Gender, Discourse, and Desire in Twentieth-Century Brazilian Women's Literature

Ferreira-Pinto, Cristina

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Cixous, in her famous essay “Le rire de la Méduse” (1975; “The Laugh of the Medusa,” 1983), in which she celebrates women’s sexual, erotic, and linguistic differences from men, urges us to take a new look at the Medusa. She encourages us “to look at the Medusa straight on to see her” (289) and look beyond the Freudian male fear of women’s bodies, thus seeing not the scary and deadly female figure, but rather recognizing a kind of feminine beauty that is self-assertive and self-celebratory. The Medusa is “beautiful and she’s laughing” (289), and Cixous invites women to laugh along.

The laugh of the Medusa resonates in Coutinho’s short fiction, as her female protagonists are able to move away from the guilt that alienates women from their bodies, to a state of self-assurance and even defiance of patriarchal ideology. Coutinho seems to contradict the findings Cunha presents in her article “O desafio da fala feminina ao falo falocêntrico”: guilt is certainly an element with which Coutinho’s protagonists struggle, but they are often able to overcome it, coming to fully experience their sexuality. The author deconstructs various cultural myths of femininity and points toward new possibilities of self-realization for Brazilian women. Thus Coutinho, in her short stories as well as in her novels, illustrates a common element found in literature by women: the appropriation and deconstruction of cultural myths. In the process, female authors also expose the existing tension between social expectations placed on women and how much (or how little) they are willing to submit (Pratt 6–12).

Having begun to publish fiction in the late 1960s, Coutinho is considered by critics to be one of the most interesting and
original fiction writers in Brazil. She has been praised for the formal aspects of her fiction, as well as for her feminist critical analysis of gender relations in Brazilian society. Since her 1971 book of short stories *Nascimento de uma mulher* [Birth of a woman], the writer has focused on the problems of women from the middle classes, showing in this early book an awareness that hers was a *female* literature: “forming a private territory, different from—but not inferior to—the male’s” (Coutinho, “Sobre a escrita feminina”). Coutinho has also been striving to create a language adequate to the representation of women’s social and psychological realities, and to the representation of the female body, sexuality, and desire. In her novella *O jogo de Ifá*, which I mentioned in the previous chapter, she presents a counterideological discourse that specifically deconstructs the Brazilian Romantic myths of gender, race, and national identity that I discussed in Chapter 1. Here she constructs a complex and polyphonic novel that utilizes various narrative strategies associated with an antimimetic postmodern discourse, such as metafiction, intertextuality, and historical and mythical references. In *Ifá*, the author’s main proposition is to question traditional gender roles in Brazilian society and therefore to create a locus wherein the expression of the female voice as agent of the historical process, and as subject of desire, becomes possible. A strategy the author employs in *Ifá* is the use of two protagonists, Renato and Renata, who are two different projections of the same being, one masculine and the other feminine. In this way Coutinho weaves an androgynous form of writing that disrupts traditional sexual binaries and, at the same time, allows for the textual inscription of female experience.1

The same proposition that informs the complex narrative structure of *Ifá* will generally inform Coutinho’s body of fiction. In seeking to give authentic expression to female desire and subjectivity, she makes use of different thematic elements, narrative strategies, and genres. These elements include the representation of lesbian desire, which I discuss in the next chapter; the adaptation of the detective novel genre; and the utilization of the grotesque as a strategy for the representation of the female body. As I discuss later in this chapter, Coutinho employs the grotesque allied with irony and humor in a way
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that celebrates the female body, in an appropriation of a literary image traditionally used by male authors to represent the threatening, devouring, monstrous, uncontrollable female.

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Born in the town of Itabuna, in the northeastern state of Bahia, Coutinho moved to the capital, Salvador, while still a child, and in 1968, to Rio de Janeiro. Her novels and short stories constantly place these two cities in opposition: Salvador, more provincial and conservative, and with a strong African heritage, and Rio de Janeiro, a large cosmopolitan city where one experiences all the problems common to a big urban center, among them loneliness, isolation, and anonymity. Her protagonists, with very few exceptions, are middle-class women whose backgrounds are similar to hers, having also moved from a provincial town to Rio de Janeiro. As women they seem to suffer twice the problems commonly associated with urban life, because they find themselves split between the patriarchal tradition within which they grew up, and the new social values of the cosmopolitan city, with its promises of freedom, independence, and self-realization.

