsure of her feelings, and certainly does not resemble the archetypal qualities of a prostitute either. Interestingly, she is not portrayed as a victim of her circumstances, nor does she feel any shame for being one, but as someone who creates her own reality. She is poetic and self-reflective: "Herculano, você interessou de cara. Te confesso. Talvez porque havia uma morta.[...] E a ferida no seio. Eu não sou como as outras. Eu mesma não me entendo"(167).

When watching her aunt die from cancer and hearing from her own mother that she would die of the same disease, she does not really doubt that that will also be her fate. Moreover, the obsession with death is a recurrent theme in the work of Nelson Rodrigues, exposing a degree of mysticism together with a fetishism of death as parts of a sort of redemptive process within Brazilian culture⁵. In a phone conversation with Geni, Herculano attempts to summarize their relationship by a contradictory mystical triad: "Escuta, você tem uma alma, meu filho outra e há uma ferida. Eu sou um bêbado que passou pela sua vida e sumiu"(176). Thus, characters, lacking belief in Catholic morality to define their lives, construct their own moral codes.

In the second act, Herculano puts Geni up at an apartment so he can meet with her in secret. Aunts # 1, # 2 and # 3 with no name, appear as a type of chorus. They appear to represent the opposite side of Geni, a dichotomy that is slowly erased as the play unfolds. Adverse to sex, older, and virgins, they support Serginho in his obsession to keep his dead mother alive by his daily visits to her grave and by taking baths and smelling his underwear in order to hopefully detect any trace of prior sexual activity, which is never found. The virgins demonstrate a perverse sexual pleasure in the act of preventing Serginho from having sexual pleasure. At the end of the second act, Aunt #1 reveals to Geni and Herculano that Serginho was raped by a Bolivian thief. Apart from the psychological aspects of the whore-madonna complex, explored by Freud⁶, Rodrigues brings to the fore the changing political and contradictory gender dynamics in Brazilian society, which is also examined in *Fala Baixo Senão eu Grito*. Herculano claims that his son "não aceita o ato sexual" (174) and when commenting on the act with Geni, Herculano degrades himself: "estou babando como um cão" (173). Though some characters repress their sexuality, they always sublimate or express it in some way. Geni is the only character who is not afraid of expressing herself sexually or of feeling sexual pleasure.

It is in this instance that the idea of the "monstrous feminine" is also exposed: Serginho's strange fear of sex, as it relates to his

mother; Herculano's nausea of his wife's dying body; Herculano's feeling of debasement when experiencing sexual pleasure; Geni's obsession with breast cancer in only one breast and with death itself (corpse) along with her incestuous relationship with Serginho and the "monstrous feminine" embodied in homosexuality. The monstrous feminine is related to the female body since femininity is unnameable. But it does not depend on the biological aspect of sexual identification, which is symbolic on the level of the play. In *Fala Baixo*, it is revealed in Mariaz' frigidity and the Man's description of her as "ugly", bloody, and as a corpse full of flies. Creed describes it in relation to the feminine in horror movies, connecting the idea with the concept of *abject* in Kristeva. All the abominations of a religious nature described below are present as a facet of the monstrous feminine in the two plays:

At crucial points, I shall also refer to her writing on the abject in relation to religious discourses. This area cannot be ignored, for what becomes apparent in reading her work is that definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection—particularly in relation to the following religious 'abominations': sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest. (my emphasis, 69)

To complement the idea of the monstrous feminine, the authors explore the dichotomic dimensions of sexual honor imposed by sexual honor codes. The idea of sexual honor explored by the two playwrights go hand in hand with the contradictions expressed in relation to private and versus public morality (or lack thereof) described in the beginning of this essay. It is important to emphasize this aspect since the playwrights are putting on display the masking and confusion in a system with innumerable contradictory viewpoints on sexuality while exploring the effect they have on the individual, but especially the female characters. These contradictions are also part of the "anarchical" quality of the dictatorship itself, as Gaspari notes in *A Ditadura Escancarada*, when describing one of the generals in charge:

Expressão do voluntarismo militarista, quase sempre falava em nome de um ente vago denominado "nosso grupo". Era exacerbado e, muitas vezes, desconexo. Propagava aquele palavreado pomposo que, na anarquia militar, confunde-se com enunciado de propósitos (emphasis added). (111)

