

Contemporary erotic market and new configurations on gender and sexuality

By Maria Filomena Gregory

I would like to thank Columbia University for the invitation to participate in this tribute to Ruth Cardoso, a person I had immense affection, consideration and respect for.

Ruth was both my graduate and Ph.D. advisor, and I also worked for her as a research assistant. I learnt from her that a considerable portion of an intellectual work is the result of a collective effort and a product of a time and place.

She taught me that the relevant questions for reflections originate from the disciplined routine of a research work and from the constant debates on field impressions – those insights that emerge from the creative process of observation that takes place when we are absorbed by an experience of investigation.

She used to tell us that ideas should not be trapped nor seen as definitive. Ideas are like an unfinished text, they are vehicles for new ideas, they incite curiosity and queries... she would say: the production of the knowledge process has as a basic characteristic the notion of incompleteness, change and communication.

She believed in teachings, and this is also part of her legacy, that seem to be related to what lies in the base of the Hegelian tradition – that the “being” and the “ought to be” are part of a unique process of thinking, interpretation of reality and acting. It is not advantageous to establish a border or a separation between the phenomenon, something that inhabits the living world that is only obtained from precise and objective instruments of a science in a pure form, and the moral issues: the positions related to the world of normativity and politics.

The “ought to be” is inscribed in the world and it is forged amongst social relations. This happens in such a manner that, on the one hand, there’s not a possibility of an objective knowledge that’s not normatively and historically compromised, and on the other hand, if such compromise is inevitable, it implies in assuming a position. Hence the importance she gave to choose the objects of investigation. She was clearly preoccupied in trying to understand, decipher and uncover the processes of change, and in doing so, to reveal the new political subjects, even those groups or practices that didn’t enjoy the recognition from neither political institutions or from scholars

Such commitment and interest focused on the social changes and contemporary dynamics that coordinate them has always been articulated to a concern in having the mind entirely open to the construction of creative hypothesis and to the choice of uncommon topics. This explains her interest in our studies on areas not much appreciated in the academy: soap operas, sexuality and abortion.

She had a keen interest on this, and Guita, Danielle, and I were advised to incorporate in our research plan, quoting her, “a relational perspective that imposes an emphasis on gender. Much has been said about gender, nonetheless, still showing discrimination as responsible for the creation of a separate world for women. And the concept of gender is there to uncover relationships that weave between the masculine and feminine a network of power and counter-power”. (Ruth Cardoso, 1993:9)

In this paper I will present part of reflections and analysis of my research material on new forms and configurations of contemporary eroticisms and their effects on gender normativities and sexuality. I propose such discussion intending to better define certain conceptual instruments to deal with what I’ve been calling erotic market (production, commercialization and consume of erotic goods).

I also propose to discuss the place that the differences and the transgression occupy in these market segments, how this place concurs in the production of bodies and, more specifically, the relationship among bodies and people.

To examine the place transgression occupies in the contemporary market of erotic goods, means to challenge the sense it is given in the specialized literature. Particularly the one emphasized by French intellectuals, who after reading Marquis de Sade, became responsible for the elaboration of the eroticism theory, which constitutes, up to this day, the analytical basis on this theme.

The core of the modern meaning of eroticism, according to this tradition, is to violate morals and social taboos. This is done not only by violating the taboos related to the participants' positions and hierarchies, but also through the alternatives that contest the sanctioned sexual practices.

Presently, what can be seen in the researched material both in the United States and in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, is the emergence of a *politically correct eroticism*. I did a research in sex shops for gays and lesbians in San Francisco and Berkeley back in 2001.

Even having as protagonists actors connected to the defense of sexual minorities, among those important names of feminism theoretical and political settings, such politically correct eroticism started to be diffused by a broader universe of erotic production, commercialization and consumption.

One of the most immediate effects of this new scenery is connected with the shifting of the sense of transgression of eroticism towards a sense more associated to health concerns and to the strengthening of the *self*. Another effect has to do with a sort of parody on violent aspects, such as those involved in sadomasochists practices and their rhetoric involving

sexual consent.

After having investigated Brazilian sex shops, my attention was drawn to the expansion of what seemed to be only linked to the North American homosexual erotic market, creating then new and intriguing perspectives.

