

# Women's social roles in the memories of Ruth Escobar and Leonor Xavier

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**Abstract:** *The gender debate features in the lives and works of Ruth Escobar and Leonor Xavier, Portuguese women who renewed their views on the social roles of women after immigrating to Brazil in the 20th century. Ruth Escobar (1935-2017) at age 16, settled with her mother in São Paulo, and was an actress, theater producer, politician, and feminist. Leonor Xavier (1943-2021) immigrated with her husband and children in 1975-1987 to São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, where she became a writer and journalist for media outlets in Brazil and Portugal. A content analysis of their autobiographies Maria Ruth and Casas contadas allows us to approach them as examples of “mediating intellectuals” for new perspectives on women’s social roles. In dealing with the intellectual trajectory and adherence to feminism of relevant Luso-Brazilian intellectuals, the importance of emigration for both of them is evident in the rupture with a masculine and conservative legacy, and their participation in the reflection on gender.*

**Keywords:** Gender; History of intellectuals; Memory; Women; Portuguese women in Brazil.

## **Papéis sociais das mulheres em memórias de Ruth Escobar e Leonor Xavier**

**Resumo:** *O debate de gênero consta nas vidas e nas obras de Ruth Escobar e Leonor Xavier, portuguesas que renovaram seus olhares aos papéis sociais das mulheres após emigrarem para o Brasil, no século XX. Ruth Escobar (1935-2017) instalou-se aos 16 anos, com a mãe, em São Paulo, e foi atriz, produtora teatral, política e feminista. Leonor Xavier (1943-2021) imigrou com o marido e os filhos em 1975-1987, para São Paulo e Rio de Janeiro, onde se tornou escritora e jornalista de veículos do Brasil e de Portugal. Uma análise de conteúdo de suas autobiografias Maria Ruth e Casas contadas permite abordá-las como exemplos de “intelectual mediador” de novos olhares a papéis sociais de mulheres. Ao tratar da trajetória intelectual e adesão ao feminismo de relevantes intelectuais luso-brasileiras, é notada a importância da imigração de ambas para a ruptura com um legado masculino e conservador, e inserção na reflexão sobre gênero.*

**Palavras-chave:** Gênero; história de intelectuais; memória; mulheres; portuguesas no Brasil.

## **Roles sociales de las mujeres en memorias de Ruth Escobar y Leonor Xavier**

**Resumen:** *El debate de género apareció en la vida y obra de Ruth Escobar y Leonor Xavier, portuguesas que renovaron sus miradas sobre los roles sociales de la mujer después de emigrar a Brasil en el siglo XX. Ruth Escobar (1935-2017) se instaló con su madre en São Paulo a los 16 años y fue actriz, productora de teatro, política y feminista. Leonor Xavier (1943-2021) inmigró con su esposo e hijos en 1975-1987 en São Paulo y en Río de Janeiro, donde se convirtió en escritora y periodista de vehículos en Brasil y Portugal. Un análisis de contenido de sus autobiografías Maria Ruth y Casas contadas permite abordarlas como ejemplos de “intelectual mediador” sobre los roles sociales de la mujer. Al abordar la trayectoria intelectual y la adhesión al feminismo de relevantes intelectuales luso-brasileñas, destacase la importancia de la inmigración de ellas por la ruptura con un legado masculino y conservador y la inserción en la reflexión sobre género.*

**Palabras clave:** Gênero; historia de intelectuales; memoria; mujeres; portuguesas en Brasil.

## Introduction

The theatre producer Ruth Escobar (1935-2017) and the journalist Leonor Xavier (1943-2021) questioned public and intimate themes in the theater and in the press, but it was their autobiographies that eternalized views on gender issues. In *Maria Ruth* and *Casas contadas*, they contributed to the wider diffusion of ideas about the social roles of women. Through these literary works and their careers, they assumed the role of “mediating intellectuals,” which Angela de Castro Gomes and Patricia Hansen (2016, p. 10) defined as the “production of knowledge and communication of ideas, directly or indirectly linked to political-social intervention” that characterized such strategic players in culture and politics. This article opts for a recent theoretical approach in the history of intellectuals by viewing Ruth and Leonor as guided by individual and collective projects with political and sociocultural dimensions and, as Gomes and coauthors (2018) have seen in other cases, immersed in networks of sociability fundamental to the formation of their intellectual profile.<sup>1</sup>

A Portuguese woman from Campanhã (Porto) who emigrated as a youth in 1951, Ruth created a magazine for the Portuguese community in São Paulo, put on shows with artistic and political values as a theater entrepreneur, initiated inmates in the art of theater, and advocated feminism (in this case as a civil society activist, state congresswoman between 1983 and 1991, and – our focus – writer of an autobiography). Based in Brazil between 1975 and 1987, the Lisbon native Leonor entered the job market after immigrating and, in the Rio de Janeiro of the 1980s, she began to identify and be recognized as a journalist and writer, initially specializing in “writing about Portugal in Brazil and about Brazil in Portugal” (Leonor XAVIER, 2016, p. 10). She was a correspondent for *Diário de Notícias*, in Rio, a collaborator of *Manchete* and *Jornal do Brasil*, and editor of the newspaper *Mundo Português*.

The lives and works of the two intellectuals are remarkably close and yet far apart, and the fact that their autobiographies were published only in their country of permanent residence makes it even more opportune to look at the works of the celebrated theater-woman in Brazil and the prolific author in Portugal with only one recent book published in Brazil – the essay *Passageiro clandestino: diário de vida* (Clandestine passenger: diary of life) (XAVIER, 2015), about her experience with cancer.