Because of the involvement of segments of the Catholic Church against the dictatorship, he even goes so far as to criticize it for trying to end "the family":

Dias antes da edição do AI-5, atacara "padres e bispos da esquerda festiva que incutem determinados problemas sexuais nos jovens para acabar com a família" e os estudantes "que fazem o jogo dos grandes grupos econômicos". Enaltecia o AI-5 como instrumento "para promover a reforma das estruturas superadas que resistiam aos esforços de atualização pelos caminhos normais". (111)

Caulfield, in investigating the history of women's sexual honor codes in Brazil at the beginning of the 20th century, reveals that, even after the Promulgation of the Republic (1889) and for decades to come, jurists attempted to rewrite the laws concerning "deflowering", "the honest woman", and "seduction" (10), but found it difficult to conciliate the new liberal mentality of gender equality before the law with the old protectionism regarding women's sexual honor:

Moreover, even without knowing it, jurists who interpreted Brazil's legal code continued to imbue honor with its older racial and class components. Honor thus frequently obscured contradictions between official principles of universal citizenship, equal rights, and democracy, and the realities of gender, class, and racially-based discrimination. (9)

A sexualized woman's body before marriage or (even within marriage, when viewing sexual morality through the prism of Church teachings) could compromise family honor and be a disruptor of the patriarchal norm. Therefore, being (or at least appearing to be) a virgin before marriage was extremely important in order to preserve the patriarchal code of honor. Besides, the mere threat of sexuality or sensuality could present a problem since it was not always easy to prove whether a woman had had sexual relations with someone or not. Nevertheless, the new liberal ideas emanating from Europe and the United States reflecting changes in the world's perspective on the traditional patriarchal family could not help but exert a strong influence on cosmopolitan cities like Rio de Janeiro, the then capital of Brazil, and São Paulo, for example. With the development of the city and its cultural manifestations and soirees together with a rapidly-emerging bourgeoisie, married women could more easily leave the confinement of their homes and participate in urban life. This new reality made protecting a woman from any sexual contact with men other than their husbands or other male relatives much more difficult to control along with the accompanying rumors and speculations that arose in this matter, thus creating an anxiety-ridden reality for women.

Caulfield, when describing the position of jurists and reformers of laws regulating sexual crimes, honor and morality in Brazil in the 1920s, affirmed that they believed "a postwar crisis of morality threatened women's honesty and, hence, the family. The danger,

they insisted, did not arise from modernity itself, but rather from the unpreparedness of the masses of Brazilians for the new liberties of modern society" (82). In this scenario, we can clearly see how the anxiety of being or not being a virgin is something that circumvents most of Rodrigues' female characters as well as the new dramaturgy authors; values that the dictatorship brought back to the fore in its imposition of censorship, media controls, and severely limiting free speech⁷. We could also conjecture, that, due to the distinct codes ascribed (and available) to the different socio-economic classes, middle-class women might be plagued with the impossibility of having an orgasm as they are generally raised to fear sex and wait to be married to have sexual intercourse.

To complicate matters even further, according to the *International Encyclopedia of Sexuality* in the Chapter "Brazil", Brazilians have a different type of attitude towards sexuality and eroticism from that of other societies that follow predominantly patriarchal and Roman Catholic values:

In this respect, Brazilians tend to allow expressions of sexuality and eroticism that are quite unacceptable in other areas of the Latino world, especially in public. This disparity can be traced to a unique blend of Roman Catholic and native Indian values with a strong African influence. Like other Latinos, Brazilians have taboos and restrictions on public sexual behavior. However, Brazilians draw an important distinction between public and private behaviors that preserves traditional Indian and African values. "Within four walls, beneath the sheets, and behind the mask of *carnaval*, everything can happen!" "Everything," or *tudo*, refers to the world of erotic experiences and pleasure. The phrase *fazendo tudo*, "doing everything," means Brazilian men and women have an obligation to experience and enjoy every form of sexual pleasure and excitement, or more precisely those practices that the public world most strictly prohibits. This, however, must all be done in private, behind the mask, between four walls, or under the sheets.

