

## Between a rock and a hard place: dimensions of appearance in the partition of the sensible of transvestite prostitutes during the covid-19 pandemic

Entre a cruz e a espada: dimensões do aparecimento em partilhas do sensível de travestis na prostituição durante a pandemia de covid-19

Entre la cruz y la espada: dimensiones de la aparición en distribución de lo sensible de travestis en la prostitución durante la pandemia de covid-19

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### ABSTRACT

The article aims to understand the different dimensions of the appearance of transvestites during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study focused on transvestites located on Av. Pedro II, an important avenue in the city of Belo Horizonte. Based on concepts such as distribution of the sensible and appearance, reports by transvestites were analysed. They were extracted from: a) the book *Translado* – to contextualize pre-pandemic routines; b) interviews by telephone in 2020; and c) a face-to-face focus group carried out in 2021. The method used to systematise and analyse the material was scene montage, inspired by Jacques Rancière. The results indicate, on the one hand, situations of humiliation, inequality, and violence. On the other hand, they reveal forms of subversion of hierarchies, strategies of appearance and political subjectivation.

**Keywords:** Transvestites; Covid-19; Self-reports; Partition of the sensible; Appearance.

### RESUMO

Este artigo tem como objetivo compreender as diferentes dimensões do aparecimento das travestis da Av. Pedro II, importante avenida da cidade de Belo Horizonte, durante a pandemia de covid-19. A partir de conceitos como partilhas do sensível e aparecimento foram analisados relatos das travestis, extraídos: a) do livro *Translado* - com o objetivo de contextualizar as rotinas pré-pandemia; b) de entrevistas realizadas por telefone em 2020; e c) de um grupo focal realizado em 2021 presencialmente. O método utilizado para

sistematizar e analisar o material foi a montagem de cena, inspirada em Jacques Rancière. Os resultados indicam, por um lado, situações de humilhação, desigualdade e violência. Por outro, desvelam formas de subversão de hierarquias, estratégias de aparecimento e subjetivação política.

**Palavras-chave:** Travestis; Covid-19; Relatos de si; Partilhas do sensível; Aparecimento.

## RESUMEN

El artículo tiene como objetivo comprender las diferentes dimensiones del apareamiento de los travestis de la Av. Pedro II, una importante avenida de la ciudad de Belo Horizonte, durante la pandemia de covid-19. A partir de conceptos como distribución de lo sensible y apareamiento, se analizaron relatos de travestis, extraídos: a) del libro *Translado* – con el objetivo de contextualizar rutinas prepandemia; b) de entrevistas realizadas medio de teléfono en 2020; y c) de un grupo focal realizado en 2021 de forma presencial. El método utilizado para sistematizar y analizar el material fue el montaje de escena, inspirado en Jacques Rancière. Los resultados indican, por un lado, situaciones de humillación, desigualdad y violencia. Por otro lado, revelan formas de subversión de jerarquías, estrategias de aparición y subjetivación política.

**Palabras clave:** Transgenero; Covid-19; Autoinformes; Distribución de lo sensible; Aparecimiento.

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## INTRODUCTION

*People keep saying: “Stay at home, stay at home”. But how can we stay at home? We have to, but what can we do? We’re between a rock and a hard place. Because we have to pay the bills. The bills keep coming and coming. Am I going to stay at home and go hungry, without power or water? (Interview with Patrícia - December 2020)*

Like Patrícia, many other transvestite<sup>1</sup> sex workers have faced the dilemma of whether to work during the Covid-19 pandemic, which was at its worst in 2020 and 2021. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2023), Brazil was one of the countries with the highest number of deaths caused by the disease. The situation was even more tragic for informal workers who depend on the streets to work and who had lost their livelihoods. A report at the time spoke of 46 million Brazilians who were invisible in the eyes of the government (Auxílio [...], 2020).

The transvestites of Avenida. Pedro II, in the city of Belo Horizonte, are among this group of informal Brazilian workers. With the reduction in customers, they also saw their income fall. Emergency government aid did not reach many of them, as highlighted in a statement by the National Association of Transvestites and Transsexuals (Antra, 2020). Seventy percent of the trans population were not covered by emergency policies during the pandemic (Benevides; Nogueira, 2021). This can be explained by the fact that many transvestites don’t have papers or don’t use the ones they do have, because they don’t identify with the name they were registered with. Others left home very early and don’t have papers with their assumed name. Since having an ID is one of the conditions for accessing financial aid, many of them were prevented from going to the bank. What’s more, going to the bank could entail the awkward situation of having to explain your transition situation and your life story. “Thus, there is no other option but to continue working on the streets, forcing this group to be exposed to the virus at all stages of the pandemic.” (Benevides; Nogueira, 2021, p. 8, own translation).

According to Benevides and Nogueira (2021), it was believed that the murder rates of trans people and transvestites could decrease during the pandemic because of isolation, just as they did among other segments of the population. On the contrary, the number of femicides increased by 22% between March and April 2020 (Bueno *et al.*, 2020). The number of reports of domestic violence and violence against LGBTQIA+ people also grew (Anuário [...], 2020). In fact, the pandemic has deepened their levels of insecurity, exposing the survival strategies and ways of life of these people. These are people that face a reality that is reluctant to respect them. This article asks: what are the different dimensions of the appearance of transvestites in a context of extreme vulnerability such as covid-19?