The sex shops are places for commercial access to erotic materials, and they can be found in many contemporary urban centers. Most of them aim at the heterosexual public and commercialize books, videos and assorted accessories (e.g. vibrators, sexy underwear, oils and inflatable dolls) concerning a specific model of desire that implies the exercise of sexual fantasies. Such fantasies violate – either by playing or even transgressing – a whole group of practices and symbols related to a socially accepted sexual experience (heterosexual and aiming reproduction).

One can assume that in such market it is appropriate to find materials that stress, through colors, shapes and the objects themselves, some violations of the instituted.

This group of symbolic elements vary historically, socially, and geographically, and yet, there is a restrict universe of symbols in the porn market, and many of them are standardized.

That is to say that the market of sexual objects and accessories corresponds to a style made by conventions which, in spite of having some variations, are not very creative. Lots of black leather, red garter belts, artificial lace, difference sizes of dildos (with an emphasis on the big ones), images of the female body with an Aryan and blond prevalence (preferably a fake blond) and huge breasts. The male bodies are predominantly muscular and there's an emphasis on enormous sexual organs.

In the videos there are often out of the ordinary sexual combinations or arrangements. But they are also restrained to a symbolic border that gives emphasis to certain aspects that can be seen in gender relations. The female bodies, or feminized ones when the man acts as the body support,

are adorned to configure the locus of the sexual penetration. Since there is no correspondence or alternative for the masculinization of the women's bodies, the male bodies are therefore adorned to configure the locus of the penetrating body. The exercise of sexuality among bodies from the same sex is predominant among women and its meaning corresponds to a same logic: it becomes an acceptable and stimulating practice of a masculine voyeuristic desire.

Beyond a simplification militant by nature, some feminists qualify these sex shops and these matters and practices as part of a "hydraulic model" of desire, that is, the desire as something conceived in a bodily input/output relationship. Regarding the discussion, this model surmises the notion that pornography implies in contesting customary and approved forms of sexuality, and, more importantly, it is a model in which the sexual difference is based on both the incommensurability and complementarity of the desiring body and the body that's being constituted as the object of desire.

It is worth emphasizing that the first one is set up, considering the variations and diverse symbolic arrangements, by a group of signals which symbolically defines masculine, and the body that acts as the object of desire by a group of signals which symbolically defines feminine.

The sex shops researched in San Francisco and in Berkeley are paradigmatic in the generation of what I've been calling *politically correct eroticism*. They represent exceptional cases when contrasted with the conventional sex shops of the market.

The totality of products and accessories are an attempt to make a difference when compared to standard sex shops.

There's a differentiating effort that creates a sort of segmented market contemplating other sexual choices. In this sense, there is a clear dialogue between conventions. While the conventional sex shops give emphasis on

the feminine body, on breasts and blond hair, in the politically correct ones, this type of reference is not found.

Despite the fact that alternatives to diversified practices are offered, there is a group of elements that guarantee the sexual practice as an exercise of pleasure, liberation and self-esteem strengthening (everything is allowed after being submitted to the partner's consent). It also guarantees the neutralization and elimination of any signs, marks or interactions that imply prejudice, abuse or treating a person's body as an object.

In the research that took place in São Paulo, I noticed the effects of this kind of politically correct eroticism: the creation, dated from no more than nine years, of sex shops in upper class districts. They have as target women who didn't regularly go to sex shops: above thirty, heterosexual and married women.

I found out there is an interesting feminization of this market, and it happens if we consider both the commercialization and consume. It is important to mention that we are facing a phenomenon that contains a market segmentation by gender, combined or articulated with a segmentation by class and city region.

Such segmentation presents the following aspects: the lower the social stratification of the target public is the more masculine is the segment. In this case, most sex shops are concentrated in the old city center, and there's a high attendance of younger or much older men. They are mostly retired, unemployed, or have a low income occupation.

And, the higher the social class the target public is, the segment gets predominantly feminine. Here, they are very young women who usually come in groups, or they are over 25 and have a higher income. The latter constitutes the market niche that was recently created, and its shops are concentrated in the city upper class districts, and most of them have women as owners.

It is also relevant to stress that in the investigated shops there's a significant presence of young ladies working as clerks, and in each and every shop researched, the majority of consumers was of women.