This division between the four walls of the home and the street complicates the sexuality of women since it creates contradictory expectations. On the one hand, women are encouraged to experience and expect sexual pleasure. On the other, they are encouraged to ascribe to an appearance of purity in the outside world. Furthermore, living under the authority and protection of a husband or father, women are also encouraged to maintain a chaste demeanor at home. In turn, we could always conjecture whether this permission to "do everything" in the bedroom applied more specifically to men to guarantee that women dispose of their bodies to, first and foremost, serve the sexual pleasure of men as opposed to their own.

Therefore, despite the rapid changes taking place in relation to the patriarchal family structure when Nelson Rodrigues begins

writing his first plays (1940s), many of the traditional honor codes ascribed to women are still in place. Petra Ramalho Souto, for example, describes dichotomic dimensions ascribed to women in Brazilian society and how the female characters in Rodrigues' plays follow their own ethics of conduct, at times contradicting the moral expectations of society and family.

...retoma a discussão sobre a visão dicotômica da mulher na sociedade brasileira (puta/santa) e conclui ... que a mulher rodriguiana ao ser classificada como santa ou puta, não é necessariamente boa ou má, segundo julgamentos morais, mas um ser que segue, a fim de satisfazer seus desejos, uma ética própria que por vezes contraria a moral sexual vigente na sociedade que se reflete no texto rodriguiano. (29)

In the third and last act, Geni, imbued with a sense of Christian guilt despite following her personal code of ethics, as seen above, says: "Eu tenho pena do teu filho, e quando tenho pena sou uma santa!" (216) She decides to ostensibly "save" Serginho, hospitalized after being raped by the Bolivian thief. At the same time, Geni and Herculando marry with the blessing of the aunts, who now consider Geni part of the family and adamantly profess she was a virgin when she got married. Fulfilling Patricio's macabre plans, Serginho betrays his father by getting romantically and sexually involved with Geni. However, in the end, he runs away with the Bolivian thief. The aunts are prone to follow an easily changeable code of ethics so they can keep receiving money from Herculano, proving that their so-called strict moral code is primarily based on self-interest. Geni, on the contrary, acts according to her own belief systems, even her belief in God is in accordance with her conduct.

A voice-over ends the piece, revealing the tragic outcome: Geni is dying. Lacan says "poetic creations engender rather than reflect psychological creations" (Session 13, p. 214). And that is perhaps the difficulty in tackling this play. Though Rodrigues' plays deal with the impossible conciliation between individual psychological desires and the morality of the Church/family/state, his plays also go beyond these dichotomic characterizations⁸. At first, characters like Geni contribute to destabilizing some moral notions we might have. There are some obvious features of the characters that are destabilized even further when considering the act of telling and/or manipulating stories. Even if we accept a story as true in terms of factual evidence, it is still hard to pinpoint the real motivations of the characters. Characters speak in half sentences, scenes are abruptly ended, and characters often show signs they enjoy leading double lives and out rightly lying, when convenient. The extremity of chastity and other types of moral prohibitions are readily deconstructed when characters are easily swayed to give up their belief systems in exchange for a different type of gain, creating an *economy of desire*.

We can assume that the whole play is told from Geni's point of view and her fantasies of death as a form of redemption and of

going back to what she believes to be her real self, "different from most prostitutes"; someone who has the soul of a puritan, a spiritual person in the body of a prostitute, yet desiring woman. The most obvious elements the play tackles are the madonna-whore complex, the dichotomy between sexual desire and its repression, and the idea behind the monstrous feminine. These elements are supposedly unleashed by lack of inhibition after moments of crisis, near-death experiences, nausea at the sight of sexual images in connection with the chaste wife, and pleasure during sex with a prostitute.

Rodrigues plays with a lot of dichotomies and many of them pertain to Brazilian culture and imagery and the corresponding social structure, as follows: the dichotomy between life and death, and sexual desire and purity, and the qualities associated with religious morality versus the those associated with a more libertine mind such as symbolized by the doctor in the play, an atheist and communist, versus the priest. In fact, Magaldi stresses that: "Em pólos antagônicos, o médico e o padre completam o círculo familiar, fundado em na autoridade da ciência e outro, na da religião. [...] A análise fria dos diálogos no contexto em que se travam, permite arriscar que Nelson não isentou de ironia as convicções que ambos ostentam" (37). Herculano actually migrates between the two extreme moral codes in quasi-analytical sections depicting the two figures of the doctor and the priest in the process of figuring out what to do with his son Serginho.

