

Women Among the Kuikúro —

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This article systematizes scattered ethnographic observations on women, womanhood, sexes, and sexuality among the Kuikuro, a Karib people from the Alto Xingu, recorded on the fringes of another study of a different nature with different objectives.¹ The Alto Xingu region, located in the State of Mato Grosso, constitutes an ecological, political, and cultural unit, the result of a long history of migrations and adjustments by various indigenous peoples who ended up forming an intertribal and multilingual society sharing many elements of social organization and cosmology.

¹ My research was and is of a linguistic nature and the objective of the field work, carried out over the course of a year and a half, was to document, describe, and analyze the Kuikuro language, one of the variants of Alto Xingu Karib. My PhD thesis was an ethnolinguistic study proper, where, in addition to structure, I consider values and uses of the language in the social and cultural context. This research would not have been possible without the support of the Program for Graduate Studies in Social Anthropology at the *Museu Nacional/UFRRJ*, the Brazilian National Research Council (CNPq), and the Ford Foundation. I continue with the Kuikuro today and I continue to learn with and about them and the peoples of the Alto Xingu. I thank Vanessa Lea for the invitation to participate in the Working Group she coordinated on gender in lowland South American indigenous societies at the 19th Meeting of the Brazilian Anthropology Association (*Universidade Federal Fluminense*, Rio de Janeiro, March 1994), where I presented a preliminary version of the data and ideas contained in this article, and where I had the opportunity to hear criticism and suggestions. I also thank Cecilia McCallum and Carlos Fausto for their contributions.

Living side by side in the Alto Xingu are Karib, Aruak, and Tupi language groups while coexisting in a dense relational network of exchange, the various villages still maintain their respective territorial, political, linguistic, and cultural identities. The reader will find a story told in a literary and personal rather than academic style, stitching together fragments from various sources: excerpts from my field diary, drawings, narratives, songs, conversations. My narrative sequence is a rather isomorphic tracing of my working and living experience as it unfolded in an indigenous village of some three hundred inhabitants from 1976 to 1982. Along the way, I gradually lost my initial feeling of oddness, as both a foreigner and a woman. An initially androgynous being ended up being drawn into a female identity constructed in the contradictory space between a woman *on this side* and another woman that was feeling her way around *on that side*. Once there, my need for emotional survival drove me into an apparently archaic feminization, together with a refusal of or reaction towards a woman being who (once again apparently) crudely revealed what we on this side identify as marginalization, inferiorization—a suffering condition. Finally, I discovered the village women themselves, once having achieved a basic command of their language through conversations and my labor at understanding words, expressions, narratives, songs—in short, my discovery of a women's collective and its power. Beyond the desire to share a woman's singular experience in the specific context of an indigenous society, this essay adds ethnographic and reflective elements to an anthropological discussion of genders.

the result of an increasingly sophisticated literature abounding in recent years I thus suggest (by way of conclusion) what one might call an alternative reading of the mythical/ritual complex of the Jamunikumalu the Hyper-Women seen as the female voice - that of the Kuikuro women expounding on the theme of difference hierarchy and complementarity between the sexes

Among the men observing the women

The first phase of my living experience in the Kuikuro village was marked by solitude and the harsh feeling of being outside the fringes of a society in which I was absolutely foreign and strange. The Kuikuro placed me in the surreal position of an androgynous being. At night certain dreams from my adolescence would reappear fantasies of androgyny and hermaphroditism. Distant from the women who eyed me with distrust since they did not speak my language nor I theirs I was stuck among the men under their control because of the goods objects gifts that I possessed and was expected to distribute or cede little by little. Distant distrustful women and nearby distrustful men defined my ambiguous ridiculous frightening identity. A solitary individual like the owners of spells I had a woman's visible and obvious bodily traits yet they were covered disguised by clothing I had male traits manifestations of some power emanating from the world of whites and traits of incomplete mutilated femaleness a *hagy*² **an old woman** according to the system of age categories and the fact that I had no children married but without a husband alone sterile exiled. To the women I was a pseudo-woman beyond reach from the other side of a borderline. To the men I was a pseudo-woman rather disgusting for not being a full woman rather desirable for having something female

inscribed in my body they accepted me among them in their territory while never failing to constantly re-situate me on the fringes of womanhood. Thus I could traverse and occupy some male spaces that were forbidden to the women the pathways on the central village grounds and the *kwakutu* the central house of the male collective where the men meet tell stories and histories rest far removed from the family and domestic domain and where they prepare for and develop feasts sacred and profane rituals. I moved about equally among the domestic areas of the houses the huge Xingu houses arranged in a circle around the vast central plaza not having my own space. I could enter all of them both free and lacking a center with no reference except my own little nook a hammock a sleeping bag a few boxes a guest imposed and received with certain careful calculations as to material and symbolic prestige adopted into a family in a pantomime of protection and control. In time I ended up having powerful brothers sisters (women) friends who waited patiently for my metamorphosis and a severe exploring and hopelessly distant mother. Finally identified fictionally as the member of a family I ended up being identified realistically as the member of a faction and gained some allies and enemies faithful and coherent as such to the very end. At the same time I never failed to be a woman for the men who always reminded me of what I could not do for not being and being at the same time intellectual limits (women have hard heads) which made the already difficult work of my learning process even harsher limits to freedom (there were forbidden spaces and times like those of the *paje-lança* or shamanic session which I was supposed to either avoid altogether or traverse with a keen awareness of the risks involved) insurmountable limits of the body (blood smell). Outside of my nook/refuge my hammock I always felt on the verge of nothingness at the edge of an abyss (or on top of an open tower in the middle of a

² The indigenous terms are written using the spelling established for the Karib variants (Kuikuro Kalapalo Maitupu and Nahuqua). The Aitô Xingu Indians are undergoing an incipient literacy phase in both their mother tongues and Portuguese.

storm another recurrent theme in my dreams/nightmares in the village) There are two definitive characteristics of being a woman among the Kuikuro (and not only among them) blood essentially menstrual blood and a particular smell unmistakable exciting and disgusting dangerous for men and individuals in threshold situations (transformations in initiation and disease the integrity of the wrestler and the *paje* or shaman) Menarche is an unavoidable fact in a woman's life marking a critical passage in her biological and social life a metamorphosis taking place during a period of pubescent seclusion³ When a woman menstruates for the first time she is defined collectively and publicly as *masope* (from *matso* to menstruate with a nominalizing and temporal suffix added she who has already had menstrual blood) is removed from social visibility for a period varying from several months to two years depending on her family group's expectations and status Physically invisible in a protected surrounded nook of the house the recluse undergoes a metamorphosis from girl to woman her body like that of any pubescent recluse whether male or female is submitted to a somatic fabrication resulting in an adult sexual and social person The body is fabricated for beauty within specific cultural mores and for the aesthetics of sexual consumption Ideal female beauty is represented by the recluse's

body which has already displayed the forms of a work of sculpture in living flesh The hair must grow black and shiny until it hides the face and back The skin must be kept perfectly white in the darkness of seclusion from which the young girl is only allowed to leave for a few minutes in the early evening or when she presents herself in dances at the height of rituals - exhibitions of her beautiful body and gradual previews of her return to society as a woman literally made Her legs are painstakingly modeled knees and ankles bound with embira fibers or cotton string for her calves to swell up tumescent and round overly highlighted between the upper and lower furrows Her body is beautiful white and fat her thighs and buttocks fat for months the recluse has her physical activity reduced to a minimum Regular scarification ingestion of emetics and observation of dietary restrictions associated with blood - interdiction of fish the basic source of protein in the Alto Xingu diet - help fabricate the body/person maintaining a balance of entries and exits of substances and experiencing pain In her confines the recluse receives visits from her nearest relatives mainly women and clandestinely from the men who desire her and succeed in approaching her skirting the protection of family isolation As the bearer of quintessential uncontaminated beauty (both internal and external) the recluse is highly coveted sexually and exciting the male appetite