*Maria Ruth*, a title alluding to the author’s name without the assumed surname of one of her husbands, was published twice (in 1987, by Guanabara and sent for publication in Portugal, and in 2003, by Arx) as well as a translation in France (*Les cheveux du serpent*, Sylvie Messinger).<sup>2</sup> *Casas contadas* (Counted houses) refers to 13 houses where Leonor lived, and won the 2010 Máxima Literature Prize and a title published by LeYa group labels in 2009 and 2018. These are clever autobiographies that illustrate the simple idea, well expressed by Argentine writer Juan José Saer (1997), that “autobiography is not always a bundle of hypocrisy tied with the solid strap of vanity and presumption of a given author” (SAER, 1997, p. 235). As such, they are repositories of perspectives from a certain period.

The work focuses on confessional writings as useful sources for capturing perceptions of the two intellectuals on women’s social roles – thereby revaluing the legacies of both, not always fully appreciated in the two countries where they lived. Ruth and Leonor are not, for example, in the Portuguese dictionary *Feminae* (João Esteves, Zília O. de Castro, 2013). The *Dicionário Mulheres do Brasil* (Women of Brazil Dictionary) (Schuma SCHUMAHAR; Erico V. BRAZIL, 2000) has an entry about Ruth, which highlights her achievements as an actress, cultural entrepreneur, politician and feminist, but omits the writing of memoirs (ESCOBAR, 1982; 1987). In the past, I have drawn attention to the perceptions in these autobiographies concerning the migratory flow in which both women participated (Mario GRANGEIA, 2019).

In this work, I reappraise the documentary value of these books adding a fertile reading to feminist studies based on autobiographies, a literary genre usually neglected in research. As for the focus on sex roles, it should be noted that this term, according to Christine Delphy (2018), was framed from a Parsonsian sociological perspective and was used extensively, developing critically in the 1940s-1960s and having as its heir the concept of gender.

Role is the active aspect of status (...). This perspective is clearly sociological, in the good sense of the term: the places and activities of individuals are not considered as arising from their nature or their own abilities, but from their social organization. Under these conditions, to speak of the “roles” of women and men is to take a big step towards denaturalizing the respective positions and occupations of the sexes (DELPHY, 2018, p. 199).

The following sections recall perceptions of women’s social roles in general (and the authors’) in the autobiographies of Ruth Escobar and Leonor Xavier. Distinctions are associated, among other factors, with their family histories and professional routines – in particular, the social roles

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<sup>1</sup> I am thankful for the reading and commentaries of the *Revista Estudos Feministas* (Feminist Studies Journal) reviewers on this article as well as Lis Vilaça and Daniel Moutinho on a draft version.

<sup>2</sup> This version, released in October 1989, whose title is linked to the figure of Medusa, is cited by Machado (2020).

they played in Brazil and Portugal. Their autobiographical accounts expose the initial presence of traditional views about women and the progressive adoption of more modern perspectives, especially after immigration. Next, the authors' perceptions of women's social roles are linked to their practices of "mediation" (the term is used here in the sense adopted by authors such as Jesús MARTÍN-BARBERO, 2003). The conclusion emphasizes how this pair of intellectual paths illustrates possibilities for the mediation of women's experiences during the 20th century.

### Ruth Escobar, the "castrating" mother and the chastity belt

Ever since she was a girl, Ruth Escobar<sup>3</sup> paid more attention to the street than the house. "I can't remember anything inside the house, not even the room, the color of the room; it is an irreducible erasure" (Ruth ESCOBAR, 1987, p. 21). This preference was attributed by psychoanalyst Hélio Pellegrino (1987), in the preface to the autobiography, to the mystery in the family atmosphere where the effort of trying to decipher things and find the place that belonged to her arose. The street was central to Ruth, who saw herself as a mediator of knowledge when she judged that her story could attract women and men by highlighting the detours that produce people like her: "my story may interest women, and perhaps also some men, by showing how many alternate routes emerge from a person who already walks alone, with the confidence and joy of letting herself be just as she is in order to see what happens" (p. 14). Writing an autobiography, it seems, was a means of imparting lessons by example – and of reinforcing the role of "mediating intellectual" before the term.

Maria Ruth lived in Porto until she was 16, when her mother Marília and she, who was born from an extramarital relationship, left for São Paulo in search of a better future for her outside Portugal, according to her mother. Marília got a job as a seamstress and Ruth divided her time between studying and working, selling advertisements for the *Revista das Indústrias*. Maternal instructions were so disconcerting that they never left the author's memory, who defined her relationship with her mother as "primary, repressive and castrating" (p. 37).

Mammy used to say: (...)

"Behave properly, like a girl. You are of marriageable age, you must have good, honest manners to deserve a good husband" (...).

"Don't rub yourself up against any boy, play hard to get; they only look for the most difficult ones and only marry those who resist the temptation of the devil; watch what you're doing to your mother" (p. 37).

While her mother saw women as bound to marriage through chastity, Ruth wanted to leave home and be independent. She soon wanted to publish her own magazine, *Ala Arriba*, for the Portuguese colony, with news from overseas and the community. Ruth married Frenchman J. at age 18, more as a gesture of solidarity from the architect-designer and colleague to take her away from her repressive mother, who made her want to run away and even commit suicide.

Her intimate changes were driven by moving away from her mother. Months later, Ruth became pregnant and Marília forced her to have an abortion, with the connivance of her husband from the contrived marriage, which later made her feel like a "disorganized female, without ideas and without will" (p. 44-45). Still at 18, she traveled to Asia, intending to bring back news from the Portuguese colonies; the trip included China, Vietnam, and Portuguese India and was paid for by advertisements from the Caracu brewery, freelance stories, and the sale of her apartment and furniture. In her memoirs, the submissive pregnant woman became a fearless traveler.