Opposing the views that tend to consider the market either as a mere reflex of social demands or as a manipulative force in which the consumer is passive, this sex shops niche expresses a good example of new positions and configurations of gender and sexuality.

It is eye catching the fact that, through this phenomenon characterized by a certain feedback between demand and opportunities, the sexual normativities that regulate the control of the female sexuality are being modified.

Without a question, we are watching an appreciation of the erotic goods performed by women: as producers, traders and consumers

It is important not to disregard the fact that they are mostly heterosexual and not so young women, and to avoid the creation of great expectations, this is the most significant segment of consume in the market, to which it is organized and whose demand is "built".

In this sense, it's not surprising that one attempts to introduce new product modalities in areas little explored. In this case, the intriguing question is not about erotic businesses being opened, but what explains the significant success and the visibility they have reached.

The most likely assumption is that the *politically correct* version, created in the United States and previously mentioned, has permitted to widen the scope of possible choices and sexual practices. Therefore, it repels sanctioned sexual practices, mainly for married women, from its normative sense of sexual reproduction.

Many users with the social profile mentioned above state that such market allowed them to "spice up" their relationships. They don't feel they

are contesting, with their new “toys”, the heterosexual matrix that hegemonically organizes the sexual practices.

The gender markers here are very relevant, especially the notion that the “feminized” body is the one to be adorned with costumes and manipulated with “sex toys”.

Besides that, such adornments denote positions of asymmetry, playing sometimes with control and other times with submission.

This way, the commercial eroticism inserted in the Brazilian context loses some of the North American politically correct sense. An important remark is that such aspect should not lead to the conclusion that it expresses a national ambit of bigger dissymmetry and segmentation regarding gender.

We should not forget that the femininity and sensuality markers being bought and sold can, and are effectively being used according to ethnographic data, not only by women. They are also being consumed by men, and they can be used individually or collectively and not necessarily by heterosexuals.

The markers might also be used to express an obscene sense. The use and play with these markers indicate the persistence of a model of eroticism that combine some elements from the politically correct (especially the more affluent feminine segment that values self-esteem and a healthy body) with transgression.

In such case, more than just denouncing machismos, it is interesting to learn the logics behind the social signals of gender, age and race that compose this field, how they are combined and what they exclude.

An interesting remark is that the trade and influx of erotic goods (together with suggestions and alternatives of sexual practices) coming from the gays and lesbians experiences in San Francisco and New York created in the Brazilian market a dynamics of re-signification that implies

new “normatizing” etiquettes, as well as contesting some of the “old” sexual normativities.

Another important remark is that this investigation indicates that the market has become one of the most strategical domains to be followed, since it is presently one of the strategical universe for transmission, creation, and (why not?) transgression of such normativities.

In the market, what is a norm is embedded in the language of individual choice, for it constitutes exercising choice in the logics of consumption. Thus, it is possible that a consumer buys a vibrator or not, hires a sexual service or not, goes to a nightclub or bar to have his/her desire fulfilled or not, and consumes all these items and services from a diverse set of offers .

The fact that this operation of consume is organized in terms of choice doesn't take away its sense of normativity, as it is indicated by the research done in one of the erotic market niches in São Paulo, where there's an interesting “feminization” associated with a pedagogical sense of teaching heterosexual women how to keep their marriages “alive”.

However, the very tendency to reproduce the heterosexual normativity innovates and transgresses as well. We observed that certain normativities (the control over the female sexuality and the association of this sexuality to passiveness) have lost ground, creating practical alternatives and new erotic horizons.

The centrality of market

Michel Foucault (1977) probably was the author who offered the most vigorous analytical tools for the sexual “denaturalization” in the western world. This is corroborated when he said that the attribution of its pretense

naturalness was actually consolidated by the normative knowledge on particular historical configurations, among them, the ones who have been elaborated by sexology since the 19th century, and that operate with notions of disease, pathology, anomaly, perversion, etc.

When Foucault gave a historical/cultural emphasis, he took sexuality as a mechanism, that is, as a “social construction” composed of an economy of power articulated to the emergency of a new instance for the subject truth in the modernity. This new economy, the Bio-power, suits the introduction of *life* in the sphere of norms and social controls, hence the preoccupation with the population, sickness, health, etc.