I was ugly breasts that did not nurse fair hair watery colored eyes skinny Yet I was never void of the characteristics of blood and smell the ultimate traits of being - at least something - as woman Blood and smell define the fertile sexual woman thus desired and feared to be controlled within the limits of her universe voracious powerful dirty beautiful indispensable creator and balance of conflicts Children and old women (up to eight and over forty years of age approximately) also exist on the fringes still not or no longer fertile enjoy some privileges not granted to the others like a certain easy access to male territories

³ I purposely deal with only female pubescent seclusion here There is a parallel seclusion for boys but they enter it at different times since they lack the manifest sign of a first blood Adolescents boys are also made (*y*) during seclusion in a process with characteristics that are very similar to those I describe for women Eduardo B Viveiros de Castro made this theme a central issue for an understanding of the person's *locus* among the Yawalapiti another Alto Xingu group (A Fabricação do Corpo na Sociedade Xinguana In OLIVEIRA FILHO João Pacheco de *Sociedades Indígenas e Indigenismo no Brasil* Rio de Janeiro Editora Marco Zero/UFRJ 1987 p 31-42) In a personal communication Patrick Menget talks about a kind of third sex a condition that makes the recluse virtually a sexually indifferenced or generically feminized category

and bodies the old women (*hagy*) exert and express powers in family and collective decision-making and as consecrated mothers they are guaranteed love profound respect and eternal gratitude from the children who close the ranks of family and even factional solidarity around them I was a child an immature being and on the threshold of society trying to learn babbling and as such with no powers I was old but with no power I was a sexual woman kept at a distance for her smell and her blood Contradictory sensations I wanted not to be a woman since I could not escape the experience of that woman being as differentially constructed in that society felt and interpreted as a sad and unbearable experience of inferiorization From my cultural and personal perspective I could not fail to interpret the solidly demarcated difference between men and women as the epiphenomenon of a kind of sexual oppression a hierarchical inequality not just an asymmetry At the same time and sufferingly I wanted to be a woman anyway (in any way) since indefiniteness and solitude were even more unbearable In that space/time I could only be loved by men and women if I recognized myself as a woman accepting the rules of the game I confess that these - the rules of the game - were comprehensible familiar based on a universal substrate of the female condition capable of being decoded by me (as by any woman from any society) but the object of rageful repulsion by a woman from this side who had already incorporated the individualist and egalitarian mutations of Western women's ideology a modern history I observed silent women among outspoken men who attributed a discourse to them Women are *augeneoto* owners of gossip/lies The category expressed by the root *augu* translated very loosely here as to gossip/to lie lexicalizes the crucial meaning (in social life) of a channel for circulation of information through stories and news (all *akinha*) which by word of mouth weave a network of alliances and

conflicts permeating the entire village The Kuikuro consider that ordinary language/speech is capable of infinite illusory inventiveness given its capacity to create verbal objects separate from their referents and to give them a life of their own in word-of-mouth communication as well as to subordinate the construction of verbal universes to prefigured objectives Thus the Kuikuro very clearly conceive of language/speech through its representational and intentional aspects conjugating its ideational and pragmatic functions In this sense to speak is inherently (and until proven otherwise) to lie To lie is to create and it is power

Above all to women is attributed the power of the creative speech of lying and they detain the covert power of creating undoing intervening in social relations through the use of non public speech Albeit excluded from public speech⁴ on many occasions they have the last word in important decisions and resolution of factional disputes at both the family and even village level even going beyond local borders and intervening in inter-village alliances and conflicts Gossip is dangerous There is a continuum linking the two extremes of political life gossip and accusation the latter act being of extreme gravity capable of sparking mortal vengeance The men manipulate this prerogative making it a definitive and negative trait of the female collective They warned me Don't talk to the women watch out they're liars! By this they meant to keep me out of the whirlwind of politics and a domain of womanly knowledge and power Of course I still had to learn that all (men and women) are liars by virtue of the fact that they all speak!

⁴ The masters of narrative art ceremonial discourse and oratory are men Some women are considered good storytellers but their narrative style is more condensed more dramatic and with a more restricted use of repetitions and parallelisms Women leadership status (inherited and exercised) or older women can make public speeches another style with its own formal essentially formulaic characteristics but nowadays this is a rare occurrence

The issue of the vital and dangerous circulation of rumors is recurrent in tolo songs performed mainly during the Jamurkumalu and Kwampy feasts. The first is a female ritual which we will come back to later; the second is a kind of small intramural Mardi Gras. Like most of the feasts, they are held to domesticate what we could call supernatural hyper-beings: perpetrators of disease, death, and destruction. Consider the lyrics to some tolo songs, small poetic texts translated here.

Who was going around telling?/your vagina of course/went around telling/and your clitoris of course/went around telling
I am tired - why don't the old women stop gossiping?/they don't like urucum (annatto)/why don't they stop gossiping?/they don't like uluri/why don't they stop gossiping?
I am cut as if with a knife/enough! stop gossiping!/when you go to the uluki/when you go to sit

Women's speech is radically naturalized: it is the vaginas (*igygy*) and clitorises (*mingaky*) that tell. The old women are identified as the most dangerous, free from fertile and controlled sex, represented by the uluri, the mark of womanhood; they exert real, efficacious power through the covert speech of gossip. There is a privileged time/space for women's verbal creativity: it is the *uluki*, an event in which women (or men) meet and make the rounds of the houses in the village, negotiating the exchange of various goods. Goods and stories are traded beyond the immediate confines of household groups.

The primary meaning of the word *tolo* is bird, and a derived meaning is pet. The tolo songs are set free to fly as messages from their owner to an addressee, but as if the person who enunciates the song is disguised, ascribing the message to others, i.e. women. There is a recurrent verse used to construct the poetic structure (rhyme/rhythm) of the text, and significantly, this verse is a repeated word *itaoni* or a phrase *itao kily*: the women speak.

