

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Working-Class Women and Television Fiction Uses: Can Subaltern Voices Speak of Sexuality?

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We reflect how heterosexual working-class women, of different generations and ethnic groups, in Brazil's southernmost region, make representations of sexuality connecting sex and affection. It seems that sexuality is more of a problem to be faced than a pleasure to be lived, although the mentalities (Ariès 1990) of working-class women in inner Rio Grande do Sul relate conformity and resistance to the patriarchal order. The accounts of appearance, manners and sexual behaviour show that family, work, school and television fiction shape a symbolic capital extracted from their class and gender habitus (Bourdieu 1999; Skeggs 2004). Such accounts – which we had obtained during two years of fieldwork and through individual sociological profiles (Lahire 2004) – present richness of material for the analysis of lived experiences and of the weight of social structures on personal lives.

Keywords: Working class; gender/sexuality; television fiction; sociological portraits; brazilian media

Introduction

Telenovelas by *Rede Globo*, the largest TV fiction producer in Brazil, attain high audience rates in the country,¹ and also reach millions of receivers in Latin America and other continents. Despite the diversity of TV fiction genres on offer via cable or satellite TV and the migration of customers to social networks and mobile media, telenovelas remain a source of collective knowledge and recognition, constituting not only a narration of the nation (Lopes 2009) but also an international-popular narrative (Ortiz 1994) which is shared globally due to cultural traits in common that are deterritorialised in order to be inserted in new spaces, where they will be located in the cultural density of place.

Despite a certain decline in ratings, the consumption of telenovelas is still highly relevant within the Brazilian population and particularly so amongst the Class C,² which make up the main audience of FTA TV in the country. According to PNAD 2013 (the National Household Sample Survey/IBGE), when survey data were obtained, 49.9% of Brazil's population accessed the internet and, according to the same index, that figure exceeded half of the population for the first time in 2014, at 54.4%. The growing role of the internet is proportional to the increase in the number of smartphones. In 2016,³ out of the entire Brazilian population, 43% of internet users did so exclusively on their mobiles.

These figures must be seen with caution, however, as income and education levels are the main divide between those who have access to the web and those who do not. The 2015's Brazilian Media Survey (*Pesquisa Brasileira de Mídia*), conducted by the federal government, shows that, whereas connection exceeds 80% of households amongst Classes A and B, only 49% of Class-C homes have access to the internet, and only 16% of households amongst Classes D and E were connected in 2015 (even though the connection rate in the lower classes has doubled since 2013). The fact remains that, in times of convergence, their reception spreads on the web even if our informants are more active in their offline personal relationships and do not fit the category of connected fans or those who are interested in social media for disseminating the plots.

Our goal is to understand the relation between the consumption of prime-time telenovelas and the process of association and dissociation between sexual pleasure and love by heterosexual working-class women from different ethnicities and generations in southern Brazil. Unlike the persistent imaginary that has been socially constructed around working-class women as sexually permissive (Skeggs 2002, 2004), research shows that, in Brazil, these women – who have not conquered the same degree of sexual freedom as middle-and upper-middle class women (Mattos 2006; Brown 2011; Heilborn 2013) – reject their image as sexually free. The media have been promoting, since the 1960s, the image of the seductive and objectified woman (Moreno 2013) and one possibility of synthesising the specific representations of women in telenovelas is that they “reproduce traditional notions of maternity and conjugal love as the ‘modern’ notion of the woman who works, but who has the time to look after her body and beauty as well as

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managing the household without having to share any chores" (Almeida 2013: 115).

In this essay⁴ we show the role telenovelas play within culture in reproducing and transforming gender inequalities in as much as our evidence encompasses uses that, for the most part, confirm male domination as well as anxieties related to working-class women's sexual liberation. One of the contributions of our research has to do with the interpretive reach of empirical data on the formation of symbolic capital of working-class women. If, according to Bourdieu (2008), only the ruling classes possess symbolic capital in the shape of social prestige, for us, the uses of telenovelas allow for the acknowledgement of women as 'workers' and as 'mothers'. This is a symbolic capital that, at the same time, subjugates them to the traditional household and allows the social valuation through labour as it represses sexual pleasure.

Social class, race/ethnicity, and gender are all interrelated concepts, but, here, our focus is on the intersection between class and gender given the theoretical complexity that is required to capture the three in empirical research. Biographical accounts were collected with interviews and participant observation during the period of two years (2012 and 2013) on the field and their later integration into individual sociological portraits (Lahire 2004). These accounts indicate that family, work, school, and TV fiction genres modulate a symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1999; Skeggs 2004) extracted from scarce economic, social, and cultural capital.

Our reflection explores a dual hypothesis: a) the working-class audience veers towards a conservative interpretation of gender relations and femininity as a way to legitimise the model mother, sacrificed by the weight of her devotion to the home in opposition to women from the elite, who possess economic capital to compensate for the overload caused by the unequal division of domestic chores; b) the female audience, in addition to identifying with the romantic model of relationships in sentimental narratives, enjoy a projective pleasure of sorts with the trajectory of characters who follow a model closer to that of confluent love (Giddens 1994).

