

# Transcending, transforming: Trans lives in the Brazilian Outback

Martinho Tota<sup>1</sup>

## Resumo

O presente artigo é construído a partir da história de vida de Iohannah, rapaz gay/jovem mulher trans, moradora de Catolé do Rocha, município situado no Sertão da Paraíba. A partir de sua narrativa apreendemos passagens de sua infância, marcada por experiências que a levariam a perceber e/ou elaborar sua orientação sexual, ao mesmo tempo que, empreendendo um interminável e nuançado trabalho de construção de si, mais tarde acabariam por fazê-la reinventar-se, desta vez como mulher trans. No texto procuro ainda apresentar alguns aspectos da diversidade sexual e de gênero observados em uma cidade sertaneja/interiorana, bem como do ativismo pelos direitos LGBT, do qual Iohannah participava, permitindo assim uma análise articulada das políticas públicas voltadas para esse segmento populacional em níveis estadual e nacional, comparando o que se deu em um passado recente com o cenário social e político brasileiro atual.

## Palavras-chave

Transexualidade. Diversidade sexual e de gênero. Movimento LGBT. Políticas públicas. Sertão nordestino.

## Abstract

This article is constructed upon the life story of Iohannah, a gay boy/young trans woman, who lived in Catolé do Rocha, a small town located in the Outback [T.N.]<sup>2</sup> of Paraíba, Brazil. Starting from her narrative, we apprehend passages from her childhood, marked by experiences that would lead her to perceive and/or elaborate her sexual orientation and, at the same time, undertaking an endless and nuanced work of self-construction that would later end up making her reinvent herself, this time as a trans woman. In this work, I also try to present a few aspects of the sexual and gender

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<sup>1</sup> PhD in Social Anthropology from the National Museum/UFRJ. Professor at the Department of Social Sciences of the Federal University of Ceará (UFC) and the Associated Graduate Program in Anthropology (UFC/Unilab). *E-mail*: martinho.tota@ufc.br.

<sup>2</sup> [T.N.] Please note that, in the context of this paper, Outback or Brazilian Outback refers to the term “Sertão,” in the original text in Portuguese, an arid and semiarid region that stretches from the North of the state of Minas Gerais to most of the Northeast region of Brazil. Bearing in mind that the term “Sertão” also includes sociocultural, populational and political connotations in Brazilian contexts, the translators have chosen the equivalent term “Outback” to convey similarities of landscape and climate.

diversity observed in a small country town, as well as the activism for LGBT rights, in which Iohannah was a participant, thus allowing an articulated analysis of public policies aimed at this population segment on state and national levels, comparing what happened in the recent past to the current social and political scenario in Brazil.

## Keywords

Transsexuality. Sexual and Gender Diversity. LGBT Movement. Public Policies. Brazilian Backcountry.

## Introduction

In a short time, the work of the anthropologist, converted to and fixed in text – whether through written language or imagery – ends up being confused with the work of the historian<sup>3</sup>. For in anthropology, at least in its long and therefore well-established ethnographic vocation, whose tradition has fulfilled the significant role of providing humanity with a vast and continuously renewed collection of descriptions of our sociocultural diversity, what is told are stories. Stories of the past, the present and (why not?) the future; stories about people's lives in their singularity, with everything subjectivity entails; stories of entire societies in their behaviors, habits, belief systems; stories of events, places, and so on. Things are enriched, and also complicated, when what is sought to be “retold” is the story – or the many stories – narrated by a subject who, from her memory (which is personal but also collective), evokes the (supposed and continuously “re-created”) stories of other people. It is then that the story told by the anthropologist acquires the air of a chronicle, a fable, an invention, while the story of an individual who is unique becomes a special kind of “autobiography of everyone.” It is, however, an invention that is not at all anodyne, especially when what I seek to tell concerns the lives of people like her. In the use of my authorial attributions, also justified by ethical imperatives, I will call her Iohannah (an invented name that overlaps another invented name...), a gay young man and *also* a trans woman<sup>4</sup> born in the town of Catolé do Rocha, in the outback of the state of Paraíba, where she lived.

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<sup>3</sup> This idea, which is certainly not new, is directly inspired, in my case, by the words of Kulick (2008, p. 9), when he states that “ethnography very quickly becomes history.”

<sup>4</sup> Before proceeding, I should give two explanations. The first concerns the category “trans,” which will be used throughout the text in an indistinct reference to transvestites, transsexuals, and transgenders, although each of these identity categories has specific and differentiating aspects.

With an estimated population of approximately 30,000 inhabitants (IBGE, 2020), Catolé do Rocha is known regionally as the “greenest city of the Outback of Paraíba”. Many of its residents mention this nickname, which makes them especially proud of living there, the place I chose to conduct my research on sexual and gender diversity. I was particularly interested in the life stories, relationships and identities of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transvestites [T.N.]<sup>5</sup>, and transgender individuals (subjects represented, or sought to be represented, by the acronym LGBT)<sup>6</sup>. It is important to note that at that time, in the field of socio-anthropological studies dedicated to understanding “dissident” sexualities and gender identities<sup>7</sup> in Brazil, little research had been conducted in contexts other than metropolitan ones. Therefore, almost nothing was known in the academic field about this problem in the vast corners (or outbacks) of the country<sup>8</sup>.

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The word “transvestite” will appear in Iohannah’s speech and is therefore an emic category. I made this choice to give more fluidity to the text and because the sociocultural and political complexity of these terms will not be analyzed here. The second explanation is about the presentation of Iohannah simultaneously as a gay man and a trans woman. I hope to be able to show in this paper how the same subject, in this case Iohannah, can incorporate two sociosexual and gender identities, albeit provisionally and ambivalently.

<sup>5</sup> T.N. Both in Portuguese and in English, the word “transvestite” (Noted by the Cambridge on-line dictionary: “This word is offensive to many people. Do not use it unless a person describes themselves using this word.”) or “travesti,” as written in the original text in Portuguese, was used with a derogatory connotation, usually in association to prostitution. But the term was reclaimed and gained political weight, being used by members of the LGBTQIAP+ community, especially transexual, as a synonym for transexual women. Some members of the LGBTQIAP+ community and scholars of gender and sexuality believe that “travesti” should not be translated by “transvestite” due to the sociocultural and political underlying meanings the word carries in Portuguese. Without taking this for granted, for the sake of equivalence, we have chosen to use “transvestite” whenever “travesti” appears on the text.

<sup>6</sup> Some people have advocated the use of longer acronyms, such as LGBTQIAP+, which includes subjects who recognize themselves as queer, intersex, asexual, and pansexual. Even so, I chose to use the acronym LGBT throughout the text, mainly because it was the acronym used by Iohannah in our talks and the most common in the literature I accessed.

<sup>7</sup> Dissenting from things such as heteronormativity, compulsory heterosexuality, and hegemonic masculinity. The notion of dissidence has been widely used (and with heuristic benefit) by researchers dedicated to the study of human diversity in matters of gender, sexualities, corporeality, etc. However, I must say that, even considering its importance, I am afraid that the merely descriptive use of this notion will end up producing, as a side effect, an image that is too agglutinating of all the subjects that can be qualified as dissidents (despite the enormous diversity that exists among them), In addition to implicitly contributing to confer legitimacy on agents, institutions and norms that these subjects seek to contest, establishing a very rigid and somewhat simplistic dichotomy between an abstract “We” and an abstract “They”.

<sup>8</sup> This has changed significantly in recent years. See, for example, the articles in the dossiers organized by Fernandes et al. (2016a, 2016b, 2016c).

Thus, if, on the one hand, the study I carried out (and from which this work is the result) is accommodated in the field of studies on sexuality and gender, it should also be read as part of a theoretical lineage that includes authors such as Said (1990) and Albuquerque Júnior (2011). The problem addressed by the latter, for example, also played a decisive role in the choice of the Brazilian Outback, or, rather, of *a(n) (un)certain* Outback as the stage, setting and context of the investigation, since another (parallel and complementary) objective of the work was to explore *other* outbacks, so close and simultaneously so distant (even in my case, as a person born in the Northeast region of Brazil). Evoking this other dimension of the work, which involves various elements such as: representations, stereotyped images, stigma, discrimination, struggle for recognition, “symbolic” violence, etc., also means giving the political question (in the broad and strict senses) a central place here, considering that there is no way to deal with the social markers of difference (such as sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, belief, class, nationality, regionality, among others) without a necessary appreciation of the social and political contexts at the local and also “glocal” levels (Cf. SAHLINS, 1997; ROBERTSON, 1999). And this is precisely what I have tried to do in this article, through Iohannah's narrative.