Based on concepts such as partition of the sensible (Rancière, 2005, 2016) and appearance (Arendt, 1956; Butler, 2018), we analyzed the accounts of the transvestites of Avenida. Pedro II, an avenue in Belo Horizonte. To put these experiences into context, we analyzed stories published in the book *Translado: narrativas de travestis e mulheres trans da Av. Pedro II* (German *et al.*, 2018). This article focused on the pandemic period. To this end, six in-depth interviews were conducted in 2020 as well as a face-to-face focus group in 2021.

To provide a geographical dimension to the location of the work, it is important to say that Avenida. Pedro II begins near the bus station and connects the center of the capital to the ring road. It runs through

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this work, the word trans is used to refer to people who have been assigned a gender that does not correspond to the one they identify with. The term transvestite is used to refer to people who have been assigned the male gender but identify as female. Many of them have undergone body-altering procedures, such as using hormones, applying silicone to their breasts and hips to reshape their bodies, among others. Another very common term for people who have been assigned the male gender but identify as female is “trans woman”. In this work, all the participants self-identify as women and introduce themselves with female names. However, most of the time they identified as transvestites and not as trans women. Don Kulick (2008) acknowledges that the transvestite identity in Latin America is somewhat stronger and is akin to being in the middle of the masculine and feminine spectrum. These experiences demonstrate gender fluidity, based on discourses, that is often re-signified in different contexts.

the entire northwest region, the most populous in the city (Arreguy; Ribeiro, 2008). A large part of the avenue is used at night for transvestite prostitution. They can only be seen at night. Invisible throughout the day, they are not included in official reports on the city's inhabitants. According to data from Antra (2018), 90% of transvestites are prostitutes, which LGBTQI+ activists refer to as compulsory prostitution.

The relevance of this study lies in revealing the experiences of transvestites who depended on sex work during the pandemic. Those experiences were of vulnerability and resistance. Specifically in the field of public health, the work points to the absence of the state in health policies for transvestites and transsexuals, especially during the pandemic. The study shows how much they are rendered invisible or, at best, seen as abject and targets of violence, accentuating the daily prejudice they already experienced before covid-19 and making them even more vulnerable. It can also contribute to public health policies by revealing these realities.

## THEORETICAL DISCUSSION: APPEARANCE AND POLITICAL SUBJECTIVATION

We organized our theoretical discussion around the concepts of appearance – as used by Hannah Arendt, Rancière and Butler – and political subjectivation as used by Rancière.

Appearance has an important place in language. It is a human condition that creates meaning, narrates feelings, and makes it possible to understand and order the world (Arendt, 1956; Rancière, 1996). The importance of the word is that which makes human beings more than social beings, but beings capable of demanding their needs. Everyone has the chance to express themselves, to use words, but not everyone is listened to or considered, as is the case with the no-part (Rancière, 1996). These are the people whose words are taken as noise, whose claims are minimized and whose existence is erased or denied. When we look at the research by Benevides and Nogueira (2021), cited above, we notice that they point out the disregard for the lives of transvestites, not only in the context of the pandemic, but in the entire social dynamic that denies their bodies, their names, and their right to exist publicly.

This brings us back to a practice in the US armed forces that allowed military personnel to be gay, if they didn't come out publicly (Eribon, 2008). In other words, their right to appear was violated. Likewise, the refusal of an assumed name is another means of denying appearance (Alves, 2017; Bento, 2014). We believe that the right to appear is the right to exist and to lead a livable life (Arendt, 1956; Butler, 2018). Undermining the right to appear, in turn, is not only violating a right, or the right to have and claim rights, but it is undermining the very existence of these subjects, who are obliged to exist according to an imposed rule. For Rancière (2005), appearance is when the no-part generate a noise that disturbs conformity and shows that, even though they have the right to use words, they are unheard or disregarded.

Continuing our discussion of the right to exist, in *Frames of War*, Butler (2015a) debates how in a war some lives are framed as grievable and others are not. Some lives are considered unimportant, whether they be those of enemies or the invisible. The death of enemies represents a victory. Those of the invisible, on the other hand, are viewed with indifference, as they are outside the realm of the livable. Their lives matter little.

Butler (2018) and Rancière (2005, 2006) defend the struggle for the words of the invisible to be considered. In other words, the sphere of appearance is fundamental for their existence and for the no-part to stir up politics, to highlight the error in disregarding their words. Rancière (2004) argues that the constitution of political space is intimately linked to a conflict of enunciation that arises when the "no-part" insert themselves into the scene through discourse, argumentation, and the poetic resources of a deviant experience, moving away from the space and status assigned to them by that considered conventional. Subjects on the margins of society don't speak from their sociologically assigned place, but from another place enunciated by the deviant experience. "The purpose of action in Rancière is not to insert the 'no-part'

into the existing community, that is, to include the excluded, but to constantly redefine the instance of common life through a process that requires a partition of the sensible that is not consensual” (Marques; Prado, 2023, p. 2, own translation).

This non-consensual partition is what Rancière (1996) calls a misunderstanding: a situation in which the other is understood and not understood at the same time, as in the case of transvestite names, in which the name on the document is understood to be correct/true and the assumed name is denied or ignored. Often, calling a trans person by their assumed name establishes another conformation, requiring another partition of the sensible; this is because many don't recognize it as legitimate, since it deviates from what is deemed to be correct. Thus, it is as if they create other words from existing words, highlighting the noise of the words of the no-part.