Examining the social and psychological obstacles faced by these urban women, Coutinho is rather critical of relationships between the sexes and deconstructs cultural myths of femininity, particularly those concerning female sexuality and aging. Her paradigmatic female character is a single woman, either divorced or never married, who, at middle age or approaching it, becomes aware of her social situation, of the obstacles she will have to overcome in order to achieve self-realization, and of the drawbacks that come with this achievement. Most typically, Coutinho’s women characters end up rejecting marriage, as the author portrays this social institution as patriarchal and repressive for women. A cultural myth Coutinho sets out to deconstruct in her fiction is the association of physical beauty and youth with an ideal image of femininity. Aging, the passage of time, the loss of youth, has been a recurrent theme in Coutinho’s fiction since her first publications. In the three volumes of short stories that follow *Nascimento de uma mulher*, the problematics of aging appear in about 60 percent of the
narratives. In this regard, the stories present some common elements: the figure of a middle-aged protagonist, the realization by the characters of the passage of time, or the sudden self-awareness of the aging body. In her 1998 novel *Os seios de Pandora—uma aventura de Dora Diamante* [Pandora’s breasts—A Dora Diamante adventure], Coutinho again addresses the issue, showing how aging affects a woman’s sense of self.

**Aging as a Social Construct**

In her short stories, Coutinho generally focuses on female protagonists, some of them already at mid-life. Her characters live a historical moment when, from the 1970s on, Brazil experiences some important social and political developments that occasion changes in behavior and social practices, including sexual practices. Brazilian women then become increasingly aware of their social condition and begin to question their roles in society, seeking more mobility and participation in the public arena. This phenomenon takes place first in the large urban centers like Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, while other regions of Brazil, like the Northeast, remain rather conservative, patriarchal societies. Nevertheless, Coutinho’s female characters represent, for the most part, a new woman, “urban, free, protean and contradictory” (Helena, “Perfis” 96). Much like Coutinho herself, her characters are often women who have abandoned the limiting social roles afforded them by a conservative society in the interior of Bahia, in order to seek a new life in the cosmopolitan and (supposedly) liberating space of Rio de Janeiro. Says Coutinho in this regard: “A transformação que presenciei no Rio foi significativa para mim pelo fato de ter nascido numa cidade do interior do Estado da Bahia. De Itabuna ao Rio foi como fazer uma viagem no tempo. Ter passado parte de minha infância lá foi como viver num enclave de passado, no século dezenove” (“Sobre a escrita feminina” 22) [“The transformations I witnessed in Rio were important to me because I was born in a small town in the interior of Bahia. From Itabuna to Rio it seemed like a journey in time. Having spent part of my childhood there, in Itabuna, was like living in a pocket of the past, in the nineteenth century”].

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Likewise, her female characters experience the double reality of two opposing social spaces, different not only in geographical terms but also, most importantly, ideologically different. These women, too, embark on a journey in time through memories, through recollections that confront past and present and, therefore, various dimensions of the same subject. Thus, in many stories, the narrative is centered on the protagonist who reminisces in a Proustian fashion, “with the I unfolding ideas and images, recalling flavours, smells, touches, resonances, sensations” (Kristeva, *Proust* 6). From the weaving of memories, thoughts, and sensations, the subject is able to reorganize her past and thus reach a new understanding of her present.

In the story “Uma certa felicidade” [A certain happiness], from the volume of the same title (1976; 1994), memories are juxtaposed to recent events and to present sensations, and from this juxtaposition emerges a portrait of the protagonist in the present: a lonely woman, living in Copacabana in the solitude typical of a big urban center, as she realizes her youth is behind her. “Uma certa felicidade” is paradigmatic of Coutinho’s fiction as it presents several elements that characterize the author’s body of work, such as the female character who leaves a conservative and repressive life in a small town to try an independent life in a large city; loneliness as the price paid for that independence; the sense of loss as a woman realizes she is not so young as she once was; and the notion of old age as a threat one tries to evade. As is characteristic of literary works that deal with the issue of aging, many of Coutinho’s stories are structured around memory and recollections from the past and, at the same time, are informed by a feeling of nostalgia. Nevertheless, aging can also represent the opportunity for a new process of learning and development, if the subject is willing to redefine her (or his) sense of identity.

Aging, middle age, old age, is usually associated with loss of physical attributes, with social alienation, and with physical and mental decadence, especially when contrasted with an idealized image of beauty and youth (Woodward 98). For Coutinho’s characters, however, the fundamental conflict is that between the aspirations one has when young and the realization later that those aspirations have not been fulfilled, while
realizing too the dwindling opportunities one may still have of fulfilling them.