In the words of the tolo songs and the men, the vagina is dear. This is called *igygy*.

ihipygy: payment for the vagina, the work that the males devote and owe to their fathers-in-law for years prior to and after marriage, as well as the material goods that the man owes to the woman whenever he wishes and manages to have extraconjugal relations. They are all *ajo*: they all have *ajo* or lovers. The women give the men pay with valuable objects, cherished by their *ajo*. Relations between lovers are clandestine; everyone knows about them, but nobody says so. Public disclosure of an adulterous encounter can lead to physical fighting, in which the victim can be either a man or a woman, and it can even lead to factional feuds. For both men and women, the locus of seduction and passion is not marriage or the family, but the union between *ajo*. This is another central theme in the tolo songs.

May wings be born on us/to fly beyond the river's edge/I shall fly yonder like a hummingbird/You cannot stay here/for us to love/take me with you/let us go to your village /Hagita/let us flee/and go far away/for us to love/for you to love me always/
Let us speak hoarsely (whisper)/I said to Nigikwegy /Ahinhukwegy/they cut your hair/in the center of the village/there on the mat /yes let us don our necklaces/only then may you burn me/wait/I wish to bathe/I wish to paint myself/only then may you burn me/not now/yes let us don our necklaces/only after I adorn myself with your necklace /I still have the little piece of wood from your uluri/the little piece of wood from your uluri/to long for you/for me to use as an earring

The songs sing of love and lovers, longing, and the desire to flee. A man asks his *ajo* to speak softly, hoarsely, so that they may not be heard while they make love in hiding. Another observes a scene from a distance: his loved one is emerging from her period of reclusion, and her hair is cut publicly. Another asks for his *ajo* to wait for him to get fixed up: only then may she burn him. While the penis pierces the vagina, he in turn is burned by her. Another kept a remembrance from his loved one: a fragment of her *uluri*.

The *uluri* (*uigy* in *Kuikuro*) is a small women's garment, a triangle of underbark covering the vaginal slit and held by *buriti* bark twine wrapping around the hips and penetrating between the buttocks. It protects, hides, and marks the vagina. Nowadays, women use them only sporadically in everyday life but obligatorily on festive occasions. New refined *uluri* are made by mothers for their pubescent, reclusive daughters who flaunt them when they are presented publicly, accompanying the dances during the feasts. The *uluri* is the mark of mature

sexuality, fertility, and is seen as an integral part of female genitalia. It is interesting to compare the graphic representations of drawings reproduced here, as done by men (*itoto*) and women (*itao*) of various ages. The male body displays a huge penis (*hyge* - arrow) - the female body does not show the sex except indirectly through the hairs and contrast in the paint. On the other hand, the male genitalia is portrayed naked, simply a phallus, while the female genitalia (*igygy*) always appears clothed, as if merged with the *uluri*. For the men, the



uluri is the vagina/clitoris and vice versa. While the male genitalia is seen as a naked organ given immediately to nature, the female genitalia is seen through its culturalization. Both this fact in particular and what can be deduced from observation of Kuikuro life in general appear to contradict the rather widespread notion that women in their primitive state are tied to a sort of natural condition, while men are linked to the creation of cultural norms.

Among the women, observing the men

Over time I underwent a metamorphosis that the women had been waiting for rather anxiously. Both contact and the search for escape from my solitude led me to assume women's roles. In the house where I lived I ended up doing chores (with a mixture of pleasure and resignation) that allowed me to taste a share of the daily weight of women's work: fieldwork, cooking, fetching water, preparing manioc, bringing firewood, tending the fire. The men themselves admit that the women work a lot harder than they, in no time at all, the body of a young woman emerging from seclusion is shaped with strong, constantly exercised musculature. A mature woman's body is wiry and robust, capable of withstanding any physical effort: generous bellies and breasts, whether swollen or shriveled, show the signs of their functions: continents of children and milk.

I began to achieve a command of the language to the point of expressing (not without some difficulty) my thoughts and intentions. I could finally exchange experiences verbally with the women. They took me into their domains with tenderness and enthusiasm to listen to them and satisfy their curiosity. Of all that I learned, I leave here some observations, data, and remarks. In our conversations, the Kuikuro women were very interested in understanding my experiences as a woman *from this side* and to compare my experiences with their own. They asked me about pain, the first sexual intercourse, what the men paid the women, sex was a central topic. They told me that their lives were

permeated by the experience of pain (*sini*), the same pain common to all and that all learn to endure as an unavoidable fact of life. However, there is a woman's pain that is particularly associated with sex and childbirth. The pain of childbirth is without a doubt the most violent, acute, and intense pain a human being can feel, they told me. For the women, it is an unforgettable **drama**. Birthing conditions in the village are certainly as natural as they can be: predictions as to the outcome always involved the suspense of unforeseen events, complications which can only be treated with the aid of traditional resources. The parturient woman, lying in a special hammock with a wide mesh, her legs doubled, is attended throughout the birthing process by older women, drawing on their knowledge from many birthings, both experienced and witnessed, and by other specialists: those familiar with remedies, *pajes* (shamans) and owners of prayers (*kehege oto*). All help to push the child out, either directly by manipulating the woman's body or verbally, drumming up her resistance, or indirectly by singing prayers to facilitate the exit, the voyage of a being that must guarantee its survival, suddenly crawling its way through a hole from a deep inner darkness to outside light. There are other unforeseen circumstances for which there are easily applicable rules: The birth of another girl after two or three in a row, the fruit of an adulterous relationship, or an unmarried woman, a child with a serious birth defect, or twins, can lead to the decision by the family group (received affirmatively and serenely by the village collective and with the mother's own serene acquiescence) to bury the newborn. This solution is unavoidable in the birth of twins, which according to their cultural standards is an animal-like, monstrous duality, a deviation, an abnormality where only one is allowed to survive, just as in the case of a child with a birth defect or one to whom it is impossible to identify paternity. The newborn, which has fallen through the mesh in the hammock into a hole dug under the mother, where the placenta

and blood are to be buried is also left there to be buried immediately with no pain. Pain appears to be absent at this moment: the exhausted mother is helped by the attendants and observes the outcome: the rapid gestures concluding long hours of terrible effort and leaving no tracks, nothing but the marks of pain in her body and the reclusion to which she must submit, like all those who have too much blood. Nevertheless, the mother has the last word when it is a case of one daughter too many: no small matter in a society based on an absolutely functional sexual division with a view towards basic reproduction. Only the mother can challenge all expectations, even (and mainly) those of the husband and father, with a decisive, definitive gesture: she bends down to pick her daughter up from the ground and lay her on her breast. The tiny being, covered with dirt, liquids and blood, is remembered and enters life: the attendants clean her and deliver her unto the mother, the body to which she will be attached for several years. I breathe in relief, alone and in silence, moved, without making any comments, out of context, pensive. In truth, it all seems perfectly plausible to me.

Sex is also painful for the women, and this pain is associated with penetration. I would dare to speak of traumatic penetration, as a radical 1970s German feminist put it. When we would talk about the first time, there were invariably two initial questions: Did it hurt? and What was the **payment** (*ihipy*)? Based on the responses, discussions developed on sex, pain and pleasure, which always revealed a contradiction between the necessary evil and the conquered good.

