

Identity, Judaism and Homosexuality

Two Stories About Belonging

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The identification of someone as a member of the Jewish community depends on the kinship relations linking the person to this collective. It was through a process of identifying members of the community that we began to collect the life histories of homosexuals that eventually formed part of the research project “Homophobia and Violence: a study of the discourses and actions of Brazilian religious traditions in relation to LGBTs.”¹

Through an analysis of two life histories obtained through interviews², this article discusses individual belonging to the Jewish ethnic/religious community, a belonging that intersects with the identification with homosexuality. This topic forms part of the field of studies into contemporary religious phenomena. According to Danièle Hervieu-Léger (2005:48), modern religiosity involves a double movement: on one hand, the waning power of religious institutions to regulate beliefs and practices; on the other, a greater freedom for people to “recompose their own belief system outside of any reference to an institutionally validated set of beliefs.” These recompositions of religious identities are guided by more or less conscious attachment

1 This research project was conducted in 2008 at the ESS/UFRJ (School of Social Service, at the Federal University at Rio de Janeiro). It also formed one of the activities involved in the PN DST/Aids – SVS/MS research project entitled “Studies into Perception and Actions among Brazil’s Different Religious Currents in Relation to Gays Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transexuals, and in relation to Homophobia and Violence against these demographic sectors.” The project is coordinated by Dr. Maria das Dores Campos Machado and the team comprises the following researchers: Andrea Moraes, Myriam Moraes Lins de Barros, Luciana Zucco, José Pedro Simões, Fernanda Piccolo and Murilo Motta. The project investigated the discourses and actions of five religious traditions concerning homosexuality: Catholic, Spiritist, Evangelical, Jewish and Afro-Brazilian.

2 The interview technique was based on the “life history” model: the interviewee was encouraged to talk about his or her family, religious, romantic and sexual life from childhood to the present, in a non-structured format.

to some of the following dimensions: communal (the sense of belonging to a religious community), ethical (the degree of individual acceptance of religious messages), cultural (the connection to religious symbols taken as part of a cultural heritage) and emotional (the affective experience connecting a subject to a religion). Hervieu-Léger argues that the modern religious subject establishes an identity-forming trajectory that traverses one or more of these dimensions. Studying these histories provides us with a “cartography of the trajectories of religious identification.” The cartography mapped out in his article concerns two accounts, one from a 56-year-old man and the other from a 25-year-old woman, who are part of Jewish family networks and also identified with homosexuality. The association between Judaism and homosexuality is unusual, involving as it does the convergence of two aspects taken to be incompatible: being Jewish and being homosexual. Reproductive sexuality is the parameter responsible for consolidating the Jewish family. Based on a clear gender asymmetry and the predominance of sexual difference, the family acts as a filter ensuring the perpetuation of Judaism as an identity across the generations. Hence, by proposing an association unthinkable within the Jewish logic – “being” Jewish and “being” gay or lesbian –, the research itself encourages the production of discourses on homosexuality that are inevitably situated on the margins of Judaism. Jewish acquaintances and friends repeatedly told us that they “suspected” other Jews of being homosexual but that introducing them to the research term would be impossible since their sexual orientation had not been openly declared “within the community.” Over time, we realized that this did not simply involve the concealment of gay and lesbian identities – a phenomena that would be far from exclusive to the Jewish community – but implied attributing a place to sexuality within this religious and ethnic discourse that makes it the basis of Jewish belonging. Insofar as “Jews are born of a Jewish mother,” sexuality, reproduction and the centrality of women are inexorably linked in this tradition. Non-reproductive sexuality is seen to disrupt profoundly the bonds involved in transmitting Jewishness. Mixed marriages, principally with non-Jewish women, are also a source of concern in the discourse on the generational transmission of the Jewish heritage (Gruman 2006).

The central role played by reproductive sexuality as an entry mechanism into the community (an inherited status) surrounds this topic with a series of complex taboos, prohibitions and rituals. As shown by the discourses of

the Jewish religious leaders interviewed³ (a rabbi linked to the more “orthodox” current of Judaism in Rio de Janeiro, and another rabbi identified as a “liberal-conservative”), sexuality when perceived as an individual pleasure is classified as “artificial,” the result of social changes that can be questioned and controlled by man, while “natural” or “organic” sexuality, over which the person has no choice, is directed towards reproduction. The marriage between a man and a woman is taken to be a social/moral rule based on nature. Hence a moral choice has to be made between doing what is right (or natural) or continuing to do what is wrong (or artificial). Religion provides the means of interpreting and separating these two dimensions, dedicating oneself to the natural. Hence confronting our informants with the association between Judaism and homosexuality was like mixing oil and water. I recall a telephone conversation with a male Jewish friend who, when I asked whether he knew a gay Jewish man or lesbian Jewish woman, replied after considerable thought: “But do you really need the two things together (Jewish and gay)?”

After much insistence, we managed to find “the two things together.” Natalia and Wagner (the names are fictitious) agreed to tell us their life histories.

Natália is 25 years old, single, holds a university degree and lives with her parents in the southern region (zona sul) of Rio de Janeiro. She has no paid job or personal income and is presently studying for a public sector exam. Both her parents are children of Jews. She describes her mother’s family as more “modern” and “cosmopolitan” than her father’s, described by her as more “old-fashioned” and “tied to the synagogue.” The extended family gathers in her paternal grandfather’s house to celebrate the Jewish holidays of Rosh Hashanah (The New Year) and Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement).

For Natália, Judaism is a “deep existential apprenticeship,” “it pervades everything in life,” forming a heritage with which she continually interacts. As she narrates her life story, Natália stresses her childhood as the time when

3 The research was divided into two main lines of inquiry, one focusing on the discourses of religious leaders and the other on the viewpoints of participants in the different religious traditions. The research methodology used with the leaders involved interviews based on structured questionnaires, while a life history approach was used in the case of participants.

she was most “faithful” to the Jewish religion, a period when she “believed more.” Religious practice and faith were important parts of her childhood and intermingle with memories of her paternal grandfather and family rituals.