In order to understand the conflicts experienced by Coutinho's protagonists, it becomes necessary to evaluate the very definition of concepts such as "maturity," "middle age," and "old age," and to examine the expectations society has concerning the aging process. Most psychologists, sociologists, and other theorists agree today that aging is not so much a biological process, but rather a process influenced by many different factors, while "old age" represents a socio-cultural category: "Aging is much more a social judgement than a biological eventuality" (Sontag 36). The social status of an old person thus varies according to the society in which she or he lives. In traditional or primitive societies, old individuals are respected for their experience and wisdom; modern industrial and capitalist societies, in turn, privilege youth, physical appearance, and sensual pleasures. These societies value productivity measured in terms of economic profit, while "age will be devalued, making it more difficult for the elderly to have a positive self-image" (Hendricks and Leedham 9). For this reason, and because most individuals, male and female, are deeply influenced by this ideological rendering of success (youth) and failure (old age), aging is experienced as a very difficult process, and old age becomes a disease one must avoid.

But not only does the older individual hold a different status within different cultures, he or she may be considered old or still young, depending on various factors: the cultural context within which one lives; the social class; the access to medical resources; and, particularly, the sex of the individual. In Brazil, as in other Western cultures, the youth-privileging ideology is assimilated by the dominant patriarchal ideology. Together these two forms of ideological discourse establish cultural myths that define what is acceptable and desirable in a man—types of behavior, social roles, and models of physical beauty—and in a woman. Women, thus, are constantly subject to a double form of discrimination: age and sexual discrimination. These cultural myths are promoted especially by the mass media and are useful in explaining why in the movies a sixty-plus-year-old male actor can easily find his romantic counterpart in a woman half his age or younger. Susan Sontag states:
“Getting old is less profoundly wounding for a man, for in addition to the propaganda for youth that puts both men and women on the defensive as they age, there is a double standard about aging that denounces women with special severity” (32).

This double cultural pattern responds to the different expectations society places upon a man and a woman. Masculinity is defined in terms of independence, self-confidence, and authority; femininity, in turn, is defined by such qualities as passivity, fragility, and dependence (Sontag 33). In this way, while men can develop or increase the qualities that make them “masculine,” the same cannot be said of women and the characteristics that make them “feminine.” In fact, in Brazil, women are able to achieve a certain authority as they get older, an authority that is linked to women’s roles within the family and to their experience as mothers and grandmothers. But this form of authority grows in indirect proportion to those characteristics associated with femininity: sexual appeal, beauty, and youth. Indeed, the social value of women is still very dependent upon reproductive capacity and ability to attract the male. In other words, a woman’s value in society derives in large part from marriage, from the husband, and from the family she might be able to have. Notwithstanding the scientific advances in the field of reproductive medicine, advances that in Brazil benefit only a minority, once a woman has grown older than her years of fertility, her social roles are drastically reduced, and she definitely loses her sexual “status.” For most women, therefore, “aging becomes a humiliating process of gradual sexual disqualification” (Sontag 34).

Aging in Sonia Coutinho’s Short Stories

The female protagonists in Coutinho’s short stories live a similar reality when they suddenly become aware of the loss of youth and of their “sexual disqualification.” The awareness takes the form of a painful epiphany, occasioned by the individual’s experiencing a psychological disjunction. This disjunction results from the conflict among her chronological age, her emotional or subjective age (i.e., the image she has created of herself), and her social age (in other words, how society sees her). Normally, it is the recognition of her social age that elicits
the epiphanic moment when the subject is made aware of the passage of time and her own aging. Therefore, the consciousness of how “old” or “young” we are depends much on the image society holds of us: “[The] recognition of our own age,” says Kathleen Woodward, “comes to us from the Other, that is, from society” (104). Society thus functions as a mirror that reflects the individual’s social value:

[We] usually don’t discover that we are getting old from internal clues; our first messages are liable to come from the outside. We feel no real diminution of capability, strength, or sexuality, but we are simply put into another category by the eyes of others. What these eyes tell us is that they will no longer mirror us. The eyes make no contact; they glance and slide off as if they had seen an inanimate object. (Melamed 75)

The protagonist of “Uma mulher sem nenhuma importância” [A woman not at all important] (from Uma certa felicidade) comes to a similarly painful realization:

Ao se deter na esquina da Rua Bolívar, à espera de que o sinal mudasse, reparou que o rapaz guiando o grande automóvel vermelho, ali parado, olhava exatamente para a mocinha loura à esquerda, e não em sua direção. Foi quando, numa bofetada, soube que os sonhos dourados, os sofrimentos atrozes e os grandes projetos haviam ficado para trás. (121 [23])

This epiphanic moment reveals to the protagonist her somewhat new inability to arouse male desire, thus revealing her new “invisibility.” At the same time, sudden images from her past come to highlight the fragility of the aspirations held in her youth, as well as the failure of any illusion of personal and social realization. What is left her is only a deep feeling of being useless, of being nobody in the consumer society in which she lives, a society of which Copacabana, its crowded streets, shops, and boutiques, is a symbol (see “Uma mulher” 122, 123).