Partition of the sensible shows who can take part in the common, according to what they make of the time and space in which this activity takes place. Thus, having this or that “occupation” defines competencies or incompetencies for the common. It defines the fact of being or not being visible in a common space, endowed with a common word, etc. (Rancière, 2005, p. 16, own translation)

Rancière (2005) believes that there can be two forms of partition of the sensible: policing and politics. Policing relates to what is seen as natural, which flows without major difficulties in social perception. It's what's easily understood. Policing consists of “organizing the meeting of men in community and their consent, and rests on the hierarchical distribution of places and functions” (2006, p.17, own translation). Disagreement is part and parcel of politics, when we expose an error in counting those who do or do not belong to the societal conformation. It's a partition that questions what is considered normal, what is considered right, what is considered natural, what may or may not appear, and what is or is not noise, as is the case with transvestites.

Drawing closer to Rancière's reflections (1996, 2005) with discussions on gender, we assume that norms seem to determine which genders can appear and which cannot; they also fail to control the sphere of appearance, operating more as absent or fail-safe policing rather than as effective totalitarian powers (Butler, 2018). Genders can sometimes appear in ways that build on, rework, or even break with the established conditions of appearance, breaking with existing norms. Thus, in the consensual grammar, some expressions of gender are perceived as wrong, deviant and disturbing, and there is a conformation to try to erase them from the daily flow. In the case of transvestites, shadows, prostitution, and other experiences highlight the attempt to erase their expressions of gender.

The political is the questioning of the normative, the disengagement with the police (Rancière, 1996). Politics, then, is the “scene in which the equality or inequality of the conflicting partners as speaking beings comes into play” (Rancière, 2019, p. 84, own translation). Politics arises when the claim to equality that is said to be guaranteed by rights is called into question, thus exposing a violation, and revealing the equality that has been disregarded.

To repair this damage, Rancière (2016) proposes the creation of political scenes that enable the establishment of the common. The scene, in this work, has a theoretical and methodological function that consists of the researchers' efforts to reorder materially and symbolically that which is considered habitual. It has the power to identify whether there is a process of equality checking in the accounts given by the women interviewed in the survey. Whether this goes beyond the reported precarity, which existed before and during the pandemic. In other words, equality is an underlying principle amid a reality in which inequality is evident, such as that of the participants in the research presented here.

For Rancière, equality is a starting point because everyone has the ability to express themselves and demand solutions to their troubles. However, the no-part are ignored, their opinions are seen as noise, as

despicable. Although everyone can express themselves, not everyone is heard. Equality is verified when this is realized and challenged, when other forms of partition of the sensible are created that can recognize the non-part. In the verification of equality, politics is evident in the noise of the expressions of the no-part.

Thus, the stories used in this article were selected and organized in such a way as to reconfigure the common, materially and symbolically. At all times, the research attitude was to reorder the flow, to propose other possibilities and ways of perceiving the world, to indicate another way of understanding a situation, through the very accounts in which the participants creatively appropriated the norm.

The aim of collecting and reordering the accounts was to highlight the processes of political subjectivation that take place in their daily lives. There are possible scenes of dissent that emerge from the need for emancipation through the verification of equality. At the same time as identifying insecurity this process is capable of provoking political shifts.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is based on the premise that accounts of the self are entangled in a social temporality that goes beyond narration, identifying the very conditions of existence as social beings subject to social norms (Butler, 2015b, p.18). Even though they are immersed in moral norms and conditions, it is precisely in their self-reports that the subjects establish a critical relationship with these norms. Participants are called upon to creatively articulate the norm, reflect on their experiences and their processes of erasure (Butler, 2015b, p. 29).

Self-reporting is always an exchange involving the subject who interpellates the norms and the subject who is interpellated in a dynamic, open to linguistic and symbolic possibilities. This listening methodology is accompanied by the articulating principle advocated by Rancière of assuming equality between researcher and participants, seeking to break with historically classified positions, in a move similar to that of Carrijo et al. (2019). This was particularly true in the face-to-face sessions, when the participants also felt free to ask questions, reversing the role of interviewer-interviewee. The stories of the transvestites were collected using three methodological procedures: a) an analysis of the stories published in the book *Translado: narrativas de travestis e mulheres trans da Av. Pedro II* (German *et al.* 2018), b) six in-depth interviews lasting between 40 minutes and an hour and a half; and c) a focus group with three transvestites. The study was assessed by the UFMG Research Ethics Committee (COEP/UFMG).

The book *Translado* (2018) reflects on the identities, territories, and memories of transvestites through T-shirt customization activities, interviews and *flâner* (drifting through public spaces that they have chosen). The work was developed over eight meetings, with a total of twelve participants. It took place in two transvestite houses in the region in 2017. In addition to the stories, the book is illustrated with photographs they took themselves with disposable cameras. For the analysis of this article, excerpts were taken from the book that contextualize the daily experiences of the interviewees before the pandemic.

The six interviews were conducted by telephone between December 2020 and May 2021, using a semi-structured script, and each lasted between 40 and 90 minutes, totaling 296 minutes. The steps indicated by Gaskell (2000) for structuring and conducting the interviews were followed. The script was designed to reflect on the pandemic period, their fears and survival strategies, as well as asking about everyday issues. The questions were designed to elicit their experiences and vulnerabilities, as well as their opinions on the context and the world in which they live.