However, her sense of belonging to the Jewish community is equally nourished by other memories not linked to the Jewish religion per se but to her schooling: she was educated in a Jewish school where she learned Hebrew, Jewish culture and Israeli dancing. Her childhood friends are Jews like herself. One of the key moments in her integration to the Jewish community was a school trip to Israel, a moment she describes as an “*entranhamento*,” during which she became immersed or enrooted. An immersion in the values of Judaism, not so much from the religious point of view but in terms of her understanding of herself as part of a people and a history. She recalls that after the trip she would become emotional whenever she heard the Israeli national anthem.

In her late teens, Natália began to question the religious universe of Judaism, a process she calls “leaving the bubble.” After returning from her first solo trip to Europe, Natália enrolled in a university. These experiences as an independent young adult helped extend her network of personal relations beyond the Jewish world. In terms of religious belief, the faith in the coming of the Messiah, something she had shared since infancy, was completely ruptured. However, her link to the Jewish identity remains primordial. At various points during the interview, Natália recognized her Jewishness, tracing some of her personal traits to this identity:

I’m not a very open person, I’m very rational-minded. That’s what I was going to say about Judaism, I don’t really know what the connection is, you know? Some issues are personal, I don’t know what comes from where (...) Jews are very rational, very rational I think.”

She also discusses her Jewish identity in relation to everyday experiences with non-Jews:

There was a time when I wanted to forget I was a Jew. I said: “Ah, I’m not at all Jewish, I don’t even want to talk about it because I’ll be marked as one already.” Because here we come up against the media discourse where everyone now is pro-Palestinian and anti-Israel. I was the only Jew in my college class and I ended up getting all the flack.”

But as she herself points out elsewhere in the interview, forgetting her Jewish identity is impossible because “it pervades everything in life,” “it’s something very strong that outsiders perceive. Jews spend much of their time with other Jews.” Even though her circle of friends has expanded and today is “half-and-half,” as she puts it, most of the important people appearing in her life story are Jewish.

The feeling of belonging to the Jewish community and her legacy of memories and dilemmas becomes more problematic when confronted with another important dimension of the interviewee’s life history. Natália has pursued emotional and sexual relations with women since she was 18. Though questioning her origins in religious terms, she is inexorably linked to her Jewish identity through family blood ties, her early experiences of socialization and the everyday interaction with non-Jews (including the interview situation itself), while her view of herself as a homosexual is lived as an open question, an ongoing process full of alternations.

Sometimes I wonder whether I am, whether in fact I’m not because it’s a real pain being homosexual. This surfaces in my mind the whole time. It’s a pain, almost an obsession. But it’s also impossible because wherever you go, everything is always so hetero, everyone is very hetero, everything you see around makes you, I don’t know (...) Ah, you know what? I’m not going to go out with anyone for a while, I’ll go without for a while because if I’m not having sex with anyone then I’m not anything, am I? I’m normal, I can be a person...

Homosexuals are commonly expected to comply with a set script of “coming out of the closet” or openly declaring their homosexuality. This script, strongly marked by a generational gaze (Simões 2004), includes certain key moments such as self-negation, self-discovery, self-acceptance, the revelation to friends, family, and so on, until the definitive declaration of their homosexuality, which may even involve joining political movements in defense of homosexual rights. However, this type of possible narrative should not be allowed to obscure other processes of constructing homosexuality, equally shaped by generational contexts. “Coming out” can be interpreted not as a political project, but as a question of privacy and choice. Natália’s narrative concerning what she calls her “other life” provides us with a complex and non-linear perspective on the paths taken by sexuality and the limits of its constitution as a basis for self-identity.

Comparing Natália's perception of her Jewish and homosexual identities reveals a sharp contrast: while Judaism seems to provide clear forms of support in shaping her identity, such as blood ties, school experience and encounters with non-Jews, Natália encounters an absence of any clear or safe boundaries for constructing her homosexual identity, making it appear highly fluid and uncertain. At no point in the interview did Natália use the word "lesbian" or any other similar expression to speak about herself. Though recognizing her sexual desire for women, Natália searches for reference points to construct a homosexual identity. Speaking about the topic of sexuality in Judaism, Natália emphasized that "Jews" (and here she includes herself) are not "liberal."

The body is less present, you know? It's something extra, a greater discipline in the head. There's a certain rigidity on the intellectual side. It's not a samba culture, you see?"

Her discourse emphasizes a contrast between body and head with the latter predominating over the former. She refers to "samba culture" as a counterpoint to this body/head distinction. Presumably she uses this image of samba to suggest that in this (other) context – distinct from the Jewish context – sexuality is more liberated since no separation is made between desire and reason. The context in which she perceives herself to be embedded hinders any recognition of her own sexual desire since the latter is subject to the head and reason. Though sexually attracted to women, what her account emphasizes is the constant individual reflection on the concrete possibilities for realizing this desire and the difficulties faced in the process.

Natália tells us that until the age of 18 she experienced moments of intense "suffering and loneliness." All her friends were involved in emotional relationships, Jewish boys going out with Jewish girls, but she was unable to "go out," with any boy. She felt "anguished, pressured." Her relations with the opposite sex were rare and limited to kissing. She found any kind of more intimate physical contact "repulsive." The boys with whom she "made out" were friends from the same age group. One of them, also Jewish and with whom she later "lost her virginity,"⁴ eventually suggested to her that she might be a lesbian. His suspicion made her think about the subject.