Copacabana is the supreme representation of a bourgeois society that buys and sells the illusion of youth, beauty, and social status. The protagonist buys into this kind of delusion,
bearing alongside her husband the existential tediousness of her petit-bourgeois life in an apartment full of questionable symbols of status. The realization that she is getting old forces the woman to recognize her present mediocrity, while memories from her past offer little or no consolation. Few are the notes of distinction left from her youth—a passing lover, French classes at the Alliance Française—and little is equally left from her adult life. She is but a woman from the middle class, married and childless, who occupies her time worrying about her looks. Contrary to what may take place in a traditional society, where old people are valued for their knowledge and wisdom, the protagonist has no social status as an aging woman in the context of Copacabana:

... não tinha lição nenhuma para dar, como se acreditava, outrora, que os velhos fossem capazes de fazer. Outrora, ah, outrora, pensava-se serem os velhos depositários de mil saberes e de poderes mágicos. Agora, tudo mudava depressa demais, Copacabana era um torvelinho onde ela se sentira, hoje, uma preciosa, inútil e patética ave rara, ... ah, meu Deus, estava ficando velha e não sabia de nada. (125–26 [24])

Lost among the crowds in Copacabana, the protagonist perceives the presence of young people around her as an aggression to her self (122). However, if on one hand she feels like a victim confronting the conspicuous youth of others, on the other hand, she also feels guilt (121). The feeling of guilt and inadequacy comes from not knowing how to stop her own aging or not knowing, at least, how to disguise it under the young-looking masks offered by the cosmetics industry.

The pretense of youth is closely associated with the idea of femininity promoted by consumer societies: “To be a woman is to be an actress. Being feminine is a kind of theater, with its appropriate costumes, decor, lighting, and stylized gestures. From early childhood on, girls are trained to care in a pathologically exaggerated way about their appearance” (Sontag 36). In Brazil women also learn from an early age to be the focus of attention for the male gaze, while men learn to openly look at women. Such cultural patterns of behavior are reinforced by the mass media that offer cosmetics, clothing, plastic surgery,
and a number of other products as a means of attaining youth, physical beauty, and sexual appeal, while these characteristics become synonymous with social power. The vehicles that recurrently sell these images—the press, cinema, television, and advertisement—most often have women as their target. The mass media thus work like “mirrors” reflecting the dominant myths of femininity as defined by a given culture. In Brazil, the ideal images of women are necessarily young looking. Thus even ads that purport to portray middle-aged individuals will show women with little or no exterior signs of aging. “Grandmothers,” in turn, are generally portrayed as happy and young looking, and the only sign of aging they display is well-styled gray hair. These idealized images are in conflict with the image the subject recognizes as her own, and from this conflict, in turn, results a psychological split of the subject in three entities: the inner I, or how the individual sees herself; the I in the mirror, the real but almost always unsatisfactory image the person finds in the mirror; and the idealized image conveyed by the mass media, which the consumer industry holds up as an attainable promise.

Sontag notes that women are much more prone to look at their image in the mirror than men are (36). A woman learns at an early age to be seen by the Other and learns too to look at herself in the mirror in an attempt to verify her own existence and to assure that the image she projects is acceptable to the dominant cultural patterns. This female dependence on the looking glass seems to be cross-cultural and is reflected in the recurrence of the mirror in female-authored literature, as Jenijoy La Belle discusses in her book Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass (1988).

Mirrors are a recurrent image in Coutinho’s short stories. In “Uma mulher sem nenhuma importância,” the mirror exposes the first sign of the passage of time marked on the character’s face: “diante do espelho, reparou que sob seu queixo, à luz implacável da cabine da loja, havia uma dupla ruga despren­dendo a pele e tornando imprecisa a linha até recentemente nítida do pescoço” (121) [“standing before the mirror, under the fitting room’s unforgiving light, she noticed under her chin a double wrinkle that loosened the skin and turned imprecise the until recently well-defined line of her neck”]. Her aging
and, therefore, her new status as a nonsexual, undesirable woman, are confirmed by the social mirror—in other words, by the male gaze that ignores her. This revelation sets her on a journey through memory, finally leading her to realize how mediocre her life has been, and how it holds no opportunities for change. As a result, the middle-aged protagonist of "Uma mulher sem nenhuma importância" arrives at a stage of self-awareness that precludes a sense of realization and integration. On the contrary, the woman is left with feelings of failure, despair, and fragmentation.3