The telephone interviews were very challenging. As the interviews took place during the transvestites' daytime rest periods, they rarely agreed to replace their downtime with the interviews. There was an attempt to minimize misunderstandings. However, the use of the telephone, and differences in the realities of the researcher and the transvestites meant that they could not be eliminated. Some answers were incompre-



hensible because they were very specific to the interviewees' experiences. Some of them were significantly shorter than expected, excessively monosyllabic, and some were interrupted on the grounds that they were in a place that lacked privacy, which could cause embarrassment.

The difficulties with telephone interviews were remedied by holding a focus group. Considering the increase in vaccination against the new coronavirus and the reduction in the number of cases, the focus group was held in July 2021 and included three transvestites living in the same house. The participants were referred by the owners of houses that rent rooms to transvestites. They insisted on face-to-face interviews because it was easier to assemble them. The focus group was held in a large, airy house.

With the aim of breaking down the hierarchies between researcher and participants and allowing different views to come together (Barbour; Kitzinger, 1998), instead of asking them questions beforehand, they were given a list of topics to choose from so that they could talk freely about work, home, family, faith, health, the body, public space, among others. They asked each other questions. Since they were close, the process was very fruitful. They would ask questions already knowing the other person's story, or even say "I'll let her answer because her story is good". There was minimal intervention on the part of the researchers. They would only do so to improve understanding, encourage participation or encourage the participants to delve deeper into a particular experience.

The data was systematized using the construction of the scene methodology (Rancière, 2016), a metaphor for theater that allows us to "construct spaces and relationships in order to materially and symbolically reconfigure the territory of the common" (Rancière, 2010, p. 19, own translation). It's a montage of stories that seeks to question what is taken for granted, letting what is often imperceptible come to light. Examples of recurring situations are chosen. The stories are then put together to organize a scene, seeking to identify other possibilities and ways of perceiving the world beyond its vulnerabilities, revealing what is politics and what questions policing (Rancière, 2005) or the norm (Butler, 2018). It is a critical and creative expression of the norm (Butler, 2015b) that at the same time reveals precariousness and seeks to reframe oppressive norms. In this article we will present one of the four scenes set up in the extended version of the research. The scene revealed accounts from before - through the book *Translado* - and during the pandemic, showing that norms and the questioning of them spans different temporalities.

At the end of the scene, we see the dimensions of appearance, which can either denote vulnerability or the power to propose new ways of rearranging their lives in the face of adversity.

## SCENE: MY RULE IS TO LIVE

-Poliana: Hey girlfriend! You ain't seen nothing, 20 years ago it was humiliating, you'd run from the police, you'd go to jail and stay there all night, you'd get out at 6 in the morning.  
-Milena: It's good, me eating and sleeping...  
-Poliana: Yes, but there was no food, girlfriend! Sorry to say, but there was no food...  
-Milena: Oh, so I would have shouted, broken everything!  
-Poliana: Ahhhh and what's the point of shouting? What good will it do? We were still beaten up, we were pepper sprayed in the face (German, 2018, p.11, own translation).

In many transvestites' accounts, it is common to see a dichotomy. Sometimes they are present in the extreme, impossible to miss; sometimes they are ignored, forgotten. This dichotomy appears almost simultaneously. While they recount the police chase and the search for the transvestite, they show that it is just another effort to erase that existence.

*I've already been beaten up a lot by policemen. There was a policeman here on Pedro II who followed us. And I won't shut up, will I? He saw us and made us leave. Then we wouldn't go, would we? You have bills to pay, how are you going to leave? Then we'd stay, and he'd hit us."* (Interview with Patrícia – December 2020, own translation).

Having “bills to pay” during the pandemic led many transvestites to keep on working, even during the period of social isolation (Benevides; Nogueira, 2021). This data reveals not only the inability of the formal labor market to absorb transvestite labor, but also the curtailment of basic rights for these people.

The life of the transsexual can be summed up as follows: unfortunately, the transsexual who has no job opportunities, who is cast out by society, who is thrown around by society as if it were a torrent, in the corners, in the culverts. So, we don't have the opportunity to work, we don't have social security payments, we don't have anything like a normal life.” (Brenda – German, 2018, p. 32, own translation).

As Brenda points out, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on informal work as the workers have no statutory rights. The physical contact inherent in prostitution was a concern for transvestites, who reported taking care of themselves as best they could and doing so to a greater extent at the beginning of the pandemic. Faced with a lack of opportunities, there were no alternatives but to go against the health recommendations. As Patrícia said at the beginning of this article: *“How can we stay at home? The bills keep coming and coming. I have to pay the bill. Am I going to stay at home and go hungry, without power or water?”*. Even if they continue to work, many report having problems.

*Why did they ban men, right? They closed everything. And then the men don't go out because of the pandemic, they don't go out. And then we go to the street, but we don't make any money* (Interview with Patrícia – December 2020, own translation).

Customers became more fearful of seeking them out and establishments such as motels, nightclubs, bars, among others, which were important for the activity, were closed by decree of the city council as a measure to contain the virus.

Food baskets, emergency aid, and other help from the government and other institutions and non-governmental organizations were mentioned as being important at this time.