## The meeting with Iohannah

Monday, March 10, 2014. I arrived in Catolé do Rocha at about 11:30 p.m., after a bus trip that lasted approximately six hours, departing from the city of Campina Grande. As soon as I got to the bus terminal, I met a middle-aged man who, shouting, tried to draw the attention of the newly arrived passengers to his car, which was playing the role of cab. It was he who took me to *Chiku's Pousada*, an inn whose owner I had previously contacted. The inn, which was not far from the city center, nor the bus station, became not only my place of rest, but also my workplace, as it was there that I interviewed almost all my interlocutors.

On the afternoon of the day after my arrival, I received a visit from Otaviano Souza, honorary president and one of the founders of the Catolé LGBT Forum Group (GF-LGBT), a governmental organization about which I will discuss later<sup>9</sup>. For now, it suffices to say that the existence of this NGO was another

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<sup>9</sup> A philosophy teacher at the Elementary and Secondary Schools in Catolé do Rocha, Otaviano functioned as an exceptional interlocutor and guide. Without his collaboration I would hardly have succeeded in the research. Otaviano's trajectory as an activist and main name of GF-LGBT will be analyzed in another work.

reason for choosing Catolé do Rocha as the *locus* of my research. By discovering GF-LGBT's website, which promoted the actions developed by its seven more or less regular members and informed an e-mail address, I was able to contact Otaviano months before our first meeting. Through him, I was able to contact the people who would become interlocutors and, therefore, collaborators in the investigation. Thus, after almost two weeks since my first conversation with Otaviano and after conducting some interviews, I met Iohannah, who came to meet me at the hostel. That afternoon she was introduced to me by Candy, another young trans woman whom I also interviewed.

Appealing to the notion of intersubjectivity – which presupposes a “symbolic communication” (CARDOSO, 1986, p. 103) responsible for the creation of meanings and collectivities and therefore not only concerning autonomous individuals – in anthropology, at least in its hermeneutic aspect, has become a common resource nowadays, almost a commonplace. However, it is difficult for me to resist such resource when I think of Iohannah, since our encounter affected me deeply and positively not only because of her life story and her intelligent loquacity, but because of herself: a person in her complex and multifaceted uniqueness. Not by chance my interview with her took place in two days and since then we have built a very friendly relationship. This is how I initially learned that she was 27 years old, had finished her secondary education and worked as a municipal civil servant.

Finishing secondary school was not a common feat in that locality, especially when considering the situation experienced by LGBT subjects. The difficulties faced in accessing educational institutions were even greater for transvestites and transsexuals, and Iohannah spoke about this, mentioning herself as an exceptional case. Even more exceptional was the fact that she had a job, which she had earned after passing a civil service examination. This gave her a privileged status, since she could count on a regular income in a place where opportunities for paid work, especially for trans people, were scarce, to say the least. I will return to this issue later. It is important to highlight at the moment the correlation established by Iohannah between the opportunity she had to study and the period in which she lived with her paternal grandparents (a couple of farmers already deceased at the time of the research), in the rural area of Catolé do Rocha:

The little education I had I owe to my grandmother, because she provided me with everything I needed for a good education when I was a child. From the pencil to the spanking. I believe that if I had been **raised** here on

the streets, I would have become a **juvenile offender**. While I lived with my mother, I was very **naughty**, I was always in the streets. My grandmother gave me an education, and I placed myself as a person in the society, a harmless person.<sup>10</sup>

The association made by Iohannah between life at the “ranch” [T.N.]<sup>11</sup> with her grandma and a “good” moral education and, on the other hand, living with her mother in the “town” and the threat of corrupting her character would demand the proper analysis of a larger set of information. However, the narrative built by Iohannah about her childhood was incomplete and fragmented. On this topic, her speech was marked by brief and adamant sentences, such as when she stated that she lived a “beautiful, beautiful, beautiful” childhood, or when she said that what led her to go live with her grandparents at the age of six was the fact that she enjoyed living in a “ranch”, that is, the countryside. About her father and mother (with whom she moved back in the town of Catolé do Rocha), her sister (married and living in a different state) and her brother (who lived in the “ranch” and with whom Iohannah had no sort of contact), she barely spoke, allowing room for doubt, speculation, and respect on behalf of the interviewer.

This does not mean, however, that Iohannah did not evoke memories of other experiences of her youth. Among them, one was especially highlighted in her speech, obtaining vital importance in her relationship with her own body; in the experience of emotions like fear, desire, and pleasure; and in the perception or elaboration of her sexuality and, later, her gender identity. Such experience happened with an older cousin, who also lived with her and her grandparents, an experience marked by the non-linear conjunction of ingredients like affection, eroticism, and violence, since Iohannah, while affirming that her cousin sexually “abused” her, said: “But I was also naughty, because I was supposed to tell grandma and I didn’t. I kept quiet and went there willingly. I consented. When I was seven years old,” she continued, “we slept in the living room. Then, my cousin would call me: ‘Come here,’ to his hammock. Every night, I would go to his hammock, and he would tease me. I

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<sup>10</sup> I emphasized the words and expressions of Iohannah with male terminations (in Portuguese) in order to contrast with other discursive formulations of her, in which she is placed as a female person, which can be observed in other parts of this work.

<sup>11</sup> T.N. The word ‘ranch’ is being used to denote a “sítio,” which, in Brazil, is usually a small piece of land in the countryside with a house and maybe some crops and animals. It may be smaller than the idea of a ranch in other countries.

don't know how things are out there, but usually here in the Outback, it's the cousin. It's always the cousin."

This final passage demands attention, not only for what it describes of the experience lived and told by Iohannah, but also because of its recurrence, comprehensiveness, and polysemy in sociocultural terms. In other research studies I have conducted, also about the lives of LGBT people in countryside contexts of Paraíba (Cf. TOTA, 2006, 2012), I often heard my gay and trans interviewees – when they narrated the moment they discovered sex, with the consequent reflexive elaboration of their erotic desires and their sexual and gender identities – stories lived in their childhood when a neighbor, or a brother, or an uncle or an older cousin emerged as the initiator of these subjects' sexual life. It is important to note that all interviewees were children at the time of these experiences, that all individuals who initiated them were slightly or significantly older than them and that the sexual relations were recalled in an ambivalent manner, since the notions of desire, pleasure, fantasy, violence, pain and suffering emerged shuffled, challenging the anthropological analysis, also given the existence of psychological elements.

Resuming Iohannah's story, for her the erotic games with her cousin played a transformational role in her life, at least regarding her sexuality. According to her, before that all her erotic desires were populated by women, and only them. However, after the nighttime games played with her cousin in his hammock, things changed in a way that, in her fantasies and desires, men were gradually taking the space that was previously exclusive to women. Thus, the children's relationships and games started to be enhanced with other content, gaining new outlines, to the point that even the moments of revelry in the woods were given a new meaning.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the process lived by

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<sup>12</sup> Iohannah's mention of the erotic-symbolic appropriation of local nature reminded me of the work of Ferreira (2006), in which the author, from a field research developed in a small village located in the Outback of Ceará, reflects upon the "misspoken affections" which involved, among other things, what he calls "agencies without dualities" created in the "middle of the caatinga", in the "moitas" (bushes) that becomes a "moitel" [see T.N.] (FERREIRA, 2006, p. 126-127). Besides, corroborating the author's records and Iohannah's narrative, it is interesting to record that in 2011 employees of the Specialized Reference Center of Social Assistance (CREAS) of Catolé do Rocha, along with members of GF-LGBT, while performing a survey with the local LGBT population, observed that the "bushes" emerged as one of the main locations for erotic-sexual interaction, due to practically the inexistence of motels in the region (there was only one motel, distant from the town's urban center), the lack of anonymity, and the economic struggles faced by the population heard by the study. T.N. "Moitel" is a play on words between the words in Portuguese "moita" (bush) and "motel" (which, in Brazil, is a hotel where people go exclusively for sexual and erotic encounters), implying that, in these towns, people used bushes as a motel due to the lack of motels immediately close to them.