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Mirrors again play a significant role in the process of self-awareness associated with aging in the story "Uma certa felicidade" mentioned before. They appear numerous times in this somewhat long (forty-six pages) narrative, but are particularly important in two specific instances. One is a moment of crisis, when the female protagonist does not recognize the fragments of her image seen in several mirrors that appear to her in a dream (23). And the second moment is one of self-integration, when the character, older and more mature, is able to accept herself without conflicts or feelings of guilt:

Nua diante do espelho, a escovar o cabelo diante do espelho, observo—minha carne macia e perfeita, como uma carne que o tempo trabalhou. Não estou mais tão jovem, mas isto tem um gosto de mel e de vinho tinto, numa branda manhã de maio, no Rio de Janeiro.

. . .

Corpo bronzeado e fresco e ardendo por dentro, rindo diante do espelho, dentinhos pontudos—vampira. . . . olho-me agora ao espelho e me designo: puta, que puta és. (55-56 [25])

The sense of integration the protagonist achieves comes mainly from her acceptance of her mature body and from her sexuality that she is now able to experience, freely and guiltlessly. The liberation of her sexuality is possible only after a long and painful learning process that begins with the juxtaposition through memory of past and present. This is a process of
coming to terms with her past, her youth and, as a consequence, of lending new meaning to what she had been as well as to her present reality. The woman's journey through memory brings to the narrative a series of thematic elements that are paradigmatic in Coutinho's fiction. They are: the female character's previous life in a patriarchal town in the interior of Brazil; the conservative education she had received; a jealous or otherwise domineering fiancé or husband; the prospects of a "perfect" but unhappy marriage; the character finally breaking away from the repressive environment; the move to the big city and the loneliness she encounters there. These elements form the background of various female characters in many of Coutinho's short stories and in her novels.

As she grows older, the protagonist of "Uma certa felicidade" goes through a process of self-development and learning that is also sexual in nature. Gradually she learns to overcome her negative feelings toward sex by having sexual relations with different men. At the same time, her perception of her surrounding reality—the streets of Copacabana, the sounds, the bodies, the beach—becomes more and more sensual. This sensuality then spreads onto the text, lending the story an erotic quality in several different passages; for example:

... o homem com uma perna nua em cima da nua perna da mulher, ela falando você parece uma pantera negra, uma grande pantera calma lambendo as grandes patas negras, o homem virando-se para pegar um cigarro, é muito bonito as costas nuas de um homem, as nádegas, uma carne sólida, dura, forte e curvilínea, ao mesmo tempo, um homem feio com uma cara de felino ... (42 [26])

Eroticism will be, therefore, not only an expression of the character's sexuality, but also an important factor in the woman's self-awareness. At the same time, the use of eroticism here underlines the important role it can play in women's lives as it enables self-knowledge and self-empowerment. Thus, in Coutinho's story, the crisis that began with the realization of the passage of time and the loss of youth eventually leads the female protagonist to a sense of integration—psychological and sexual. However, the final integration of the self does not imply the crystallization of female subjectivity. Similarly to the
novel *Mulher no espelho* that I discussed in Chapter 2, “Uma certa felicidade” presents a textual circularity that takes the reader from the last paragraph back to the beginning. In this way, the character is continuously engaging in her assessment of past and present, and in her redefinition of her own self. Female subjectivity, therefore, is for Coutinho a “process, a becoming,... an ongoing discursive practice” (Butler 33).

The conclusion of “Uma certa felicidade” clearly contrasts with that of “Uma mulher sem nenhuma importância” discussed above. In “Felicidade,” the protagonist is able to break away from the patriarchal order in which she grew up and learns to live in the instability and loneliness of the big city as a form of freedom. At the same time, she is able to accept her aging body, and guiltlessly experience her sexuality. As for the character in “Uma mulher,” the realization of her own aging does not lead her to self-development or to personal integration, as she is not able to change her unsatisfactory reality. While one woman takes on an active role in life, as a “vampira” (“Felicidade” 56) who looks for her own sexual and personal satisfaction, the other is unable to act, but is rather resigned to her tedious and unfulfilling married life, waiting, melancholic (“Uma mulher” 129), for old age and death. Not by chance does the author point to a connection between marriage and a woman’s dissatisfaction in this story. In fact, in her fiction, marriage represents a hierarchical relationship, following the dominant gender relations that submit women to male desire. Coutinho often denounces an ideology according to which a woman’s self-worth comes not from herself, but from a male figure—the father, the husband, a fiancé, or boyfriend. Marriage represents thus, as Gary Lesnoff-Caravaglia points out in “Double Stigmata: Female and Old,” a path women follow because of social expectations or for the lack of other acceptable options (17).