*But you know that transvestites don't like to be dependent, right? Then we are stuck waiting for the day, then the person calls us and says, “I'm going to take you... I'm going to give you a food basket”. Then we keep waiting and hoping, the person doesn't care, we have to go down to the street, to chase, to make money.* (Interview with Thalita – December/2020, own translation)

There were also reports about difficulties in getting access to condom distribution, an AIDS prevention policy. As the right to receive this aid was uncertain and inconsistent, they reported that they had to take risks. The need to do so perpetuates the denial of the right to physical integrity that has historically been denied to them.

*[...] now this law that changed the name, so now you're considered a woman, right? Then they get a protective order, go to jail and everything, right? But in the past, when you assaulted a transvestite, it was bodily harm. Then you'd get there, you'd go, you'd go through a lot of embarrassment at the police station, with your documents, you know? And the police classified it as bodily harm. Now that we've changed our name, we no longer suffer prejudice with our documentation. But even so, when we need to go to the police station, when we go to the police station, they look to see if we've had surgery, if we're...you know? That kind of question* (Interview with Patrícia – December 2020, own translation).

If not recognizing their name is a way of erasing their existence, so is the time of day when they are awake. Transvestites have a different circadian cycle. The nights are the days when they go to work and earn a living.



[...] six in the morning for her is like six in the afternoon. It's the time when she comes into the house to shower, get ready and go to sleep. Nine o'clock in the morning is when she can really fall into deep sleep, when she can switch off. She's already taken off her make-up, showered, eaten something, relaxed, and put her mind at rest, so she's going to sleep. There's no such thing as saying that midday is a transsexual's lunch time because it's not. At most, a transsexual eats one meal a day - not because she wants to, but because her body forces her to. They eat around six o'clock [in the evening], when they get up. By eight o'clock [at night] they're already showering, nine o'clock they're already out on the street! And when they're on the street, they have little snacks: go to a bar, eat something... then a little time passes, they go to another bar, eat something else." (Brenda – German, 2018, p. 56, own translation)

The transvestite's time is nocturnal, which implies a kind of concealment of her existence in daylight. In response to the attempts to erase the lives of transvestites and deny their dignity, many of them mentioned conforming to a certain etiquette of good manners: being as discreet as possible and trying not to attract too much attention. It was common for them to say in interviews that it's better to ignore someone who is taunting them.

The dimly lit setting is a hallmark of daily life for transvestites, whether they are waiting for a client or hiding from possible threats, amid the dichotomy of trying to be seen and to hide at the same time.

Some [customers] say, 'Wow, I didn't see you on the street!' Picks up in front of you, he's seen you there... There's one who did it like that, he always went out with me. There was me and the fag<sup>2</sup>, next to each other because we were talking. He stopped; I went over. I went, my client, right? When I went, he said 'no, her'. I looked at him like, 'Well', I turned back, like, wanting to cry. 'I can't believe it!' You know? Guys, he always goes out with me! He was out of order! (Livia – German, 2018, p. 45, own translation).

The clients' disregard for transvestites is apparent when she states she is not seen. It is also evident during the short time.

*When we enter a room, they think we're their slaves, there to do what they want. Just because they're paying a price that is out of our reach.* (Interview with Laura – May/2021, own translation)

Invisibility is also revealed in the values negotiated.

-Milena: Yeah, we're forced to accept 10 reais, 20, 30, to 'fuck' a man without a condom...  
-Poliana: Come on, just don't accept it! You're on the street, but you have a choice, several men have stopped me and offered me that. What did I say? 'No, love, I won't accept it. Thanks, bye.' Life goes on. But they like to slobber, you know?  
- Milena: Forty reais, the boy wants to fuck without a condom? What! Catching AIDS for 40 reais? Who are you, you piece of trash?  
- Interviewer: Did he say that to you?  
- Milena: I said that to him! (German, 2018, p. 11, own translation).

In the world of pornography, it's common to see a certain fetish for unprotected sex, with the title of the video announcing it as "naked head", "bareback", among other names. However, this account exposes the price a life costs for a particular client: R\$40 and the risk of contracting diseases, which can also jeopardize their livelihood. At the same time, they say that customers are looking for something different with them, a certain escape from routine, especially during the pandemic.

*The man's libido is high, he's sitting at home doing nothing, he's only on the internet, it's over. Sometimes he can't get himself off. They spend a lot of time indoors, boredom, a lot of sameness, he's not entertained, so that's a happy moment.*" (Interview with Yara – December 2020, own translation).

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2 It's common to hear transvestites refer to each other as «bicha»(fag), «viado» (faggot), among other terms that can also be recognized as homosexual-cisgender.

During a shortage of opportunities, you can try to take advantage of situations. Yara was the only one who reported having made financial gains from the pandemic. She says that *“it was the most opportune moment, from a financial point of view. The moment they got tired of staying at home (laughs).”* Even though she is the only one to have a positive account of the pandemic, she is not the only one to notice possibilities to take advantage of her current situation. Thus, without disagreeing with the complete erasure of their experiences and subjectivities, it is possible to find a way to appear.