The Confucian idea of women marked her in Saigon, where she was reminded of the view of women under male tutelage in Portugal during the dictator Antonio Salazar's time. It is worth noting the critical account of the condition of Vietnamese women:

She always walked three steps behind her husband. A man could have as many wives and concubines as he wanted, but the adulteress was condemned to have her head shaved and be put in irons, or to be crushed under the paws of elephants; a widow was faithful to the memory of her husband forever and ever, and if she was caught in a suspicious attitude, she was beheaded. Now, a Vietnamese husband could get rid of his wife, just because she was a chatterbox (p. 65).

Ruth married and had children with philosopher Carlos Henrique Escobar (Christian and Patrícia), set designer Wladimir Cardoso (Anna Ruth and Inês), art critic Nelson Aguiar (Nelson), and engineer Daryl Paffenroth (no children, in 1992), built a theater, and wrote that she never wanted to be an object of support and consumption by men. Reviewing facts after decades, she took significant stock of how she saw the status of women, after witnessing gender relations in Portugal, Brazil, and other countries. For example, she considered that "being a woman" was something absolute for her, and said she wanted to understand women more after centuries of self-destruction.

<sup>3</sup> All citations, unless specifically indicated, are from *Maria Ruth* (ESCOBAR, 1987).

"As I try to untangle the yarn and undo my knots, many women will understand me, and perhaps my story will help them to tell their own, to see themselves, to fall in love with their identity as I fell in love with mine" (p. 52, read here a mediating self-image). Ultimately, being a woman requires overcoming this secular tradition of self-destruction and getting to know this identity better.

In the gap between desire and reality, Ruth sealed a pact with Wladimir to wear a chastity belt adaptable to her panties with the padlock key carried around his neck. This months-long "amorous exhibitionism," in her terms, yielded psychological scars as well as health problems and the fear that her "love charm" would be seen backstage – until her friend the actress Cacilda Becker intervened after becoming aware of the artifact. "With her queenly manner, clad in authority and full of affection, she made me see the exotic anomaly of such subordination. She made me swear that when I got home I would not only throw away the padlock, but all the perforated panties" (p. 123). In Ruth's memory, admiration for her friend is coupled with an admission of subordination.

## Artist between feminists in Portugal and engagement in Brazil

Going over her life, Ruth attributed her attraction to feminism to her contact, in Lisbon of 1973, with the authors of *Novas Cartas Portuguesas*, a pioneering book on feminism in Portugal, from the previous year.<sup>4</sup> For the theater producer, who had spent months in the local season of *Cemitério de Automóveis*,<sup>5</sup> the authors of *NCP* and two friends of hers in Lisbon made her rethink the theme and, moreover, familiarize herself with ideas that she would spread on Brazilian soil in public interventions (interviews, staging...) and, later, in her autobiography. Her acquaintance with one of them, Brazilian actress and feminist activist Norma Bengell, made Ruth associate debates on women's emancipation with criticism of the dictatorship in Brazil, Portugal, and Latin America.

I knew nothing of feminism, awareness of being a woman, or of oppression. I began, from new and revolutionary information, to restructure my edifice. I read *The Second Sex* and *Novas cartas portuguesas* for the first time.

In this re-reading of myself, I began to see how my symbols and feelings had all been imported from a strictly masculine universe.

I had built a theater, put on a fantastic show, brought my mother and children, in short, organized a whole space that you, my M., should reflect back to me as a filter of my image (ESCOBAR, 1987, p. 144-145).

Discussions with feminists renewed her perspective on life, as everyday issues faded: "everything seemed unreal, as if I were in a lysergic fishbowl. (...) My religiosity and messianism sank into the well. At night I talked myself to exhaustion, then slept all day, recharging my batteries to be able to come back from the end of my sleep again" (p. 145). Deep reflections preceded the unrestricted adherence to the feminist cause.

In the chapter "A descoberta" (The discovery) from her autobiography (25th of 30, followed by correspondence and notes called "fragments of the now"), she revisited her initiation into feminism and made brief remarks about writers who deprecated women (St. Thomas, Rousseau, Roger de Caen, and Pierre Damian) and women she admired (George Sand, Flora Tristan, and Simone de Beauvoir). Her intellectual writing in the second half of the 1980s considered then that 19th century romanticism had turned the woman from a "witch-sacrifice to an idealized muse on a pedestal" (p. 147). She pitted these figures against a new time ushered in by strong women and writers (as in her case, as one might add reading between the lines). Seeing herself at the center of the revolution, in 1973, Ruth began to see herself as another. "A woman was going to be born! And if my awakening as a feminist was based on the history of women's struggle in France, I soon discovered English women, American women, and the long history of horror and mutilation of our African sisters." (p. 148).

After performances of *Cemitério de automóveis* in other countries, Ruth returned to Brazil willing to renew herself. So much so that in 1974-75 she became progressively involved in the women's liberation movement, in parallel with the struggle to put an end to the dictatorship that had been installed in Brazil since 1964. These were times of intense questioning about her personal investments up to then and in the future. "I didn't know what hurt more – the great love interrupted, a whole life without clarity, a troubled career, a bunch of children, or loneliness" (p. 154). The acute pain of Clarice Herzog, widow of journalist Wladimir Herzog, murdered by agents of the dictatorship who faked his suicide, marked and incited new mobilizations.<sup>6</sup> "She [Clarice] gives me, to this day, the sense of security in being a woman, the animal that emerges from the supercilious,

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<sup>4</sup> Written by Maria Isabel Barreno, Maria Velho da Costa and Maria Teresa Horta ("the three Marias"), *Novas Cartas Portuguesas* was a milestone of feminist thought in the literature of Portugal, a country that did not recognize female emancipation and was living through the final years of the dictatorial regime (1933-1974).

<sup>5</sup> Text by Fernando Arrabal, directed by Victor Garcia, with staging authorized in the city of Cascais only.

