

# Game of checkers: Ethnography of transvestites (travestis) who prostitute in Aracaju, capital of Sergipe/Brazil

## Abstract

This research record is part of the cycle of an ethnographic investigation, which I carried out from 2014 to 2020, in territories of transvestite (travesti, in Portuguese) prostitution. The ethnography that moved along these years encompassed several cities, including European cities. However, I selected only part of the records made in Aracaju for this present contribution. The clipping is due to the urgency of exposing the conditions in which travestis, a silenced, concealed, stigmatized and violated group, submit themselves, as a Brazilian cultural phenomenon, when they find themselves at the heart of the tangled tensions in the field of forces that sew their nocturnal lives in regions of prostitution. Travestis are, in general terms, people designated male at birth, whose gender expression deviates from what is imposed on them and aligns with what is socially established as female. However, they do not consider themselves women.

**Keywords:** travesti, prostitution, violence, ethnography, Brazil

Volume 8 Issue 2 - 2023

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**Received:** May 8, 2023 | **Published:** May 30, 2023

## Introduction

This ethnographic research proposes to unveil, from the perspective of the transvestite (travesti, in Portuguese; the translator chose to use the Portuguese term from this point on, as it denominates a specific gender identity) universe, the rites of construction of travestis who work as prostitutes' bodies in the Atalaia neighborhood, in the Capital of Sergipe, Aracaju, Brazil, from 2015 to 2019. We intend, as a main objective, to reflect the body's construction and its imaginary of beauty. For this universe of people, the use of clinical methods, which possess security regarding their lives, is an impossibility, in most cases, due to the financial costs and social stigmas.

"Thus, the use of the noun travesti, as feminine, is also related to the appreciation of the construction process of the feminine gender in the body and subjectivity of travestis".<sup>1</sup> It is also with feminine pronouns that travestis relate and self-refer. However, they do not wish to be women.

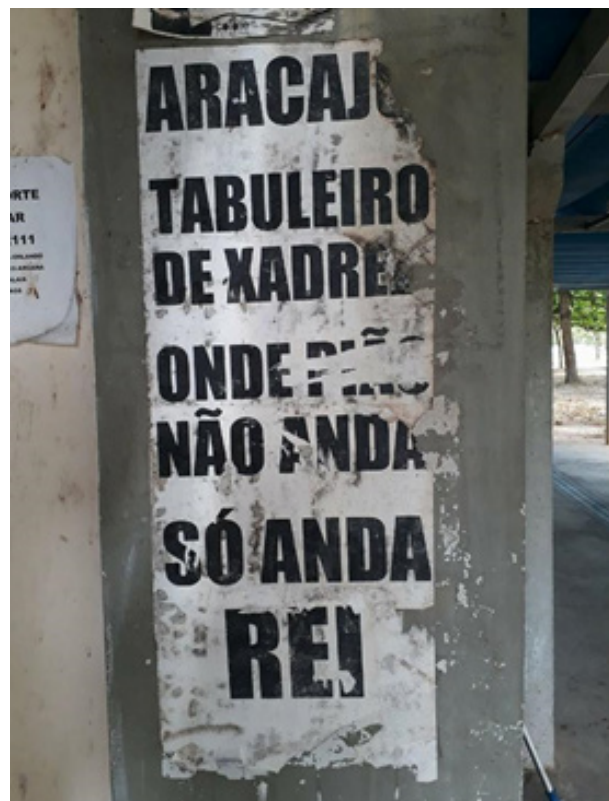
### The territory of travestis' prostitution: Atalaia, Aracaju/Sergipe

The city of Aracaju differs from the nearest capitals: Maceió and, more strikingly, the capital of Bahia, Salvador. The Portuguese model of Salvador's urban layout is nothing like Aracaju. Salvador was assigned urban planning (street outlines and clearly demarcated definitions), and the mercantile logic and relationships that drove it were different, regarding the time period, purpose and topography (Figure 1).

Poster with "Aracaju: chessboard where pawns don't walk around, only kings do" written on it. Source: the author (photo taken in Jan 16th, 2017)

We can observe that, as in part of Brazilian cities, the downtown areas are abandoned while other regions are valued, by the port in the past, more recently by real estate speculation, and violence or the discourse of security, as a social status. Aracaju, in addition to these factors, omits its past, with Atalaia being modernity. With the current change in the master plan allowing verticalization, the replacement

of houses by buildings begins, with inserts, names in French and English, green glass and the prevalence of flow over permanence.