Iohannah of perceiving her own sexuality was not at all smooth. Initially, she was taken by denial: “There is no way this is happening to me!” she reacted. “In the beginning, it was really hard,” she said,

because I was born sort of in that man and woman thing. I didn’t want to be gay, because I thought it was ugly, I thought it was vulgar, that everybody would mock me. I lived in a ranch, get it? When someone called me a faggot at school, I found it ugly. There are gays here today that, when they walked on a street, I would cross to a different street, I was ashamed of them. So much so, that they confront me today. And there are others who did the same thing too. Today, I’m the one who walks by, and people move away. Today, I’m a victim of this same behavior I had, right?

This type of “internalized homophobia,” present in Iohannah’s narrative about her childhood, made her behave as a “manly man,” “macho man” at school, because she was “ashamed of being gay”: “Because I didn’t see a gay person in there. At the time, gays were all *encubados*<sup>13</sup>. A few of them are out in the open, very few! Then, I was very manly.” For Iohannah, differently than in the city, where “you are in contact with other gays,” “living in the countryside, you are in contact with nobody, only your family and you family’s friends, those people. Then, it’s complicated being gay in the countryside because you are not in contact with people who are also gay. Since I was a child,” she continued:

Since I was little, I already figured out I was gay, my strongest desire was having a gay friend, who was my age, so we could walk together, you know? In the ranch, I was lonely. I think this was the reason I didn’t know better; I was very biased. I didn’t know, I didn’t have anyone, I didn’t know better. What I saw was... What I had was a man who lived in a ranch, who was openly gay and everything. But I saw everyone beating him up. Then, I was like: “I don’t want to know, because they will beat me up too.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Or “*incubado*” [incubated], commonly used expression in other parts of the Northeast, with the meaning of closeted, not openly gay. I also heard it during another research (see TOTA, 2012) and found it (spelled as “*incubado*”) in Parker (2002, p. 249), among the answers of one of his interviewees in the countryside of Ceará, which suggests a wide spread of the term.

<sup>14</sup> According to Borrillo (2010, p. 98), commenting on the work of other researchers, “individuals from the countryside are more inclined to have homophobic attitudes than residents of big cities”. On the other hand, in the urban context “[the] possibility of living with gays and lesbians and the openness to others [...] stop the development of homophobic feelings.” Apart from the strictness



Loneliness, the absence of positive references and, even worse, the image of someone being target of mockery and disdain by the local population because of their sexuality, all this fueled in Iohannah a tenacious and diffuse feeling of non-acceptance of self, of social ineptitude. Religion, in this sense, did not make things better, much on the contrary: “Usually, ranch people are very religious, and you barely leave the house because in ranches you don’t have much to do,” she said. Since she herself had a Catholic upbringing, the feeling of guilt began to haunt her. However, her grandparents, according to her, did not contribute to her suffering, after all, according to Iohannah, they did not even know homosexuality existed:

Today, there are mothers who close their eyes. Today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are mothers who see their children like this, with gay manners, but they close their eyes, they don’t even talk about it. Let alone people who came from the 1960s! I think homosexuality didn’t exist for them [the grandparents].

Ironically, if the religious guidelines were perceived by Iohannah as one of the sources (if not the main one) of her conflict with her own sexuality, initially that did not distance her from the spiritual dimension of her life. Actually, during her adolescence, Iohannah attended “three or four evangelical churches”:

I have always been raised, when I was a little boy, with “this is right, and this is wrong; this is a sin and this is not a sin,” these things that religions teach. And, as I grew up, when I had one of those depressions we have, that sadness, I looked for evangelical churches. I always thought I could strengthen myself spiritually against the problems we face in life.

However, instead of the expected strength, what Iohannah found was a series of frustrations when she noticed, among other things, that “the believers’ faith was stronger than the pastor’s faith. That was what I noticed.” In this

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embedded in the country/urban dichotomy underlying here, which holds the countryside context as particularly unfavorable for LGBT people and that, it is important to mention, may be found in a vast literature (see CHAUNCEY, 1994; GREEN, 2000; PARKER, 2002; BARBOSA DA SILVA, 2005; ERIBON, 2008; KULICK, 2008), Iohannah’s speech seemed to illustrate well the author’s words.

sense, among the situations she experienced and narrated, one involving a pastor particularly stroke her for implying her sexuality:

Initially he treated me very well, as if he really [was] worried about me. On the next day, I went to church, and he called me to the altar. When he called me, I felt that he wanted to expose me as a homosexual that he was curing. I felt that he wanted to say: "I am curing a homosexual." So, I think he managed to teach me a lesson of at least not trusting pastors anymore. On the next day, I was terribly angry, and I just wrote to him: "See you in hell." So, because of this story, I haven't taken part in any other evangelical service.

After this episode, Iohannah decided to take a turn in her life, this time more secular and, consequently, without the company of priests or pastors, convinced that she suffered from no diseases to be cured by physicians, let alone religious leaders.

## **Iohannah's double invention**

The death of her grandparents caused profound changes in Iohannah's life. It meant the move from the countryside ("ranch") to the urban center of Catolé do Rocha, as well as the return to her daily life with her parents, with whom she returned to live. But, above all, it represented the beginning of a new stage in her biography. Finding in the town "a new freedom that I didn't have in the ranch," Iohannah "opened" herself up to the world. To this end, her friendship with a young gay man played a decisive role in this process of self-construction:

I opened myself up in 2004. That was the year I met a friend of mine. Then, we kept talking, becoming closer. After he helped me open the window, the door and run away, today I'm very open to people. Today, I'm way more than out. Why did I come out? When you have a little friend who is gay and who is out, then you...how do you say: you don't influence anybody, you just open the closet, you know? I think this little friend just opens the closet, just helps you be the person you are, the person inside of you.

The importance of gatherings and socialization with similar ones, with subjects with whom you can share one or more identity aspects as sexuality, for example, is well established in the literature produced in the social sciences. In the field of sociological studies on homosexualities, Barbosa da Silva, in his

pioneering research carried out in the second half of the 1950s on homosexuals in the city of São Paulo, already observed:

As the homosexual manages to make contacts and discover that there are other people in the inclusive society who are similar to him, also excluded from the minority group, he tends to face the option in a different way, which then means his personal statement as homosexual, attaching him even further to this category. (BARBOSA DA SILVA, 2005, p. 104)<sup>15</sup>

However, in a way, Iohannah's life change was a consequence of a larger one, since, according to her, Catolé do Rocha

has changed very, very much. Because, when I was gay, I think I could count on my fingers the openly gay ones here. When I started being gay, there was almost no one here who was, almost no one. There were many *encubados*, but I could count them [the outed ones]. Today, you go to that corner and find a herd.

Thus, in a context of transformation where she could enjoy more freedom and count on the friendship of another gay man, Iohannah found a favorable place for acknowledgment and acceptance of her sexuality, which does not mean that she did not have to deal with some setbacks, because if when she lived with her grandparents her homosexuality was never a reason for family conflicts, when she moved back with her parents her relationship with her father was frequently strained, and for a long time:

My father was the one with whom I had the most conflicts, because he is very grumpy, he is very macho, extremely biased. Always been. My father has even hit me, because of my manners, and he said that he didn't accept it. And like that, I grew up, my hair started to grow. And every day my father would say he was going to cut it with a knife. I even had to sleep outside because of my hair. He [the father] said I would enter his house when I cut my hair. Then, mother, always that quiet person, would hang the hammock outside and I would sleep there, because of my hair. He didn't accept it at all. Until I stood up for myself.

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<sup>15</sup> This is not the case to discuss the theoretical problems found in notions such as "minority group" or "option" used by the author. My intention here is only to point to the permanence – attested by Iohannah and despite the historical changes, sociocultural variations and the voluminous and rich bibliography produced in the last few years by social scientists on sexual and gender diversity –, of a social phenomenon already recorded in the first study on the topic in Brazil.

Fortunately, however, things were slowly improving between father and daughter, to the extent that, again without detailing the circumstances in which this change happened, she stated: “Today, my father doesn’t pick on me anymore.” Then, it seemed that the efforts employed by Iohannah to become a young gay man were completed the moment she obtained the “acceptance” from her family. Nevertheless, more than a conclusion, Iohannah’s narrative pointed to a new beginning in her existence, and such beginning had everything to do with her magical hair, which she had been growing for the following reason:

I let my hair grow because I saw a difference in how people treat gays here. I have always been gay, but it has been a while since I started doing drag. Not here. I don’t do drag here, I do it far away. I have a motorcycle and I take this motorcycle; I take someone else with me, and we drive to another town. Because I see a big difference in the way they [trans women] are treated here and the way they are treated there, let’s say São Bento, where I go every weekend.