Coutinho’s protagonists, however, are most often single or divorced women. Some may still long for the sense of “security” that comes from marriage or from a stable relationship with a man. And if they have not found such a relationship by the time they are no longer young, these women look for ways of escaping from the marginal position in which society places the older single woman. This situation takes place, for example,
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in the story “O dia em que Mary Batson fez 40 anos” [The day Mary Batson turned forty] from *O último verão de Copacabana* [Last Summer in Copacabana] (1985). Here the female protagonist, in order to minimize the sense of isolation and loneliness, “se transformou numa mulher de constantes novos amores, não sabe como isso chegou a lhe acontecer, a ela, a maior vocação para o amor e a fidelidade eternos, entre as amigas de sua geração” (68) [“became a woman of constant new lovers, who knows how this happened to her, who had the greatest vocation for eternal love and fidelity, among the friends of her generation”]. Passing lovers, “superficial” and “provisory” (“Mary Batson” 71) friendships, help her bear the “burden” of living alone, a condition worsened by society’s demands upon women. As Lesnoff-Caravaglia would explain: “Living alone is a radical change in lifestyle for many women, but the difficulties of single life are compounded by the fact that in our society women have been led to believe that they require a man to fulfill their existences” (16).

Single middle-aged women are numerous in Coutinho’s fiction, but they are often portrayed with humor and irony in their attempts to disguise their age. For example, in another story from *O último verão*, “Josete se matou” [Josete killed herself], we find such a portrait: “uma mulher no início da casa dos 40, queimada de praia, os cabelos pintados de acaju, passeando na calçada com seu cachorrinho pequinhos ou *poodle-toy* [sic]” (17) [“a woman in her early forties, tanned, her hair dyed red, strolling down the sidewalk with her little Pekinese dog or toy poodle”]. This image appears in Coutinho’s stories with slight variations and one constant element: the dyed-red hair trying to hide the first signs of old age.

Nevertheless, perhaps more typical in Coutinho’s fiction are the characters who *choose* not to marry or those who leave their unhappy marriages after becoming aware that leaving would be necessary in order to attain personal realization. The protagonist of “Uma certa felicidade,” which I examined above, falls into this category. She and other characters like her break away from the patriarchal ideology in favor of self-realization—professional, emotional, and sexual. The woman able to go against this ideology can, as a result, accept her own maturity, her sexuality, and independence. However, this acceptance necessitates a certain degree of rebelliousness and marginality,
which are represented in images such as “vampira” and “puta.” We can infer from this that, in Coutinho’s view, the self-realization of Brazilian women (including their sexual liberation) is possible only at a mature age, and it implies the deconstruction of conventional female roles and of cultural myths of femininity.

The Female Grotesque: “Cordélia, a caçadora”

The short story “Cordélia, a caçadora” [Cordelia, the huntress], from the 1978 volume Os venenos de Lucrecia [Lucrecia’s poisons], corroborates what I have discussed concerning women’s aging in Coutinho’s short fiction. At the same time, it serves to illustrate the appropriation of the grotesque by the author in order to represent a transgressive and disruptive female body. As Geoffrey Harpham explains, the grotesque implies “a confusion of language categories. The word itself is a storage place for the outcasts of language” (xxi); in other words, the grotesque typifies those bodies that, because they juxtapose elements or characteristics that normally do not belong together, occupy “multiple categories” or fall “between categories” (Harpham 3). In this way, the grotesque lives at the margin of the dominant discourse and calls into question fixed categories defined by such discourse. The grotesque is thus the transgressive body par excellence.

In addition, the grotesque is profoundly associated with the female body because of the name’s connotation: grotto-esque, cave, cavern, vessel, womb. However, while the grotesque has been used to represent the female body from a masculinist perspective, the “female grotesque” may be appropriated by women writers and artists as a category that proposes transformation. This argument is made by Mary Russo in her The Female Grotesque: “the female body as grotesque . . . might be used affirmatively to destabilize the idealizations of female beauty or to realign the mechanisms of desire” (65). It is in this manner that Coutinho employs the grotesque, as a strategy that deconstructs myths of femininity and the ideological repression of female desire.