<sup>6</sup> In 1975, the director of journalism at TV Cultura went to testify about his links to the Brazilian Communist Party at the DOI-Codi in São Paulo, where he was arrested, tortured, and murdered. The initial official version was of suicide using his belt

like lightning before the hecatomb. (...) A new challenge weighed me down – to participate, to resist, to conspire. I changed my human landscape; I began to participate in meetings” (p. 156-157). Here she repeats the actions of the intellectual's new challenge: “participate”, “resist”, and “conspire”. As noted by Mariza Correa (2011), feminists in Brazil defined themselves better during the struggle against the dictatorship, although their history was longer.

The Teatro Ruth Escobar (initially touted as Gil Vicente) became a relevant address for culture and politics. The critic, Jefferson Del Rios (*apud* Eder RODRIGUES, 2015, p. 87), said it was “one of the points of resistance to the dictatorship, one of the tribunes for public liberties, which culminated with the *Diretas Já* (Direct Elections Now) movement. It is a merit of Ruth. The venue was also the site of debates involving feminist and Black movements”. This reference to events in support of the Black cause suggests a less segmented activism.

This political activism is best witnessed in *Dossiê de uma rebelião* (Dossier of a rebellion) (ESCOBAR, 1982), about the work of the team she led to create a theater group in a São Paulo prison. As noted by lawyer Heleno Fragoso in introducing the book, the work had enormous influence on prison life until it was interrupted after a riot in Christmas 1980. “This volume reports on the work of an admirable woman, who brought hope and joy where there is only sadness and desolation” (*apud* ESCOBAR, 1982, p. 10). The book closes with letters from inmates to Ruth, complaints about the penitentiary, and news of the aforementioned riot. Averse to the dictatorship, the actress had been arrested so many times she lost count, was facing lawsuits, and would be the target of acts of psychological terrorism and bomb threats at her shows.<sup>7</sup>

In the 1980s, Ruth Escobar added a political focus to her theater, becoming a two-term state congresswoman in São Paulo (1983-1991) for the Brazilian Democratic Movement Party (PMDB), and was the first president of the National Council for Women's Rights (1985-1986). The autobiography was released after she left that position, but her period in office and her first term in the Legislative Assembly were not revisited in the work. In the second edition, in 2003, the book cover announced that the writer would release another volume in which she would narrate the events that took place after the electoral campaign. Her health, however, prevented that plan: she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's in 2000 and all her memory and professional activity would be compromised, until she passed away in the spring of 2017. Years later, the richly illustrated biography *Metade é verdade* (Half is true), by Alvaro Machado, was published. (2020).

## Leonor Xavier and the civil status that distinguishes women<sup>8</sup>

In her memoirs, Leonor Xavier made an interesting narrative choice: she wrote the chapters making direct reference to the houses where she lived. This is the reason for the title *Casas contadas* (Counted houses) which refers to the 13 addresses that give the chapters their names. The autobiography begins in her maternal grandparents' house in Lisbon, Portugal, where she was born in the spring of 1943 and lived her first three years, and continues to the country house in Ribatejo, a refuge completed in 1995.

The memories of the 1940s encompassed those who passed by in everyday life and visitors on holidays, such as the great-aunts. Women of the oldest generation cited were described by visible characteristics, such as their bulging eyes or quiet voice, until mention was made of qualities common to them:

All diffuse images, more or less successful matriarchs, or single women destined to silence their opinions. A family in which the women had a somewhat commanding role, and in which the men carried out their liberal professions, with a good name and proven competence. Of the great-uncles, I did not retain anything that I can recall. And of their children, I have preserved the names, Maria da Graça, João, Maria Leonor. Names repeated until today, in the succession of the house (XAVIER, 2018, p. 18).

Leonor Xavier depicted the then naturalized association between women's identities and their place in the family life: if married, they played a leading role in the families; if single, they were “destined to silence their opinions”. It is interesting that her memories about the great-aunts contrast with the forgetfulness about the great-uncles (“nothing that I remember did I retain”), also because of the greater contact with these women than with the men in a context of greater familial conservatism.

It was at home, but outside of the family, that her initiation into aspects of love life began as a girl during visits to her grandparents' home. The cook Desidéria would give her lessons such as that the first stolen kiss is the best of all and would draw parallels between her boyfriend's body and smooth custard milk, decorated with cinnamon hearts on a platter. This lack of decorum

<sup>7</sup> In the most violent attack, on July 18, 1968, Marília Pera, other actors from the cast of *Roda viva* (Chico Buarque's play), and part of the audience were beaten up and the theater trashed by the extreme right-wing paramilitary group *Comando de Caça aos Comunistas* (Communist Hunt Command) (CCC).

<sup>8</sup> All citations, unless specifically indicated, are from *Casas contadas* (XAVIER, 2018).

was recognized by the child, because it was a subject forbidden to every interlocutor, by age or profession.

The distance between masters and maids, in turn, was a lesson learned early on. In Chapter 2, from the household lived in from 1947, Leonor Xavier notes that the maids “lived in a world apart and did not have to know about matters that did not pertain to them” (p. 22). Hence, she recalls her parents speaking about private matters in French at the table in front of the maid summoned by the ringing of a metal bell. The illiteracy of the maids made Leonor no stranger to some of their issues and feelings: she became a confidant by answering requests to write letters dictated to her. Domestic work, as the autobiographer described, was exclusively female and, in that social environment, restricted to maids.

Her description of her mother expressed an uneasy viewpoint concerning intimate matters. Born in 1908, she was described as beautiful and mannerly, “sweet and discreet”, a polyglot who played tennis, rode a bicycle, and swam. “She had suitors and sweethearts, when I was already a woman; she laughed without much explanation if there was any allusion to her femininity, to the strength of her personality, her ironic way of appreciating everything around her” (p. 24). For Leonor, her mother hid her emotions of sensuality from herself until death. Without going into detail, she wrote that she “expressed, in the twinkle of her eyes, the good times of her youth, soon overshadowed by the woes that came early in her adulthood” (p. 24). For instance, the autobiographer ignored the reason (always silenced) for her mother no longer having contact with in-laws.