Kaikuro women dislike large penises and consider penetration a necessary outcome, good for men (whose pleasure is linked mechanically to ejaculation) and not so good for them. Pleasure is relative, happening on rare occasions and in certain (rare) positions, like a tickling. Women and men seduce, but only men display violent behavior. To cross the pathway and to take by the wrist (*inhutake*) are

typical gestures of male aggressiveness: any desirable woman can be taken by surprise (not only by her lover) on the way to the fields or to the lake and literally dragged to some secluded place, into the woods. With such characteristics, the first sexual intercourse, i.e. the first penetration, can occur when the woman is still a preadolescent, before menarche, at the initiative of much older men. After the fact, the girl spends several days, virtually hidden inside the house, **ashamed** (*ihysu*), under a protective blanket, with a sad countenance, silent. Having gone through this kind of **initiation** and reduced reclusion, everything returns to normal: after all, the incident was normal, and no apparent marks are left, except for the memory of pain, relived in conversations among women. Pleasure is elsewhere, in the game of seduction, the thrills of clandestineness and the play preceding penetration, in the excitement caused by the goods given in payment. Rare are those who do not cultivate their *ajo*, their lovers, pleasure and passion appear to be outside the family domain, dissociated from procreation, constituting another domain where women exercise surprising autonomy, both individual and collective. In this domain, they control their own wealth, their bodies, their sex, their goods. They establish alliances and reinforce ties of family solidarity and formal friendship, since mothers, sisters, aunts and friends protect the lovers, keeping watch for the secret, not to be discovered, confirming stories and cover-ups, administering the payments received. Thus, extraconjugal relations form a complex, diffuse and vital network of parallel exchanges. As a rule, the goods acquired by women in their amorous encounters are immediately placed in circulation in a kind of ritualized market, the *uluki*, exclusively for women. In the *uluki*, objects, stories and versions are exchanged, whereby facts and payments are diluted, passing from one to another successively, and the tracks of their origins are lost. The women go back home, happy, satisfied and secure.

Jamunkumálu, the Hyper-Women

Jamunkumalu is myth and ritual. The name is known even to non-Indians as one of the main intra- and intertribal feasts in the Alto Xingu a rite with female characters played by women recalling and updating the homonymous myth every year. I dwell here on a revisit of the myth a possible reading of the particular outcome of what I would call a universal theme from a woman's perspective conjugating my feeling with that of Kuikuro women as I understood it. The word Jamunkumalu is from the Aruak language (*jamuri kuma-lu* woman-hyper-female) in Kuikuro a Karib language it is *itao kwery* woman hyper⁵. The gloss **hyper** that I propose for the modifiers *kuma* and *kwery* is merely an approximation in the attempt to translate them. We already have interesting exegeses on their meaning by some of the ethnologists familiar with the Alto Xingu societies⁶ in this context suffice it to say that every (let us say) mythical being defined by cognitive distance and excess is hyper in a system of differential relations with current or actual (real?) beings which can be adequate (having the right measurements) or inadequate (i.e. deficient). Hyper-beings belong to the domain of collective fabulation expounding on origins they are cosmogonic yet contemporary. They exist in some space/time. As mentioned above hyper-beings could be thought of as models generative categorizing ideas hyper-canoe hyper-butternut hyper-people hyper-jaguar hyper-fish hyper-caraíba⁷ hyper-woman etc. Hyper-beings

⁵ The Alto Xingu is a multilingual sociocultural system where the Karib, Aruak, and Tupi languages are spoken by nine different peoples in ten villages. A major portion of the mythical and ritual vocabulary is in the Aruak language.

⁶ Take for example the article by Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, *Alguns Aspectos do Pensamento Yawalapiti (Alto Xingu): classificações e transformações*. In *Sociedades Indígenas e Indigenismo no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Marco Zero/UFRJ, 1987 (pp. 43-83).

⁷ The term *caraíba* in Portuguese is used in the entre Alto Xingu to refer to whites. In Kuikuro the word is *kagaiha*.

are excessive and as such dangerous (*inegetu*) to make contact with them wrecks disease and death. They are *itseke* spirits and they inhabit far-off places the deep waters, the heart of the forest phenomena of nature that terrify humans. Jamunkumalu is the *akinha* (story narrative) of the Hyper-Women who existed among the peoples of the Alto Xingu and exist today at the far ends of the Earth who knows perhaps in the cities of the Caribbeans say the Kuikuro. A widespread myth among the lowland peoples of tropical South America with variations and transformations recurrent fragments reaching the world of the whites in the vulgarized story of the Amazons and mentioned reproduced and interpreted in various ethnographies including those on the Alto Xingu peoples. I reproduce here the synthesis of two versions told to me in 1982 by Ijali, an elderly highly respected storyteller, owner of stories, master of the narrative art among the Kuikuro and by Moka, one of the most knowledgeable women in Jamunkumalu songs. What follows is a by-product, the summary of a translation in linear prose of the original oral renditions, almost an hour of narrative style, a quasi-poem weaving the sequence of the story's scenes through a sophisticated use of parallelisms and dialogues punctuated by the songs of the Hyper-Women⁸.

Once the *iponhy* ceremony (male initiation marked by ear-piercing) was over for the son of chief Magija, the men decided to go off fishing to seek food for their children. They were supposed to spend five days on the banks of the river in the middle of the forest. Many days went by and the women waited for them in vain in the village. Off in the forest, the men were turning into *etinki*, the hyper-boars' hair.

⁸ Comparing the versions and renditions by Ijali and Moka, what stands out are a canonical, almost hypnotic fluency in the male narrative and a condensed dramaticity in the female narrative where adherence to the norms of storytelling art is less important than the songs marking supernatural transformation as the story's highlights.

and fangs grew on them and they grew huge Agjyakuma wife of Magjja sent her recently initiated son Kamatahirari to the river to see what was happening Kamatahirari saw the fathers turning into hyper-boars The men-boars called out to him and wanted to feed him with some of the fish they had caught and Kamatahirari put the fish inside a flute and took it back to the village Night came and he told his mother everything he had discovered Agjyakuma cooked the fish and took it to the center of the village calling all her sisters Our husbands are turning into hyper boars they are becoming monsters while we are here waiting for them They shared and ate the fish in the center of the village in the men's place and then shouted Let us dance let us celebrate we no longer want our husbands and they no longer want us As they were singing all through the night they turned into Hyper-Women Morning came and they were already Hyper-Women they ate leaves and insects and stung their clitorises with poison ants their vulvas became swollen and bulging and showed between their legs They sang they sang the Jamurikumalu songs The men listened from out there in the middle of the forest and became bewildered The Hyper-Women sang on the roof of the *kwakutu* the men shout and played the *kagutu*⁹ the forbidden flutes The men-boars decided to return to the village They came in by the main path where they ran into the procession of women aggressive wearing the men's adornments (earrings kneebands armbands belts) With dogfish teeth they beat the men into bleeding