To interpret the notions that the female audience build of love and sex in telenovelas, we resort to Giddens' study of the transformations of intimacy, in the passage from romantic to confluent love, which, as has already been noted (Ronsini et al. 2015), are valid categories to think multiple sexualities. In romantic love, conceived as of the Middle Ages and consolidated in the 19th century, faithfulness and erotic passion are exercised by the woman with the same partner, to whom she promises her eternal love whilst the man has the permission – nowadays implicit – to enjoy his sexual life freely outside marriage. In confluent love, reciprocal sexual pleasure is fundamental and is complemented by spiritual and emotional ingratiation between the couple.

The research design seeks to juxtapose the life experience of working-class women and their reading of telenovela. Thus, the structure of the text refers to the modern gender tradition, linking it to Brazilian historiography and to relationships with telenovelas. The methodology of sociological portraits captures the interviewees'

trajectories from childhood until the current context, in the family, the neighbourhood, at work, at school, and in their social relations at large. Next, it addresses ways of living and of assigning meaning to love, synthesised with interviews that cover from conceptions of family to relationships and beauty care. The analysis of the ritual of consuming telenovelas focuses on the ways of seeing and reading the narratives as support for the maintenance of conservative values, which, however, also give way to female independence.

Therefore, by contextualizing informants' experience through a sociological portraits methodology correlated to a historical analysis of feminine condition in Brazil, we have noticed that the uses of telenovelas by interviewees result in their reaction against the objectification of working class women coupled to their need to assert sexual freedom.

The Modern Gender Tradition

In Brazil, sexist and patriarchal cultural traits (Heilborn 2013) allow for an exploration of the hypothesis of a modern gender tradition. In principle, the modern woman can be defined as the one who has conquered economic independence, sexual freedom, and emotional autonomy, but whose conquest depends, amongst other factors, on social class and the constitution of mentalities and worldviews. On the one hand, it was middle-class and upper-class women who profited from more equal gender relations (Mattos 2006); on the other, however, sexual freedom is lived by more educated and more privileged groups of Brazil's population whereas the conservative mentality of most stops any changes to customs from taking place (Almeida 2007). Almeida's work on the opinion of Brazilians from all social classes and all age groups on "liberal sexual practices" argues that those residing in capitals are more liberal than those living elsewhere; those without religion are more liberal than those who profess any faith; to the exception of homosexuality, men are more liberal than women; and the worldview of people with higher degrees of education are more liberal than the worldview of those with less formal education. As we shall see, our data confirm what the authors mentioned above interpret about customs in Brazil.

Feminist waves also abound here: the egalitarian androgyny (genderlessness) of first-wave feminism and the right to gender differences of the second wave. The latter of which was a movement taking place between the mid and the late 1970s that rejected the masculism of the Western episteme but overlooked other forms of social division, such as "race" and social class (Pierucci 1999). The outcome of second-wave feminism is the proliferation of racial and class-based differences, the abandonment of womanhood and sisterhood by acknowledging the deep breaks within this exclusive feminism of white, middle-class and ruling-class women, with the risks of essentialism that it holds in its defence of diacritical signs that define genders, classes, "races", cultures.

Considering the scale of inequalities in Brazil in comparison to advanced capitalist countries, the subordination of poor, black, mixed-race, and white women has similarities and, taking into account social class divisions,

it is undeniable that there is a common history between the two. Feminist historiography in Brazil shows that the origins of the dissociation between carnal love and affection, between the figures of prostitute and mother, are associated to religiosity and class relations between upper-class women and white, black, and indigenous women in Colonial Brazil, as has been broadly developed by Mary Del Priore (2009), following the history of mentalities (Ariès 1990). Del Priore mentions the roles of the State, the Church, and Medicine in the sacralisation of marriage as a way to control eroticism associated with the “streetwalker” and with the confinement of mothers inside the domestic space. The lascivious woman and her demonic body, in the 16th and 17th centuries, opposed the fruitful woman, at the service of the species, thus fulfilling her biological aptitude. It is known that the main interest in moralising customs is of an economic nature, as a modernising capitalist expansion for criminalising and sexualising poverty is the counterpart to dignifying the honest, and nearly asexual, worker.

Our aim is to show that the moral tradition of the “holy mother” is partially contested by women from different working-class generations, especially due to TV fiction that congregates tradition and modernity in the realm of customs, a market that sells what is in fashion in telenovelas (Ronsini et al. 2017b) and, with that, values that constitute a hybrid femininity: anointed with a constraining and superficial sauciness on the one hand and with the autonomy of free corporal expression on the other. The tradition of romantic love fulfils the role of renewing the image of the mother without abandoning heteronormative eroticism.