The closeness between Leonor and Alberto Xavier, her first husband, went back to high school, where he made fun of the Greek alphabet in language classes. They married after seven years of courtship. She graduated in Romance Philology at the University of Lisbon and he graduated as a lawyer – for her father, her entrance into university was the great landmark of her emancipation. She felt similarly, considering it a significant achievement to attend university, study for pleasure, and date without limits. Married life did not align with her yearnings for emancipation, she noted when quoting the rite of marriage: “At my age, dressed in white, little did I know that it would be difficult for me to submit on all future occasions to what the Epistle to the Ephesians told me: ‘Let wives obey their husbands as to the Lord’” (p. 51-52).

A more lived-in look at marriage is evident in the fourth chapter, after Leonor looks back at photos from a younger age. Saying she was almost moved to see the smooth skin and naive look, she rethinks her habit of saying “we” to talk about her tastes, choices, and decisions, referring to a unity with two people.

As if to make concrete the idea that man and woman are one body and soul through marriage, I would thus express a presumed consensus with my husband, no matter how big or small the issues. The ideas, the feelings, the impressions would not be different between us (p. 82).

Never going to the movies, theater, restaurant or parties without her husband, she remembered with discomfort the many years until she could express herself in the singular.

The civil status of married was for me the position of a woman free from obedience to parents, it meant the right not to ask permission to practice the acts that seemed to me more daring, libertarian, and independent. Always as a couple, choosing the times, the reading, the schedules, the outings, the entertainment (...) Thinking I was my own mistress, my body didn't belong to me, I didn't know what to do with it, which at these times was beyond me, and I thought that nature itself was like that, without artifices when it came to making love.

Apparently, we fulfilled the perfect model of the couple in vogue in the 1960s, which I followed as if the world outside were evolving without conflict, without ruptures or convulsions (XAVIER, 2018, p. 82-83).

The writer referred to the liberation struggles of the overseas colonies from Portuguese rule, responsible for familial splits felt by other women, but not by her, since an innate deformity in Alberto's foot got him out of military service. Leonor ended up associating this fact with her not learning about the uncertainty, distance, and insecurity that would distinguish her from so many of her friends. A peculiar situation with her husband, however, led Leonor to reinvent her life abroad.

## **Immigration and a female writer's new look at women**

When democracy returned to Portugal in 1974, after closed regimes since 1926, the changes were felt more by families like the Xavier family: Secretary of Planning in the 40 days before “Revolução dos Cravos”, Alberto was removed from his position as a law professor at the University of Lisbon. So, he, Leonor, and their children Leonor, Maria, and Gonçalo immigrated to São Paulo in March, 1975. She only found out about the destination three days prior and her parents paid for the flight ticket to São Paulo.

There began “the great turning point of my life” (p. 106), since until then Leonor had not worked and she ended up becoming a journalist and writer in Brazil. The lack of knowledge and

planning in the departure can be seen in the hesitation about what clothes to take: “with no notion of the cold or the heat, the rain or the good weather that we would discover on that other side of the world totally unknown to me, and distant from all my imagination until the moment I was made aware of and obeyed the order to leave” (p. 107). Note in this excerpt her subaltern self-image.

Between 1975 and 1979, the family lived in São Paulo, where Alberto became a professor at the Pontifical Catholic University (PUC-SP) and a partner in a law firm. Leonor experienced in Brazil “the discovery of life torn apart, waiting for me there clandestinely. With my eyes wide open in astonishment, I could not imagine what shape the future would take, because I had never before thought of anything but the serene continuity of all things, forever” (p. 134). She claimed to have an unpayable debt of gratitude to the country. Immigration renewed her perspective on women's roles.

In her four years in São Paulo, she went from being a housewife with a growing network of contacts to a private French teacher and door-to-door reseller of Tupperware plastics and, later, Jafra cosmetics, living “decisive years in my story as a woman” (p. 221). The reinvention included examples like Marlene, a 19-year-old maid from Bahia, from whom she says she learned self-esteem, independence without anger or disrespect, freedom of speech, and performing manual labor without subservience. Another thing she learned about in Brazil was consumer society.

She didn't waste opportunities to experience new things – like going to the carnival in Rio de Janeiro in 1976, where she saw the samba schools' parade; she would take part in the parade years later. The move to Brazil disrupted women's social roles in a way that was unparalleled to the conditions in Portugal. Leonor witnessed countless cases up close, especially among families under the effect of the democratic transition after the *Revolução dos Cravos* (Carnation Revolution).

(...) women who reacted to the events, refusing to be bitter, to complain, be angry, or revolt against the new political order in Portugal. Women from good families who rarely exercised a profession, because of limited studies and poor qualifications. They had been prepared to follow traditional structures, and left the country out of obedience to their husbands. Already in Brazil, the men's salaries being insufficient to cover the family's expenses, they left the order of the home and took to the streets, committing themselves to work, trying to find a gap in the space they could reach. And then there were great revelations (XAVIER, 2018, p. 185).

The autobiographer would then recall the philosopher Agostinho da Silva's statement that Portuguese immigrants discovered in Brazil the existence of an outer space equal to their inner space. She agreed, adding that women had discovered this earlier, so much so that many had turned out to be entrepreneurs at the head of small businesses and services. Later, she saw those examples up-close in “women who grasped life with gusto, and soon figured out the new rules in the new world” (p. 235). Another country, other women—an observation that, it should be noted, is described among women who were literate and had notably more favorable material conditions than most of those who were part of this flow.