If I'm standing on the corner, in the bakery, and a guy stops and says, 'Wow, you're beautiful'. You can be sure that he'll call me beautiful, 10 minutes will pass, he'll pick up the phone, just like everyone else does, and he'll say to me 'I want to fuck you'. Got it? He's not going to say, 'Wow, that's great, I want to get to know you, what do you do for a living, what is your name'. They don't even ask your name. And he's like, 'want to fuck, want to fuck'.... He's always taking advantage of me. Then he won't even look me in the eyes because he's with his wife, he has his wife. So, I have to take advantage of him somehow too. Got it? I'm disposable to him, just like I told you, we're disposable to them. If we're disposable to them, let them be disposable to us too. Let's make the most of it (Livia – German, 2018, p. 38, own translation).

Charging is the solution found to make a profit in the face of all the exclusions and erasures. A way of making up for the losses caused by not having rights. And so, they appear at just the right time when customers are willing to pay for pleasure and enjoyment.

*I go out to earn whereas people go out to spend. Got it? The guy gets out of his car so he can pay me, so he can enjoy himself. I go there to have fun and earn his money. So, I adapted everything to my project* (Interview with Yara – December 2020, own translation).

That moment can be the time to express your wishes, to satisfy other desires.

I went to a motel in Contagem [metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte] and the client gave me R\$700 just so he could sniff my ass. He wanted to sniff my ass and keep me company. Then he said: 'You can have anything you want'. Then I just drank Smirnoff Ice and ordered lasagna. I ate all the time, 24 hours a day, breakfast (Milena – German, 2018, p. 82, own translation).

And even with short-sighted customers, you can find ways to be seen:

Then one day he came back, 'How are you?' In the past, I used to fight before I got in the car. Not now, I'm very cynical. 'Hi my love, how are you?', 'ah, let's go for some short time', 'let's go, the price is...?', 'the same price, love'. The guy goes and does the usual short time. In the end, 'that's it?', no. 'That's not what I agreed with you.' 'No, but you've always done this amount', 'no, it's not this amount. It's this much, this much', 'no, but...'. 'No, it's this much, love. Or do you think I'm a clown? You remember that day I was on the corner...' 'No, but you weren't on the street. I didn't see you', 'Oh, you didn't see me? I was to the side, I got into the car... you... I was freaking crazy!' 'I didn't see you!' 'I got to the car and you said it was someone else. Didn't you see me?'. They're very cynical! There's so many things they say, that make you want to... You have to be just as cynical as they are. (Livia – German, 2018, p. 45, own translation).

Playing the same game and dancing to the music may seem like submissive actions, but not when the rules are flipped in your favor.

Because if you get stressed, you fight and that's that. You lose a customer. You just have to be as cynical as they are. Got it? Play their game. They're lying, you know they're lying, you... 'it's true'. You know that, at the end of the day... It has to be that way. Then he said 'no, but I didn't see you, you weren't on the street'. I said: 'I wasn't on the street? No? Do you think I'm a clown? I go out with you, I do this, this, this... I don't set a time, I treat you very well, I play the perfect role with you, and you do that? At least pick her up far away from me! Now you've been very naughty, very insolent!' 'No, but I don't know what...' 'No, it's this much and this much'. Then I start to... I'm very bad. I pretend to be crying, I make

a whole scene. A right scene. 'It's because you don't know, I do everything for you!'. There was one who said, "No, Livia, take it, take it, take it. I'm sorry..." 'Do you promise me...? Now hold me...'. Just like a soap opera. You know? But that's the way it has to be! You have to be an actress. Because if you get stressed, my love... So, it has to be like that with them. (Livia – German, 2018, p. 45, own translation).

Playing a game in which you know little about the rules and are in an unfavorable position is an act of courage. Even in a disproportionate situation, finding ways to place your cards and not surrender to threats is also about asserting your existence and your will. You can't control how the game will go.

He put the knife to my neck and said, 'hand over the phone'. Fabiolla started shouting 'hand over the phone!', and they were shouting... I said I wasn't going to hand over my phone. Then I handed it over but told him I'd wait for him to take out my SIM card and my memory card. (Palloma – German, 2018, p. 15, own translation).

Perhaps ignoring aggression can be seen as an act of resistance. This is certainly an act of survival when it comes to a plot against your own life. Against the rules that only want to annihilate their existence, transvestites seek to create their own rules and thus create the possibilities of appearing and having a livable life.

*When I lived with them [the family], I couldn't follow the rules, and make them see mine... And my rule is to live. So, I lived it* (Interview with Yara – December 2020, own translation).

## DISCUSSION: VERIFYING THE SCENE IN TWO ACTS

For Rancière, politics lies precisely in trying to ensure that the pain of the no-part (those who are ignored or unhappy with the place they occupy) is recognized as pain, and not just as a noise or something despicable. Politics lies in the symbolic reordering of the sensible, capable of making the inaudible heard. In this way, we have organized our analysis into two pillars, or, in keeping with the metaphor of the scene, two acts. In the first, we discuss the erasures that these women suffer; in the second, we discuss the reordering of meaning that shows disagreements capable of generating non-consensual partition of the sensible, but which question the established standards, destabilize norms, and create political subjectivities.

Just like in a first act, right at the beginning of the scene, Milena's conversation with Poliana, taken from the book *Translado* (German, 2018, p.11), is an effort to signify her pain. Poliana strives to convey what humiliation really is, in other words, a situation in which a person's value is suppressed or ignored, in which their condition of being no-part reaches its purest stage: the experience of being persecuted, imprisoned, silenced, and even beaten if they try to speak out.