“Cordélia, a caçadora,” which won the 1977 Revista Status award for erotic literature, is about a middle-aged, working-class woman, never married, her hair dyed red-brown (19).
Cordélia is dependent and submissive, and her constant “ar de Vítima” (19; capital letter in the original) or victim’s countenance, reveals to men the easy sexual prey she is. Not that she truly enjoys sex; rather, sex is for her a means of obtaining the male companionship that validates her existence. Coutinho explains the character’s submissive behavior as a consequence of two factors: the endless “Vocação para a Virtude” (19; sic) (“Vocation for Virtue”) and a conservative and repressive upbringing. The author describes Cordélia’s situation with irony and in a tone of tragicomedy, while the use of capital letters and hyphenated phrases—two recourses Coutinho employs frequently—emphasizes its banality. In the writer’s perspective, it is a situation affecting many women that originates from cultural myths society imposes on them: “Felicidade” [“Happiness”], the “Mulher Livre” [“Free Woman”], the “Mulher Casada” [“Married Woman”], and her “Deveres Conjugais” [“Conjugal Duties”] (19–23). Each one of these myths implies a number of expectations placed on the female subject, and the impossibility of fulfilling them causes a kind of social schizophrenia and a deep sense of failure.

From the outset, Cordélia is presented as a failed individual, not only because she is a middle-aged and single woman or, in other words, a solteirona or spinster, but also because of the cultural resonance of the geographical space she occupies. Cordélia lives in a small and modest apartment in the Largo do Machado, a small area adjacent to the Flamengo district in the city of Rio de Janeiro. Since the 1970s, the Largo do Machado has become home largely to a working class and a decadent bourgeoisie that does not have the means to move to better or more influential neighborhoods. This space will contrast with another space to which Cordélia is introduced by a man she meets, Papá, who proposes marriage. Papá takes Cordélia to visit his large oceanfront apartment in Leblon, a beach district in Rio de Janeiro that symbolizes the social status of the upper classes. In addition to his luxurious apartment, Papá has other ways of impressing women: his powerful profession, lawyer, and his manly attire, suit and tie (“Cordélia” 21). All these attributes characterize Papá as powerful and authoritative; indeed, his very name suggests his position as a patriarchal figure. Thus a power relationship is established in which Cordélia submits to him, not only because of his supposed
social power and wealth, but mainly because he rescues her from her degrading position as a solteirona.

Although the events generally follow a chronological order, "Cordélia" plays also with the subjective time frame of memory. The narrative is structured on three different time levels: the period before the protagonist meets Papá; their first encounter, the courtship, and the married life; and her new life, after Cordélia abandons him. Concomitantly, the protagonist experiences a psychological fragmentation marked by the use of different subject pronouns ("you," "I," and "we") and by the use of different verb tenses (past, present, and future). The second-person pronoun, "you," dominates the narrative, changing occasionally to the first person. This strategy allows the reader to identify the narrator as being Cordélia engaged in a dialogue with herself. It's as if the character were standing in front of a mirror and addressing her reflected image as "you." Therefore, to narrate is not here simply a memoirist activity but, rather, serves to review the past in a methodical and explanatory way. The use of first and second person pronouns also establishes a psychological distance between the character in her present reality and the woman she had been before (a victim, humble, submissive). The last part of the text, however, which narrates the events in Cordélia's life after she has abandoned her married life, suggests a sense of self-integration through the use of "we." In a similar manner, the utilization of the future tense in the last part of the story gives expression to the character's self-affirmation. This happens after she leaves Papá's home and, particularly, after she learns to take pleasure in her own body.

In "Cordélia, a caçadora," Coutinho again depicts marriage as a patriarchal institution in which women are rendered objects of male desire. Nevertheless, humor and mockery are the main strategies the writer employs to deconstruct the patriarchal order Papá embodies. After realizing that the respectful and powerful man is a fake, an old man of unconventional sexual preferences and even given to violence, Cordélia confronts the reality of marriage as a prison within which she must comply with society's demands: to keep the appearance of a normal life.

Cordélia is thus faced with two clear choices: to remain submissive and keep her social status as a married woman or to attempt to regain a sense of integrity but abandon Papá and the
“Golden Myth” of marriage (“Cordélia” 27). The character opts for her freedom and independence, and from that point on, the narrative describes a process of transformation, as she moves from one social space to another: from Leblon to a solitary room in a boarding house, and from there to a studio in Copacabana. In the anonymity and turbulence of this populous district, where people from different social groups, races, and ages continuously pass each other, Cordélia sets out to construct a new sense of identity. In a dialectical relationship, this new identity is related to the character’s renewed enjoyment of her body and sexuality, much like what happens in the story “Uma certa felicidade.” If at first sex meant for her a tender moment with a male companion, in the end, Cordélia pursues sex solely for sexual pleasure. She has become Cordélia, the Huntress, actively seeking on the sidewalks of Copacabana young men with perfect bodies who can offer her pleasure.