**Figure 1** Poster placed on the Campus of São Cristóvão of the Federal University of Sergipe (UFS – Universidade Federal de Sergipe), [n.d.].

According to the municipal government, the edge of Atalaia is 6 km long. For ethical reasons, I will not pinpoint the exact location of where I worked, thus preserving travestis who, despite all their strength and impetus, are a vulnerable group.

These travestis, ladies of the night, wearing perfumes that can be felt from meters away, sprayed on their clothes, in order not to transmit the essences to the clients' bodies, reconfigure the urban landscape of the locality in the Atalaia neighborhood. After all, this space is more like a street during the day. When the sun goes down, the travestis arrive. The street starts being taken over by another, another and another of them. Commonly, they greet each other: "Hey ya!", hyperbolizing their voices, approaching a feminine tone. Work begins.

The territory is not limited by geographic barriers, but time-related ones: always at night. The placement of each travesti along the streets depends a lot on the relationship they have with each other, especially the ones physically closest, as there is a feeling of mutualism and competition. Mutualism because they protect themselves (in case of theft, or refusal of payment), attend to customers together and share some substances to use during the night, such as alcohol. Competition refers to the fact that both will be evaluated by potential customers as two competing products.

Just as "the people have not yet been completed", the territory flows in continuous evolution. The travestis, prevented from performing sex work near the waterfront, were pushed, under resistance, to the innermost region of the neighborhood, which later proved to be more profitable.

During the 2015 to 2017 timeframe there was a quantitative increase of travestis in this territory, which led to more conflicts. The famous "lady of the black house" declared war on them. This lady moved in and rented the property. She threw hot water and feces on the travestis, who are also victims of hostility from the government, through the police and residents, who have had and still have their homes devalued.

In these new incursions, conflicts between travestis reached the most violent level. I assume this is related to some factors, including a decrease in the clientele and maintenance of hourly price, since 2015.

*[...] It is not known for sure, the fact is that this one travesti stole and she lived in an improvised house right here on the street. One day they set her house on fire, and they say it was the police or the local population, or the other travestis themselves, nobody knows, nobody saw it. She also received several death threats, then she disappeared, they say she left. (verbal information)*

The National Security Force in the territory of prostitution of travestis, in the Atalaia neighborhood, operates continuously, circulating at low speed (something around 20 km/h, or less), in large, black, duly identified cars, usually with four or five heavily armed men inside, each carrying a machine gun or a rifle (I'm unable to identify which one it is), with the barrels projecting through the window, watching and intimidating everyone.

This strategy quickly caused customers to be taken over by the fear of visibility and stop frequenting that territory. After all, the provision of services by travestis is marked by strong stigmas, and the presence of repressive forces really fulfills the role these forces are intended to play. During the early hours of December 23rd, 2017, Key, Dulce and Boca de Ouro (Golden Mouth, direct translation) were at a spot used by them for more than six years, since I worked in that territory, where there were regular customers, such as Petrobras employees who work onboard ships for fifteen days on and fifteen days off, and other customers such as shopkeepers and civil servants. With these new actors and the loss of income/tourism issues, the impact was deep. After all, Aracaju became part of the ten most violent cities

in the country. The hourly sex work rate, during a six-year period, fluctuated. Yet it returned in the same financial contribution range: R\$ 50,00 for a complete job (oral sex, anal sex and masturbation, with kisses being avoided); R\$ 30,00 for oral sex only. Other possibilities are negotiated, such as the client wearing the travesti's clothes, using a dildo, group sex and sex without a condom (these are rarer occurrences, but some of the workers always claim to know others who perform them).

The sun begins to hurl its rays impetuously. Selena, in her beautiful silver chariot, drawn by white horses, has already crossed the sky: the day rushes in. The daily rite comes to an end, time to return home. The streets are gaining other actors, these in a hurry like machines. Now, the territory becomes fond of the streets, as it has lost the scent of the ladies of the night, the danger of thieves and the National Security Force has already gone to sleep. While alone, on returning home, even if some return in pairs or in trios, they will face the looks of morality, the mockery.

### Game of checkers

To whom does the body of travestis serve? I question, while I begin to consider. Perhaps subtly, we immediately say that this question is utilitarian, and trying to answer it too much would impoverish the experience of travestis and their symbolic universe. Then, we move on to other questions: how can I understand/feel the experience of travestis with their bodies: as rites, personal values, stigmas signified and interpreted by them, who work as prostitutes in the Atalaia neighborhood? Under an aesthetic and simultaneously existential dimension? I understand that yes, as in the song by Linn da Quebrada (Linn from the Suburbs, direct translation; Brazilian travesti rapper. Song from 2018): "So take a look, doctor, check out how great / You know my identity / Nothing to do with pussy and dick".