⁹ Looking at the paired *kagutu* flutes which only the men can handle and play is strictly forbidden for women It is said that disobeying this interdiction wreaks terrible punishment meted by the *kagutu* spirit and the men of the village raping of the woman who dares to look touch or play the flutes With a grave sound these flutes play melodies from the *tolos* songs The women follow the men's musical rendition attentively locked in the houses the doors of which are kept carefully closed In the village there is a solemn ominous air broken only occasionally by the duets/challenges between men and women which I will talk about later

with their clitorises bound in red thread they danced around the circle of houses Finally after turning the only man in the village Kamatahirari into an armadillo they followed him underground Upon the surface the men could still hear their songs The Hyper-Women took to the underground burrows once in a while they would surface appearing in the villages enchanting other women Although the men desperately tried to hold them down many women joined the Jamurikumalu Sisters leave the men behind to miss us! said the leaders At the river's edge they threw away their *ulun* which turned into fish and threw away the men children who turned into fish They took only the girls destined to all remain together They rubbed their bodies with butternut bark and became covered with thorns They went farther and farther away crossing rivers and fields dancing where there are no more people beyond the world of the caribbas They stayed at a place surrounded by water the men tried in vain to follow them Leave our husbands let them tire of waiting for us! Let us eat everything that is forbidden to eat tapir deer all the animals! They stayed there once and for all playing the *kagutu* flutes (Men only serve for procreation captured they fecundate the Hyper-Women who eliminate the sons keeping only the daughters The Hyper Women are dangerous fatal to meet up with them means disease and death they are beautiful and enchanting mortally enchanting)

The Jamurikumalu feast is a periodic reenactment of a founding fact that is the first rendition of the women's songs constituting the metamorphosis of the Hyper-Women definitive and primordial in the myth momentaneous and representational in the ritual The ritual recalls and updates (in the ceremonial parenthesis) a possibility dramatically imagined in the narrative Like all rituals the Jamurikumalu is frequently held because of some disruptive event a disease in some individual who has come into contact with spirits (the *itseke* in a dream in the forest in the delirium of a

fever) The spirit must be removed from its conjunction with the human being through an intervention by the *paje* who removes from the sick person's body the minuscule or even invisible darts shot by the spirit and the ritual collectively performs the disjunction and subsequent domestication and departure of the spirit. On the other hand like all rituals the Jamurikumalu feast results from the *mise en oeuvre* of a complex system of social relations involving the **owner of the feast** a kind of sponsoring representative in an inherited or ascribed position, the group of people who formally request of the owner that the ritual be held, male or female singers (*igisy oto*) and owners of songs (*iginhu oto*) who must receive payment to allow **their** songs to be performed publicly. In the Jamurikumalu there are only female singers, highly prized specialists whose knowledge is rewarded; however, during the time I was in the Kuikuro village there were only men as owners of the feast and the songs. The feast takes place on one day with the participation of several invited villages, the culmination and apogee of months of rehearsals and previews that liven the life of the host village, a long cycle of collective fishing expeditions, intense work (particularly by the owner of the feast) to amass large amounts of food from the fields, as well as dancing and singing. As the days go by the women gather into little groups (that get bigger as the final event approaches) to perform the Jamurikumalu songs, which are of two types: those without words and the *tolu*, the genre mentioned previously. The *kagutu* flutes are heard in the men's house. The houses are closed, the women close themselves in, they listen and whisper comments or they may respond to calls by one of them, an older and more daring woman, and a prankish, exciting duet gets started. Goaded by the performance of the songs of the *pyga-pyga* toad, especially the song of the vagina (*egy igisy*), in which the men describe ugliness, secretions, smells, and dangers in the female sex, the women react with the *hyge igisy*, the song

of the penis poking fun at the ugliness of the male genital organ or its weakness since it faints soon after penetrating a vagina. This is the fight of the penis and the vagina. Men and women, penis and vagina also fight during their frequent skirmishes, rather violent games characterizing the entire Jamurikumalu period. The women become aggressive and especially attack unsuspecting visitors, sparking laughter from onlookers.

On the last day of the feast, an intertribal event, the women are the Jamurikumalu, the Hyper-Women. Adorned as men, they occupy the village center and in a grandiose enactment they perform the complete sequence of the songs and dances in an order strictly established by tradition, recalling episodes and characters from the myth through the metaphors constituting the formulaic text of the *tolu* songs.

In the case of the Jamurikumalu there is a gap in *pathos* between myth and ritual. While the narrative is tragic and gets the storyteller and the audience wrapped up in the emotion of a cognitive journey through a virtual scenario (the possibility), the feast reshapes what is imagined/imaginable in a kind of tragicomic play, alternating solemn moments and others of absolutely cathartic comicity. The myth is history, and the ritual repeats history as a force. In the myth the women dominate; in the ritual it is the men, since they are not actors but directors in the final analysis. The women act the parts earnestly, while the men watch, assess, and direct, detectors of the norms of tradition, the sequence of dances and songs, the movements. The overall climate is not the same as in other feasts; it is more festive in a certain sense, since debauchery and laughter greet the men's criticism of the women's performance.

A revisitación of the myth of women's revolt

Various versions and interpretations of the Jamurikumalu myth in the ethnographic or pseudo-literary literature have portrayed the world subsequent to the women's revolt as natural or wild chaos generated by a fictional subversion of the real order and

which should return to order thanks to the men's reaction a view that even became banal or common-sense Thus Joan Bamberger defined this mythical body from the South American lowlands as a key to the understanding of the original primordial male domination in human societies in an article significantly entitled *The Myth of Matriarchy why men rule in primitive societies*¹⁰ In general the myth of women's ancestral rebellion as recounted by this researcher is either terminated with the men's successful revenge or is associated with another myth that of the origin of the forbidden flutes (*kagutu* in Kuikuro) forming a logical sequential complementary pair with the former closed in a pathway leading back to a same original order or the only real order where men dominate once the female disturbance has been traversed¹¹

¹⁰ Bamberger's article was published in one of the first reference works for gender anthropology ROSALDO M and LAMPHERE L (ed) *Woman Culture and Society* Stanford Stanford University Press 1974

¹¹ Th Gregor (*Anxious Pleasures the sexual lives of an Amazonian people* Chicago Chicago University Press 1985) and E Basso (*A Musical View of the Universe* Philadelphia Philadelphia University Press 1985) present versions of the myth of the Hyper Women and the origin of the forbidden flutes among the Mehinaku and the Kalapalo respectively other peoples constituting the Alto Xingu system According to the myth of origin of the flutes in ancestral times men lived in a savage state naked and without any type of utensil forced to masturbate in order to satisfy their desire for sex Women however lived in a perfectly structured exclusively female society and they possessed adornments festivals songs cotton and the *kagutu* flutes The men heard them playing and decided to take everything life itself In order to do so they made bull roarers with which they stormed the village Frightened by the sound of the bull roarers and having been duly instructed to occupy their place and play their role the women tore off their adornments fled inside the houses and finally during the night had to make sex with the men the new masters of the village It is interesting to note that both the Jamunkumalu and *kagutu* flute narratives have an opening and first act with the same scene that of a female order contrasting with male presocial animality

There are other readings of the Jamunkumalu complex Cecilia McCallum in an article entitled *Ritual and the Origin of Sexuality* in the *Alto Xingu*¹² criticizes the Western (i.e. ethnocentric) perspective underlying classical analyses of the theme of sexual difference in terms of hierarchy and dominance structured in social forms where the female condition is that of **fear and torture** The readings proposed by Bamberger and Gregor are considered examples of an approach intending to consecrate the universalism of male supremacy either as defining so called primitive societies (in the generalization and generic nature of Bamberger's analysis) or as the same in all societies whether exotic or familiar Western or non-Western traditional or modern (see Gregor's interpretation of sexual psychology in Mehinaku fantasies dreams and myths) McCallum starts from a controversial question is it possible to interpret supposed and extreme manifestations of sexual violence such as gang rape from a more sophisticated anthropological perspective refusing facile generalizations or universalistic affirmations regarding the female condition? What is the significance of the terrible punishment the Alto Xingu peoples say besets women who by chance or through their own *dang* lay their eyes on or have some type of contact with the forbidden flutes?