Because he had dedicated himself to examine normative configurations from institutions such as prisons, psychiatric clinics and judicial processes, Foucault circumscribed the notion of mechanisms of sexuality in the production mark of institutionalized and technical knowledge and saw in them the consolidation of the modern notion of “sex”: this fictitious unit that Judith Butler calls regulatory ideal or matrix to signify and re-signify practices whose meaning implies the articulation between body anatomy, biology of sexes, and the behavior associated to gender and desire.

When I study the new forms of eroticism and try to decipher erotic conventions and questions such as difference and transgression, I can't only look into those institutional universes of knowledge production appropriated to the consolidation of the “bourgeois society” of the 18th and 19th centuries.

I consider strategical to investigate the practices and the dynamics involving eroticisms in a universe that seems to be absolutely central in a contemporary setting: the market.

Apart from the empiric proof that this universe is meaningful in the context of new erotic alternatives, I presuppose it constitutes today one of

the most intriguing and paradoxical figure. In this setting, experiences and practices are gathered, alternating in a complex fashion, the normativity and transgression efforts. Such paradoxical complexity can't be treated from a Marxist vulgarizing approach that only denounces, in a Manichean way, the alienating and instrumentalist misadventures of the market.

Regarding the discussion about analytical instruments of market operation, it's worth remarking the conception signaled by Peter Fry (2002) when dealing with the beauty products for the afro descendents population, as well as their bigger participation in Brazilian advertisement.

The author analyses the way in which the products enter the market, opposing not only the perspectives that consider the consumers as passive victims but also those that consider the manufacturers' only function is to make the consumers' dreams come true. This production is organized to explore all possible social differentiations through a motivating differentiation of goods.

This way, when dealing with new segments of the afro population market, Fry is careful not to assume we are facing something that could only be seen as resulting from an afro descendant middle class demand. Actually, the author comprehends such process as a component of this middle class formation.

Such indication is particularly valuable to carefully examine the notion of erotic market. The emergence of sex shops can't be seen as a mere reflex of new configurations of gender relations or new patterns for sexual practices.

It is a process of many faces that implies, on the one hand, the articulation between perversion, self esteem, gymnastics and pleasure, thus losing its previous clandestine sense, and, on the other hand, the constitution of procedures deriving from gender and sexual conventions.

To deal with the erotic market and consume concept, it's also appropriate to examine some studies of anthropological approach, especially the ones developed by I. Appadurai and A. Gell. Both bring a valuable contribution to the non-western goods circulation in social life.

These are interesting perspectives. In the *Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), Appadurai states that goods, just like people, have a social life. This is a clear contestation of the analytical models that establish a rigid border between gift societies and commodity societies. In this sense, it's worth trying a more complex and processual analysis that follows the trajectory of how objects (things turned into goods) acquire sense.

For Appadurai, goods are objects that have an economic value. His definition has an exploratory sense, and he finds inspiration in Georg Simmel (*The Philosophy of Money*, 1907). For him, value is not given by the inherent propriety of objects, but by what results from the judgment the subjects make about these objects. Judgments are based on subjectivities that, by principle, imply temporariness. Simmel suggests that objects are not difficult to acquire because they are valuable, but they are valuable because they resist to our impulse to possess them.

He believes the economic objects are the ones found between the pure desire and immediate satisfaction, in the distance between the object and the person who wants it. Such distance can be overcome through the economic trade in which the objects value is mutually determined, that is, a dynamics where the desire for an object is consumed by the sacrifice of a second object which, by its turn, is the desire of somebody else.

The many articles in Appadurai's book deal with the developments of insights about the forms in which the desire, demand, sacrifice and power interact to create an economical value in specific social situations. They interest us exactly because the analytical proposal is to see the trajectories

of how the objects acquire sense, that is, to follow the things and see how their meanings are being inscribed in their forms and uses.

In these trajectories analysis, it is adequate to avoid the opposition (acclaimed by anthropology) to distinguish or establish a rigid border between gift societies and commodity societies. The exchange of gifts is present in many visions (Sahlins, Taussig, Dumont) opposing the exchange of goods, what ends up incurring in reification: the gift is associated to reciprocity and sociability; and the good is associated to a gear oriented by interests, calculus and profit.