In one of the letters from that time, sent to her parents, she revised her (self)criticism about mothers of small children in São Paulo, seen as “slaves to hours and traffic, to ballet and English classes, to physical activity in clubs, to dutiful religious practices” (p. 188). In a letter to a friend, she offered a defense of Jorge Amado's female characters. “Colonel Jesuino's repression was reminiscent of the Geisel government. And the struggle of the women of Ilhéus for freedom, against machismo, arbitrariness, and impunity, gave those who thought about all these things a lot to think about” (p. 212). In São Paulo or in the interior of Bahia, women were faced with different challenges, and the writer stressed both to her readers.

The family moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1979, when Alberto opened an office branch. Leonor compared the move to immigrating to a Portuguese colony with a restricted mentality, closed off to Brazilian topics, always in groups and saying bad things. She became a journalist for outlets in Brazil, such as *O Mundo Português*, *Jornal do Brasil*, and *Mulher de Hoje* magazine (in which she said she gave tips to women), and in Portugal, such as *Diário de Notícias* and *Tempo*. In Rio, she published *Atmosferas* (XAVIER, 1980), an essay about her beginnings in Brazil and reminiscences of Portugal, two books of interviews – *Entrevistas* (1982) and *Falar de viver* (1986) – and the novel *Ponte aérea* (XAVIER, 1983).

The author felt her private life was going badly – in contrast to her public life – with the couple's growing mismatch of interests. “The change of country and mentality was fracturing the unity we had affirmed in the celebration of marriage. The differences were accentuated by opposing paths in daily life” (p. 266). And she attributed the crisis that led to the separation in 1984 to immigration and its effects. The consequences of this divorce were not long in coming:

While adapting to my new status as a divorced woman, alone, first person individual, responsible for myself in Rio de Janeiro, I went through several convulsions. One moment I was full of confidence and affirmation, the next I felt abandoned, insecure and unattractive, thinking I had

to go on a diet again because I was fat. (...) I realized that it is women who command men and not the other way around, I analyzed the behavior of the women called teases and the same in the false ingénues, who play the fool and are the devil (XAVIER, 2018, p. 289).

The debate about women's social roles makes a rare appearance in *Falar de viver* in an interview with the Azorean poet Luiza de Mesquita. In the words of the then assistant for cultural affairs at the US Consulate in Rio de Janeiro, "the liberalization of women goes through this independence: a liberated woman cannot depend on her husband for everything, she has to be able to realize herself through a job or an idea" (Luiza de Mesquita *apud* XAVIER, 1986, p. 235). Leonor did not make further considerations on the issue, but, because of visions like these, she concluded her text by declaring that she gained a greater enrichment every day through what she learned from others.

The writer returned to Lisbon in 1987, reconnecting with an identity that had never been lost. The return was decided after she had covered the visit of President Mário Soares to Brazil and saw that her Brazilian identity (she had obtained dual nationality) did not outweigh that of her roots. In the Portuguese capital she teamed up with the famous actor Raul Sonado, of whom she wrote a biography. In the media, she became one of the journalists for the women's magazine *Máxima*.

In the final chapter, in which Leonor refers to her country house in Ribatejo, her neighbor Luisa is highlighted as an example of a mature woman, wiser than many insensitive and witless society women. The hesitation whether to call her a "working woman" or a "talented woman" suggests doubt about new visions of womanhood.

Willing to share the lessons she learned with readers, Leonor exposed the metaphor of the mature woman that she took from the actress Tônia Carrero's answer when asked about her suitors, "who were always in their prime": "Now I don't need a boyfriend, I have a man at home. My grandson João, four years old, who stays close to me asking me what clothes I'm going to wear, what hairstyle, what cream, and gives me attention, and thinks I'm pretty" (Tônia Carrero, 1987 *apud* XAVIER, 2018, p. 370). Although the major cultural mediation of the author was between people from Portugal and Brazil, Leonor acted as a mediator not only in Luso-Brazilian relations, but in topics of behavior, such as gender differences and inequalities.

## Perceptions of women and cultural mediation

In their autobiographies and other channels, Ruth and Leonor contributed to the circulation of ideas about women and their social roles. The idea of Gomes and Hansen (2016) that the "mediating intellectual"—notable among professionals in the arts, journalism, and other fields—"perfects him/herself in mediation activities and in the use of languages and strategies with his/her experience and with that accumulated over time" (GOMES, HANSEN, 2016, p. 19) is shared here. With more sharpness in the actress-politician than in the journalist-writer, they seemed to have gained expertise in reaching audiences not specialized in feminism.

The literary works and interviews of these Luso-Brazilian women reveal their explicit and tacit knowledge of the feminism they helped to spread. It is natural to note differences between the starting and ending points of the two, but, each in her own way took on a leading role as "mediating intellectual" in their time and for their audiences. By recognizing the value of this facet of these women, we aim to reduce a long-standing gap, a deficit in the studies not only of them as "mediating intellectuals", but of both sexes.

Although the activity of cultural mediation is indispensable and unavoidable in any society—education is perhaps its best expression—frequently the mediating intellectual—who devotes time and effort to it [cultural mediation] and always has a political-cultural project—, especially when exclusively dedicated to mediation, is not even recognized as an intellectual, being neglected in the analyses and considered of secondary value, if not superfluous (GOMES; HANSEN, 2016, p. 17).

The comparative analysis presented here has provided not only a broader understanding of each of these intellectuals, but also a clear understanding of the pair of elements dear to the history of intellectuals: intellectual trajectory—with its respective means, networks, and places—and generation. On the one hand, there is a Porto woman who, since she was a little girl, clashed with the more traditional notions of womanhood that were part of the repertoires of her mother and her husbands, J. and Wladimir. On the other, the woman from Lisbon who, from childhood to early adulthood, considered marital status as a marker of women's identity. While one came into contact with feminism in Portugal, amidst women from the cultural scene, the other started to rethink women's social roles in Brazil, given the example of immigrants who, like her, were urged to reinvent themselves.