Of note, there is one insight that is in tandem with the idea of the monstrous feminine, or the abject, which is related to Serginho's sexuality. When alluding to Serginho's assumed rape by the Bolivian robber, the doctor says: "Pois essa monstruosidade foi o ponto de partida para um processo de vida" (205). At this point, it is hard to know whether or even if the imagination and memory of Herculano play a part. The conscious mind is certainly put on display via theatrical scenes and devices, mirroring the fictional narrative. Again, the poetic imagery engenders the psychological structures, making it hard to maintain the dualities put forward on stage.

The patriarchal stance is completely demolished in the process of uncovering the monstrous feminine as not so monstrous and then embracing it. Geni is a highly-sexualized woman, who also does not easily take orders from men. Although she is still inscribed in the male fantasies and their manipulations, she attempts to have the last laugh by killing herself (corpse and death as abject). To what degree her love interests and even falling for Serginho is a mere stepping stone to her suffering, an excuse for martyrdom, and the ability to die the noble death, is never clear. There may be a certain nobility in the incest in the play since she is the mother figure for Serginho.

The fetishism of a woman's body is focused on the breast (as in breast cancer), on the naked body, and on the contradictory shame of seeing the naked body, which the aunts and Geni both obsessively have to cover up. As we will see in more detail later, the abject of the female body as the unknown both attracts and repulses. Geni,

for example, constantly makes reference to her breasts: "O melhor você não sabe. Tenho uma cisma que vou morrerrei de cancer no seio" (1054). Or: "A coisa mais difícil é um seio bonito". Geni also feels that her body is that of a martyr's: "Meu amor é pena" (1091) and even though she works as a prostitute, and has no qualms about it, she feels nauseated when looking at a picture of herself naked. As seen in all of Rodrigues' plays, Geni embodies the two opposite extremes of stereotypical female fetishism (saint vs. prostitute). She attempts to redeem herself by marrying Herculano and having Serginho as a lover in order to save him (again, accepting a double code of ethics of both saint and prostitute). Most of all, through the conscious performance by Geni as both martyr and savior, she justifies her past behavior as a prostitute as well as her adultery, making it possible to act out both in a continual performance of these two roles as an obsession.

Moreover, all the characters are looking for some sort of salvation or sexual pleasure through the adoration of one another, which seems to create a split and either a continuous consciousness of doubleness or consciousness of performance. The contradiction within the structural relationship highlights DaMatta's configuration of Brazilian society that accepts contradictions as long as each is relegated to different spaces in the social structure (house, street, and the world of the dead). Even though morally "wrong" in the eyes of the Church and in the home, for example, Geni feels she is doing something good so that Serginho can live, i.e., according to a kind of street code of ethics. By the same token, she assures herself she is doing something good for herself as well by being with someone she considers very pure (atoning in the world of the beyond, saved by love and grace). She performs the role of prostitute, wife, and lover as if they were mutually inclusive. However, the presence of these different structural and contradictory expectations of the female body is mostly oppressive to the female characters that are dependent on men for their survival. Geni, even though she makes her own money, ends up being financially dependent on Herculano after she meets him.

Though, at first, it would seem that Patricio is the catalyst for the characters' decisions throughout the play, it becomes clear that Geni could be seen as the catalyst. Her complete sense of personal and moral freedom, as reflected in her suicide, is a type of agency she is trying to impart, which she cannot either as a wife or a prostitute. There is the *in betweenness* explored in her obsession with the abject of death. Her affair with Serginho is redeemable in her view since it is due to "pure motherly love", free of the shackles of the two institutions.

Thus, in terms of the history of Brazilian theater from the 20th century on, Geni is certainly one of the strongest female characters ever created. By developing her own ethical code of conduct amidst the confusion of sexual honor codes ascribed to women in different ways depending on their class, race, and socio-economic position, Geni reverses the typical gender roles. Her sexual expression is front and center similar to a man's considering the type of male charac-

ters in the theater of the time. She says, for example: "Há homens que gostam de apanhar!" (205), in response to Herculano's accusing her of not being a lady for swearing. She also says she is young, needs a man, and cannot go without sex for too long (205). In the end, she transforms her breasts into symbols of her femininity, degradation, and salvation, all at the same time: "Lembranças à tia machona! Malditos também os seios!" (238) Due to her bending of gender norms, Geni became a muse for a cross-dressing/transgender character in *Opera do Malandro* (1978), a play by Chico Buarque, also written during the dictatorship.