The author who did not do field research in the region delves into the ethnographic literature on Alto Xingu peoples and analyzes the mythical and ritual complex of the flutes and the Jamunkumalu through fine operations of cultural contextualization and symbolic interpretation dwelling on the meaning of the representations contained in narratives native comments acts and ritual events since that social universe is considered specifically with its network of relations (kinship within and between domestic groups within and between villages between men and spirits

¹² Published in HARVEY P and GOW P (ed) *Sex and Violence* London Routledge 1994 pp 90-114

between men and women etc.) Space does not allow me to reproduce the details of the author's ethnographic course so I will focus on some of her conclusions. Each step in the author's analysis is based on an attentive weaving of ethnographic data and stresses the complementarity indeed an egalitarian harmony between men and women.

The rituals of the *kagutu* flutes and the Jamurikumalu are thus understood as complementary both in form and in rationale (p. 104) and are concerned in parallel fashion with the construction of separate male and female agencies but on a collective rather than an individual scale (p. 105). Sexuality is constrained within the framework of kinship. Sex is a pleasure for both men and women, a possible danger for both, a matter of sensuality and fun and also a deadly serious business (p. 105). A close reading of the ethnographic data would allow one to state that it is evident that masculine and feminine agency underlie the cyclical creation, destruction and reconstitution of persons in a complex and interdependent process involving work, sex, eating and abstention (p. 107). The fear women feel towards the flutes as they recall the possibility of sexual punishment is seen as equivalent to the fear that keeps the men far from the center of the village during the Jamurikumalu festival, the fear of being assaulted by the women in celebration. There is something underlying both fears that makes them **equal** and complementary according to McCallum. Every ritual is a **making** of relations between the human community and the spirits, responsible for disease and death in successive moments of separation and approximation. At an initial moment, the productive power that the spirit embodies at the height of the ritual is extremely dangerous and potentially violent. Human and spirit must remain mutually invisible. At a second moment, the spirits are reusherred into the bosom of the human community to be fed, so as to then leave the village in a new (and now peaceful) separation, leaving the humans

with a power both safe and non-violent (p. 108). The **making** of social relations through the ritual performs the separation between both humans and spirits and men and women, and here sexuality, a central aspect in persons, is a crucial element. Having sex and eating are essential to human reproduction and antithetical to what is done and what **exists** in the world of the dead and the spirits. Sex is life and that is what opposes and distinguishes men and women as collectives. This is the ultimate value/significance of the complex and specific representations in the Alto Xingu society in its fabulations and in its daily and ceremonial acts.

McCallum concludes: In interpreting sexual violence or any form of symbolic action, we must be aware of the way that individual action and experience are bound by historically specific social and cultural contexts. Feminism has made anthropologists particularly sensitive to these issues. Any analysis of myth and ritual can benefit from the deconstructive critique typical of feminist scholarship. Moreover, in such an ethnographic context it is vital to employ a clear view of symbolic form and action. In the West, sexual murder is the killing of a representative object of sexual desire and this representative object is a specifically Western construct. To assume that this form of symbolic violence is universal is to ascribe debased forms of symbolism and representation to other cultures. Such debasement is likely to go hand-in-hand with the imposition of a Western theory of human sexuality: gang rape in the Alto Xingu - whether as an idea or as an event - is many things, what it is not is a manifestation of a supposed universal male desire to overpower and humiliate women (pp. 109-110).

By way of conclusion and entering into the anthropological and feminist debate, I intend to engage in dialogue with McCallum's arguments and add one further alternative reading of the Jamurikumalu myth based on my own ethnographic data. This reading emerged almost naturally from a personal perspective as

an observing woman combined with a perspective that I ascribe to the Kuikuro women as I was capable of hearing them and understanding them. The debate traversing anthropological literature on the genders is not finished, on the contrary it is kept open with others, at least until we succeed in shifting its terms and its axis to a subsequent phase of reflection on the history of societies.

It appears to me that Gregor's view based on his Mehinaku ethnography and McCallum's an ethnographic flight over the Alto Xingu take opposite directions yet both tend to silence a discourse that of the women. Despite the differences between groups from the Alto Xingu I am struck by certain contradictions when comparing their empirical data. Thus I disagree with Gregor when he says for example that female libido is let us say weaker than male libido, it is the concept of libido that needs to be considered in a relative light contextualized. Thus in general I agree with McCallum's criticism of certain statements by Gregor and I admire her brilliant argumentative construction but I disagree with one of her central themes, the dilution of the hierarchy between men and women in favor of emphasis on complementarity. Kuikuro women speak at great length about what distinguishes them from men, about the difference and at the same time they speak at great length about their unequal position in a hierarchical position which they do not interpret as domination or oppression, concepts and feelings of a female condition and a feminist discourse that are specific historical and cultural products. Western and modern¹³ I spoke of biological imperatives leading to hierarchy, this is what Kuikuro women talk about. In this sense we see each other as close. I mentioned the specific meaning

that the experience of **sexual** pleasure has for them. In this sense we see each other as simultaneously different and close. I would indeed stress the moments and areas of women's power (market, gossip, lovers), women's fabulation, the construction of a female collective opposed to the male collective in veritable Gender Wars (a fortunate expression of Gregor's) it is here that the Kuikuro women feel pleasure and succeed in laughing fully.