When we use the expression “modern”, we are not solely referring to political, social, and cultural processes typical of modern rationality (Giddens 1991; Illouz 2013), but also to the formation period of a modern consumption society in Brazil (Ortiz 1991), between the 1940s and the 1970s when the cultural industry and the market of symbolic goods altered the very notion of popular culture – that now meant culture that is consumed and no longer the national-popular culture with roots in the working classes. In spite of the 1964 military coup, intellectuals were incorporated into the TV market as telenovela writers, whose potential remain in emancipatory pretensions of the “people”, as shown by Ortiz, Ramos and Borelli, in the history of TV production (1989).

This process of inclusion in the consumption market reaches the contemporary period, equally promoting the slow transformation of the sexual and affective sphere based on equality and on dialogue with the other’s needs and feelings. This cultural model of the intimate sphere, according to Eva Illouz (2011: 43) is made evident in cinema narratives that focus on the dismantling of relationships, “at the end of which women usually discover their own freedom and sexuality”, just as Giddens (1993) highlights the massive diffusion of romanticism by the novel in the 19th century.

For working-class women in Brazil, telenovelas have represented, during 50 years of existence, the modern tradition of gender and class relations (Tufté 2000), allowing,

at once, for the maintenance of mild domination and for a shift in mentality in relation to the sexist education of previous generations.

To allow for the production of a successful and positive national identity that became the national myth (Souza 2007, 2003), the dominant social imaginary in the country is made up of ambiguous virtues, showing Brazilians as joyful, warm, sensual, welcoming, emotional in comparison to individuals from advanced capitalist societies, who would, in turn, be driven by calculation and rationality. The representation of the noble savage as body and emotion naturalises difference and follows the separation between tradition and the “people” versus the modernity of the autochthonous “elite” in classifications that produce class, gender, and racial inequalities. Values of sexual and behavioural respectability, cherished by working-class women, speak volumes about the way in which inequalities are lived in relations between genders and “sexes”.⁵

This seems to be the totalising way to understand Brazil’s modernity and its national myth in order to approach their practical repercussion in gender relations, namely in the reproduction of a subaltern sexuality. In this process, emphasis is laid on the uses of media in maintaining and transforming gender subalternity by introjecting narratives of romantic love and of confluent love. The consumption of Brazilian telenovelas stabilises traditional intimate relationships in accordance with a conservative femininity and destabilises the *doxa* of gender in a comparative reflection to those differences observed in heterosexual relationships of women from the elite.

Similarly to our study – in which the contradiction between the romantic heroine who suffers in order to find love and those modern heroines who, in addition to love, conquer personal and professional autonomy – essays by Mazzioti, Sánchez, Cassano (2017) and Piñón (2017) on telenovelas aimed at audiences in Argentina, Brazil/Argentina, Peru, and the US demonstrate the ambiguity in representations of gender and sexuality in their plots. Whereas some openness has been attained in terms of sexual diversity, as Sánchez (2017) suggests, Mazzioti (2017) questions those tendencies observed in countries such as Colombia and Mexico, where the heroines lose their leading role over the prevailing display of their physique. Rincón (2017) reaffirms Latin America’s identification with telenovelas, especially by the lower classes, who discover their own lives in characters with whom they can identify on the screen by means of a popular aesthetics, a narrative type that is based on recognition. What is more, says Rincón, people’s sentimental education is achieved via telenovelas.

Feminist critiques from British, US, and Latin American Cultural Studies point to the fact, that soap operas and telenovelas not only portray female fragility and its restriction within the domestic space but also portray characters that represent strong, independent, clever women who are socially and economically powerful. These analyses reinforce the idea that, in Brazil, telenovelas seem to cater not only to more conservative mentalities, stuck to the plot’s romanticism, but also to modern ones, open to confluent love.

Methodological Portraits of Classed Women

Our epistemology, Critical Reception Studies (Ronsini 2012), does not intend to perform an immanent critical analysis of the text of TV fiction. Ideally, there should be a research project on which text specialists worked alongside reception specialists because codes synthesise social conventions at the service of economic and political power. However, it can be argued that this limit does not prevent an analysis of the social uses of the flows of fictional texts. As well as a discourse or semi-otic analysis does not require accounting for unforeseen uses thereof.

The method is that of Lahire's individual sociological portraits (2006), which capture subjective aspects of experience that are structured on concrete institutions and on the social totality by the synchronic and diachronic examination of cultural practices. That is, to comprehend the heterogeneity of personal trajectories in relation to class and gender dispositions, compared to the cultural consumption of telenovelas.

In-depth interviews and participant observation allow for the description and interpretation of various dimensions of experience (family, work, school, consumption, etc.), giving voice to informants in an approach to investigate the formation of symbolic capital based on gender and class *habitus* constituted in the consumption of telenovela. The interviews were based on five instrumental tools – three of them were semi-structured (with both open and closed questions), one was open, and another biographical – a total of 190 questions and 28 topics of biographical interview. Each tool was applied in one interview session, around 2 hours each, that is, five encounters and approximately 9 hours of interviews with each of the 12 informants. The overall result was 60 documents and over 245 thousand words transcript into text.