In analyzing the character of Mariaz, we could initially say that she represents Geni's extreme opposite. Mariaz is a virgin, well organized, lives with other women in a hotel (*pensionato*) that possibly has a religious affiliation, and does not have many dreams besides the immediately mundane. But a closer look reveals she is a mystic of sorts and wishes she could have studied philosophy. She also obsesses about feminine images, especially those associated with her childhood. Her fixations echo Geni's regarding her lack of a childhood and her motherly instincts transformed into sexual ones. In contrast to Rodrigues' style, Assunção's style lacks a melodramatic tone and is tragicomic bordering on the absurd. Thus, the alienation effect employed here unfolds through the absurdity of the situation.

Mariazinha makes an effort to always look impeccable in her uniform, a discreet suit. She believes she's always "well-behaved" and fulfills all her obligations by following rules to a "t". She is punctual at work, always pays her loans on time, and regularly saves money every month so she can finish paying for this small studio. Awaiting the day, she can move to her own apartment, she spends her days in a boarding house for girls watching TV in her free time. Hebe Camargo is one of her favorite entertainers. Mariazinha claims she could have studied philosophy since she thinks she is a mystic. All this is said in her own words although the tone borders on the ridiculous. She is seen talking to the objects around her, especially the wall clock her father gave her, the nightstand, the bed, and a closet. They are all hilariously decorated with balloons and bows and ribbons that young girls would wear.

When she was a child, she fit inside the furniture. As an adult, she would ask: "Não é esquisito não caber mais dentro das coisas? Foram elas que cresceram, ou fui quem diminuiu?" (27). Because of the absurdity of the scene, her thoughts, though seemingly profound, gain a strange quality, becoming meaningless. She seems to be repeating words from books by Lispector (27), Lewis Carroll (27), or José de Alencar ("olhos negros como as asas da graúna"[27]), for example. She also talks in the language of jingles and children's folk songs. However, despite the apparent emptiness of her words, she gradually reveals unexpected aspects about the world and herself after meeting the "Homem" (literally meaning the "Man").

Orgasm is an unknown experience for Mariazinha. She claims to have tried but unsuccessfully. A virgin resigned to the idea of being single for the rest of her life, she is surprised, one night, by an

armed Man who enters her house. The Man asks her: "Não sabe o que é gozar? Não? Responda!", to which she replies: "Não sei! Não sei!" (112). The encounter precipitates an imaginary tour of the city of São Paulo, in hallucinatory mental leaps, literally breaking not only with convention, so to speak, but the entire world of objects surrounding her. Fearful and demure at first, furious and impulsive in the end, she makes use of swear words as well as reveals a desire to be loved and married. When finally asking him to be her boyfriend, the Man replies: "E você acha que o bonitão aqui vai perder tempo com um bagulho como você?" (100). Feeling desperate, she responds: "intelligentíssima, independente, intelectual bonita" and, screaming, she asks: "Minta! Minta! Minta! Que é um solitário que talvez se case comigo. Eu sou boa de cama! Mente que quer casar comigo" (101). At this point, though also in the pretense of a performative mode, she relates her dream of marrying a prince just like in the fairy tales she read as a child while the Man standing in front of her is real, flawed, and might even be a criminal.

The prayer of Mariazinha to meet a Man to marry is formulated in the course of the imaginary trip that she and the Man take as they are running around the room. As she lets the construction of herself change, perceiving the performance to which she has been ascribed, all the objects in the room lose their importance. Reality, as a possibility that would destroy imagination, gives rise to anguish. The Man, while disdainful towards her throughout the encounter, finally decides he wants her to go away with him. When a woman announces in the hallway that it is 7 a.m., Mariaz suddenly wakes up from her "dream" and screams for help rather than run away with the Man.

The prejudices among the different social classes, the monstrous feminine as a religious prerogative aiming to maintain sexual honor, and the performance of different gender roles are all dramatized in this play through the character of Mariazinha just as they are in Rodrigues' play through the character of Geni, who acts as a catalyst. In fact, because the Man is unnamed, he can also be seen as a figment of Mariaz' imagination or of the chorus' (as the aunts are in the other play).