In Coutinho’s fiction, and especially in the stories of O último verão de Copacabana, the famous beach district represents a synthesis of the problems of contemporary urban life. Here it is the right background to facilitate the changes Cordélia undergoes. In spite of its decadence since the 1950s, Copacabana still stands for a beach culture centered on the body and physical pleasures. It is therefore an environment where the female character can become reacquainted with her body and her sexuality, while discovering in her sexuality a source of renewed strength and power (27). The transformation in Cordélia’s inner self is externally marked by a change in her hair color now dyed “platinum blonde.” Her sexual pleasure is anticipated in the self-satisfaction she derives from the smiling image in the mirror: “Olhando-nos ao espelho, veremos um rosto moreno e voraz sob os cabelos de palha iluminada, um rosto quase belo, de lábios úmidos, sem o menor ar de vítima. Esta noite mesmo, Cordélia, a Caçadora, voltará a excursionar” (27; my emphasis) [“Looking at the mirror we will see a dark and voracious face under the lit-hay-colored hair, an almost beautiful face, wet lips, showing no sign of being a victim. At this very night, Cordélia, the Huntress, will go out again”]. Once more the female subject’s sexual liberation takes place only at middle age, after the deconstruction of cultural myths of romantic love, marriage, and women as submissive. At the
same time, female eroticism represents not only sexual satisfaction, but also personal realization and a sense of wholeness experienced by the character.

The fact that the character’s sexual liberation and personal integration happen at middle age and are marked by a change in her physical appearance is of importance. Moreover, it is very significant that the hair, a cross-cultural symbol of female sexuality, is the physical mark of her transformation. The dyed hair is the most immediate and accessible mask to cover the signs of old age. However, the red-brown tone that Coutinho often describes, represents an attempt to disguise not only the passage of time but also the mask itself. In other words, it is an artifice that tries to hide its artificiality. The “platinum blonde” color, on the other hand, is a mask that reveals itself as such and has the function of representing rather than disguising. The “platinum blonde” hair represents, in an extravagant and excessive manner, femaleness.

Cordélia’s body/face, framed by hair of ostensibly false color, and parading on the streets of Copacabana, takes to an extreme the theatricality that marks the feminine according to Sontag. The proposition that “Being feminine is a kind of theater” (Sontag 36) complements the idea advanced by Kristeva and other feminist critics that the feminine is a social construct. In “Cordélia, açaíadora,” the representation of the female body becomes, in the end, a parody of the consumer society and of the ideology that privileges feminine beauty and youth. In this sense, Cordélia is the carnivalesque body, undermining existing patterns of behavior. As the aging woman and the sexual woman, she challenges definitions, resists closure (cf. Armitt 69); she represents the female grotesque as Russo defines it: “the open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change” (62–63).

Hence Coutinho presents two types of masks. One denies the subject’s aging and thus expresses the acceptance of cultural myths of femininity as youth. It implies women’s compliance with “the dominant economy of desire in an attempt to remain ‘on the market’ in spite of everything” (Irigaray 154). The other kind of mask represents resistance and defiance of the dominant patterns of female behavior, since it opens up a space for the aging woman who wants to fully enjoy her
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sexuality. In other words, the defiant mask creates a social space for the female subject who refuses to act “her age” as determined by the dominant ideology. In this case, if women wish to remain “on the market” of sexual desire they may do so, not as merchandise, but rather as subjects, able to acquire the source of their own satisfaction.

The irony and humor employed in the final characterization of Cordélia are strategies that affirm Cixous’s “laugh of the Medusa,” and may be found in other stories by Coutinho, such as “Darling, ou do amor em Copacabana” [Darling, or of love in Copacabana] (from Uma certa felicidade) and in several stories from O último verão de Copacabana. In the latter volume, Coutinho specifically deconstructs the “mythology of mass culture, so typical of city life” (Lobo 168), playing with the image of cinema icons like Lana Turner and Greta Garbo. In deconstructing these myths, the author exposes the dominant ideology that stigmatizes older women, while her female characters search for—and many times find—ways of overcoming such ideology and its concomitant.

In the last two chapters, I have discussed some different strategies of representation employed by Brazilian women writers in depicting the female body, sexuality, and desire, and to problematize women’s alienation from their own bodies. Like Luft and Telles, Coutinho utilizes the grotesque, but with different objectives and results. In appropriating the grotesque, the writer is able to create a space wherein the expression of female sexuality, unrestrained by masculinist desire, is possible. In the stories examined here, Coutinho has portrayed female heterosexual desire. In the following chapter, I will discuss how she and other Brazilian women short-story writers represent lesbian desire as a space for the unrestrained expression of female desire and sexuality.