4 The episode of losing her virginity is narrated as a necessary stage of life. Natália says that "I needed to do it" because it would have been impossible for her "to remain a virgin." She therefore chose a friend she could trust.

At the age of 18, 19, I'd never had a boyfriend, I was a virgin. And that's how things stayed, you know? Naturally I was very lonely. I knew there was something I couldn't properly understand. When I found out I felt liberated. It sort of came to me: wow, that's great that you can do that, I didn't know you could. It was one of my male friends who said: Hey, Natália, don't you think maybe you are? So I thought to myself, am I? Am I? I thought about it and then I felt it, you know? I felt that thing here in the pit of my stomach, and I said: yes, I am. But after that it's difficult, isn't it? To enter the scene."

Despite being "certain" about what she wanted, Natália recounts her difficulties in finding female partners and "entering that world." She speaks of her insecurity in telling whether a girl is interested in her, knowing the places to go, forming the networks of contacts – how, as she says, "everything works." According to Natália, the only environments she sometimes frequents where she could perhaps find a partner are "modern parties."

My friends aren't homosexual. So I didn't go out much to those kinds of places, I seldom frequented them, I had nobody to go with.

Her relationships with women have been short-lived. So far she has had three girlfriends. She is currently going out with a young woman she met over the internet who is not Jewish. The internet has proven to be a useful ally for these encounters: it provides a way of meeting future partners without the risk of being recognized by someone from the Jewish community. Her sex life ends up unfolding under the protection of the families of her girlfriends who accept the two young women as partners, as in the case of her current lover.

At particular moments of her life history the interviewee distinguishes between "knowing what it is" to be homosexual – a knowledge that in her story begins with a doubt concerning her capacity to form relationships with men, a doubt contained in a friend's question – and *entrar no meio*, "enter the scene:" in other words, understand the codes, know where to go, have sexual relations with women. Another important dimension is telling her friends and family about her amorous relations. These dimensions are not connected in linear fashion but overlap. Each has its own specificity. "Knowing," simultaneously implies desire and reflexivity. Uniting these two elements is an arduous task of self-construction anticipated by Natália. She uses a variety of resources to weave together her self-perception:

I don't know. I try to use a bit of philosophy, right? I learnt that we don't have any choice over our desires, you know? I don't know if I was born, born this way or if it came to me and I had no choice about it. In truth we have no choice about anything in our makeup. So, in this sense, I don't think I have much choice because really a very strong desire comes over me. Now, could I feel this one day for a man? Can I work on this? Is it something to do with my childhood or my cultural upbringing? Maybe. Was it to do with a very strong rejection? A figure that I ended up constructing and believing in? Maybe so.

Natália also cites a book, given to her as a present by a gay friend, which she says is helping her to “separate things”: that is, separate her “identity, who [she is], from things that derive from her homosexuality.” According to her narrative, the book identifies various stages in the person's discovery and acceptance of his or her homosexuality. A concept from the book quoted various times by Natália is “inner homophobia,” meaning that the homosexual person is unable to accept him or herself. Natália refers to her feeling of guilt, especially in relation to her family, as a “clear sign of inner homophobia.” The book offers Natália a resource for imposing order on her life trajectory. But it only goes so far. As well as knowing oneself, the person needs to “enter the scene.”

This entry means establishing relations with other girls who like girls, discovering and frequenting new places. Establishing these relations and frequenting these places create a risk of Natália revealing herself to her pre-existing networks of relations: heterosexual friends, family and the Jewish community.

It's always difficult finding out you're homosexual. I became desperate because I thought: well, firstly I cannot be a Jew anymore, my parents won't want to know about this, this isn't possible, you know? They're completely prejudiced. And what do you do about your friends? Because it's a small community, I think it becomes something similar to persecution, you know? I'm afraid someone will see me. That they'll tell my grandfather. I'm paranoid about that.”⁵

Natália tells us that she has already come out to her friends and that it was “very easy and smooth.” One female friend thought it was really “cool”

5 The fear of gossip, of becoming the target for comments from the group, indicates the Jewish community's degree of cohesion. A confined world where everyone knows each other and that induces the feeling of a loss of anonymity (Elias 1965).

and reassured her by saying that in “Israel everyone is gay, there, nobody cares about tradition.” Her parents know and she feels profoundly guilty in relation to them. Natália’s relationship with her parents is steeped in conflicts over her sexuality. At her mother’s bidding, Natália began therapy. The first sessions also involved her parents. The therapy has become another resource in Natália’s effort to construct a meaning for her life trajectory.

Natália turns to philosophy, books on homosexuality, therapy and trustworthy friends to construct a sense of homosexual identity. These are reference points that help her map a sense of belonging, but which lack the same stability as those that inform her Jewish identity.

While the latter is embedded in family memories, blood ties, school socialization, experiences shared with her peers (Jewish like herself) and everyday interactions with non-Jews, her other, homosexual identity lacks any kind of solid memory to support it. She has little experience with her peers and, more than this, she remains uncertain as to who precisely her peers are. Finding a legitimate means of living this sexual experience is difficult, the language to refer to it is entirely encompassed by the language of heterosexual practices. As Natália puts it, “everything is very hetero, it’s a very hetero world.”

In parallel to this search for reference points, Natália has established various sexual and affective relationships with women involving numerous difficulties and limitations, part of a process she calls “entering the scene.” This is a complex path criss-crossed by rationality and desire. Her parents are central figures with whom she has to deal along the course of this path. For them, their daughter’s homosexual desire is neither right or normal. But she remains hopeful that the process of reflexivity unleashed by the therapy can lead to a change of some kind. For Natália, the interaction with her parents forms a key area of her personal battle to construct a sense of belonging to her “other life.” A battle that seems to be far from over.