They also realize that their humiliation is in relation to society. In the book *Translado* (German, 2018), Brenda says that transsexuals are "thrown around by society as if it were a torrent, in the corners, in the culverts" (p. 32, own translation). Likewise, this realization is revealed when Patrícia, in an interview during the pandemic, reports that even with the legal recognition of her assumed name, she still goes through embarrassing situations with questions about gender reassignment surgery. During their work, they are "made to be slaves", as Laura said, or they are made offers to have sex without a condom and are subject to diseases, as Milena said.

Transvestites don't seem to be among the lives and bodies that matter, as Butler says (2015a, 2019). It is important to mention the original English title of Butler's work which is *Body that matters* (Butler, 2019). The title contains a pun that is not very noticeable in translation and which, to a certain extent, sums up the main discussions in the book. Matters can be understood in the sense of having importance, meaning, and even pestering, but it can also have a relationship with "matter", with the material linked to existence. The

book discusses the meanings that a body can have, the discourses that focus on it, and how the importance or otherwise of a life is justified.

When asked what R\$40.00 is worth, the expected answer is not exactly what you can buy with that money. Would sex without a condom be on that list? Even if we argue that forty reais is not the amount the client would pay for Milena's life, but the value of sex, it is possible that this client and many others who have relationships with transvestites have not even considered the value of these lives.

The offer by clients of insignificant amounts of money to have sex without a condom is also related to the lack of supply of condoms for transvestites during the pandemic. They say that the number of clients has dropped, which leads to the conclusion that the distribution of condoms was conditional on the practice of prostitution, and not on the health of the transvestites themselves. In other words, it is as if they had to say how many customers they would have, to calculate how many condoms they should receive.

According to this logic, condoms would be more for the clients than for the transvestites. It's as if only transvestites could be infected with the AIDS virus or other diseases. Prevention would be aimed at preventing them from transmitting diseases to their clients and would take place through the distribution of condoms. Furthermore, reducing the distribution of condoms reveals the instability of a decades-old public health policy of epidemiological control, when another health problem arises.

This highlights the social and institutional process of erasing these lives who, on the one hand, do not have formal work opportunities and, on the other, run risks in the work they do. Despite all the recommendations to stay at home during the pandemic, relying on the help of others is not safe either, and so they find themselves between a rock and a hard place: "*How can we stay at home?* The bills keep coming and coming", as already mentioned, says Patrícia in an interview. Institutional erasure was also evident in government policies during the pandemic. Emergency aid barely reached them, even with the extensive solidarity network that had been formed. It wasn't always possible to count on receiving the basic food basket, a favor that some people promised but didn't always deliver.

Another important discussion is the role of security agents. Police persecute, imprison, prevent, or hinder them from practicing prostitution, the only profession that is made available to them. 90% of them are prostitutes (Antra, 2018) and there is little room for choice in the professional spectrum. The police, who should look after the safety and physical integrity of these people, treat the violence they suffer with disdain, asking questions that do nothing to remedy or solve the violence they experience. Butler (2015a, 2018) argues that the right to have rights and the right to claim rights, the pursuit of a livable life, is a condition of appearance. Here this condition is curtailed, denied, and hindered.

So far, we have highlighted the erasures and vulnerabilities of the transvestites on Avenida Pedro II in Belo Horizonte. However, as if in a second act, the scene constructed in the previous topic also exposed the cracks and attempts to appear amid invisibility: "*And I won't shut up, will I?*" said Patrícia in an interview. Rancière (2006) suggests that through symbolic and material reordering, those who are discardable are also able to discard, in a way that reverses the flow, destabilizes hierarchies, and promotes a common.

Being on the street is a pretext for police harassment, but also the only way many of them can survive. After all, they have bills to pay, they need to eat, they need to dress, among other basic needs. Moreover, as Thalita says, they do not want to depend on others, they want to build their own autonomy. This pursuit of autonomy also appears as a negation of hierarchy. They don't want to depend on anyone, they want to have their own lives, to be able to enjoy freedom of choice, to be who they are and not need favors and charity or forms of support from other people or the government.

The same autonomy can be seen in the refusal to have short time without a condom. "*Catching AIDS for 40 reais?*" Milena asks, showing that although the government and the clients don't value her life, she does. Not only does she reaffirm her own value, but she also demeans the customer: "*Who are you?* You piece

of trash?”. It was a way of saying that anyone who belittles her, who doesn’t recognize the value of her life, doesn’t have the authority to do so, and is therefore a despicable person.

According to Rancière (2006), the common is established through the verification of equality, when hierarchies are suppressed and the partition of the conventional sensible is suspended. The space of politics emerges. This common is established, for example, in Milena’s speech asserting the value of her life. The posing of the question “*who are you?*” suspends the hierarchy of the payee and imprints the idea that the transvestite doesn’t need or depend on that other person. It can also be seen in Thalita’s speech, albeit in a friendlier context, when she says that transvestites don’t like to depend on anyone. “*Who are you?*” also suppresses the other’s meaning, to some extent stating that she can’t understand them either, their words are noise to her.

This flow reversal, this shaking of the hierarchical foundations, happens when they see themselves taking advantage of a situation, in other words, having a certain advantage over someone who might see them as slaves. The flow is reversed when they themselves create their own means of protection against unfavorable contexts, establishing the conditions and possibilities for being seen.