The gift would connect objects to people and the goods would “objectify” the people, in the sense it assumes as sort of *drive*, apparently exempt of moral constraints, that connects things via money. The author, opposing this interpretation, proposes to analyze what there is in common between gift exchange and goods exchange.

Sex Toys: goods or sexual agents?

The second problematic I’d like to point out has to do with how the investigated material emphasizes social experiences. And also, how the erotic market reveals the dynamic way in which the relationship between bodies and people are encased, and the material limits of the body as something distinct from what defines people. This is seen through the prism of the trajectories of things that are turned into products and accessories for the sexual relations and practices. It’s not that such borders are completely diffuse, but it’s evident that there is a circulation of the sense attributed to things and people, which moves from people to things and vice-versa.

The dildos, vibrators and a diversity of sexual stimulators are called “accessories” by the interviewed women, and, according to them, should

not be seen as a consolation, a designation employed by our traditional sexual culture that evokes a widow's solitude. The sex toys, on the other hand, should be seen as part of the fun that spices up the sexual practices.

Acts of denomination like these can strongly indicate that this is an operation where the object starts to vivify a relationship between people with many variables. From the interviewees' perspective, the sex toy – and not the prosthesis or consolation – brings alternatives that go against the idea of perceiving the object as something that merely fulfill a deficiency.

The sex toy doesn't establish a metaphorical relationship between the object and the user: many testimonies emphasize the use of it not as a replacement, and the partners should not be threat with comparisons. It's about "something extra" that presents a more metonymical connotation with a polymorphic sense: it's for stimulation and the play between bodies, but not as a mere instrument to express the relationships of people's bodies with the materiality of the object.

I have a strong hypothesis that the "faces", the animal forms, the associated names suggest a sort of "personification" of these objects. The sex toys, thus, can be seen as something that belongs to the existing interpersonal relationships, as well as in relationships among three bodies or three people.

Another striking aspect in the interviewees' statements, which was also remarked by other fieldwork and interview situations, has to do with the limits, or more specifically with the expansion of the material limits of the body. The growing consumption of accessories called "realistic" (those made from cyberskin) shows that the body, in its material dimension, is open to the experiences promoted by the accessory both as an extension of the organism and as separated organism. These experiences are only possible when they try to transform the object physical materiality into "carnality".

It would be premature or restricting to say that the “realistic” accessory is the penis substitute. I reckon it could be understood as a carnal expression of multiple directions which sense might only be deciphered within contexts of particular use.

In a study about Anthropology of Art, Alfred Gell brings contributions to our interpretations about sex toys. He presents an analytical perspective that provides more complexity to the relationship between people and objects, and, above all, an indication to introduce in these relationships the concept of social agency. To begin with, the author explains that Anthropology is a Social Sciences discipline, and in so being, the investigation must focus on the context of production, circulation and reception of art, as oppose to evaluate the art work, which is a critic’s function. Therefore, such context interests us as long as it is supported by certain objective social processes that are connected to other social processes, such as politics, trade, religion, kinship, etc.

The object of the study falls on the social relationships, that is, the relationships between people and things which are articulated to different social systems. It’s worth mentioning that Gell points out that “culture” (perhaps a category too abstract) doesn’t exist independently from social interactions.

His researches delimit sets or settings where social experiences take place. Effectively, “the Anthropological Theory of Art cannot afford to have its primary theoretical term a category or taxon of objects which are exclusively art objects because the whole tendency of this theory, as I have been suggesting, is to explore a domain in which objects merge with people by virtue of the existence of social relations between persons and things, and persons and persons *via* things” (Gell, 1998:12).

The concept of social agency that he employs is situated in the domains of problems Anthropology brings, without merging with discussions carried out by Philosophy and its contentious theoretical agents.

What it means is that the agency is attributed to those people and things which are seen as protagonists of causative sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by mind, desire or intentional acts, as opposed to the concatenation of physical events. The idea of agency is culturally built by a thought procedure that establishes a causal nexus. Therefore, when an event occurs, it is supposed to be caused by a person-agent or by a thing-agent, very similar to when people attribute intention or conscience to objects, such as cars or images of deities. In fact, we are used to attributing mind and intention to animals and material objects, but they are always, in a residual sense, human minds because we only have access to human minds, more precisely our own minds.