From this point on, I will analyze different passages in chronological order. Due to the absurdist quality of the text, it will provide a more organized overview of the path, the play follows. In the beginning of their encounter, the Man incites Mariaz to act and to change. He is a catalyst. Towards the middle, Mariaz takes the lead and, finally, towards the end, they blend in until the dissolution of their encounter. The emergence of truth in story telling is questioned when the Man says: "Dona... Não tem nada que mexa mais com meu nervo que desacreditar da minha palavra... Quando é mentira, eu acabo com o imbecil, mas mesmo quando é verdade, eu já fico puto da vida!" (36) He then calls the balloon in her room "vermelho hemorragia", verbalizing the first instances of the monstrous feminine. Her apparently childish love for balloons is seen as blood (due to menstruation or a cut) and the border with the abject, which, according to Creed, is "a taboo object within religion" (71):

There is, of course, a moment in which the concept of a border is central to the construction of the monstrous in horror films. That which crosses or threatens to cross the 'border' is abject. Although the specific nature of the border changes from film to film, the function of the monstrous remains the same—to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability. (71)

In this play, the abject of the monstrous feminine is represented as: the threatening of stability in encounters among the social classes, the encounter of different gender roles, the instability of her organized life during the encounter, and her repressed sexuality. The construction of the discourse on an organized life is also seen as a type of control for fear of the abject. The Man philosophizes that "a cor que eu vejo nela é aquela que resolvemos chamar de vermelho. Hemorragia. Se bem, que daí, de onde você está, poderia ver ela com um reflex, da luz, e daí muda..." (38). He sees this abject in her and forcibly makes her agree with him, demonstrating his patriarchal control over women. Immediately afterwards, he shows another side of himself by saying he just wants company and is not there to steal or rape (41). In terms of class, he sees his situation as having all the doors closed to him because of his lower socio-economic status. And Mariaz replies by offering to find someone to help him find religion. He crosses the path of the abject (her monstrous sexuality) when he says: "Eu só respiro quando vejo olho olhando, carne, risada, suor, pele....." (47). Later the Man calls her a rock, to which she replies: "Eu não sou pedra, nada!" (49). Her response is strange since in the beginning she is upset and fearful of the intruder. At this moment, she instead reveals a sense of pride and a desire to be seen as sexually attractive for the first time in the play. After confronting the unknown in him and in herself, she slowly demystifies the monstrous feminine while revealing that the furniture and objects around her are her own family and friends, i.e., the fetishism of objects. As Lacan points out in describing the imaginary object *petit a*:

The object of the fantasy, image and pathos, is that other element that takes the place of what the subject is symbolically deprived of. Thus the imaginary object is in a position to condense in itself the virtues or the dimension of being and to become that veritable delusion of being [*leurre de le'tre*] that Simone Weil treats when she focuses on the very densest and most opaque relationship of a man to the object of his desire: the relationship of Moliere's Miser to his strongbox. This is the culmination of the fetish character of the object of human desire. Indeed all objects of the human world have this character, from one angle at least. (15)

The Man's perception of the value of these objects prompts him to perform a scene in which the objects are all put up for auc-