The travestis' body is a process, and "it is in the body that the travesti constructs herself as a person". Therefore, it is also in the body that this group concentrates a significant part of their daily lives, their desires and their power of consumption. The appropriation of goods and services is, almost always, focused or orbiting in the construction of identities close to the feminine, with the body at the center. The travesti's body is not a support for a symbol, it is a symbol in itself. The bombadas ("pumped up" ones, which will be explained and discussed further on), the bichinhas ("femboys"), the traveconas ("trannies") are categories referenced in it.

*I imagine myself like this... More butt, but not too much, you can tell when a travesti is fine! Oh! Improve my hips [passing hands over waist], do a laser treatment to remove those blessed hairs from my face, and chest number 44 or 46, of course, belly, 0 (Verbal information).*

The (re)birth of a travesti is associated with the metamorphosis that distances her from the male name assigned by her family, and links her to one or more names. After all, the first names of travestis are, for the most part, all female or glamorous, like the surnames of actresses.

It was possible to identify, at least in the model perceived in the field, the possessions, whether of silicone, hormones, clothes, or the non-possession, for example, of male products. The construction of travestis' identities is based on their own culture. Symbolic universe that approaches the feminine, referring to itself. Nonetheless, the idea of woman, of feminine, as known in Western culture, is raw material for the travestis at Atalaia. They subvert products, give a new meaning to drugs and highly toxic products, such as industrial silicone. Therefore, it does not seem appropriate to classify travestis

as women who were born men, or men who wish to be women: “[...] I didn’t want to have a pussy, if I did, I wouldn’t be a travesti, I’d be a transexual. I’ll cut my cock and what will I work with? You know, João, that the disgusting sissies from Atalaia just want to be fucked in the ass!” (verbal information).

The travestis I worked with, for the most part, did not seek an essentially feminine ideal of beauty, but, it is believed, a very strong reference to the feminine universe. The voice, for example, is commonly known to have a strong bass. Therefore, they produce words with a sound reference in their own group.

When we allude to the metamorphoses of the human figure, more specifically to the question of identity, we are led to surmises, or to a radical imagination:

*Once identity has been launched, its vanishing point, what remains is a principle of permanent mutation commanding the sensitive perception of the universe: sleep merges with vigil, day with night, man with woman, human being with worm. Everything is written in the equivalence of opposites, annulling any claim to truth. Forms lose their stability Bodily forms become equally interchangeable: the sex rises to the head (Magrille: leViol), the eye lowers to the anus<sup>2</sup>*

By being indifferent to the medical sciences, perhaps because of not having access to them throughout their lives, travestis do not condone or even pay attention to this universe, only doing so when referring to aesthetic intervention surgeries. They are not classified as Personality Dysphoria (ICD 11) by the World Health Organization (WHO), a fact they are unaware of, and, moreover, these are foreign terms, which, in the field, they despise as those who reject a culture that makes them vulnerable.

With that being said, the body of the travestis who work at Atalaia operates under other references, which will be discussed during the course of this analysis. With an external look, it may look like madness, ignorance or other illness. This perception by part of other audiences about travestis has violent repercussions, or, as Moira meticulously explains<sup>3</sup>:

*But there are times when the synchrony of my passage with that river sounds too strange, it makes me insecure, it assaults me. And there are times when, in this insecurity, someone comes along who likes me, and whom I like, to ask how can I stand it, how can I let it go and not go there and spit in the unhappy face. How can I stand it like this, “doing the peach” (not batting an eye). Because if I realize what’s going on around me, the way they look at me, how much my figure doesn’t make sense, then I lock myself in my room and cry. Like yesterday.*

However, there is an oral transmission of knowledge and, in the contemporaneity of the internet, with its social networks, which connect them, showing assertive aesthetic experiments or not. In this regard, this group has a greater observation and management of their body, when compared to other groups. Changing hair color, for example, requires the work to be done by themselves, due to its price. In this way, they get to know the rites and products available. For the researched group, it is not customary to delegate to others what is understood as taking care of one’s own body.