In sum, the qualitative sample basing our analysis is made up of 12 women belonging to the lower and lower middle classes,⁶ all of whom reside in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. Generational scope of younger informants goes from 19 to 24 years-old (Andreia, Luzia, Jussara, Marluce); of adult women, from 30 to 57 (Eliane, Norma, Rosângela, Vilma); and of the elderly, from 65 to 80 years-old (Hilda, Jiani, Sara, Zulmira). In terms of ethnicity, Brazilian miscegenation is evident as six interviewees are brown/mixed; one black; and five white. Low education levels prevail as eight informants have finished Primary School; two of them started but did not finish Secondary School; and only two of the younger women were admitted into Higher Education. In terms of employment, either current or past, women from the lower middle class work predominantly in the service sector, as a receptionist, secretary, massage therapist, seamstress, to the exception of one student. On the other hand, amongst those from the lower class, occupations refer to low-paid, heavy jobs, such as farmer and day-care assistant, housemaid, cleaning lady, to the exception of one housewife. Three of them are beneficiaries of the *Bolsa Família* programme, a federal basic stipend paid to poor families. Half of the informants reside in their own properties; four of them rent (two of whom are young women who live with their

parents); one of them has set up residence in her mother-in-law's backyard and another one lives in a settlement.

With regard to family organisation, all informants correspond to the heteronormative sexual orientation (Skeggs 2002). Six of them have traditional nuclear families, made up of a couple and their children. Three of them live in recomposed families, that is, family groups composed of children from different relationships, as is the case of the interviewee who is divorced or separated but in a second marriage. Two elderly women are widows and only one young woman is single. Except for three young women all other interviewees are mothers.

In our own terms, class C or hard-working class includes those lower middle and lower fractions, which we infer from the occupations of the informants' best-placed family member (criteria of economists Quadros and Antunes 2001), from their own occupation and from their whole life trajectory in terms of capital acquisition as established by Bourdieu and his interlocutors.⁷

The informants' working-class condition defines the heteronormative model applied to everyday practices of gender relations and personal (subjectivities) and collective identities ("classed women"). Being a woman is being framed by their social class in opposition to women from the dominant or middle classes. They "have no class" (elegance, style), perceiving consumption as the purchase of legitimacy of the well-born class, who possess the natural gift for sober traits in gestures, speech, and laughter. More than women, they desire to be feminine, to follow the parameters of beautification, the virtues of the mother and the mythical figure of Eve.

Ways of Living and Signifying Love

Emphasis on the effort it takes to maintain a domestic life – place of work, of love for the children and of caring for everyone more than for her own sex life – and the work outside the home explains the dramatic nature that the term "hard-working woman" and "fighter" involve. In reference to men, the term hard worker/fighter does not seem to bear the same symbolic weight as he is the legitimate representative of the hard-working breadwinner even when the woman's salary is higher.

Identification and expressions of solidarity with people from the same socioeconomic group, the hatred of the arrogance of rich people and the established middle class are not incompatible with the desire for social mobility and the identification with telenovela characters who become rich by means of their own labour. Even if we cannot claim that there is class consciousness due to a lifestyle that lacks participation in the political sphere, there is certainly a fractured consciousness of social injustice that is disguised in the ideology of merit and personalism (Ronsini 2012).

Family, politics, media, Catholicism are the institutional sources of these women's gender habitus. The identity of most of the interviewees is related to the example of hard-working women, such as their mothers, aunts, daughters, and sisters whilst two of them identify with president Dilma Rousseff's (2011–2016) example of governing with courage and in solidarity with the poor. Other two of them

are inspired by the Virgin Mary's sacrifice and her love for her son and by the "joy" of telenovela characters played by actress Susana Vieira. Both informants who mention president Rousseff are the only ones to show any sympathy for left-wing parties and for the Landless Workers' Movement (MST).

The evaluation of what they define as the synthesis of the "Brazilian woman" is loaded with ambiguity. On the one hand, "curvy" body features (which do not abide by the normative bourgeois beauty standard) and racial miscegenation; on the other, honesty, dedication to the family, laboriousness, courage and determination to face problems. The gap between body and moral virtues appears in these accounts to escape the stigmatised representation of Brazilian women, especially poor, black, or mixed-race women, who are reduced to their bodies. Only one university student, in a demonstration of racial prejudice, said that Brazilian women are "vulgar" when comparing women from the state of Rio Grande do Sul to women from the Northeast of the country. All others are split into highlighting either laboriousness or the inability to acquire body capital that is worthy of representation in light of scarce economic capital. The traditional feminine "model" extracted from the "people" is based on its ability to work, a concept in crisis in contemporary audio-visual production due to its fragility in defining symbolic capitals ever more dependent on a bourgeois lifestyle that is historically based on aestheticizing the everyday as symbol of freedom from necessity. Work is always a value to be highlighted in association with respectability.