As the excerpt suggests, from a certain point, the story told by Iohannah becomes more complex and multifaceted. After all, if what she narrated initially seemed to be only another heroic story lived by a young gay man in the countryside of the Northeast, marked by suffering, struggle and overcoming, the narrator showed that it was not the case, or not only that. While talking about the growing hair and stating that, months before our meeting, she started “doing drag,” that is, dressing in women’s clothes, Iohannah pointed towards movement, that is, a series of displacements or transitions: between geographical spaces, in her own body, in her subjectivity. This was due to the fact that she found a job, bought a motorcycle<sup>16</sup> and was able to come and go, that is, leave Catolé do Rocha towards other neighboring towns, especially the municipality of São Bento<sup>17</sup>:

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<sup>16</sup> On the symbolic dimension of the motorcycle, particularly regarding the issue of gender, I observed in another paper (TOTA, 2012, p. 107n), based on Vale de Almeida (1995, p. 41, 61-63), that this means of transportation works, in certain social contexts, as a polysemic symbol of masculinity, virility and social ascension. In the case of Iohannah, it was the factor directly related to her class, in its most economic meaning, that became more relevant in comparison to the gender issue, even though the two dimensions are not automatically exclusive: after all, it was the possibility of moving to other towns that allowed Iohannah to adopt a feminine aesthetics, performance, in summary, a feminine persona.

<sup>17</sup> Municipality also located in the Ouback of Paraíba, with an estimated population of a little more than 34 thousand residents (IBGE, 2020), about 48km away from Catolé do Rocha.

When I go to São Bento with them [two trans women who are her friends], I feel so **appreciated**. So much that the gays over there don't like us so much, the boys come on to us, talk to us, invite us to their table. **We say we are trans**; they say: "We don't have any prejudice." They go out with us, some approach us to talk and end up kissing our lips in front of people, get it? And here [in Catolé do Rocha] this is something that does not happen. You will never see a trans woman kissing a guy right there in front of everyone. This will never happen here!

So, Iohannah noticed that, in São Bento, there were no trans women, and the ones who visited that town were the most "desired" and "appreciated" by men (in the universe of erotic interactions), who felt, according to her, not only attracted, but comfortable to interact with them publicly, paying no mind to possible comments or other acts of censorship practiced by people – something inconceivable in Catolé do Rocha. She then started reinventing her body and also her gender. Such change, as she said, had as one of its reasons the meaningful change in the social and moral configuration between Catolé do Rocha and São Bento when issues related to sexuality and gender were at stake. In this sense, besides factors like the existence or nonexistence of trans women, their "appreciation" or not, the element of "anonymity" also came into play, according to Iohannah herself, to whom, contrary to what happened in São Bento, erotic interactions involving men and trans women did not become public in Catolé do Rocha precisely due to the fact that everybody knew everybody:

I also think that maybe it's because they [trans women] are known too much here and, if they kiss [someone], it'll be the comment of the town on the next day, right? Since there are no [trans women] in São Bento, nobody knows us there, there are no big repercussions, get it? Since we are not known there, it's like [we are] an appreciated thing, something foreign.

As we may observe, for Iohannah, "being foreign," that is, from another locality, served to increase the erotic capital of the trans girls who visited São Bento. The fact that they were a "novelty" there, or unknown, made them more "appreciated" and attractive to the local men, who, in turn, treated them in a "fine" and "elegant" manner. "Being foreign" was so determining in the promotion of this type of relationship arrangement that, still according to Iohannah, when trans subject from other cities of Paraíba or even from other states of Brazil arrived in Catolé do Rocha (usually to participate in events

promoted by GF-LGBT), they received similar treatment than Iohannah and her friends in São Bento. So much so that she, with a good sense of humor, concludes: “There is a saying that goes ‘the shoemaker's son always goes barefoot.’ Write it like this: The shoemaker's faggot always goes barefoot as well.”

Jokes aside, the issue of femininity became a profoundly serious subject for Iohannah, being the object of a concern that, even though relatively recent in her life (she made the decision to undergo gender transition less than a year before we met), was a matter of first importance because:

I saw them [trans women] getting ready and, since I am gay... I think all of us [are] like that too: the gays, since they are very connected to them, see that they are considered an extremely hot sexual object for them [straight men]. I think the hottest thing in life is being desired. It's incredibly good to be desired, it's a pleasure! And we, gays, see it in them [trans women], we see men desiring them. Trans women are much more desired—this is the truth—than gay men themselves. Especially by straight men. Of course, we know that those who enjoy it are not [straight], they're bi, right? But, in their minds, for the men here, of course, if they hook up with a trans woman, they [think]: “I am a man, I'm not gay. I didn't put out, I wasn't passive, I'm active. I'm a man.” So, they, the men, treat them [the trans women] very delicately. And I think this is what every gay man wants and what every trans woman wants: to be treated as a delicate person. And I saw this a lot with the [trans] girls.

Thus, following the flow of becoming attractive and appreciated by men in the domain of interactions and erotic pleasures, Iohannah decided to “do drag.” It is interesting to observe that, in this sense, the procedure adopted by her was similar to some of Vencato's (2013) crossdresser interviewees, who also used the notion “doing drag” as a synonym of “dressing up as the opposite sex”. Some of the author's observations also seem relevant to reflect upon the experience lived by Iohannah:

To some people who feel the wish to dress up with clothes socially assigned to *another sex* or *another gender*, the wish to *do drag* or to *dress up* and the execution of this desire constitute important experiences, something that is described as unique for their self-esteem, their self-images, and their perception as a *whole person*. (VENCATO, 2013, p. 140, emphases of the author)

There is no space in this text to reflect upon the diversity in the experiences of crossdressers, which, according to the author (VENCATO, 2013, p. 139-140) are also diverse and, for this reason, cannot be automatically associated to any particular category of identity, as gays, homosexuals, transvestites, and transexuals. We should, then, focus our attention on Iohannah's narrative, according to whom the decision of reinventing herself was related to her self-image, to the way through which she perceived her body: "I used to look in the mirror and say: 'No, I don't have a man's body; I don't have a man's traits. I think I will do well if I do drag. I think I will date a lot'".

This is how Iohannah started to dress in feminine clothes and even use a woman's name, which would only happen, however, in extremely specific spaces and circumstances. That is, the *persona* Iohannah only appeared during weekend nights, having as her privileged staged the municipality of São Bento, a place chosen by her to enjoy her pleasure, which included alcohol consumption, dancing, flirting, and interacting with friends and young men, in the latter case erotically as well. While talking about this, Iohannah recalled vividly the first time she went to São Bento and got "really lucky": "The first time I went to São Bento and got really lucky, I was treated very well, some men invited me to their table, you know?", differently than the men from Catolé do Rocha, she said, who, "after having sex, would get up and leave". "And there, [in São Bento] it doesn't happen, they sit down, cuddle, kiss. All that. I really like it. So, because of that, I feel good dressing up as a woman. And when I'm out there, I feel even better. São Bento is so good!"

Iohannah did "do drag" in specific moments and places, as mentioned, which meant that in Catolé do Rocha and during the week she would continue wearing men's clothes and go by the name she was registered at birth. This happened for a series of reasons, which included her parents, her work, and the fact that everyone knew her in town. Even so, little by little, she implemented some changes in her outfits, by wearing women's pants even when she went to work, a governmental department. Maybe because she was at the initial stages of her transition process, which included her body, but was deeper and more comprehensive. Iohannah's narrative was full of changing and complex nuances and undertones, therefore it was difficult to be completely grasped in anthropological terms. However, in a more attentive reading, it was not impossible to capture the connection my interviewee established between the sexy girl and the elegant woman she wanted to become: "When I go out at night, it's like that: I don't want very feminine cleavages, because I don't want to shock people too much. Since everybody [in

Catolé do Rocha] sees me dressed like a man, when they see me as a woman, they will laugh, they'll see you as a joke. So, for me not to draw that much attention from people, I just put on a blouse, short shorts, these sort of things."