Wagner is 56 years old and lives in a neighborhood in Rio de Janeiro’s north zone (zona norte) with his partner, who is a few years younger, and is a non-practicing Catholic and a public service employee. They chose this region as the area to buy their own apartment. Wagner has a tgraduate degree, is retired and currently works from home. He and his partner have been together for 16 years.

Wagner’s parents were children of Jews who had emigrated to Brazil from Africa. According to him, a “less elitist Judaism without racial issues.”

Wagner did not receive a strict Jewish education. In the interview he recalls greatly enjoying going to the Synagogue because afterwards he could drink beer with his father.

We left the synagogue early, he [his father] would eat cod balls and drink beer with two of his friends. We [Wagner and his brother] would leave the synagogue and go with him to drink beer, we went more for the beer afterwards. It was really pleasant. We went to hear pagode, meet friends, escape from the Shabbat ritual a little, spend the whole morning out from 8 a.m. to 11:30, right? So I wasn't going to devote the whole time sitting and listening to Hebrew without understanding a word."

Wagner also studied in Catholic schools, considered to be the best in his hometown at the time. His relationship to Judaism was never intense from a religious point of view. Nonetheless, he took part in some festivities and rituals with his family. His siblings and their spouses and children go to the synagogue on specific dates, celebrating rituals such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Some of his siblings married non-Jews but they still perform various practices linked to Judaism as a family tradition. On the last anniversary of the death of his parents, Wagner went with his siblings to the cemetery and placed a stone on the tomb, part of the Jewish mourning rites. The stone or plant are placed on the tomb to show that it was visited and that the dead will not be forgotten. When he moved to his new apartment, Wagner fixed a mezuzah⁶ on the doorway as a symbol to protect the house, something for which his siblings teased him, saying he was "coming back to religion."

Wagner is also a migrant: he left the North of Brazil, where he lived with his family, for Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s to complete his university education. This period coincided with the moment when he began to think that his sexual desire for men was not something that "was going to pass," as he had thought up to then. Wagner's narrative on his sexual and romantic life history follows a very clear chronological structure, an exemplary case of the

6 The mezuzah is an object signalling that "a Jew is found in this residence or establishment and its doorway contains his greatest protection: God. "Mezuzah" is a Hebrew word meaning doorpost. It consists of a small roll of parchment ("klaff") inscribed with two handwritten Biblical passages, the "Schema" and "Vehaia." The mezuzah, which must be placed on the right-hand side of the doorway of each room of a Jewish home or establishment, observes the following commandment of the Torah: "And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house, and upon thy gates." (Deuteronomy 6:9, 11:20)." (www.chabad.org.br)

generational discourse of “coming out of the closet:” discovery/denial, acceptance, revelation and finally open declaration. He says that he felt the “appetite” for men since the age of 12 or 13. He specifically recalls an older friend to whom he was intensely attracted. At the age of 15 or 16 he had his first sexual experiences with other boys, but also “went out with girls for appearances sake.” His sexual experiences from this period involved caressing and touching boys from the neighborhood, school colleagues from more or less the same age group – “we would touch each other up, kiss each other, even come” – and sexual activity with the housemaid, which Wagner classifies as a middle-class habit of the period.

I had a casual relationship with a woman, the housemaid, you know? That teenage boy thing, right? Sticking it any hole going? [Laughs.] Nothing against women (...) We were messing about, she was there, the housemaid was pretty, you know? (...) That thing happened, you know, that bad middle-class boy thing. Today that doesn't go on any more. When I was young that's what happened, all the local boy, everyone had sex with the maid.

These first sexual experiences took place in his hometown in Northern Brazil. During this period, he thought of his sexual encounters with other boys as an error that would correct itself over time with marriage. He compared it to a bad but uncontrollable habit.

I thought it was something a bit wrong. But it satisfied me, it was delicious. It began when I was 15 or 16, that thing I told you about. [I thought] I'm too young to marry, I'll marry when I'm 23, I can enjoy this until I'm 22. That's how I calculated things. When a year goes by without liking this, that's it, I'll get married. Imagine going a year without liking it? [Laughs.] But that was what was in my head, liking it, you understand? It was something I thought was wrong, of course, but I liked it. It was wrong, but something like: I'll start a diet on Monday, isn't that what people say? I can only eat chocolate until Sunday, right? Monday I'll begin. So, since I never started the diet, I continued to eat chocolate.

His move to Rio brought the possibility of new experiences. Practicing anonymous sex was a landmark event for him. At the time, Wagner was already around 20 years old and the project of improving his “bad habits” remained on hold. In Rio de Janeiro he shared an apartment with his brother

and friends. One of the them was gay.

I remember that living in this apartment in Rio – I was 20 years old – were my brother, myself, and two others. A close friend of mine, F., whos still a friend today, and the other F. who worked in the theatre. F. was gay, I thought F. was great. F. was the house's openly gay man, so much so that he chose the maid's quarters⁷ when the rooms were being shared out because there he could have sexual liasons whenever he wanted. And so he was there, but it was made abundantly clear, he made it clear to us, right? He worked in the theatre, he was starting a theatre career in Rio. So there were parties to which he used to invite us (...), I thought it was great, totally glam. F. was openly gay while I was still in the closet. (...) I remember one milestone event that happened around this time: we got tickets to a carnival ball at the Monte Líbano Club. So we all went, right? Yikes! It turned out the Monte Líbano was really dull. I wasn't having fun at the carnival there at all. But there was always the chance of wandering the streets of Copacabana and at that time you could flirt, no problem. Today you can't even think about it. But at that time there was no problem, no violence, nothing. 1970, the 70s. So I decided to leave the party early, I left and caught a taxi. I got out of the taxi – I never forget this – a short distance before my apartment so I could walk a little bit and try to chat someone up, which I did. I did it, it was a quick one in the street, with a guy who had just left a party at the Iate Clube, I think. [Laughs.] And so that's what there was, things like that, you know? Quick pick-ups. There was a gym where you could go on a Saturday, you left the gym and went upstairs to the sauna, a male sauna.”