Moreover, we cannot say that manipulation of the body in search of an ideal is exclusive to travestis. In Brazil, the number of surgical interventions with aesthetic purposes has grown every year. Bodies still teenaged are more and more frequent in plastic surgery clinics. Thus, a nose takes on another shape, the mouth is lifted, the skin is stretched. What we can mark as differences are the beauty imaginaries

of this group. After all, as Alice, 22, said: “You can tell when a travesti is fine!” (verbal information).

### **Silicone: the pain of beauty**

In Atalaia, more specifically in the territory surveyed, there are travestis who enjoy a social difference among the group, even charging a higher amount for their work, due to the fact that they have breasts, as a result of the *bombaço* process (pumping process, direct translation; rite described by the application of an oily polymer – silicone –, marked by pain and the immediate transformation of the body, and the symbolic importance for this group). Those who take hormones through contraceptive medicine do not manage to produce breasts, from the point of view of travestis and clients.

In 2013, we did not find travestis with silicone prostheses, a fact that has been repeated now. Yet, according to Bebel, 26 years old: “There were, João, some... you know! Things have changed a lot, it’s gotten more difficult and some, the most dolled up ones, went to Salvador, Rio or Europe, or at least they say they will!” (verbal information).

Ever since its first use, reported in 1980, *bombaço* has been empirically improved and disseminated. As stated by Kulick:<sup>4</sup> “[...] However, some travestis go as far as injecting 20 liters of [industrial] silicone”. In another passage, Kulick mentions that this is the last resort of the travestis he researched. The reality in the territory of Atalaia is signaled by the older ones as a possibility for the transformation of their bodies from the beginning, and it is a marker, a rite of passage.

Industrial silicone must be distinguished from breast implant silicone, which is sterile and pure. The industrial one is raw material, as its name suggests, for the automotive material industry and domestic cleaning products, not presenting the two qualities of the silicone used for breast implants. Its usefulness is directed, originally, to the production of a specific type of rubber or products for domestic cleaning, among several other applications.

The presentation of the product used by travestis is odorless, colorless and oily, sold clandestinely. According to Dara, 23 years old: “It exists! Nobody knows how she [the *bombadeira*, or *pumper*, person responsible for the application] gets it, but she has as much as you want” (Verbal information).

The purchase seems to take place in the clandestine market, since, according to bill no. 26/1999 (direct translation):

*From the COMMISSION OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS, to the House Bill No. 26, of 1999 (No. 3.961, of 1997, at its origin), which “Establishes norms for the medical use of silicone prostheses and makes other measures” among other questions below:*

*The House Bill No. 26, of 1999, aims to prohibit the use of liquid silicone in the human body, as determined in the caput of art. 1st of the proposition, and define conditions for the use of silicone prostheses, as provided for in art. 2nd.*

The *bombadeiras*, in Aracaju, are not restricted to a territory, a fact described by Kulick and Oliveira about Salvador.<sup>4,5</sup> Normally, these *bombadeiras* are older travestis and, therefore, more experienced, which corroborates the hypothesis of the tradition of oral and empirical communication. They, after a long period of coexistence accompanying *bombaço* processes, being *bombadas*, watching the rite or participating as helpers and caregivers after the silicone applications, begin to perform the function, since prostitution is no longer a market so open to them.



It is important to emphasize that bombadeiras occupy a prominent place among travestis, as breast prostheses were not shown to be a possibility:

*Here, there is only one doctor who does it, but who has R\$5.000,00 for that? It's a lot of R\$50,00 sex work. We also have to dress up, do our hair, shoes, makeup and stuff like that, right? It's impossible! Now, if I go to Madrid, that's a whole other situation. But there they only want it with breasts and all that stuff. (Verbal information)*

The application of industrial silicone, in turn, is an option at a possible cost, immediate transformation, and everyone knows the risks. All interviewees showed knowledge of cases of fellow travestis who, from their perspective, were beautiful, and others who were deformed. Bela, 26 years old, one of the most experienced travestis interviewed, pointed out something that she had never read in ethnographic reports or scientific articles:

*Bela: When [the industrial silicone] doesn't work... they make a hole in the middle to let the blood out along with the silicone.*

*Me: Does that really solve it?*

*Bela: It improves a lot and with the massages, it does eventually solve the problem (Verbal information).*

Some choose to apply the silicone in small quantities and several times, despite the high cost, due to their work. This process reduces the risk, however, comparing the travestis described by Kulick, who applied up to 20 liters of silicone, this is not the reality found in the researched territory.