I had exhausted my repertoire of reconciliations with reality. The feast of the great love, the illusion of the prince, lord, husband and lover, fulfilling the synthesis of all the dreams of the woman-girl-adventurer-seducer, was over. It was a giant fragment full of deep, dark cracks. Where was the cement to fill them? (ESCOBAR, 1987, p. 148).



They left behind class prejudices, simplified their routines, opened their homes in a fraternal way, and became more human. Steadfast, they accompanied their men, overcame personal and marital crises, gained a broader vision of the world and of life (XAVIER, 2018, p. 185).

In such autobiographical excerpts, these intellectuals – not always so widely recognized for their *social role* of cultural mediation – would unwittingly corroborate the critiques of authors such as sociologist Andrée Michel of what Delphy (2018, p. 200) has termed “women’s cantonment in traditional roles and the notion that this is good for them and for society.” By playing the role of “mediating intellectuals,” Ruth and Leonor interpellated, through memory – and tacitly – the perspective of social role, of high historical value as an analytical category (although progressively preempted in favor of the concept of gender). Lucila Scavone (2018) noted that the French concept *rappports sociaux de sexe* (social relations of sex) could resemble the construction of social sex, despite its more explicit Marxist materialist basis than the concept of gender, more tied to poststructuralist and postmodern theories.

No longer harboring illusions such as that of the man capable of fulfilling his dreams as a woman, in a rupture attributed in her autobiography to contact with feminism from sources in the Northern hemisphere, the actress and theater producer reviewed phases of her engagement in an interview with Leonor Xavier. On this occasion, she explained feminism’s strategies of expression at the end of the 1970s:

In 1978, we met every Monday in a group of twenty, thirty women, almost all university students, to have lunch at my house. From there the *Frente Nacional de Mulheres* (National Women’s Front) was born and the great Brazilian women leaders emerged. The women’s movement gained such scope that we started to have debates on Monday nights in my theater. We did revolutionary things, like inviting Luiz Carlos Prestes, leader of the Brazilian Communist Party, recently returned to Brazil, to talk about his experiences, or asking several prostitutes to give their personal testimonies about the condition of women. I began to speak out against the violence against prostitutes, with the support of the Church (ESCOBAR, 2002 *apud* XAVIER, 2016, p. 177-178).

Ruth’s account demonstrates her commitment to the introduction of feminism in Brazil, and she worked to spread it via domestic settings (home lunches) and public arenas such as the Ruth Escobar Theater itself. Editions of the newspaper *Ruthilante*, from her first term in office, were revisited by researcher Eder Rodrigues in his thesis on facets of the artist-politician. The first issue of the newspaper contained the text “*Ser mulher e parlamentar*” (To be a woman and a parliamentarian), with her instigating considerations about the role of parliamentarian played by women:

Politics in our country has always been a man’s business. On the podium, we women are seen as strange figures or rare birds. And our words have little meaning for many. In fact, there is still so much to be done before we can appear before each State and before the entire Nation as a real, incisive force, full of creativity with regard to the transformation of women’s living conditions and as an emphatic reinforcement of our liberating struggle (...)

The challenge is great and the battle is hard, but I believe in our vitality and in our capacity to shatter old power formulas, without having to become “honorary men”. We will not budge! (ESCOBAR, 1984 *apud* RODRIGUES, 2015, p. 272).

The external image of women on the podium as “rare birds” appears alongside Ruth’s look at her mission to “shatter old power formulas.” In his thesis, Eder Rodrigues reconstructed Ruth’s trajectory, highlighting eight facets of her life: adventurer, novice, producer, rebel, organizer, resister, feminist, and resurgent. The approach, based on oral sources and written documents (mainly texts in the press and from official censorship), highlighted how multifaceted this cultural agent’s path was, drawing attention to her contribution to theater in Brazil. One should not lose sight, however, of the fact that her life and work—in theater and, as emphasized here, in literature—made rich contributions, among others, to civil society activism in the 1970s/80s and to cultural dialogues between Brazil and Portugal.

Whether as a cultural agitator, political activist, or autobiographer, she set her course in such a way that her views on the feminine deserve attention even in the 21st century. This observation also applies to the views of the social roles of women in Leonor Xavier’s autobiography, which complement those of Ruth through the unique traits of each personal path.

The paths of Ruth and Leonor crossed again when, in the early 2010s, the journalist participated in a congress on immigrant women and cited the theater producer and two other immigrants to Brazil – economist Maria da Conceição Tavares and playwright Maria Adelaide Amaral – as exemplary women of the Portuguese diaspora. In her speech, she pointed out that Portuguese women like them have turned emigration into a way out of conditioning.

Today, Portuguese women no longer correspond at all to the model of exclusive dedication to marriage, motherhood, and the service and organization of the home. When they emigrate, they free themselves from the kinship and closeness that so often still condition them in their countries of origin. In the countries of destination, the less qualified women value themselves and

gain knowledge to improve their condition at work. Learning self-esteem and competition, they fight for leadership positions; they want to attain leadership, to nullify inequalities.

Growing up in society, they learn to live with what is different; they become aware of justly acquired rights, and experience the sharing of domestic chores. They take care of their health, adopt family planning methods, and accompany the adaptation of their children to the codes of the society in which they now live (XAVIER, 2011).