The casual sex practiced by Wagner is explained in more detail when he recalls the impact caused by AIDS on the way in which sexuality was experienced by the Rio gay scene in the 1980s.

I remember the first time I heard about AIDS was in 1982, when we were in the US. We were there at that time, A. [a friend] and I. We were at the gay synagogue in São Francisco when we met one of his friends, a somewhat crazy friend who said: “Over in New York there's a disease that kills gays.” I said: “What an idiot! That's a symptom of repression, something stupid people say to repress

7 TN: Many apartments in Rio de Janeiro, particularly those built in earlier decades, include a small bedroom for use by a live-in housemaid, situated close to the kitchen and laundry area and usually next to a door providing seperate access to the rear service elevator.

stuff, isn't it?" "No, it's a disease that kills gays." I knew nothing about it, not even what it was, you know? How it was transmitted, nothing. I knew it was a gay disease, that it killed gays. A crazy situation. We came back here [to Brazil] and began to hear more about it. And here I was lucky. I think maybe even because of this, even today, I love all the stuff of touching, jerking off and so on. I never really liked having sex with someone who I'd met in the street. I never went the whole way, I didn't enjoy it; I made out, kissed, played with the other's dick, came, jerked him off, all that stuff, you know? But not total penetration, right? Foreplay, yes, but no penetration. I was never ever penetrated like that, not then. So, thank God, I think this saved me (...) From then on I started protecting myself more in this regard, you know? I only had full sexual relations with people who I was going out with, right?

Wagner recalls that this phase of casual sex lasted around four years until the first namorados, or "boyfriends," began to appear in his life: in other words, the more stable, long-term relationships. Some lasted two or three years, others a few months. For Wagner these relations marked the period when he began to "come out." By coming out he means the moment when he finally abandoned the idea that he would "stop liking this," the period when his family learned about his relations with men and also the period when he began to practice penetrative sex.

The first family member to learn about Wagner's homosexuality was his older brother who lived with him in this period when he was beginning to have more long-term relations. Taking his boyfriends home, he decided that he ought to tell his brother, who, Wagner remembers, was not disturbed by the news. For Wagner, telling his brother "helped break a taboo."

It was a process, gradually changing, I think it took me a while, I think it was when I was 27 or 28 that I realized that there was no point hiding, you know? And that was it, I came out. (...) It was completely serene that way, you know? For my family, for everyone. I came out waving a banner, declaring I was gay. But life continued normally; who saw it, saw it, who didn't, didn't. I didn't plaster the fact I was gay on my forehead, but I didn't hide anything either, right?

His boyfriends were not presented to his family as partners but as friends. It was only with his current partner that, Wagner says, his extended family began to hint that it recognized the relationship between the two as amorous. He also emphasizes that what helped win over his family was the

fact that M. is not “effeminate,” a trait Wagner dislikes, and that he is an “honest, intelligent and cultured person.”

When I met M. I was already 40 years old, I’d already had other boyfriends, you know? Not a long-term relationship, but relations lasting a couple of years, a year and a half, but also the family knew him, like, they’d met him, right? They didn’t know that he was my boyfriend, right? He was with me the whole time, he went to parties, he’d go with me. So with M. it was more definitive. And that was that, he visited my home, my father adored him, he wouldn’t let me go out until M. arrived. My father was already old and so had this thing about wanting to protect his son, as though I were a child. (...) We went to [his hometown] and stayed there, when we arrived they gave us the room with the double-bed, complete with bedspread. [Laughs.]

His relationship with M. is seen as a “definitive” union in which sexual activity plays a minor role. Although Wagner attributes this low sexual intensity to the age of the two men (both over fifty years old), he also argues that their relationship was always different in nature.

We never were... My relationship with M. isn’t just about sex. It has always involved friendship, companionship, tenderness, liking each other. We had sex but it wasn’t mind-blowing, you know? Was sex the most important thing? No, never. For neither of us. I think that’s why we’ve been together so long. Things matured and consolidated over time (...) We’re much more into going out, eating out, relaxing at home. Sometimes sex, but it’s nothing special.

Judaism, homosexuality and the “invisibility” of lesbianism

In a book edited by Christie Balka and Andy Rose (2004:41), the contributors provide a range of accounts from gay and lesbian Jews concerning their homosexual experiences and their relation to Judaism. A recurrent theme in these declarations is the idea that the two spheres do not touch, meaning that considerable effort is required from the individuals concerned to construct a sense of themselves that spans both dimensions of their existence. Some of the accounts are explicit on this point:

Although my feelings about being Jewish and gay are very intense, the two weren’t always related. My paths towards Judaism and homosexuality always remind me of the US 1 and Interstate 95 highways in New England – sometimes

converging, sometimes diverging and sometimes running parallel. They bend and twist, full of sharp turns and sudden detours. The battle to integrate my Jewish and lesbian identities was really two separate battles, albeit interwoven.

The two trajectories narrated in this study differ considerably. The gender and age group of the interviewees are very different, so too is the moment in their life trajectory when these individuals are providing this testimony. While one is a 56-year-old man, professionally and financially established, and involved in a long and stable loving relationship, a “marriage,” the other is a young woman who is still financially dependent on her parents, lives with them and has no history of stable, long-term loving relationships.