Simultaneously, outside this group, these bombadeiras can be classified in three articles of the Brazilian Criminal Law Code: bodily injury; illegal practice of medicine; and medical charlatanism (curandeirismo, in Portuguese). Such crimes are punishable by up to eight years in prison. Perhaps this is one of the aspects that make access to the bombadeiras difficult.

The pumping process called *bombaço* is part of the conversations perceived in the daily life of the travestis, both in their intimate lives and on the street, observing the bodies of the bombadas (those who underwent *bombaço*) and commenting, as verified during the field research in 2015. The aforementioned issue of private and public life I could observe in the speech of Raquel, 21 years old, on the importance of *bombaço*:

*An actual travesti has tits, ass, hips and long hair, right? So bombaço is a matter of luck, you can look beautiful, wonderful, earn even more money or not. On the other hand, just with hormones you're a "gayrota" (neologism, gay plus girl, similar to "femboy"), a fag in a wig, that's how it works (Verbal information).*

The liquid silicone, the *bombaço*, are parts of the definitive rite of passage for travestis, which began with the change of name. I never found it respectful to ask what their previous name was, but some told stories that fatally referred to their male name.

According to their reports, the process of ingesting industrial silicone is characterized by severe pain, which is understood as part of the transformation to a pretty body, as if there was no beauty without pain. And this experience, marked by pain, can lead to death, which they themselves call "Pain of Beauty", the meeting of silicone (chemical substance – polymer) with organic tissue.

The travesti, in order to be "pumped" (*bombada*), has the area perforated by veterinary needles, due, according to them, to the thickness of the silicone, as it is a type of substance with a high degree

of viscosity and dense when compared to oil. Commonly, for the application of two liters to build the hips, 20 to 30 veterinary syringes are applied, with greater thickness. To reduce pain, xylocaine or another anesthetic is used.

To achieve symmetry between each side, the same amount of syringes should be injected, followed by massage. Each bombadeira has their own process and form, some do it faster, others do it more slowly.

*How to do it depends on her [bombadeira]. Each one has their own way, so you have to choose which one of them you trust, because it's not cheap. I myself, before "pumping" myself, looked at the bodies of others, heard the stories, this kind of stuff. But with me, thank God, everything worked out and I liked it (Verbal information).*

In order to prevent the substance from flowing down to the lowest part, the legs are tied. In the breasts' case, even a wooden board is placed in order to prevent the so-called pigeon chest. Some travestis die of a heart attack, others of an infection. However, this is the only resource available to a group without further choices. This polymer (silicone) thus builds a body with other raw materials.

The possible body of travestis, loaded with liquid silicone, makes me think on the basis of two articles published in 1929 and discussed by researcher Elaine Robert Moraes,<sup>6</sup> in *The Impossible Body* (O Corpo Impossível, direct translation):

*Doctor Charles Henry Maye set out to establish exactly what a man is made of and what his chemical value is. Here's his wise research. The fat of a normal human being would be enough to make a lot of soap. Enough iron is found in their body to produce a medium-thick iron nail and enough sugar to sweeten a cup of coffee. Phosphorus would be enough for 220 matchsticks. Magnesium would provide enough photograph-worthy material, plus some unusable quantity of sulfur and potassium. This would be the material valued in the local currency at the time, representing a sum worth 25 Francs.*

The possibilities of rationalizing the body are as diverse as the body's ability to change. Let's imagine how contemporaneity interferes in the chemistry of bodies, and the small portions would be even smaller compared to the body of a travesti, who injected up to 20 liters of a polymer called silicone, hormones, hair extensions, among other substances. Still, the identity and the body do not exist in this chemical reflection. They are post-dissection, decomposed. Of course, we can also infer about the calculus fetish. Just as people with tattooed bodies sell, in life, their skin, which will have an owner after death, the prices of substances would be high, depending on the perceived value of the bodies/products. However, there is no longer an individual, only a sober calculation, which reduces the human body to the development of a photograph, to iron nails and soap.

## Conclusion

A research presupposes the search to solve a brought up problem. But, as stated by Woolf,<sup>7</sup> it is important to look to the sides. The question is: how to continue looking for a certain dynamic balance between observing other issues and having focus. The way I look at it, focus isn't about ignoring the surroundings, which would impoverish trains of thought.