tion, destroying any possible means for her to experience sexual pleasure through sublimation. Elza Cunha de Vincenzo refers to the objects as "fantasmas dos valores da família burguesa" (p.90, quoted in Vieira de Andrade, p. 34). Again, bringing back the monstrous feminine, he tells Mariaz that her hair is full of flies as if her body had become a corpse (to mirror the death of the objects in her room). Thus, though the monstrous feminine causes disgust, in the play, it is deliberately prompted so that aspects of gender and social structure are put on display in this nauseating dynamic. To the point, as he says: "Aqui jaz, Mariazinha Mendonça de Morais..." (63). She replies by threatening to kill everything around her, including him. The fear and hate of the monstrous feminine that could be unleashed by the destruction of the world as she knew it, prompts her to enter into a game of make-believe. They imagine themselves naked together walking down the street. As expected, they stroll around a cemetery, jumping from one tomb to another. At one point the Man says: "Eu te pego e viro do avesso" (82), a definite allusion to the sexual act as it relates to death. His reaction is mixed with words such as "Eu sou uma caveira" and that he will kill her (80). Later, they both admit to not representing the typical gender norms. She says she hates to cook and he says he cannot have sex five times straight, he is not a "macho" (83). At one point they start repeating words such as "sewage", "water drop", "everything broken", calling out the abject from behind the clean façade of her room. She pretends to be a rich woman, then the femme fatale Heddy Lamar (95). At which point her moral code related to sexual intercourse comes to mind when she says: "Será que ela está pensando que sou uma prostituta? Nossa! Olha lá a madame Rosalva! Se me vê, na certa conta pra dona Celestina que nunca mais me deixa entra na casa dela!", and he replies: "(ele mesmo) Burra! Mulher independente não pensa isso! Faz o que quer!" (99). Later, she repeats the need for a lie she can believe in. She says she believes in marriage again and begs him to pretend he will actually marry her. She gradually begins to get tired and remembers her obligations. He convinces her to swear, which she does. Towards the end, after he confesses to wanting to have sex with her, she trembles and confesses she is a virgin. The fear of the monstrous feminine of orgasm proves greater than her desire. Finally, she hears the lady from the boarding house waking everyone up. No longer the ridiculous woman with the perfect curls anymore (113) (in the words of the author), she is conflicted. She ends up calling for the police, screaming: "Socooooooooooooo!!!!!! Tem um ladrão dentro do meu quarto! Polícia!!!" (113) Creed, in the third definition of the monstrous feminine in the horror film, says: "In the child's attempts to break away, the mother becomes an abject; thus, in this context, where the child struggles to become a separate subject, abjection becomes 'a precondition of narcissism' (p. 13)" (72). In the case of Mariaz, she cannot break away from the mother (as it is clear in her references to her childhood). On a metaphorical level, Mariaz is tied to the womb of the nation, the image of the nation-state, that develops into the image of the abject related to women's bodies. She at least tries to break away from the

idea of the monstrous feminine by being in direct contact with the abject, at which point the feminine is not so clearly relegated to a space of oppression. Assunção might not be giving us an answer to the problematics of gender in Brazil, but, through this process, she is showing the mechanisms that are used to keep it in place as well as the possibility, however contradictory and remote, that Maria has to find a type of agency. Maria, though committed to a life of cleanliness and orderliness, has already found a way to have agency as an independent woman, at least financially speaking. The encounter with the other in terms of gender and class changes her while bringing to the fore the absurdity of a value system based on a patriarchal authoritarian system. Furthermore, as Vieira de Andrade points out,

No Brasil de 1969, o repúdio à submissão da mulher soava como um eco de repúdio à falta de liberdade política imposta pela ditadura. A questão feminina, pela primeira vez, deixava de ser unicamente feminina para transformar-se em algo mais universal: o desmascaramento do poder autoritário. [...] Quem poderia imaginar que uma solteirona infantilizada pudesse tornar-se tão perigosa? Para a censura, o perigo vinha justamente do fato de que a figura e Mariazinha era a prova da estupidez de todo um sistema de valores defendido pelo autoritarismo da ditadura militar. (33)

The performative aspect of the dictatorship, in controlling radio and TV to propagate the values of the patriarchal family as well as that of the patriarchal father, failed to completely repress the production of dissident texts in the theater realm. Though it was eventually silenced and was responsible for the exile of a number of playwrights and directors, the combination of contrary viewpoints springing up during that time, led to plays that challenged the ge-

neric boundaries of gender and questioned the patriarchal family as the model of the perfect Brazilian family. Rodrigues, and then Assunção, developed nuanced characters that required critical evaluations on the part of the audience due to the authors' use of clever estrangement effects. Though Assunção is considered a feminist playwright, Rodrigues is not usually associated with the feminist agenda. In fact, both made it clear they were unwilling to adhere to or be associated with any type of strict ideological agendas. In this article, I hope to have shown how Rodrigues' work is echoed in the new dramaturgy of the time while providing even more critical perspectives on gender than were expected of the generation of 1969. It is also important to emphasize that these writers transformed the problematics of gender into a political issue, beyond feminism. As Vieira de Andrade suggests:

No caso de Leilah Assunção e *Fala Baixo Senão Eu Grito*, o enfoque dos problemas específicos do tipo de mulher que temia enfrentar seu próprio desejo sexual talvez não tivesse alcançado a mesma receptividade por parte da crítica se o ambiente cultural não estivesse tão dominado pela necessidade de luta contra a repressão política e a opressão em geral, o que permitiu que a problemática do personagem Mariazinha também pudesse ser compreendida de maneira mais ampla, para além dos limites da questão feminina. (9)

It is in this scenario that a new view of Brazilian social structures is put on display. The writers are responsible for creating theatrical devices of a complex nature while effectively producing other types of allegories to question the idea of *Brazilianess* (so much explored by the modernist writers of the previous generations) especially innovating in new concepts of marginal, within the framework of the female characters.