Even though it seems an obvious statement (which is not), Iohannah's caution with her garments was also gradually becoming a caution with her body and, more importantly, her gender identity. That is, if initially the fact that "doing drag" could be interpreted, in her case, as the choice of an individual of the masculine gender for wearing "women's clothes" (giving room to label her as a crossdresser)—and, as it seems, that was exactly what happened—, over time, the way she started noticing herself as a subject in terms of gender began shifting to the extent that Iohannah brought to herself, as her self-identification, the term "trans". By the way, reflecting upon the different meanings of the words "transvestite" (see T.N.<sup>5</sup>)—considered by her to be "very ugly" and "heavy"—and "trans," Iohannah commented: "I never tell a man I am a transvestite." Therefore, she preferred the category "trans," of relatively recent use in Catolé do Rocha ("trans is something that's happening now," she said), which she learned with her gay friends and, above all, her trans friends with whom she met frequently<sup>18</sup>.

It is interesting again to pay attention here to the importance of this game involving "mirrors and masks," as Strauss (1999) described in his now classic study on identity. In the past, as Iohannah's friendship with a gay man played a determining role for her to recognize herself as gay, now her encounter and relationship established with transvestites and trans women started reverberating in the way she perceived her body and her identity or ipseity,

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<sup>18</sup> Iohannah and other people I interviewed claimed they met four trans women or transvestites in the region, and one of them was from the municipality of Brejo dos Santos, about 18.6 km away from Catolé do Rocha, where she lived. I was not able to meet her. The inclusion of this fourth person was certainly due to the fact that she belonged to the same network found in that context. It is interesting to notice that Iohannah did not include herself as one of these trans women, nor the people that I interviewed, maybe because she was still in a very incipient phase of her gender transition process. I also consider important to record that, throughout the field work, I established contact not with four, but nine trans women or transvestites who lived or commuted to the town, especially during the weekends, which indicates the circulation of these people through town and/or the emergence of a population that began recognizing themselves as trans recently. Among all of them, I interviewed only one, Candy, whose life story will be told and analyzed at a different time. Mentioning another one of them, Kimberley, known as the first transvestite in town, Iohannah said: "Kimberley is the reason why there are trans women here, because she was there alone, dressing up as a woman. Kimberley was the first transvestite here." However, maybe just because of the pioneering role of trailblazing spirits like hers, Kimberley's life was not easy, it was marked by financial struggles and episodes of violence and threats, including by her father, with whom she did not live and who promised to kill her when he found her "in some corner", according to Iohannah and other people I interviewed.



since while she mirrored her trans girlfriends and her gay friend, seeing them as examples, and the possibility of becoming a certain kind of person she would like to be (even if temporarily), she did not see herself or did not want to see herself in any of them, feeling and desiring to be different. Maybe this self-effort explains why her narrative was somewhat discordant with the ones found in some of the most famous socio-anthropological studies on transvestilities [T.N]<sup>19</sup> and transsexualities in Brazil. BENEDETTI, 2005; BENTO, 2006; SILVA, 2007; PELÚCIO, 2007; KULICK, 2008, among others), in the sense that Iohannah did not think of herself essentially as a woman, nor as a transvestite. Because the trans experience is so diverse (Cf. VALENTINE, 2007; MURTA, 2013), because she was taking her first steps in the polysemic field of this experience or due to other reasons, the fact is that Iohannah while reluctant to adhere completely to any identity label, accepted them all (gay, trans, and even transvestite, depending on the circumstance). However, in one way or another, her body seemed to take the role not only of target or object, but of the main catalyzing instance of everything, so much so that Iohannah pondered:

Today I define myself as only gay because I still don't have a... Only the hair, but any gay man can have long hair. But I want to undergo hormone therapy, I want to become feminine. Because I see them [trans women] all pretty, I see them being desired, men like it, and when I do drag, I feel like a woman.

In order to begin hormone therapy with the purpose of becoming more feminine and feeling like a woman, a few days after our meeting, Iohannah traveled to João Pessoa to visit the Outpatient Clinic for Transvestites and Transexuals of Paraíba (Ambulatório TT/PB)<sup>20</sup>. While talking about the importance of having medical care throughout hormone therapy, in order not to compromise her health, Iohannah criticized people who used female hormones on their own, moved only by the desire of becoming “hotter, because they think that, if they take hormones, they will look hot and that's it. But it's not like that. To take hormones, you really have to know what you want. And

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<sup>19</sup> T.N. Free adaptation of the recently coined term “transvestilidade” in Portuguese, in order to avoid the suffix “-ism,” commonly used for diseases. The same process occurred in the change the term “homosexualism” for “homosexuality” after homosexuality was removed from the list of mental disorders in the 1990s.

<sup>20</sup> Created in 2013 as a unit of Hospital Clementino Fraga, in partnership with the State Department of Health (SES), it is one of the first exclusive outpatient clinics for the trans population in Brazil.

many of them don't even want to be women, they just want to look hot and look pretty."

Specifically at this point, while comparing herself to these "other" people, Iohannah tried to set herself apart from them, trying to show that, in her case, things were quite different, even though she heavily emphasized the importance of feeling attractive or "hot" before. When asked about the reasons that led her to take hormones, she answered: "To make me feel better." This search for "feeling better", which often requires a time-consuming and painful work of self-construction, began, in Iohannah's case, with the discovery or elaboration of her sexuality, and continued now with the "reinvention" of her body and, also, her gender: "Since I was a child, I didn't even want to be gay, and now I am. If now I want to be a woman, what is the difference? If now I want to be trans, what is the difference?" she asked herself and me. Feeling better for her meant that she also did not want to be a man in a cisgender body anymore. Removing herself from this "gay body" (from her own body and the bodies of other gay men who did not attract her sexually) and, on the other hand, attracting other bodies to herself, the "heterosexual bodies" – or those bodies which are more settled in the heteronormative structure for performing a type of masculinity that is close to the one such structure seeks to build as ideal – constituted another important reason for Iohannah to change her body:

I don't like to go out with people who are gay like me. I like men who go out with women because I want to feel like a woman. I'm attracted to masculinity; this is what I think looks good in a man: his masculinity. Trans women's pleasure is all there. I think this is what I want, being treated like a woman. This is why I want to be a transvestite<sup>21</sup>.

## **On other LGBT lives in the Brazilian Outback**

In an attempt to learn how individuals perceived their lives and the lives of other LGBT people, not only in Catolé do Rocha, but in other places I have been to as a researcher, I noticed the recurrence – not to say the repetition – of an

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<sup>21</sup> Yet, Iohannah categorically detached her sexual interactions from the sentimental field and relationships in more institutionalized shapes, like having a boyfriend, for example: "Can you believe I never made love? I was never able to fall in love with anyone. Because I see something that doesn't work. I see something that only causes me trouble, get it? And I don't know how to belong to a single person, I'll never manage to be faithful. I think it's pretty when a guy is in love with a transvestite. But I don't see myself in this place of finding a person I can correspond to his feelings, and he can correspond to mine."

antinomic pair as the basis of the speech formulation, marking the experiences of the "dissidents" in the matters of sexuality and gender. Thus, in the positive extreme there were notions such as: pleasure, joy, intelligence, sensitivity, freedom; while in the negative spectrum, the following notions emerged as the main ingredients of prejudice: discrimination, violence, pain, and suffering, to characterize the lives of these subjects (especially gay men and trans women). In this sense, judging by her words, Iohannah's perception apparently did not escape this standard storytelling:

I wanted to be born again as gay, because being gay is incredibly good. Gays have a culture of intelligence, which I think is something most of them develop. [The word] gay comes from joyful, it's already fun. And I think gays have that: being fun, being joyful, being extroverts, being smart. I like myself so much that I think the fact that I'm gay doesn't change anything. I think the person who is gay feels really happy<sup>22</sup>.

"Now, unfortunately, she is a big victim of the biased society," Iohannah countered. "I think this is the only bad thing: I think gays will never dress up or be the person they are because of the society that discriminates them due to their orientation." In Catolé do Rocha, as in other places, such society discriminated and limited the horizon of possibilities that Iohannah and other LGBT subjects had, also when it comes to the job market:

Since this is a country town, it's a little complicated for you to grow professionally. Because this is a small town and there aren't many opportunities. If I didn't study, so I could have the capacity to be selected for a public position, I would be unemployed today, because nobody would open their doors for me. I think the issue is more about people's prejudice because people here don't see you as a professional capable of exercising that function. They see your sexuality, as if you weren't capable of doing anything, as an irresponsible person.