The relationship between the different territories was marked by charmings and confrontations, sometimes with my way of understanding, other times with how I was understood, pain, friendships and other affections were and are present. The travestis taught me that there are realities and worlds. As in a musical texture,

they build Aracaju, our daily life. In the territory of prostitution in Atalaia, Aracaju, they are almost always observed and considered as monsters, as already mentioned in Michel Foucault's class, compiled in the work *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, or reflecting over Bataille's gaze:

*Low-level prostitution is on the last degree of relegation. It could not be less indifferent to prohibitions than an animal, but important to arrive at perfect indifference, it knows about the prohibitions that others observe: and not only is it drooping, but it is given the possibility of knowing its decadence. It knows itself human. Even without shame, it may be conscious of living like pigs.*

Thus, the construction of travesti bodies in Atalaia, the transition of their genders, also means more resistance and denial by the city's part. This conflict between the body they built and heteronormative values triggers a scene of rejection and violence against themselves.

The work Orlando begins with the protagonist playing with a head, during the Elizabethan period. After a phase of life as a nomad, both in terms of space, time and gender, the book comes to an end in modernity. Here is one of the last fragments of the work: "[...] the twelfth stroke of midnight on Thursday, October eleventh, nineteen twenty-eight". It does not seem absurd to me to establish relationships between some aspects of the cited work and the journey of the search for identity through the creation of a city, referenced in the various exchanges of the capital of Sergipe, which would follow to be São Cristóvão and, later, Aracaju.

In this game of changing names, places and identities, the capital abandons the old, once again aiming for the new. Leaving its first drawing in oblivion and turning to the more modern region. It differs from Orlando, who keeps memories inside himself. However, the movement, with different motivations and valuation, is present in the city, in Orlando and among travestis.

The period of research time, which started in 2012/2013 and ended, for the completion of the doctorate, on February 17th, 2018, proved to be sufficient for raising questions and answers and new problems. The geographic distance between the capital of São Paulo, where the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP, Pontificia Universidade Católica de São Paulo) is located, and Aracaju, increased the time gaps between the various returns, which also occurred during the Sandwich Doctorate (part of the PhD program is done abroad as a foreign exchange student). However, it was feasible and possible to maintain contact with the new professionals and those who reside in Aracaju, mainly through an informant called Bela (the name we chose together).

The construction of bodies through the denial of clinical procedures has shown itself, sometimes as resistance to pathologization, sometimes to the lack of access to health services. I understand that both elements are intertwined. Therefore, the oral culture of procedures prevails as an accessible possibility. Here, I express a limit of my work: the study of oral language and its transmission processes. However, I understand that I cannot encompass a social fact in its entirety. Let's leave it to new studies, other researches. After all, nothing is finished, reconstructing the speech of Guimarães Rosa.<sup>8</sup>

Like the androgynes, desirous to reach heaven, present in Greek mythology, reflected in Aristophanes' speech, in Plato's Banquet, are transformed into monstrosities in the present. Leite Jr.<sup>9</sup> leads us to think through his work "Our bodies also change: the invention of the categories transvestite and transsexual in scientific discourse" ("Nossos corpos também mudam: a invenção das categorias travesti

e transexual no discurso científico"), a valuable research on the discourse of science on these bodies, which is linked to changes.

The travestis, or part of those researched, carry valuable questions in their bodies, from my point of view. Not only the denial of the clinic, but also the subjugation and customization of brands, the capacity for confrontation and encounters, showing themselves as nomads, who migrate from city to city.

The sex workers in Europe presented themselves with a more accentuated aspect of nomadism, when compared to the travestis from Atalaia. With the exception of Porto, constant migration was common and with a short stay timeframe, which we can attribute to the situation of clandestinity and market opportunity.

The condition of vulnerability of travestis in Atalaia was highlighted at various points in time. From the fight for territory to the surveillance of the National Security Force, or to the attempted murder, when someone set fire to one of the travesti's house, with her inside.

A striking aspect was the absence of NGOs in the travestis' speeches. These organizations were absent in this universe or were denied by the travestis. So, without support, under attacks done sometimes by feces, sometimes by fire, they continue to build their bodies, which mean so much in their lives, to the point that, it seemed to me, it put Aracajuans in great discomfort, when confronted with the possibility that they can transform their bodies, far from what the other city inhabitants expect.

Bridges, perhaps these are a founding meaning of this research. Thus, I launched myself in an attempt to build these bridges and I hope to contribute so that in a not too distant horizon, they can write about their lives and occupy spaces, whether in the academy, during the day, in the streets of Aracaju, without being treated with violence and/or in other spaces.<sup>10-18</sup>

## Acknowledgments

None.

## Conflicts of interest

Author declares there are no conflicts of interests.

## Funding

None.

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