And our minds are inevitably social ones, just like the action can't be a concept, unless it is in social terms. Therefore, the agency that associates itself to objects is inherently social. This is not about self-sufficient agents "but only "secondary" agents in conjunction with certain specific (human) associates" (Gell, 1998:17).

It's also important to mention that, for Gell, wherever the human agency occurs, it becomes real in the material world. The main implication of such argument is that the "things", in their causal proprieties as things, are as essential to the agency operation as they are to the mind state, what is usually considered the initial "engine" of a causal sequence.

To break with the primacy of rationalism is therefore the author's goal. But, as he also states, it is necessary to avoid becoming subject to any form of material culture mystification.

His intention is to show how the social agency works “via the proliferation of fragments of ‘primary’ intentional agents in their ‘secondary’ artefactual forms” (Gell, 1998:21). He establishes this distinction between primary agents (intentional beings) and secondary agents (artifacts). It is via these secondary agents that the primary agents distribute their agency in the causal mark and therefore constitute an effective agency. The very fact of mentioning secondary agents doesn’t result in depriving them their capacity to act, nor considers them agents as a figure of speech. It only means that the agency origin and manifestation take place, mostly, in artifacts. The agents not only make use of the artifacts, but they can also occupy their place when connecting to other beings.

In order to show how these notions can be vigorous when analyzing concrete cases, the author brings two examples that, from our perspective, can be very adequate when dealing with the relationship between users and the erotic accessories.

The first example brings to light a girl and her doll. She loves her doll and considers it her best friend: she names her, she dresses her up for special occasions, the girl talks to her all the time. Does this mean that the girl in an extreme situation, such as having to choose between the doll and her brother, would choose the doll? No, it doesn’t. The girl establishes the difference, but this doesn’t reverse the sense attributed by the girl to the doll, which is seen as a social being or even as a family member. Even considering that the doll is not a self-sufficient agent, like a human being, and the fact that the girl is aware of it, the doll can still be seen as an agency manifestation.

Firstly, it is a manifestation of the child herself, but, as the author states, the doll expresses a mirror, a vehicle, an agency channel, or even a source of some experience of “co-presence

The second example: if the doll still has some figurative resemblance to human beings, let's consider the relationship between people and cars. The author is not, in this case, thinking of cars as property or as means of transport: such meanings are not agency locus by themselves. The situation evoked is when the car is seen as something invested of social agency.

Pretty much like when a car dealer compares physical aspects of his prospect's appearance (good teeth, combed hair, elements that indicate a successful deal), with a particular car (a brand new Mercedes Benz, Black, etc). The car here not only reflects his potential owner's personality, but it's fair to say that the car starts to own a personality. In his personal testimony, the author says he owns a Toyota, to which he claims to have an objective love. In his family, the Toyota has a name (Toyolly or simply Olly) and he believes it has a lot of consideration for him: it only breaks down in not very inconvenient situations.

Rationally, he admits that such feeling may seem bizarre, but it's not IF we take into consideration that many car owners have similar feelings and, above all, this sort of link is part of a *modus vivendi* present in the technology world.

What it's interesting in these familiar examples of our daily lives has to do with two questions. First, it's about thinking of the implications of having things as social agents. It's not about attributing conscience to the essence of these objects. We are facing contextual and socially delimited situations, where it's possible to presume that one feels that the things are persons, not only because of the affection invested, but also by the type of relationships that result from such interaction.

The objects can configure, in particular settings, the active ones in the relationship, as well as in such setting, human beings may be the passive ones. There's a possible interchange, a transitivity to be considered.

This is the second aspect I'd like to draw your attention to: when we establish a rigid border between people's self-determination and the inert materiality of things, we forget that people and objects are similarly constituted by social agency, by an activity and a mobility of places of action between them. The sex toys or accessories can be seen in this perspective. In this sense, it's not odd that they are agents related to women, between women, with men and between men and women.

Yet, the effects of such relations should be developed when we consider the settings that are mobilizing erotic practices. The analysis of the users' material might bring into light the implications of this perspective in the gender relations.

This could happen in such a manner that it wouldn't be strange to ask if the sex toys have a gender, when this happens, and if they are or not used in either homosexual or heterosexual relationships. And it wouldn't be inopportune to affirm that they can be seen, as well as the persons involved, not only as erotic goods but also as erotic agents.