The contexts underlying their sexual histories are also distinct. Wagner uses reference points from his memory of male homosexual experiences in Rio de Janeiro’s urban landscape in the 1970s and 80s, while citing the emergence of AIDS as a watershed in his romantic-sexual life history, first heard about on a trip to San Francisco in the early 1980s, the iconic setting for the gay civil rights movement. These comprise elements of a collective memory of male homosexuality in the Zona Sul of Rio de Janeiro that can be deployed to tell his personal history. For Natália, these elements are missing. She seems to be feeling her way around in an unknown landscape, searching for places and people who can help her construct a network capable of connecting histories and memories. Although there are various new spaces for encounters and sexual experimentation, such as the internet, and others that are not so new but may possess a different meaning, such as the “modern parties” (Wagner cites the parties held by the “theatre folk”), none of these spaces appear in Natália’s discourse as solid or stable reference points for the constitution of her identity. Reference points that she has consolidated in terms of her life history as a Jew. But in the Jewish network there is no room for homosexuality.

The vocabulary used by the two interviewees to speak about themselves and about homosexuality is also different, influenced by the distinct contexts in which they experience and narrate their life histories. Natália uses terms such as “inner homophobia” to talk about her problems and fears in relation to living openly as a homosexual. She refers to “homophobia” to narrate episodes from her life where she believed she has been discriminated against because of her sexual orientation. Although Wagner recognizes that for some years he interpreted his attraction to men as a “bad habit” to

be overcome at some point in the future, he does not use the term “inner homophobia” to refer to this idea. Nor does he use the term “homophobia” to refer to other episodes of prejudice, none of which occupy an important place in his narrative. The impression given by Wagner’s narrative is that he pays little attention to instances of discrimination. Perhaps this indifference is related to Wagner’s lengthy experience in a social environment relatively protected from openly discriminatory situations, having spent much of his life surrounded by theatrical friends, frequenting professional and social circles where homosexuality is accepted. Natália is the only one to refer to the term homophobia occasionally during her interviews and to emphasize episodes of prejudice.

The category “homophobia” used in the native discourse brands and explains events, incorporating the episodes of prejudice and discrimination into a social classification and establishing a logic that connects these episodes, a logic informed by the imperative of heterosexuality. The events narrated as situations of prejudice are seen as heterosexual reactions to homosexuality. The “homophobe” is not thought of as an individual who acts but as a bearer of social rules, a mouthpiece for the prejudices latent in society as a whole.⁸

The vocabulary of homophobia is learned by Natália in the context of the questioning of her sexuality by herself and by others close to her. When will Natália come out? This seems to be the key question guiding her narrative. The first revelation of the secret surfaces in the question posed to her by a close friend: “Natália, don’t you think maybe you are?” As Sedgwick argues (2007), the reference to “coming out” is a constant in the life history of gays and lesbians. Coming out marks the public/private disjuncture in the constitution of these subjects. While “coming out” can be seen as a continuous process in Wagner’s life history, moving from private to public, in

8 Neither interviewee mentioned any episodes identified as anti-semitic. On one occasion, Natália referred to her period at the university when accusations against Jews seemed to relate to the context of the Middle Eastern conflicts. According to Sorj (2007), this is one of the traits of contemporary European anti-semitism, but not the only one. The more explicit concern with prejudice in relation to Jews appears in the discourse of rabbis. In their view, Jews are the victims of prejudice, not homosexuals. For the rabbis, there is no reason to include the latter in the list of victims of prejudice because they do not form a collective, unlike Jews who are discriminated against in their condition as a historically oppressed people. Homosexuals are seen as individuals who are isolated and for a wide variety of reasons – psychological, medical, familial – transgress the natural order and are therefore located in the field of abnormality.

Natália's narrative coming out is a condition that appears possible in some situations but impossible in others. For her, the boundaries between privacy and the public world are blurred. For Wagner's generation, coming out was inspired by other ideals, incorporated into the pursuit of a bohemian and autonomous lifestyle surrounded by networks of urban sociality, which in his case filtered the experience of more virulent moral judgments.

Age is also an important variable here. Wagner looks back on his life trajectory at the age of 56 and tells us an a posteriori story. Natália's time is different: it is the present that stands out, the anxieties experienced in the heat of the moment. Perhaps when she can look back, she will be able to identify clearer contours to what today appears blurred. This perhaps is one of the most important aspects of investigating particular life histories: they enable us to perceive the sharp contrast between different viewpoints.

As well as distinct personal moments, the insertion of both interviewees in the "Jewish world" is also different. For Natália, the link to Judaism constitutes her as a person. The significant people in her life form a daily part of the Jewish culture, her life history is fully encompassed by her sense of Jewishness. School socialization has had a significant impact on the construction of Natália's Jewish identity. Her studies in a Jewish school and the school trip to Israel formed the contexts for establishing social relations with Jews for the same age group and for immersing herself in Jewish culture. To use Natália's term, this was her *entranhamento*, "immersion" or "enrooting" in Judaism. The perspective constructed in these contexts involves the identification of Judaism as a national question. Israel appears as the emblematic place of Judaism, the Jewish people embodied in a territory with their own anthem and flag. Learning Hebrew and practicing Israeli dancing at school are remembered as key moments in cultivating this sense of belonging. It is worth noting that when Natália told a Jewish friend about her amorous interest in women, her friend had reassured her, affirming that in Israel "everyone is gay, there nobody cares about tradition." As a kind of safe-conduct for her attitudes, Natália was able to find comfort in the "promised land." This comment also allows us to perceive the relative importance of tradition in identity discourses.

As a territorial space, Israel can feel free to abandon "tradition," while here in Brazil (where Natália and her friend are located) the weight of tradi-

tion makes itself felt as a constraint on individual practices.⁹

Bila Sorj (2007), in an article on contemporary anti-Semitism, identifies, among other aspects that inform the specificity of the topic in today's world, the presence in Europe of a growing identification of Jews with community life.