Hard-working women's families cannot fully live the pleasure of romantic love. However, conversely to Jessé Souza's team's research with hard-working women (Berg 2010), we have found a certain autonomy of the erotic sphere even if children and the family as a productive unit are still the priority. Not only the two young women with higher levels of educated cultural capital – who are able to study Law and Advertising thanks to scholarships granted by Lula da Silva's government – but also the one who works as a cleaning lady at a shopping centre, the one who works as a housemaid, one elderly (lower middle class), adult women from the lower middle class and from the lower class worry about appearance and invest as much as possible in beauty procedures. What is more, when asked about sensuality, most of the interviewees deem it important as a way to boost self-esteem and as a way to seduce, a strategy whose meaning is that of being seduced back, a female activity that is reduced to making herself be noticed by her partner.

The wish for confluent love comes through when some of the interviewees claim sexual freedom for all women, which is, nonetheless, contradicted by sequential monogamy that is tolerated only in extreme cases: widowhood, physical aggression, alcoholism. Unlike confluent love – in which both "sexes" may remain or not on a relationship –, informants claim the ideal of eternal love. Working-class heterosexual women cannot even fully realise romantic love. For them, it would be deemed enough to live their sexuality and monogamous pleasure by its antithesis, male pleasure. Motherhood, which is idealised,

and the effort into caring for children and the home fully occupy their mind and body. Conservative romanticism prevails, but the dramatic experience of symbolic gender violence and of factual gender violence promotes a feeling of disenchantment or effectively leads to the formation of a new family nucleus or to a new life as a single woman.

Most express dissatisfaction with their marriage in the form of complaints of all sorts: boredom, work overload, lack of job opportunities because of their duties towards their husband and children. Satisfaction with their family and conjugal relationships is expressed by only two women and, even then, carrying a feeling of duty to the women's actual reality. Jussara and Luzia, young women, as well as Norma and Rosângela, adult women, have already split up. Only Luzia has not remarried and establishes, with much conviction, her need for freedom, including sexual freedom.

There is a clash between the image that they have of their husbands and that of upper-class men. Working-class men are, based on their own lives with alcoholic or aggressive fathers/stepfathers, generally badly evaluated. Amongst all participants, eight of them have suffered violence due to their partner's and/or father's/stepfather's behaviour. Disenchantment with men is made evident in the description that they make of their relationship with their husband or of the very image that they have of their marriage: almost all of them (9) make complaints because of fights or infidelity. According to the informants, reasons why women remain single are the maintenance of their own freedom, the absence of overload with chores related to the home and the children and five of them understand that women abdicate their wedding because of romantic disappointment or because of traumas through which they either lived or which they have observed in their families.

In response to a question on their evaluation of the ideal man to whom a woman could get married so as to know if there could be any rejection to marriage at all, none of them even fathomed the possibility of a woman not wanting to get married. Most often, adult and elderly women would describe the man as the hard-working breadwinner. Regardless of generation, the second most appreciated characteristic is male fidelity and affection, a mix of understanding and fondness. This is the combination between the conservative view of the division of sexual labour and the dissatisfaction with men's double standards on sexual morality. The ideal of the seductive woman, professed by all women interviewed, is to show sensuality without hypersexualising feminine traits.

The most frequently cited characteristics of a woman whom a man would choose to marry, in the informants' view, are fidelity, laboriousness (at home and outside), beauty or care for personal appearance. They corroborate the degree of demand that they themselves fight to achieve as well as the preoccupation with male honour, highlighted in Miriam Grossi's research (2004), as a matter of life or death for the working class.

Most of them naturalise men's proclivity to lose control in search of satisfaction for their own desires, whereas half of the interviewees, without disagreeing with those

differences, either admit that women are unfaithful to take revenge or that they could, just as men can, be unfaithful because of dissatisfaction in their marriages. Therefore, they signal an acceptance of men's lustful nature but also a discomfort or inconformity with infidelity. What the informants desire is a monogamous relationship that is satisfactory to both, what is ever more difficult for women due to their work routine at home and in the public space.

Sexual pleasure or the approval of erotic love are assessed less repressively by half of the informants, in response to questions on the positive aspects of femininity or on long-term relationships and marriage. For those who are married, the couple's intimate life is complicated by having to take care of the children and, thus, confirm motherhood as a priority over sexual practices. Luzia, Mara, and Jussara, younger women, as well as Vilma and Norma, adult women, are more outspoken in their accounts of their intimate life and of their admissions to sexual pleasure. Norma, for example, says that, during the period when she was separated, she would still have sex with her ex-husband. Zulmira, elderly, not only approves of the exercise of female sexual freedom in choosing their spouse but also says that she was criticised for the freedom that she offered her young daughter. She defends sexual freedom and more daring outfits for women, perhaps because she feels free from the imperative of decency that haunts younger and adult women on the marriage market.

Even though the classification as a "respectable woman" still holds and the cultivation of sexual abilities is repressed, most interviewees consider that the female sexual experience should not be limited to the man whom they marry.