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<sup>22</sup> If we compare Iohannah's words with the words of one of Barbosa da Silva's interviewees, in his aforementioned paper, we will have a good example of the strength in this type of speech, that resists time and sociocultural variations: "Sometimes, I wonder: how would I be, if I were a normal individual? From my inferences, I would never wish to be one. In this case, my life would be completely different... very trivial... I, certainly, would be nothing but a silly blond, completely normal, without a pinch of eccentricity who would stand out in this huge world of cool things" (BARBOSA DA SILVA, 2005, p. 153).

The problem related to discrimination due to sexuality and gender affected particularly the trans women who lived there. According to Iohannah, with the exception of Candy and herself, no other woman had even finished Secondary School, therefore the low educational level of this population hampered even further their entrance in the job market, already hindered by transphobia. It was a vicious circle which was difficult to overcome, bearing in mind that this same transphobia often determined these people's dropout rates. Reflecting upon this reality, Iohannah said:

I think there is a lot of discrimination against the [trans] population here. Even though Catolé is the only town in the region with transvestites/transsexuals, I notice they are outcasts of society. I think it's very difficult for someone to give them job opportunities. Here you don't see a sociable transvestite, living among society. What you will see is them outside, in the outskirts of society, cast in that corner, alone.

For the second time in her narrative, Iohannah mentioned that corner, where I walked by every day and where I went to some evenings (or a portion of them). After all, it was less than a ten-minute walk from the inn where I stayed. It is also located in the vicinities of the center of Catolé do Rocha, in a commercial neighborhood, close to the town square and the Parish Nossa Senhora dos Remédios, the largest and most impressive church in town. It is interesting to dedicate a few lines to it, given its importance as the appropriate place (basically during nighttime) for gays and trans women and, occasionally, potential sexual partners. Gathering there, occupying the space in a complex interaction with elements like friendship, affection, conflict, interests, experiences, life projects, eroticism, etc., the corner opened up to countless sociological readings as the ones by Simmel (1983), in his analysis of sociability (of "real" sociability, that is, the one without "content"); by Certeau (1998) in his interpretation of "practiced place"; by Magnani (1984) when he writes about "*pedaço*" [T.N.]<sup>23</sup> and even by Park (1967), with his classic definition of "moral zones" - all possible readings, if made with proper specifications. In any case, the fact is that the corner was "the" place, the spot, one of the main scenarios where gays and trans women met, and where other types of agency also took place, such as the ones involving what Perlongher (2008, p. 254) called "flows

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<sup>23</sup> T.N. With the word "*pedaço*" (whose literal equivalent would be "piece") Tota refers to a book by the author Jose Guilherme Cantor Magnani called "*Festa no Pedaço*," whose title is a reference to a Brazilian expression that could be freely translated to "party in the area."

of money and desire”, in relation here to sexual trade, especially in the case of trans women, fact that Iohannah condemned: “They are only seen here as sex objects. They are nothing but a sex object there. It’s not a job because they are not carrying a small purse around [T.N]<sup>24</sup>. But anybody who walks by [the corner], who wants to pay them for sex, they will take it.”

Iohannah’s opinion about this topic is, at least, curious, considering its ambivalence. In a first reading, her speech led to a conclusion that local trans girls, “victims” of a transphobic society turned to prostitution as the only way to have some income – which was not always possible, because there were not a lot of men willing and able to afford paid sex. On the other hand, after a second reading, it is noticeable in Iohannah’s words a type of blame or accountability on trans women themselves, who did not employ enough efforts to their studies and, consequently, did not accomplish better living standards, so they ended up choosing the “easiest route.” However, both versions of Iohannah’s narrative had a common element: the phenomenon of social exclusion as one of the main marks of trans people’s existence, regardless of whether they were “outcasts” or if they had “cast themselves out” of society. Still on this issue, another noteworthy element in Iohannah’s speech was the distinct (and distinctive) social role she assigned to herself while comparing her situation to the situation of other trans people she met:

I have tried to break this taboo. I keep picturing in my head: “I am capable, I’m a person with education, I know how to behave in front of people.” And then I tell you: transvestites here are able to live in society. Now, unfortunately, education is the only thing missing for that. It is better to include yourself in society than to be out of it. Here, if you have education, you may not have a decent job, but at least you will be able to walk in and out of places.

Besides comparing herself to other trans women, Iohannah also established a counterpoint between them and gay individuals in Catolé do Rocha. According to her, most of the gay men she knew lived in a better educational and professional condition, a fact that is strictly associated with the issue of gender performativity: “They find jobs easier; they are much more acceptable, society accepts them much more. The less effeminate you are, the more you can command respect. At least, that’s how it is here.” Highlighting this stress

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<sup>24</sup> T.N. In Brazil, a common image or allegory of a prostitute is a cis woman (but usually a trans woman or a transvestite) standing in a corner carrying a small purse.

element, that works as another differentiating axis between gays and trans women in that context—in relation to the disgust awakened by the feminine, especially by the bodies considered “abject” in the words of Butler (2014, 2019; see also GRUNVALD, 2009, for a critical analysis of the notion of abjection as an analytical category), among which trans women are certainly an example—, contributes equally to the understanding of the existence of another social fact described by Iohannah: the rejection of trans women by gay individuals. “Most [of the gay men] have a certain rejection towards trans women. If a trans [woman] comes up to them and sit down, gays don’t have the courage to sit down with a trans woman here at a table. I see that gays here have a certain rejection.”

As for lesbian women, also targets of Iohannah’s comparison, she was economical in her words, to say the least, confirming the low social visibility of these individuals both in Catolé do Rocha and other social landscapes (Cf. TOTA, 2021): “I’m a person who can’t make friends with them. They don’t get along with me and I don’t get along with them.” However, surpassing the strictly personal dimension of Iohannah’s speech, it revealed something particularly relevant in socio-anthropological terms, once it pointed not only to conflicts present in the relations among gays, lesbians, and trans women, but also the greater “fixity” of gay men’s sexuality when compared to the sexual behavior of women, which would be more “fluid”:

You meet most of the lesbians here while [they are] dating a man. It happens so much that [there are comments]: “Jane Doe became a lesbian.” Those are women who started dating men, then ended up coming out as lesbians. But they weren’t lesbians before. Here it’s not like: “John Doe became gay.” It’s rare to hear: “John Doe became gay.”

At the same time that she mentioned these differences and even divides involving LGBT people in Catolé do Rocha, Iohannah did not believe there were significant distinctions between what happened in the place where she lived and other parts of Paraíba and Brazil. For her, everything was “very similar.” “[Gays] are remarkably similar, they like clubbing, parties. They are everywhere: at the fanciest clubs, the cheapest clubs. They are in. I don’t see any difference,” she said, and soon continued, comparing São Bento and Catolé do Rocha again.

In São Bento, the gays are very *encubados*, very concealed. Very few of them are outed in society there. And here, it’s not the case. The ones here,

when they are of [legal] age, they already know what they want. Here [the gays are] more open-minded, they are more open, especially because they are in a greater number. In terms of [number of] outed gays, Catolé is not behind any city. Catolé slays, it slays! This is why we have the LGBT<sup>25</sup> Forum Group.

## **Iohannah's third invention: LGBT activism and the "new" wave of obscurantism**

"Yes, I am an LGBT activist. I feel happier everyday with who I am and who I will be as an LGBT from the Outback," said Iohannah. Echoing the words of Fernanda Benvenutty<sup>26</sup>, whom she met in one of the events promoted by Catolé LGBT Forum Group (GF-LGBT), Iohannah strongly affirmed: "Do you know when LGBTs will start being respected? When each one of us start commanding respect towards ourselves. I think Fernanda is completely right when she says that we will only get respect when each LGBT demands respect. I'm sure about that." Imbued with this fighting spirit, Iohannah described the episode that, according to her, would found, through tortuous roads, GF-LGBT (the first LGBT non-governmental organization in Catolé do Rocha, created in 2010). It all started with her idea to establish in Catolé do Rocha the Municipal Day to Combat Homophobia, celebrated on May 17. Then, Iohannah talked to a city councilor friend of hers so they could elaborate a bill to be submitted to the members of the City Council, which was what they did. After defending the bill during one of the Council's ordinary sessions, the result was the following: two votes in favor, two abstentions (due to councilors' non-attendance) and five votes against. For Iohannah, the defeat happened because of the reaction of the "evangelical class" to the word "homosexual": "We thought the name 'homosexual' affected the evangelical class. When the bill was defeated, the pastors stood up: 'Praised be the Lord, praised be the Lord!' with their bibles. All of them [city councilors] came on to me: 'Jesus loves you; Jesus loves you!' and the bill was defeated."