By thinking of ways to take advantage of certain situations, they look for other ways of understanding, living through, valuing, and experiencing the way they survive. It could just be a short time, but they manipulate signs and meanings so that it’s not just a short time. The short time, then, involves an excess of possibilities, both positive and negative, in which they seek the appearance that is concealed in the words “*take advantage*”. In this case, appearing also means participating in what people value, such as eating well or being paid well for your work. Transvestites make it clear that they are considered outsiders when they subvert humiliation and invisibility. By partitioning new sensibiles based on what is not consensual, such as taking advantage, for example, they build the conditions for political subjectivation.

This subversion of hierarchies of who enjoys and who is the object of enjoyment can also be observed in Livia’s case. A compliment that is accompanied by “*I want to fuck you*”, as she says, is a compliment that comes at the price of satisfying that desire. “*You can be sure that he’ll call me beautiful, but 10 minutes will pass, [...] and he’ll say to me ‘I want to fuck you’*”. Once the desire has been satisfied, it’s as if the compliment never existed; the person who gives the compliment doesn’t even look the person in the face anymore, they don’t even know their name, since “*they don’t even ask for your name*”, as Livia emphasized. The sudden appreciation of that life is ephemeral and volatile.

Rancière (1996) said of Ancient Rome that: “there is no point in [the patricians] argu[ing] with the plebeians, for the simple reason that the latter do not speak. And they don’t speak because they are nameless beings” (Rancière, 1996, p. 17, own translation). Livia’s name was ignored in the same way. However, Livia asserted her name and sought another form, another partition of the sensible, to be a part and thus show that she was not just an object of desire, but an excess, which transmutes the symbols of the name and becomes a monetary value.

Charging to satisfy this desire is not only a means of survival, because that’s how transvestites pay their bills, but also a way of gaining some value as a person. In this way, they try to re-signify themselves, prove that they are worthy and enjoy the moment. After all, as Yara tells us, she’s going out “*to have fun and earn her money*”.

In this way, as much as they serve as objects of sexuality, the clients are also associated with the amounts they pay. In other words, forty reais is not the value of sex without a condom, but the amount Milena is willing to accept or not. The amount charged, for the client, represents the satisfaction of their desire; but for the transvestite, the amount charged represents how much she is willing to satisfy that desire with that person, a reflection that covers self-care, health, dignity, fun, among many other things.



Considering them invisible, as Livia's story reveals, is not an unpunished action. The moves they make between erasure and appearance, between invisibility and existence, denote actions that subvert norms and remove them from the position of being pitiful or vulnerable.

So much so that even insolence and daring are charged separately, packaged with dramatic lines, worthy of a soap opera. However, the aim is only to enhance that life, that person. If you didn't see her on the street, "*made a clown out of me*", didn't appreciate that "*I play the perfect role*" for you, now you'll have to bear a greater financial cost or, at the very least, you'll have to be part of a scripted scene, starring her, to highlight the value of her life.

Accounts such as Livia's reveal the verification of an equality, even if it takes place in different languages and is translated for each party with equally different meanings. The customer may feel they are in charge, as they decide who they are going to see on the street. But it's Livia who decides what the cost of this is, how willing she is to be in this situation, and poetically imprints the value of her life through a "*scene*" she creates.

Other accounts, such as that of Palloma, who refuses to obey the assailant, even with a knife to her neck, also expose a verification of equality. Her life was in the hands of the robber, it depended on whether he wanted to kill her to get her cell phone or not. Even so, she set out her conditions: he had to wait for her to take the SIM card and memory card out of the device.

For Rancière (1996), appearance takes place through the efforts of those who are unheard to be heard; of those who are invisible to be seen. Through this scene, amid all the efforts to erase transvestite experiences, and even in the mix of being seen and hiding, there is an effort to appear, an effort to make these lives livable. At the end of the scene, Yara says that, above all, she chose to live, which demonstrates a reaffirmation of this partition of another sensible.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This work sought to discuss the different dimensions of the political subjectivation of transvestites and their relationship with the sphere of appearance during the crucial period of Covid-19. It was necessary to revisit routine aspects of this appearance to show whether the pandemic was, in fact, primarily responsible for the invisibility of transvestites on Av. Pedro II, in Belo Horizonte. This was done by analyzing accounts taken from the book *Translado* (German, 2018). The interviews and focus groups carried out in 2020 and 2021 confirmed the view that these women have occupied the space of political subjects on the margins since before the pandemic.

The conditions of isolation, the reduction of clients, the difficulty of access to public policies for transvestites, the restriction of physical contact, among other situations that have occurred during the pandemic, have obviously increased the vulnerability of those who work on the street using physical contact. But it's important to note that this vulnerability already existed before the pandemic. The dynamic of light and shadow, night and day, to which transvestites are subjected when they work/appear at night, in the shadows, has remained the same regardless of the pandemic.

They play with this dynamic themselves. Sometimes they need to be discreet, sometimes they need to appear. This is part of the partition of the sensible that is presented in the stories and that reveals the re-signification of these vulnerabilities, the subversion of hierarchies, misunderstandings that challenge what is accepted as morally valid and, in the end, a form of political subjectivation, from the margins, that chooses life.

The results of this study can guide public health policies for the LGBTQIA+ population, to foster listening to their experiences more, both in terms of the vulnerabilities they present and in terms of reframing the



hierarchies imposed on them. Considering them as political subjects with rights involves understanding their ways of surviving and their survival strategies from the margins.

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