In reference to data collected in a previous research project (CNPq 2013–2016) on the constitution of symbolic capital by telenovela receivers from the upper and working classes, we observed that the term "hard working" is used indistinctly by all class fractions to refer to women who reconcile professional life and domestic chores. Meanwhile, working-class informants claim the identity of the suffering mother due to the family's debt to her for her sacrifice and/or claim to regret having gotten married so young and having to take care of the offspring.

The more prudent use of expressions such as "independent woman" and "modern woman" by five informants to refer to the condition of female autonomy seems relevant even when we take into account that those expressions were mostly used, in the aforementioned research project, amongst women from the upper and upper middle classes. These are symptomatic of a shift in the consciousness of working-class women even if independence means, above all, working outside the home. Nine informants work outside the home and even those who have already retired still have occasional jobs. Andreia studies and is supported by her husband and Jiani, elderly, and Eliane, adult, are housewives. The fact that seven of these women do not use such common expressions is symptomatic of the dismissal of poor women by modern discourses on female independence.

Independence, for Andreia, means not having to submit to the husband or partner. Luzia believes that an independent woman is the one who works, does not have any children and goes to parties by herself. Vilma confirms the ideas that independence is obtained by means of labour and that there should be autonomy in decision-making. A term related to "independent" is "modern", which can mean both women who work outside the home and, for Zulmira, women who follow a pattern in fashion consumption (fresh and "in vogue") or the evolution of customs that allow for a sex scene to feature in telenovelas. In addition to that, Zulmira defines herself as "modern" because of the sexual education that she offered her daughter, encouraging her not to get married too early and to date first to better choose her partner. She is an exemplary case of coherence in relation to all informants because she assesses how much her own trajectory could have been different had she had the courage to walk away from her unfaithful, alcoholic husband.

The sphere of sexuality and the deprecating representation of working-class women throughout history seems, therefore, to demand from them a sexuality that is regulated more by marriage and by motherhood than by the right to eroticism. The conquest of a free sexuality in the formation and in the expression of identity, which began as of the 1960's sexual revolution (Illouz 2011), is an acquisition that working-class women only know conflictedly. Diagnoses of the new family configurations, of the diversity of conjugal relationships, of greater equality between the genders, and of conjugal ties aiming at the autonomous development of family members do not apply to all social classes and "romantic relationships based on affection, complicity, and sexual satisfaction" are much more common, according to Mattos (2006: 182–183), amongst the established middle class. Meanwhile, in the lower fraction of the working class, absence, abandonment, or violence through the figure of the father generate serious problems in children's self-esteem as they grow into adulthood, making it more difficult for the self to constitute itself autonomously and for capacities, such as discipline, self-responsibility, and prospective calculation to be learnt.

Rituality in Telenovela Consumption: Ways of Seeing and Reading

During the period of data collection, informants would mostly watch prime-time telenovelas on *Globo* network, namely: *Fina Estampa* (Aguinaldo Silva, Aug/2011–Mar/2012); *Avenida Brasil* (Emmanuel Carneiro; Mar/2012–Oct/2012); and *Salve Jorge* (Glória Perez; Oct/2012–May/2013). Informants' repertoire is composed of memories of telenovelas broadcast on *Globo*'s prime time in addition to countless other telenovelas watched during the rest of the day on other channels (*SBT* and *Rede Record*).

Watching telenovelas is more often done on a TV set, in the company of family members or, in the case of elderly women, by themselves. Additionally, talking about telenovela is usually a face-to-face conversation with family members, acquaintances, friends, and work colleagues.

Over the two years of interviews, 50% of the participants were not connected, and only one adult woman and two young women had internet access at home. For half of them, using the internet is a matter of searching for information (which includes general knowledge, news, and entertainment) or services (job opportunities). Among those who do use the internet, only two, do not consume any content on telenovelas.

The working-class and upper-class characters that attract receivers unveil both the reproduction of gender differences in accordance with the class to which the latter belong as well as the parallels that receivers draw between observing and interpreting the experience in the plots as representations of real life. Working-class characters that are remembered are those who start off poor and move upwards on the social ladder by means of their effort and determination without ever losing sight of values such as humility and ethics. On the other hand, upper-class characters that are remembered are notoriously arrogant and villainous wealthy characters and, to a lesser extent, are those that have reproachable sexual conduct, seen as inadequate to the elegant and sober behaviour of “posh” women (Ronsini et al. 2017a).

Male upper-class characters are chiefly represented in a positive fashion amongst receivers in opposition to working-class characters, whose representations are almost exclusively negative. The former are called rich, well-dressed, polite, civilised, successful, well-read, thoughtful, fragrant, good parents, etc. The latter, on the other hand, are described as extortionists, poorly dressed, impolite, ignorant, dirty, etc.

Representations of male characters naturalise divisions between poor and rich men, where poor men have no qualities and rich ones are idealised based on their behaviour and appearance as if flaws and virtues were essential to class and gender. Female characters, in turn, also present a classed and gendered nature: working-class women are pigeonholed in the binomial hard worker-vulgar whereas upper-class women, in the binomial elegant-arrogant.