NOTAS

¹The authors not only contest the patriarchal family as a revision of the authoritarian regime, but also revisit the model of the Brazilian patriarchal family as a historical prerogative to understand Brazilian culture. This, in turn, provides criticism of the work of important Brazilian social theorists such as of Gilberto Freyre and Caio Prado Junior. This discussion, though pertinent, is beyond the purview of this essay.

²DaMatta in *A Casa & a Rua* describes the idea of complementarity of social planes and ethics of dual codes: Tenho tentado revelar que, no caso da sociedade brasileira, o que se percebe muitas vezes como mudança ou diferença é apenas uma parte de um sistema diferenciado, uma constelação sociológica com pelo menos três perspectivas complementares entre si. Realmente, se entrevistarmos um brasileiro comum em casa, ele pode falar da moralidade sexual, dos seus negócios, de religião ou da moda de maneira radicalmente diferente daquele quealaria caso estivesse na rua. Na rua, ele seria ousado para discursar sobre a moral sexual, seria

prudente ao mencionar seus negócios e ultra-avançado ao falar de moda. Provavelmente ficaria querendo ouvir para se comunicar sobre religião. Em casa, porém, seu comportamento seria, em geral, marcado por um conservadorismo palpável, sobretudo se fosse um homem casado e falando de moral sexual diante de suas filhas e mulher! Pela mesma lógica, uma pessoa numa igreja, num funeral, num terreiro de umbanda ou num centro espírita poderia marcar suas atitudes com um discurso diferente daqueles requeridos pelos espaços da rua e da casa. Não é agora podemos saber—ao acaso que temos um ditado que diz: "Faça como eu digo, mas não como eu faço". Entre dizer e fazer há um abismo que parece caracterizar todo sistema dotado daquilo que Weber chamou de "éticas dúplices", ou seja, códigos de interpretação e norteamento da conduta que são opostos e valem apenas para certas pessoas, ações e situações. (33)

³The plays, after being written, were classified by Magaldi, Rodrigues most renowned critic, following Rodrigues' approval. The classification re-

mains controversial, since Rodrigues creates his own classification in the beginning of each play, which at times, contradict Magaldi's overarching denominations.

⁴ According to Brecht, estrangement or alienation effects, especially the ones used in modern theater, "are only designed to free socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them against our grasp today" (8).

⁵ For DaMatta, death is seen as a metaphor for going up or down a type of hierarchical plane: Ou seja, a morte no Brasil é concebida como uma passagem de um mundo a outro, numa metáfora de subida ou descida—algo verticalizado, como a própria sociedade—e jamais como um movimento horizontal, como ocorre na sociedade americana, onde a morte é quase sempre encapsulada na figura de uma viagem aos confins, limites ou fronteiras do universo (Cf., para o caso brasileiro, Freyre, 1977: 84). (103)

⁶ See, Freud. *A Special Type of Choice of Object made by Men (Contributions to the Psychology of Love I)*.

⁷ Michalski (1979) lists some of the guidelines officially received by the censors, which are very vague, but assumes a certain understanding of the expectations of what is considered proper (espousing family values) or not:

- a) conter qualquer ofensa ao decoro público;
- b) conter cenas de ferocidade ou for capaz de sugerir a prática de crimes.
- c) divulgar ou induzir aos maus costumes.
- d) for capaz de provocar incitamento contra o regime vigente, a ordem pública, as autoridades constituídas e seus agentes;
- e) puder prejudicar a cordialidade das relações com outros povos;
- f) for ofensivo às coletividades ou às religiões.
- g) ferir, por qualquer forma, a dignidade ou os interesses nacionais.
- h) induzir aos desprestígios das forças armadas. (25)

⁸ Guidarini in *Nelson Rodrigues: flor de obsessão* (and other critics of Nelson Rodrigues) has emphasized the dualities and play of opposites in Rodrigues' plays. I, on the contrary, believe that the play of opposites is used to destabilized prescribed dichotomies, a theatrical device.

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