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<sup>25</sup> Let us pay attention to the fact that, here, Iohannah mentioned exclusively gay individuals, since, judging by her words, there were no trans subjects in the vicinity. As for lesbians, she did not mention anything in terms of comparison to other places.

<sup>26</sup> Born in the municipality of Remígio, in Paraíba, Fernanda Benvenutty, dead in 2020, was an important trans activist nationally known for her struggle in the defense of the rights of the LGBT population, particularly transexuals and transvestites. She was one of the founders of the Association of Transvestites and Transexuals of Paraíba (ASTRAPA) and vice-president of the National Articulation of Transvestites and Transexuals (ANTRA).

This episode, interpreted by Iohannah as a public and explicit demonstration of sexual and gender discrimination fueled by the religious factor, represented a political defeat not only for her and her friend the councilor, but also for the local LGBT population as a whole. However, what was initially a defeat ended up being the spark for the LGBT activist movement in Catolé do Rocha. Since, unfortunately, there is no space to detail this story here, it suffices to say that, after what happened in the City Council, Otaviano Souza comes into picture, the person I mentioned in the beginning of this text. According to Iohannah,

Otaviano felt provoked and even invited me to create a group here and, because of that, this Group [Catolé LGBT Forum] was founded. That was the beginning of everything. With the bill being defeated with a staggering argument, Otaviano felt provoked. Everybody and I there felt provoked. Then [we decided]: “Let’s create a group and fight. If they don’t want to give us rights, we will fight for the rights of these minorities.”

So, with Otaviano’s leadership, Iohannah and some other actors<sup>27</sup>, GF-LGBT started its activities, which consisted fundamentally of “awareness-raising” actions aimed at the LGBT local population focusing on: a) their rights to free enjoyment and expression of desire; b) the importance of fighting crimes like homophobia, lesbophobia, transphobia (just a reminder: at the time, the previous terms were new to many); c) the prevention of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), with the distribution of contraceptives, etc. The activities developed by GT-LGBT also included the promotion of communication channels and access to governmental and non-governmental bodies that assist the LGBT population and services as the ones offered by TT/PB (located in João Pessoa, exclusive to the population of transvestites and transexuals, as mentioned), which Iohannah herself would access. Finally, the members of GF-LGBT also organized recreational events, like Balada LGBT and the Miss Trans Pageant. All of this, according to Iohannah, to “give them more visibility, offer that knowledge to that population. And I think all of that is the difference we can make: show that positive side.”

To promote these actions, GF-LGBT leaned on occasional partnerships with other NGOs from Paraíba, like Associação dos Homossexuais de Campina

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<sup>27</sup> Which were never many. When I started the research, in 2014, GF-LGBT had seven members, from which only three were more active, including Otaviano himself and without the participation of Iohannah, who was away from the group due to internal conflicts.



Grande [Association of the Homosexuals from Campina Grande] (AHCG), the Movement Espírito Lilás (MEL), and Associação das Travestis e Transexuais da Paraíba [Association of Transvestites and Transexuals of Paraíba] (ASTRAPA), the two last ones are headquartered in João Pessoa. It also had, at least in the beginning, the support of the municipal government, through the Municipal Reference Center Specialized in Social Assistance (CREAS) and the Department of Social Assistance (CRAS), during the administration of Edvaldo Caetano, from the Brazilian Labor Party (PTB). According to Iohannah, during this period “we didn’t have a lot of concerns. When Edvaldo was here, he always helped, always sponsored [us]; he gave us venues, cars, when the guys from João Pessoa sent us a request to go there, give lectures, go to seminars they were organizing, he would do everything.” As for the support received from the state government, administrated by Ricardo Coutinho, elected in 2010 and reelected in 2014 by the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), Iohannah’s words were even more enthusiastic:

The Group was getting incentives from the State Government. So much so that I believe that, if the Group managed to hold an LGBT forum, we have to thank the public policies of the State Government, because this is an incredibly unique administration. This government has paid attention to the LGBT public policies, you know? It’s a socialist government that really deserves applause and to be reelected 20, 30 thousand times, it’s Ricardo [Coutinho]’s administration.

In the initial stage of the research, I realized the need to investigate the existing connections between the governmental and non-governmental bodies associated with the municipal, state, and federal administrations, in order to understand more accurately the genesis of a historical process that resulted in the creation not only of Catolé LGBT Forum Group, but also of similar collectives in other parts of Brazil, especially in the countryside (or the Brazilian Outback). Unfortunately, I could not do so, nor would there be enough room in this text to deepen the analysis on the topic. Notwithstanding, it is safe to say that, in a macrosocial dimension, the political scenario and the configuration of social movements and public policies focused on the LGBT population in Brazil in the 2000s were (and are) significantly different than the framework analyzed by Parker (1994), Green (2000), Trevisan (2002), Facchini (2005), Simões and Facchini (2009), MacRae (2018), Trindade (2018), and other authors who have been contributing to tell the story of what would be the

current LGBT movement in Brazil since its beginning, in the late 1970s until the 1990s.

The first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have been characterized as a period of sensitive transformations in Brazil and in the world regarding the human rights debate, political activism, academic production, and the public policies dedicated to the issues of gender and sexuality (Cf. WIERINGA; SÍVORI, 2013). Amidst the “unstable contemporary geopolitical chessboards,” in the words of Corrêa (2013, p. 21-22), in reference to the international debates on the topics, however, nothing is quite simple. At least in the case of Brazil, this is a historical moment that has been marked by a higher recognition of LGBT issues in governmental programs, which translates into the emergence of candidates representing this segment of the population, as observed by Simões and Facchini (2009, p. 139), for example. This phenomenon became more visible because it gained more strength and comprehensiveness, during two terms of the President of the Republic Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (elected in 2002 and reelected in 2006 by the Workers’ Party - PT). According to Miskolci (2017), in this period there was more dialog between the Federal Government and social movements, with the creation of “departments dedicated to gender and ethno-racial relations and some policies involving sexuality” (MISKOLCI, 2017, p. 108). That was how, for example, in 2004 the governmental program Brasil Sem Homofobia [Brazil without Homophobia] was established with the purpose of combating violence/discrimination against LGBT (or GLBT, acronym used at that time) subjects and promoting their citizen rights. Since then, a series of actions and projects formulated for this population by the federal and state administrations started being implemented, contemplating health care, social assistance and security, education, employment, and safety services (Cf. MELLO et al., 2012). A milestone of this policy was the 1<sup>st</sup> National Conference of Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transexuals, held in Brasilia in 2008<sup>28</sup>.

During the administration of President Dilma Rousseff (also from the Workers’ Party - PT) – elected in 2010, reelected in 2014 and deposed from office in 2016, in one of the most controversial episodes in the recent history of Brazil, and who ruled the country at the time of my research –, it is important to record, as per Pereira’s observation (2017, p. 206-207), that there was a “decrease in the total number of initiatives by the Federal Executive for LGBT

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<sup>28</sup> Whose Reports may be consulted on the following website:

<https://direito.mppr.mp.br/arquivos/File/IConferenciaNacionaldeGaysLesbicasBissexuaisTravestiteTransexuaisGLBT.pdf>

people in comparison to the previous administration". Still, the same author highlights some actions implemented during this period, such as the National Policy of Integral LGBT Health, from which several events were promoted like workshops and seminars.

The topic of social movements, public policies, and other actions of the government (at the state, federal and international levels) and non-governmental organizations focused on the LGBT population, especially during the Workers' Party administrations (2003-2016), has been object of analysis of several researchers interested in unraveling the intricacies, contradictions, advances and setbacks that characterize one of the fascinating phenomena of our contemporary history. It is not a simple task, given the heterogeneity of the actors involved, the diversity of speeches, the conflicts of interest, besides the fact that we are inserted in this ongoing process, which is uncertain, as so many uncertain things. People who are more authorized than me are reflecting upon it, which has made literature more robust (Cf. MELLO et al., 2012; IRINEU, 2014, 2018; FERREIRA, 2006; BULGARELLI, 2018; FEITOSA, 2018, among others). That said, allow us to resume our focus on Catolé do Rocha and Iohannah.