Similar to results found by Janice Radway (1984) on the role of fiction literature in building escape routes, at least imaginary ones, for women’s dissatisfaction with their marriage, the female working-class audience finds in telenovela narratives relationship standards that they consider to be more satisfactory than those that they and other women from their class enjoy.

In terms of work, mentions that value labour as a way to overcome those difficulties imposed by their class position are common and spontaneous. The double or triple work shift attached to the emphasis given to taking care of the family resounds those definitions of “hard working” and “fighter”, which refer back to an “heroic ethos” (Escosteguy et al. 2013). For half of the interviewees, identification with telenovela characters is established in narratives of model women, who work and take care of their children. If, on the one hand, their declarations demonstrate the personification of the independent woman – the one who works –, on the other, they implicitly deny them a love life.

Again, comparing the trajectory of characters mentioned, most of them are women who act as the heads of their families and who never got married, were abandoned by their partners, or who have problems in their relationships. Additionally, the professional trajectory of some of them is characterised by achieving a decent economic condition by setting up a small business (beauty salon, restaurant, and pub). Their condition as head of the family portrays the reality in Brazil, where, according to data from the last census, in 2010, the number of homes where the woman is the breadwinner reaches 37.3%.

In the informant’s view, Brazilian women in telenovelas are represented by characters from the lower classes who dedicate themselves to their families (children) and to their work, distant from the imaginary that Brazilian women are marked by a sexualised body. The historical construction of Brazilian women as *mulata*/mixed as a synonym for sexual depravity leads to the consideration of the ethnic intersection alongside that of social class in order to interpret the interviews. It is worth noting that the body that is valued is the working body, far from the negative standards associated to apparent signs of poverty (Ronsini 2017a), one of which is the vulgarity associated with working-class women (Skeggs 2002).

Although moral judgement prevails in notions of representations of conservative versus liberal women, the topic of infidelity in the telenovelas’ plots points to a questioning of the naturalised roles and sexual desires of men and women. Most interviewees claim that, when telenovelas feature infidelity, especially male infidelity, as “normal”, they are teaching people to accept it, which is contested and rejected by the interviewees. Whilst only two elderly women are in favour of banning scenes of infidelity, one elderly woman, two adults, and a young woman believe that telenovelas portray reality. Two young women, who acknowledge the existence of infidelity, complain that telenovelas treat male infidelity as normal maybe because they wish a more equal treatment of what they consider to be an issue common to both.

Nearly all informants disapprove of sex scenes in telenovelas as they believe that these are disrespectful or unnecessary. In sum, we can point to the uses of the body in telenovelas’ representations equating to the pair working body and seductive body, in which the former is a motto for self-identification and recognition of Brazilian women – all of which does not ultimately escape the symbolic capital of the working classes and the notion of respectability. The latter is a point of contrast to the traditional morality that represses female sexuality, which is evident in claims by three interviewees, one from each generation.

If Freud was right to claim that the ability to help one’s self is conditioned by social class and does not depend on pure willpower (as cited by Illouz 2011: 61), it is equally right to claim that telenovelas contribute for working-class women to help themselves in a slow awakening process over gender oppression, even if often they cannot completely change male domination. At least, they gain partial consciousness of oppression by identifying themselves with or projecting themselves on the female

characters in the narratives that they follow since childhood or adolescence, which leads to questioning those sexist institutional structures and practices confining women and men. Telenovelas are parameters for them to trust in change on the field of customs, more visible for adult and younger women or for the elderly who, as widows, are free from male domination not only as a physical presence but also a symbolic one.

Telenovelas work as therapy to face family conflicts. They offer examples of strong women who impose themselves before male authority, who overcome domestic violence, who gather their children around them. The fact that the informants rarely go to the cinema and, moreover, their lack of access to *cinema d'auteur*, which explores the topic of women's freedom, leads to the conclusion that the model of freedom known by the informants is that offered by telenovelas. It constitutes a limited step forward that seems to disseminate the idea of a more equal heterosexual relationship in comparison to the ones that these women enjoy. However, it is still centred on the ideal of women who navigate both the public and the private spheres without debating crucial issues such as the sexual division of labour.

For Mazzioti (2017), telenovelas tend to show that the heroine becomes emancipated through emotions and the troubled hardships of love. That is how she is capable of coping with the difficulties imposed by class, discrimination, etc. Such emancipation is often limited as it is restricted by impositions of romantic love. However, within the oral tradition of Latin America and given their difficult access to other cultural forms, telenovelas are one of the few representations of female emancipation accessible to many working-class women.

Final remarks

In opposition to patriarchal and sexist views, which have historically represented working-class women as promiscuous and available for sex, we have found that the experience of sexuality is disputed between the principle of pleasure and the commitment to domestic chores, between pleasure of the body and sovereignty of feelings. Sexual pleasure and feelings are second to duties towards family and work and melodramatic narratives are a daily reminder of the differences between the less conservative, modern bourgeois family and the traditional working-class family in which women's autonomy is more restricted.