The myth/ritual of the Jamurikumalu essentially deals with the theme of the encounter/disencounter between men and women as distinct opposing collectives and the possibility imagined (yet intensely experienced in the narrative and the feast especially by the women) of an exclusively female social order. I call attention to the fact that the Kuikuro women never drew an explicit connection between the Jamurikumalu and *kagutu* flute myths and that none of the versions of the former that I collected concludes with a scene of male revenge. The Jamurikumalu are still on the edge of the world, rulers of their villages, ominous and fascinating (a fascination that is danger, dream and desire). The strength of opposition between men and women in society, as I have said, is as productive as its famous complementarity. Indeed there can be no complementarity without opposition. The myth/ritual of the Jamurikumalu picks out the theme of difference and works with it to the ultimate consequences: an absolute, metabolized difference, finally a new order, no longer based on complementarity, which I would say leads forcefully to sexual hierarchy through the unavoidable subjugation to biological imperatives but rather based on (female) homogeneity. It is the invention of the only egalitarian order possible for women, an ancient fantasy frequently dealt with as a theme. It is the collective (female) creativity serving the ideation of a paradise, a land without ills. The narrative thus speaks of (and the ritual fragmentally enacts) an irreducible antagonism, a possible female order contrasting with the men's animal-like

¹³ For an exercise in anthropological relativization of feminism see the article by B. Franchetto, M. L. Viveiros de Castro, Cavalcanti, and M. L. Heilborn, *Antropologia e Feminismo*. In: FRANCHETTO, B. et al. (org.) *Perspectivas Antropológicas da Mulher*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Zahar, 1981, vol. 1, pp. 11-47.

transformation There are no Hyper-Men rather just Hyper-Boars and Hyper Women The Jamunkumalubreak the alliance move off once and for all in their own way externally eliminating and internally absorbing difference maleness they are hermaphroditic beings the clitorises become penises rubbing them with butternut bark they enhance the vaginal smell all over their bodies appropriating male insignia neutralizing all interdictions not only sexual (the *kagutu* flutes) but also those affecting all individuals in society I am reflecting on the consequences of the use of the **hyper** classifier in this context

cognitively speaking the distance and generative capacity of a *hyper* category make it possible to conceive of a virtual female world of maximum density and of its decantation into the real world adequate yet impoverished existing yet merely sufficient This is the real world in which men exist and not just women - difference penises and vaginas sexual division of labor spaces interdictions and fears destined exclusively for women the family fate How many women have dreamed of this voyage? Among the Kuikuro I learned to love difference

CLAUDIA FONSECA

The Double Career of Women Prostitutes

After a brief look at the anthropological literature on prostitution in Brazil this article examines the data collected from an ethnographic study on prostitutes working on the central square of Porto Alegre giving special attention to the women's day-to-day experience according to the notion of careers

La Double Profession de la Femme Prostituée

Une revision de la litterature anthropologique sur la prostitution et une recherche ethnographique de terrain servent de point de depart a cet article sur l'univers des prostituées dans la place centrale de la ville de Porto Alegre. L'auteur s'interroge sur le quotidien de ces femmes en se servant de la notion de carrière professionnelle

La Carrera Doble de la Mujer Prostituta

A partir de una revision de la literatura antropologica sobre prostitucion en Brasil y de un trabajo etnografico de campo el articulo examina el universo de prostitutas de la Plaza Central de la ciudad de Porto Alegre. Enfoca la experiencia cotidiana de la vida de estas mujeres a la luz del concepto de la carrera

Women Among the Kuikúro

The author linguist and anthropologist brings together her observations memories and reflections about women among the Kuikuro Karib people of the Upper Xingu to begin a dialogue with the anthropological literature on gender. The ethnographic narrative follows the field work experience of a woman outsider ambiguous and androgenous who entered the world conversations desires and fears of indigenous women. An analysis of the myth and ritual of the Jamurikumalu the Hiper-Women provides an alternative reading of the theme of female revolt which sets up a society without men.

Les Femmes chez les Kuikúro

Cet article regroupe souvenirs observations de terrain considerations sur les representations que se font les Kuikuro des sexes et de la sexualite. Les Kuikuro sont un peuple karib du Haut Xingu en Amazonie. Ce discours ethnographique suit de pres l'experience vecue par une femme etrangere ambiguë et androgyne en rapport avec les conversations les desirs et les inquietudes des femmes indigenes. Une analyse du mythe et des rites des Jamurikumalu les hyper-femmes permet une lecture alternative du theme de la revolte feminine comme principe fondateur d'une societe sans hommes.

Mujeres entre los Kuikúro

El articulo reúne observaciones recuerdos y consideraciones al respecto de mujeres representaciones sobre sexo(s) y sexualidad entre los Kuikuro pueblo Karib del Alto Xingu proponiendo un dialogo con la literatura antropologica referida a las cuestiones de genero. La narrativa etnografica acompaña la experiencia de investigacion de campo llevada a cabo por una extranjera ambigua y androgina que se aproxima al mundo conversaciones deseos y miedos de las mujeres indigenas. Un analisis del mito y del rito de las Jamurikumalu las Hiper Mujeres ofrece una lectura alternativa en relacion al tema de la revuelta femenina que instaura una sociedad sin hombres.

Brazilian Families on the Threshold of the Third Millennium

In this article the author discusses recent trends in separation and divorce in Brazil as well as the related increase in the proportion of women-headed households. On the light of available data and studies already published the author approaches the various demographic and social factors associated with the observed changes in familial relationships addressing some key questions from the perspective of gender relations.

La Famille Brésilienne à l'Aube de l'An 2000

L'article fait une lecture des tendances les plus récentes observées au Brésil en matière de divorces, séparations et augmentation du nombre de familles ayant à la tête des femmes seules. L'auteur reprend nombre de facteurs démographiques et sociologiques pour expliquer les changements dans l'univers familial, soulignant les questions qui méritent d'être considérées avec plus d'attention par les études sur les rapports de sexe.

La Familia Brasileña en el Umbral del Año 2000

En este artículo la Autora discute sobre las tendencias recientes a la separación y al divorcio en Brasil, así como sobre el aumento de la proporción de mujeres jefas de hogar. A la luz de los datos y estudios existentes discute los factores demográficos y sociales asociados a los cambios en las relaciones familiares, señalando algunas cuestiones que deben ser enfrentadas desde el punto de vista de las relaciones de género.

Rebuilding or Reacomodating Democracy? reflections on gender parity

In this article Eleni Varikas opens again the debate about parity so frequent in Europe discussing the subject with women writers who are in favor of stablishing quotas for the political representation of women. Varikas shows what there is in favor and against parity and ends by eloquently arguing against this mechanism when one is looking for the means of reaching equality between the sexes.

Refonder ou Raccommoder la Démocratie? réflexions critiques sur la demande de la parité des sexes

Dans cet article Eleni Varikas reprend le débat sur la parité très actuel en Europe. Elle confronte d'autres auteurs qui sont favorables à l'adoption de quotas de représentation politique pour les femmes. Varikas discute les arguments pour et contre l'adoption de la parité et donne avec des arguments très éloquentes son opinion contraire à ce type de mécanisme dans la lutte pour établir l'égalité entre les sexes.

Refundar o Reacomodar la Democracia? reflexiones críticas acerca de la igualdad entre los sexos

En el presente artículo Eleni Varikas retoma la discusión acerca de la paridad tan en voga en Europa y entra en el debate con autoras que defienden la adopción de cuotas de representación política para las mujeres. La autora expone los pros y los contra en la implementación de la paridad y manifiesta su posición de manera muy elocuente contraria al uso de tal mecanismo cuando se busca construir la igualdad entre los sexos.

Feminism of the Sacred a romantic restaging of difference

This article deals with the updating of the dilemma of equality and difference in the thinking of women Catholic theologians living in Rio de Janeiro. Investigation into this line of reflection – organized women within the Catholic Church – the legacy of Liberation Theology – and women's participation in the Comunidades Eclesiais de Base (Christian Base Communities) suggests that new proposals are surfacing for combining religion and feminism.