Over the last two decades, children's attendance of community schools has increased. Indeed Jewish people are showing more inclination to take part in community life. Furthermore, they have begun to assert themselves as visible actors in public space, as well as express their closeness to Israel, which began to have an important role for those Jews who claim an ethnic identity. (Sorj 2007: 104)

For Wagner, the relationship to Judaism never absorbed his day-to-day life or his sense of self, nor that of his forebears (Jews coming from Africa, which for him already signals a transgression of the more traditional image of who Jews are: "white, of European extraction rich."). The link to Judaism survives as a cultural heritage, marked by his affective ties to his brothers and celebrated in the performance of certain rituals and the use of various objects. The sense of belonging to Judaism differs for the two interviewees. Comparing the two cases, Natália seems to be under greater pressure to reconcile her different attachments: family/Jewish life on one side and the world of homosexual desires on the other. Her account reflects many of the issues explored in the work by Balka & Rose, cited above. In constructing her subjectivity, Natália faces a challenge: how to maintain the ties with her family and, consequently, with her Jewish inheritance while, simultaneously, finding a place for her sexual desires – desires that clash with the expectations of her family tradition.

Female homosexuality occupies a particular position in the Jewish tradition's view of human sexuality. According to the statements of the rabbis interviewed for this study, female homosexuality does not exist since it is not an effective sexual act. In the understanding of the rabbis, it is a

9 In this discourse Israel is taken to be a homogeneous whole, almost a mythic space of freedom. Like any other place, Israel contains internal divergences. A recent report published by the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper commemorating 60 years of the state of Israel highlighted a number of internal differences within the country, also related to customs. The report stated: "While Jerusalem becomes increasingly religious and nationalist, the cosmopolitan Tel Aviv is turning away from politics and cultivating hedonism and personal success" (*Folha* 2008: A 24).

non-penetrative act: the perceived absence of a penis in this relationship, a penetrating member identified with masculinity, means that this interaction cannot be interpreted as sexual per se. Thus female sexuality only exists when encompassed by the male. Despite the various nuances observable in the opinions of rabbis concerning Judaism, in terms of gender relations, the dominant view is that women belong to another universe, complementary but distinct and separate from the male sphere. The relation between the genders is marked by “respect” for women and the identification of the female with the sacred. Men are responsible for controlling these boundaries of separation and respect. In more orthodox interpretations, the menstrual period, for example, is taken as a liminal moment in which the woman suspends her reproductive status (natural, complementary and different to the male). This moment is therefore marked by avoidance behavior vis-à-vis the woman. Douglas (1976: 51) denominates these forms of avoidance as “polluting behavior,” that is, “the reaction that condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications.” Spilled blood, like spilled semen, are symbols of the suspension of (expected) reproductive functions and visible marks that overflow bodily boundaries. Contact with these spilled fluids exposes the person to disorder, the danger that forms part of the functioning of bodies and society itself. This loss must be controlled, therefore, maintained within a logic that serves to avoid contradiction and, in the final instance, to reinforce pre-existing divisions. Rituals of purity and impurity consequently form the bases for social organization.

The “invisibility” of female homosexuality is not a trait exclusive to the Jewish worldview. Various scholars of female homosexuality have already pointed to the difficulty of examining the theme and the predominance of male over female homosexuality. In academic analyses of the latter, the activity/passivity antinomy is argued to be inadequate for the analysis of sexual relations between women (Heilborn 2004). Produced to conceptualize a hierarchical view of male homosexuality, this opposition reflects the idea that homosexuality is related to the passivity pole, the person who is penetrated being labelled a *bicha*, “queer,” and occupying the relationship’s female position. The antinomy implies that the active pole is dominant and superior to the passive pole and that it preserves intact a heterosexual identity. The active pole instigates sexual activity, an idea reflected in gendered language, which attributes the male pole with the position of the action’s

agent/subject. This distinction, which assigns homosexuality to a subaltern position, prevents it from being comprehended as a relation between equals (Fry 1982) and locates the homosexual person as an object on the plane of relations. It also prevents any comprehension of homosexuality between women, since the acts outside the binary terms of an active pole versus passive pole are not recognized as sexual.

The bibliography on female homosexuality emphasizes the symmetry in female homoerotic relations, a phenomenon explored, for example, by Heilborn (2004) and Muniz (1992) in their studies of middle-class lesbians. It is worth recalling that these pioneering studies were undertaken in the late 1980s and early 1990s with adult women between 30 and 40 years old. In this context, the symmetry was sustained through the eclipsing of the sex life of the pair of women: sexual practice was not the relevant point in the configuration of the couple. The lesbian couple was seen to be constituted through the equalization of the two individuals, an equality manifest in the sharing of household activities and the mutual responsibility for maintaining the closeness of the relationship without this process implying the effacement of either woman's individuality. The gender discourse produced by the lesbian couples themselves envelops the significance of the sexuality between the women, making it appear as a secondary element in the relationship or as a sphere of interaction to which little attention is paid, since it is not sexuality that defines the women as a couple. The literature on the topic highlights the fact that this discursive concealment of female sexuality is a generational phenomenon. The women are from a particular age group who engage in relations with other women on the basis of a determined sociohistorical context that constitutes discourses tending to conceal sexuality.

In a critique of the mainstream feminist discourse, Judith Butler (2006) suggests that lesbianism was interpreted as a political practice of radical feminism. This meant a loss of the dimensions of desire and sexual practice with lesbianism seen as a political choice for confronting male domination.

A more recent turn in academic studies of female homosexuality has argued in favor of the observation of alternative modes of masculinity that are not necessarily inscribed in a biological-social male body or modes of being a woman that fail to correspond to those stipulated as female roles (Lacombe 2006). Research in the field of homoerotic socialities has emphasized that the active/passive distinction has not only lost its meaning but also that

there are continual shifts in the parameters of gender classification. The boundaries between “being male” and “being female” are diluted, meaning that what remains are sexual performances, the continual interplay and exchange between male and female imagery, and the emulation of hybrid scripts. In this scenario, the sexuality and pleasure between women comes to the fore and multiple reference points are created, assigning new meanings to acts and practices.