Having briefly presented this macropolitical background, I hope I managed to indicate facts like: a) the actions implemented by the state government of Paraíba for the LGBT population, as the implementation of the Outpatient Clinic TT/PB in João Pessoa; b) the emergence of NGOs as Catolé LGBT Forum Group; c) the emergence, in the context studied, of a new lexicon with notions which were, up to that point, unknown—because they were recent—such as homophobia, transphobia, LGBTphobia, transsexuality, transgenderness, etc. These were more than just words, they produce (and are produced by) social subjects in their struggle for rights, they are aspects that cannot be attributed to voluntarism of a single individual, because they are inserted in a social and political context populated by a multitude of actors in different historical spaces and times. Thanks to that, people like Iohannah were able to recognize and reinvent themselves. And, thanks to that, we were able to meet.

However, since there are no truces in social life, the struggles faced by Iohannah and the other members of GL-LGBT were many. If, in her words, the former mayor of Catolé do Rocha "did everything" to help the movement, the same could not be stated about the current mayor of the town, who "does not like the social [agenda]. This is the truth, he really enjoys welfarism. But he doesn't like socialism. Because the social [agenda] here in the Brazilian Outback doesn't get votes. Welfarism is what gets votes, especially in a country town,"

she said. The religious factor, represented by the so-called local Evangelical Caucus, maybe illustrating what Natividade and Oliveira (2013) called the “heterosexist monopoly of the religious power”, did not make things easier, much on the contrary. According to Iohannah,

we felt persecuted by the evangelicals. They wanted to try to put it as if we wanted to be better than the heterosexuals, than all of them, get it? I think this is the flag they raise: that we want to be better than them, that we want to be superior. When, actually, we only want respect. Talking about respect, we know that, if we place a heterosexual person on the street, and if we place a gay person on another street, we see the difference on how society will treat them. There are even some people who say: “Hail, Mary! After they invented this damn LGBT Forum, this city is full of faggots!”

Thus, in the middle of a heavy atmosphere of hostility, fueled by a wave of “demonization of sexual diversity” (Cf. NATIVIDADE, 2016), the existence of GF-LGBT and everything it represented in terms of rights of the LGBT population in that region was at risk, especially due to lack of financial resources. To continue its activities, Iohannah said, “The Forum Group will need resources, sponsorship, someone who believes in it and supports its work. During today’s administration, we don’t have much support from the local government. The only thing they give us is the public space.”

### **“A drop of water in the Outback”: for many others, for many more**

The public space Iohannah was talking about was the Cultural Center Geraldo Vandré, with rooms and a theater, where the members of GF-LGBT usually gathered and organized events, such as the Municipal LGBT Health and Human Rights Forum, which had had three annual editions before I arrived in town. Still on the space, it is important to mention that the collective did not have its own headquarters. Actually, in 2015, one year after the beginning of my study, Otaviano Souza rented, using his own resources, the first floor of a townhouse located in the vicinity of the center of Catolé do Rocha, which would become the headquarters of GF-LGBT. All its furniture was received as a donation from a school that was recently demolished. Otaviano was visibly happy when he took me to the location for the first time. That was where I conducted some interviews and participated in a round table, invited by Otaviano, an occasion when I could speak to an audience of eight people about

the study I was conducting in the town. It seemed to be an especially important moment for local activism, as the people present demonstrated a consensus on the importance of engaging in the activities of GF-LGBT.

However, problems soon appeared. To manage the house's maintenance costs, it was obviously necessary obtaining financial resources. Otaviano said that a congresswoman from the Brazilian Socialist Party (PSB), committed to the LGBT movement in the state of Paraíba, had taken the responsibility of collaborating at least with the rent for the room. But, while these funds did not arrive—and they never did—, Otaviano appealed to the other participants of GF-LGBT to contribute with any amount of money, an unpopular measure, whose main effect was an internal conflict and the consequent withdrawal of people involved. After all, it is worth saying that, among the few who demonstrated real interest in political advocacy, practically nobody had a job or income, so the financial factor ended up being a determining ingredient for closing the location, few months after its inauguration. Therefore, what initially seemed to be the beginning of an especially promising phase of a true strengthening process of GF-LGBT, ended up becoming the reason for its almost dissolution.

There was something in the air. In fact, winds blowing from somewhere far away, spreading rapidly throughout Catolé do Rocha, throughout Brazil, making the environment oppressive, propagating a spirit of fear, apathy, and disillusionment. The signs were being sent, but I believe that, at that point of the events, few people were capable of understanding them, and I was not one of them. The fact is that, a few months after my first trip to Catolé do Rocha, President Dilma Rousseff was deposed from her position, victim of a coup d'état, as per the opinion of many, inside and outside Brazil. If her administrations were not the best in terms of public policies for the LGBT population, according to the movement itself<sup>29</sup>, the situation would deteriorate even further in the future, that is, in the present, the moment I am writing this text. There is much to be said, however little room to do so. Therefore, I can only point to the current political scenario in Brazil, a scenario that had already been outlined by actors like those councilors who, in the City Council of Catolé

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<sup>29</sup> According to Bulgarelli (2018, p. 489), "Dilma Rousseff's administrations (2010-2014 and 2015-2016) ended up strengthening bonds with religious sectors, especially Catholic and evangelical leaderships. This assessment was later adopted by an expressive part of the LGBT movement to criticize what they considered the undermining and draining of the participation structure consolidated in the previous administrations, besides the lack of investment and political prioritization."

do Rocha, with their bibles in hand, voted against the bill that implemented the Municipal Day to Combat Homophobia, all “in the name of God”, of “Christian values”, of the “traditional Brazilian family” and the “righteous people”. People like those city councilors, millions of them, elected as their spokesperson Jair Messias Bolsonaro who, even before being inaugurated as the president of the Republic, had already said, publicly and repeatedly, sentences like: “if I see two men kissing each other on the street, I’ll beat them”; “the blood of a homosexual can contaminate the blood of a heterosexual”; “I’d rather have a son of mine die in an accident than show up around with a man with a big mustache”, and other similar ones. It is not surprising, therefore, that his administration’s brand is extremely hostile politics, to say the least, towards the demands not only of the LGBT population, but also of the so-called “minority groups,” composed of Indigenous peoples, the Black population, women, defenders of the environmental cause, and so on. In the case of the LGBT cause, the prohibition of funding, through the National Agency of Cinema (ANCINE), of films with themes related to sexual and gender diversity, and the removal, through an interim measure, of the LGBT population from the human rights guidelines, are only a couple of examples of many measures adopted by the Federal Government, which has stimulated other politicians, in tune with the bolsonarist ideology, to implement equally anti-LGBT policies in state and municipal administrations in the country.

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Here is a sad note and that is why I do not want to finish this paper with it. I would rather recall that Friday evening, March 27, 2015. It had been a year since my first meeting with Iohannah at *Chiku’s Pousada*, where I interviewed her. That night, however, when I met her again, it was not because of an interview or anything of this kind. Actually, we saw each other casually at the Club of employees of the Bank of Northeast of Brazil (known locally as simply BNB), where on the weekends the party known as “Créu” happened, the most famous party in Catolé do Rocha. Happy to see each other again, we spent that night together, accompanied by other people, drinking, dancing, flirting, and enjoying ourselves. More feminine than ever, Iohannah seemed happy and very satisfied with the result of her hormone therapy, despite the embarrassment she said she suffered from some women every time she went to the restroom of the club. But nothing could shake her happiness, also because at the time our sad present was still the future, a future about which we knew

nothing. And that way, among so many things said during our conversation, Iohannah thrillingly revealed, for my flattered joy, that the interview she gave me the year before helped her feel “surer” about her transsexuality and convinced of the importance of fighting for LGBT rights.

Even though in that moment she no longer considered herself a regular member of GF-LGBT, Iohannah, loquacious as always, incidentally mentioned the importance of the group to the local LGBT population: “Mother Teresa said that the work she did was nothing much, nothing less than a drop in the ocean. And, since we are in the Brazilian Outback—the only city with an LGBT group—, this Group is nothing more, nothing less than a drop in the Outback.” So let it rain, Iohannah, a lasting and abundant rain, to expand the oceans of diversity, to drench the grounds of the country deserts of Brazil and the huge desert we are crossing today.

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