Le Féminisme du Sacré une nouvelle mise en scène romantique de la différence

L'auteur vise à reactualiser le dilemme égalité/différence dans la pensée des théologiennes catholiques établies à Rio de Janeiro. Cette ligne d'investigation suggère de nouveaux liens entre religion et féminisme à partir de l'organisation des femmes à la fois dans les Communautés Eclesiastiques de Base et à l'intérieur de l'Église Catholique en rapport avec le courant de la Théologie de la Libération.

Feminismo de lo Sagrado una re-es escenificación romántica de la diferencia

Este artículo trata de la actualización del dilema igualdad/diferencia en el pensamiento de las teólogas católicas radicadas en Rio de Janeiro. La investigación de la trayectoria de esta línea de reflexión – de mujeres organizadas dentro de la Iglesia católica – en la herencia de la Teología de la Liberación y de la participación de las mujeres en las Comunidades Eclesiales de Base sugiere que nuevas propuestas de combinación entre religión y feminismo están saliendo a flote.

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tomo 4	vol 2	n 1/94
tomo 5	nº especial/94	
tomo 6	vol 2	n 2/94
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ARTICLES/ARTÍCULOS

- 7 The Double Career of Women Prostitutes
La Double Profession de la Femme Prostituée
La Carrera Doble de la Mujer Prostituta
CLAUDIA FONSECA
- 35 Women Among the Kuikuro
Les Femmes chez les Kuikuro
Mujeres entre los Kuikuro
BRUNA FRANCHETTO
- 55 Brazilian Families on the Threshold of the Third Millennium
La Famille Brésilienne à l'Aube de l'An 2000
La Familia Brasileña en el Umbral del Año 2000
MARIA COLETA OLIVEIRA
- 65 Rebuilding or Reacommodating Democracy? reflections on gender parity
Refonder ou Racommoder la Democratie? reflexions critiques sur la
demande de la parité des sexes
Refundar o Reacomodar la Democracia? reflexiones criticas acerca de la
igualdad entre los sexos
ELENI VARIKAS
- 96 Feminism of the Sacred a romantic restaging of difference
Le Féminisme du Sacré une nouvelle mise en scene romantique de la
différence
Feminismo de lo Sagrado una re-escenificación romantica de la diferencia
FABIOLA ROHDEN

POINT OF VIEW/POINT DE VUE/PUNTO DE VISTA

- 118 Gender War and War on Gender
La Guerre des Sexes et la Guerre aux Sexes
Guerra a los Generos & Guerra a los Generos
SUELY ROLNIK

DOSSIER ON AFFIRMATIVE ACTION/DOSSIER ACTIONS

AFFIRMATIVES/DOSSIER ACCIÓN AFIRMATIVA

- 124 Presentation/Presentation/Presentacion
LENA LAVINAS
- 126 New Paradigms in Power Circles
Nouveaux Modeles dans les Spheres du Pouvoir
Nuevos Paradigmas en las Esferas de Poder
MARTA SUPPLY
- 138 More Women Leading the Central Workers Confederation
Davantage de Femmes à la Tête de la Centrale Unifiée des Travailleurs
Mas Mujeres en la Directiva de la CUT
MARIA BERENICE GODINHO DELGADO
- 148 Affirmative Action in the Workers Party
Actions Affirmatives dans le Parti des Travailleurs
Acción Afirmativa dentro del Partido de los Trabajadores
TATAU GODINHO

- 158 Valuing Women's Labor: affirmative action in context
 Valorisation du Travail Féminin dans le Cadre des Actions Positives
 La Valorización del Trabajo Femenino: contextualizando las acciones
 positivas
PAOLA CAPPELLIN
- 171 Increasing Women's Competitiveness in the Labor Market
 Renforçant la Compétitivité des Femmes dans le Marché du Travail
 Aumentando la Competitividad de la Mujeres en el Mercado de Trabajo
LENA LAVINAS
- 183 Differences between Race and Gender Discrimination and
 Antidiscriminatory Policies: Design
 Differences entre Discriminations de Genre et de Race
 Diferencias entre Discriminación Racial y de Género y la Elaboración de
 Políticas Anti-Discriminatorias
RICARDO PAES DE BARROS
ROSANE SILVA PINTO MENDONÇA
- 194 Beginning in Brazil and ending in USA?
 Debut au Brésil et la fin aux USA?
 El Comienzo en Brasil y el fin en Estados Unidos?
EDWARD TELLES
- 202 Affirmative Action and Racial Inequality in Brazil
 Actions Affirmatives et Inégalités de Race au Brésil
 Acción Afirmativa y Desigualdad Racial en Brasil
SERGIO DA SILVA MARTINS
- 209 The Black Movement and Affirmative Action
 Le Mouvement Noir et les Actions Affirmatives
 El Movimiento Negro y la Cuestión de la Acción Afirmativa
MARCIA CONTINS
LUIZ CARLOS SANT ANA
- 221 The Importance of a First Question
 Importance d'une Question Inaugurale
 Relevación de una Pregunta Inaugural
ILANA STROZENBERG
- FEATURES/SPECIAL/INCLUSO**
- 225 Women Among the Kuikuro
 Les Femmes chez les Kuikuro
 Mujeres entre los Kuikuro
BRUNA FRANCHETTO
- 240 **ABSTRACTS/RÉSUMÉS/RESUMENES**
- 246 **CONTENTS/SOMMAIRE/CONTENIDOS**

BOOK REVIEWS/COMPTE-RENDUS/RESEÑAS

- 249 Another City
La Ville Clandestine
La Ciudad Clandestina
MARIA STELLA BRESCIANI
- 252 Precarious Gender Identity
La Precaire Identite de Genre
La Identidad de Genero Precaria
GUIITA GRIN DEBERT
- 254 Dissatisfaction with the Fate of Women
Insatisfaction avec le Destin de Femme
La Insatisfaccion con el Destino de la Mujer
NELSON H VIEIRA
- 257 Safe Sex for Women?
Du Sexe Sûr pour les Femmes?
Sexo Seguro para las Mujeres?
REGINA HELENA SIMÕES BARBOSA
- 262 The Paradoxes of Equality
Les Paradoxes de l'Égalité
La Paradoja de la Igualdad
LUCILA SCAVONE
- 265 Fighting the Logic of Opposites
Lutte contre la Logique des Contraires
Combate a la Logica de los Contrarios
BILA SORJ
- 267 Turbulent Partnerships
Partenariats Drôlement Complicques
Parejas Muchas Veces Bastante Caoticas
ANA ARRUDA CALLADO
- 268 An Experience to be Experienced
Une Experience qui Vaut d'Être Vecue
Una Experiencia para Ser Vivida
CELI PINTO
- 270 The Solitude of Women from the Rural Elite
La Solitude de la Femme de l'Elite Agraire
La Soledad de la Mujer de la Elite Agraria
OLGARIA MATOS
- 271 Crazy and a Woman
Être Folle et Être Femme
Ser Loca y Ser Mujer
JANE RUSSO

278 AGENDA

282 CONTRIBUTORS/COLLABORATEURS/COLABORADORES