In research I conducted into the sexual histories of women from different generations of the urban middle class (Alves 2007), I concluded that when examining sexual narratives and performances as the constructions of the social subjects involved, we need to pay attention to elements that appear to mark this constructive process. A number of elements sustain this process of constructing female homosexuality and help women to produce meanings for their experiences vis-à-vis others. The main element, I would argue, is the woman’s generation: in other words, the field of possibilities perceived by the woman to offer the erotic resources deemed legitimate for exercising her sexuality within a determined space-time. This field allows particular kinds of sexual interactions to be established. The construction of the subject’s self-presentation and of sexual practices is informed by the woman’s own perception of the setting and the resources available to her at any particular moment. This perception is not always conscious, but the capacity to express it in words and describe it to another person – in an interview, for example – denotes an effort to lend meaning to the construction. A meaning that is intelligible and that plays, therefore, with social values, desires and expectations. The narratives of women about the process of self-construction as sexual beings – whether in heterosexual or homosexual life histories – involve attempts to order experiences. This ordering may contain elements that either stress the individual’s decisions or attribute the course taken by the events marking this trajectory to external factors. Homosexual life histories seem to include a double attempt to give meaning to events, since socially these women are asked to provide explanations for their sexual preferences. The older women I interviewed – all over the age of 60 – claimed that the possibilities for sexual interaction between women were more limited in the past and the amorous script implied assuming one of two distinct positions in the relationship: one was the *sapatão* (dyke) and the other the *namorada* (girlfriend). Among younger

women – aged between 20 and 30 – this script did not appear to be dominant and the possibilities for meeting partners are more ample: the university and the internet both appear as potential spaces.

Natália's case is highly emblematic from this point of view. Her narrative reflects a search for reference points for her desire for women, at the same time as she maintains a strong feeling of belonging to the Jewish community, a community within which homosexual relations are rejected and, principally, where female homosexuality lacks any meaning. Here the expression she uses – “it's all so hetero, it's a very hetero world” – becomes highly pertinent.

The fact that she is a young woman of 25 also helps define her position in this discourse. Female homosexuality among younger generations has been experienced and narrated in a context where, on one hand, there seems to be more tolerance and more spaces available to meet potential partners than there were among older generations. On the other hand, this “visibility” is equally accompanied by a profusion of self-explicating discourses. It is not enough to like other women: there is an entire generational vocabulary making this desire explicit, a vocabulary that asserts this position vis-à-vis others and thereby differentiates itself from other positions, such as heterosexual and bisexual, while simultaneously fomenting the conditions for ambiguities. An entire universe of identity classifications is imposed on the reflexive gaze of subjects. These classifications are contemporary productions and affirm various possibilities of “being lesbian.” In a study of the life histories of American feminist lesbians from the “baby boom” generation, in other words those born after World War II, Arlene Stein (1997: 200) reflects on the paths open to the new generations:

Many younger women coming of age and coming out today are also reconstituting lesbian identity, in ways that tolerate inconsistency and ambiguity. They simultaneously locate themselves inside and outside the dominant culture as they pursue a wide range of projects. Their strategic deployment of lesbian/gay identities is balanced against their recognition of the limits of such identities.

Conclusion

The identity-forming trajectories traced in this article, those of Wagner and Natália, constitute distinct possibilities for interacting with the Jewish heritage. In both cases the family appears as the common feature enabling them to speak about Judaism as something inherited, transmitted across generations in the family. The relations between grandparents-children –grandchildren, in one case, and the relations involving siblings and collateral members of the family network, in the other, delimit what the “Jewish world” means to each of the interviewees.

As Natália tells us, in addition to her family relations, the socializing experiences with her peer group, attendance of Jewish schools during childhood and adolescence and the trip to Israel have all informed and shaped her identification as a member of the Jewish community.

The intersection between Judaism as a family inheritance and/or as a generational experience and the identification of the interviewees with homosexuality – an identification that is neither univocal or linear – illustrates the complexity of contemporary modes of belonging. My analysis of Wagner and Natália’s narratives has looked to trace the making of their identity-forming trajectories. Identity is understood here as a lived and narrated process that mixes various levels and degrees of belonging at different moments, and attributes to them consistency and coherence (Klein 2008).

The subjects interviewed, who are embedded in social life in very different ways – age, gender, position in the family network – elaborate their life histories and interrelate with their self-classification as Jews in a dynamic form. Homosexuality is also situated dynamically and, particularly in Natália’s interview, led to the production of a dialogue between the homosexual condition and her perception of what it is to be of Jewish origin and to possess a Jewish family heritage. By proposing these kinds of interconnecting threads in her life trajectory, the interviews helped her to construct a narrative of self in which sexuality and community belonging operate as shifting classifications (Natividade 2008). This is not a question of considering to what point one can eliminate or overlap the other. The analyses of life histories clearly show that this is not the case. Identifications are always situational and subjects construct their forms of self-identification, both changing and unchanging, constructing a plot which is minimally coherent. However, what we can extract as the common factor in these accounts of

subjects socialized in Judaism – albeit in distinct ways – is that this “Jewish heritage” marks a limit to their self-experiences as homosexuals. Judaism imposes precise contours on community life within which sexuality and gender relations are clearly associated with the heterosexual norm. This association is common to the Judeo-Christian tradition, forming part of its basic religious premises. What perhaps marks Judaism more intensely is the fact that it presents itself as a religion and an ethnic-cultural identity whose community ties may be denser or looser depending on the context in which this community is inserted. Solid community ties in this case pose obstacles to the projection of any sexual trajectory differing from heterosexuality.

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