Therefore, the construction of working-class women's mentality in cities in the countryside of the state of Rio Grande do Sul is on par with the patriarchal order and yet shows timid signs of inconformity with the reproduction of gender inequality: with expressions of tiredness and disenchantment with men or with themselves for the choices that put them off the track to autonomy (a word that, itself, is absent from their vocabulary but that finds a correlative in 'not depend on anybody'). This inconformity is appeased by the naturalisation of motherhood and of the heroic character of female sacrifice for the sake of their family.

The critique that informants elaborate to the image of the seductive woman, in opposition to the image of moral

rectitude of her working-class counterpart, seems conservative if we take into account that the association between love and sex is much closer to the spectrum of liberal thought than to the disapproval of the sexual behaviour of the slag (*periguate*). Whereas characters representing working women express their sexual desire with much reservation, the dissociation is also visible when, in their reading of telenovelas, informants oppose the Brazilian woman represented for her beauty and curvaceous body to the hard-working Brazilian woman.

From another point of view, receivers complain about the objectification of the *periguate's* body on the marriage market, without realising, however, another key aspect of the anti-heroine's submission, namely their economic dependence on their partner. *Periguetes* do not work; they look for husbands.

Uses of telenovelas also reinforce the model of the hard-working housewife in opposition to bourgeois elegance, understood as the standard to be attained. The assimilation of romantic love prevails as opposed to the modernity of the working woman and to *periguetes'* sexual freedom, a characteristic that opposes the notion of the respectable woman, which does not exist in the characterisation of confluent love.

As we have seen, women allow themselves to speak if they are duly authorised by the media's "abstract system", which simultaneously means emotional and cognitive security in face of precarious medical, psychological, and legal support to deal with intimate issues – at once, personal and collective, private and public. Women's biographies within institutional family, school, and work environments – narrated from the perspective of gender and class relations – unveil voices which are, at times, silenced and, at others, amplified in evoking the memory of resentment/suffering, resignation/rebellion and of the triumph of courage, of work, and of love in the journeys of those who seldom dare to claim the right to sexual pleasure. In sum, we put forth the thesis that women in conditions of subalternity express a working-class "identity" to deal with subjugation and depreciation as women subjected to hypersexualisation.

As general explanation of the relations between female working class audience and media seem valid to comprehend the important role of media and telenovelas, which surpasses the contextual character and location of the study, we understand that: a) media's authority, particularly the telenovela, springs from its centrality in regulating economic, social political and cultural processes, and the recognition of its authority by the audience; b) representation of fictional television prescribes positions of class and gender reproducing silences and consent, however, desires to change these arbitrarities are also present and vocal.

Finally, we hope that our work has made clear that, on the one hand, even though they might put some effort into personal appearance and even though they might draw inspiration from what they see on TV in order to adjust to beauty criteria that are necessary for their love life, the scarce economic capital and the maintenance of a monogamous and offspring-driven family structure favour

the production of a subjectivity that is based on internalising modes of perception and self-perception that are linked to the value of paid labour and of labour in the household. On the other hand, it shows that the observation of sexual freedom experienced by female characters from the working class sets off questions around monogamous marriages and, for only a few of the informants, those characters encourage claims for the same freedom that the informants believe that men possess. In other words, the symbolic capital of working-class women, equally formed by telenovelas, subordinates women to the traditional private space.

Notes

- ¹ A comparison of 9-o'clock telenovelas with high ratings as registered by IBOPE: Fina Estampa, 42.1% (Aguinaldo Silva, 2011–2012); Avenida Brasil, 41.5% (João Emanuel Carneiro, 2012); Salve Jorge, 40% (Gloria Perez, 2012–2013); Source: Rede Obitel.
- ² Brasil. Presidência da República. Secretaria de Comunicação Social. (2014). *Pesquisa brasileira de mídia 2015: hábitos de consumo de mídia pela população brasileira*. – Brasília: Secom. The segmentation of social strata into A, B, C, D, and E is based on income and net worth and roughly corresponds to upper class (A), middle class (B), working class (C), and poorer strata of the working class (D and E).
- ³ Research on the use of ICT in Brazilian households (2017) TIC domicílios. *Núcleo de Informação e Coordenação do Ponto BR*. São Paulo: Comitê Gestor da Internet no Brasil.
- ⁴ This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – Brasil (CAPES) – Finance Code 001.
- ⁵ If, on the one hand, the concept of sex has been morphed into that of gender, on the other, it is still used in reference to its political validity or, addressing the strand of feminist debate that does not fully validate radical constructivism, its biological reality. It is, therefore, similar to the concept of race, whose implications in the distribution of power are evident despite not having any scientific validity any longer to explain genetic differences.
- ⁶ Respondents formally accepted to take part in the research and the names herein shown are pseudonyms, to protect subjects' privacy.
- ⁷ Debate on types of capital derive from original concepts of Bourdieuan theory (Bourdieu, 1999, 2008, and others) and are developed by international and Brazilian commentators.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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