Leonor had seen changes in her self-image as a woman as early as two years after immigrating: in letters to friends referred to in *Casas contadas*, she no longer conjugated verbs for family decisions in the first-person plural. "I'd already started writing about these topics in the first person singular, showing that my will as a woman was also going to be important, in the organization of the family" (XAVIER, 2018, p. 187). As a literary professional and, strictly speaking, as an intellectual, she emphasized how changes in her language related to her own changes.

Leonor's early non-fiction books ignored female themes; and women are in the minority of interviewees (five of the 51 names in *Entrevistas* [1982] and ten among the 50 in *Falar de viver* [1986]), unlike Portugal *Tempo de Paixão* (XAVIER, 2000), in which women accounted for half of the 100 testimonies about how 1975 was experienced in Portugal. In the 1982 book of interviews, the author pointed out that she was not a feminist like Teresa Costa Macedo, interviewed as Secretary of State for the Family and who had a memorable remark about the status of women: "I do not champion equality for women, but parity and complementarity in relation to men" (Tereza MACEDO *apud* XAVIER, 1982, p. 75). Leonor was said to have recorded and adopted this phrase.

In another interview, the writer Lygia Fagundes Telles told her that she saw deception and many frustrations among women. "Feminists mess with the heads of those women who have no intellectual vocation. The insistence with which feminists say that women have to leave the home is reactionary and radical" (Lygia F. TELLES *apud* XAVIER, 1982, p. 109). Without making a value judgment, Leonor would transcribe the writer's idea that feminists had the same urge as chauvinists to trample, dominate, and become arrogant.

More than merely divulging interviewees' points of view on the most varied themes to Brazilians and Portuguese, the interviewer provided an example of women's changing social role upon returning to her country in 1987. According to the diplomat and writer Marcello Duarte Mathias (2015), this woman from a bourgeois background, who grew up in traditional Lisbon, had plunged into the boundless universe of Brazilian life, returning to her home country a different woman from the one who had emigrated.

The little bourgeois girl who grew up within the parameters of a traditional Lisbon, so bourgeoisly educated and married, suddenly plunged into the boundless universe of Brazilian life! A girl goes to Brazil, and from there she becomes a woman. That is the touching side of this book: the still emotional debt of gratitude of one who does not forget the seductions once lived. The whole book of memoirs is a point cast between several margins (MATHIAS, 2015).

Through their autobiographical narratives and declarations in the press and debates, Ruth Escobar and Leonor Xavier bore witness to women's emancipation as a construction, not a given condition. Borrowing the phrase dedicated by Marcello Duarte Mathias to Leonor's autobiography, one can read this work and Ruth's as "a point cast between several margins". As Mathias noted, there are several interlaces in the memoirs—for example, margins from Portugal and Brazil, childhood and mature life, boyhood and girlhood, among others. Using these interacements, the memoirists recorded their cultural practices of mediation.

## Final considerations

The history of intellectuals is a fertile field of study and, contrary to most of the area, this article focused on the life and work of female intellectuals, even affirming that the category "mediating intellectual" is far from being applicable only to men. As a matter of fact, the hybrid figures of writers-journalists and journalist-intellectuals have been the subject of good studies among Brazilian authors (e.g., Cristiane COSTA, 2005; Fábio PEREIRA, 2011), but the potential for studies on the trajectories of female intellectuals (journalists or not) remains underexplored. While reconstructing how two women who exercised roles in cultural mediation, in which they are a minority, we discussed how the actress and theater producer Ruth Escobar and the journalist and writer Leonor Xavier conveyed, in their autobiographies, perceptions of women's social roles: daughter, wife, mother, professional, immigrant, entrepreneur, cultural activist, political activist, intellectual, etc. This selection of corpus categorically demonstrated how autobiographies can be relevant sources for capturing perceptions about a theme such as this in a given time and place.

The content analysis of Ruth's and Leonor's works enabled us to contrast women from distinct social origins and trajectories with certain common traits, such as immigration in 20<sup>th</sup> century Brazil—even when not definitive. Furthermore, it accentuated the emergence of new social roles for women as experienced by them after immigration (one immigrated in 1951 and

the other in 1975). In the accounts of Ruth and Leonor, we observe how the understanding of the feminine varied over the generations: one indicator is the criticism of a more traditional view of marriage as a feminine aspiration—a view that Ruth's mother sought to transmit to her daughter and that had become naturalized among Leonor's great-aunts and even in the first phase of the author's marriage.

It is evident how changes in their language accompanied attitudinal changes: the first-person plural gives way to the singular as the wife sees herself more as an individual than as part of a couple. Leonor and other migrants saw the departure from their homeland as a watershed in the construction of autonomous identities as women. Ruth, the daughter of a single mother who emigrated with her before she came of age, wrote about her views of the female condition based on her own life example and those of her friends Norma Bengell and Clarice Herzog.

The two autobiographies provide testimony that women's independence can represent an achievement depending on the background of each life story. More than the dependent-independent dualism, the prose of the two writers gives concreteness to their roles and those of so many women in the theater, press, literature, politics; in short, in the mediation of themes such as feminism. This question was central for Ruth from the 1970s on, and for Leonor, who showed admiration for the actress and other Portuguese immigrants in Brazil; the keynote of the feminist struggle should be parity and complementarity, not equality between women and men. Whatever their perspective on the feminist cause, both dealt with the social roles of women with an originality and wit that prove the importance of both women to literature as well.

On the intellectual scene of a country at the end of the dictatorial regime and the return to democracy, the presence of Ruth Escobar and Leonor Xavier was marked by the way in which, in theater, politics, texts or speeches, they sought to communicate with non-specialized audiences, whether on feminism, political action or Luso-Brazilian themes, for example. Whether addressing broad or segmented audiences – such as women or the immigrant community – they demonstrated that they grasped the changes underway in women's lives. And, as they became aware of the changes, they did not keep those facts and meanings to themselves, preferring to live them and spread them to readers and listeners.

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