

# Formation contexts: Mariza Corrêa's importance to a generation\*

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## Abstract

This article in honor of Mariza Corrêa presents a personal account regarding the political environment and discussions in Unicamp in the late 1970s. It also examines the contributions made by this great anthropologist in her early studies, both to the development of qualitative research on gender violence in Brazil and to a critical approach to family studies.

**Palavras-chave:** Mariza Corrêa, Gender Violence, Brazilian Families.

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At the start of one of the first chapters of *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf (1972:37) writes:

The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over. Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfill the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write finis on the tombstone above our heads.<sup>1</sup>

With this fine irony, the author then narrates one of the mysterious and undocumented episodes that marked the 350 years of this character's life, such as waking up as a woman during a stay in Turkey. It is an outstanding work of fiction that includes, according to the experts, biographical notes on Vita Sackeville-West, her close friend. Thus, it is a work of fiction, but also someone's biography, not to mention an imaginative exercise of personal memory.

In what concerns this text, *Orlando* teaches us to address time, articulating British history, from the 16th century until the Victorian time, to the life of an individual (who lives as a man and as a woman) in a narrative that also incorporates temporality and various inflections on gender. In these pages, I will discuss the work, the contribution to my development and my deep friendship with Mariza Corrêa. Rather than a methodical overview, which her oeuvre demands and deserves, they bring together strands of memory within a personal account. But an account which bears witness to a time and indicates, above all, how much I miss her.

I majored in Social Sciences at Unicamp between 1979 and 1981. During that time, marked by the decline of the military dictatorship and by the reorganization of civil society, in addition to intensely participating in pro-political-opening events and

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<sup>1</sup> The novel *Orlando* was originally published in 1928.

marches, I was invited by Heloísa Pontes to participate in the Campinas Feminist Collective. I was an activist in this group composed of students and young professors, such as Mariza Corrêa, Verena Stolke and Jeanne Marie Gagnebin, who presented to us, students, works by Michel Foucault, feminist anthropologists such as Michelle Rosaldo, Louise Lamphere, Sherry Ortner and historians such as Sheila Rowbothan and her incisive analysis of the trajectory of certain English women who, still in the late 1960s, moved from the New Left to feminist groups. More than a study group, it was an alternative form of collective and, above all, personal, activism. I owe my development as a feminist to this experience, as do my fellow students Heloísa Pontes, Ana Fonseca, Angela Araújo, Maria Conceição Costa, Iara Beleli and Lilia Guedes. We were fascinated by feminism in both theoretical and political terms, and this excitement was also due to the interactions between interesting women and different generations. As I write this, going over memories of the past, our weekly meetings come to mind, each night in a different member's home, sitting on colorful cushions and leaning our backs on Indian textiles hanging on the walls. There was much affection, giggles and open laughter when, in trying to conceptually discuss the limits of the universal treatment attributed to the "female condition" (our critical impetus was always evident), we would describe situations we experienced in our families of origin or our first romantic and sexual histories. Rather than identifying a universal oppression or putting forth an abstract denouncement of patriarchy, we engaged in a kind of radical therapy, with room and solidarity to discuss experiences with abortion and sexual fantasies, moving from the difficult to the fun without the rigors of academic life or the manicheisms of political life. I believe that, for all of us, the collective was a political, affective and intellectual education.

From this education, which we largely owe to Mariza Corrêa, I acknowledge the legacies of Ana Fonseca and Lilia Guedes. Ana, an outstanding archivist, kept articles, newspaper clippings, varied and complete information on all the subjects that could be of interest when reflecting upon the themes we discussed in the

group. All this material, gathered in red folders, was political and intellectual nourishment which she generously provided to us, in addition to the repertoire that led her to create the Bolsa Família program and its immense relevance in the fight against social inequality in Brazil. Lilia Guedes articulated politically, had an enormous capacity for leadership and a contesting joy. Mariza, Ana and Lilia, present.

We organized what we called the *Weeks of the Woman*, seminars which articulated the more theoretical and academic discussions (originating, above all, in the Social Sciences and Psychoanalysis) with the dialog and interface with political movements and, more specifically, with the Campinas women's movements. In an article titled "From feminism to gender studies in Brazil: a personal example", Mariza Corrêa (2001) highlights that the innovative context of these initiatives was bringing together "Theory and Practice", the title of the closing party of one of the weeks, in which we wore buttons with the Emma Goldman quote "*If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution*". If today the reference may seem banal, at the time, connecting the personal and the political meant transgressing borders and contesting hierarchies. On our part, the limits separated, on the one hand, academic authority and student activism. In the feminist collective, many women had been involved with student and leftist movements in the 1960s. Some had been imprisoned, such as Ana Fonseca and Lilia Guedes. There was something innovative in the political experience we developed in the interactions with these women who had previously been members of Leninist organizations and which, alongside the critiques from the texts we read, many suggested by Mariza, promoted the impetus or the utopia to invent new ways of doing politics and, especially, of doing theory. On the other hand, there was a barrier created and fed by more traditional leftist groups which questioned what they ironically called "small bourgeois deviations", present in our activist and personal experiments. These groups were present in the organizations which, while they were still clandestine, mobilized a considerable part of the women's movement and

which not only fought against the military dictatorship, but also combated the structural paradigms of capitalism.

In the political history of feminism in Brazil, that moment was marked by the disputes between leftist groups articulated with the women's movement and feminists – university-educated, middle-class women who were returning from exile. We feminists believed that the struggle for re-democratization required addressing what we called “specific women's issues”, among them sexual freedom, inequalities in the private life, and what would become our most visible cause, the fight to end violence against women.

If we can say that violence against women was the issue that brought feminists together behind a cause with the potential to broaden the scope of our activism beyond our intimate collectives, the subject had already been addressed, in a pioneer fashion, by Mariza Corrêa in her Master's thesis “Os atos e os autos: representações jurídicas de papéis sexuais” (“The acts and the documents: court representations of sex roles”), completed in 1975 under her advisor Verena Stolcke. The book *Morte em Família (Death in the Family)* was published in 1983, but in that ten-year interval photocopies of the thesis were exchanged from hand to hand and it was the object of heated classroom debates, not only because of the innovative subject, but also because it was an impeccable example of ethnography. In fact, the thesis is exemplary. In addition to its quality, it reveals the marks of one of the most creative lineages of Brazilian anthropology, born in the second half of the 20th century. Verena Stolcke, Peter Fry and Antonio Augusto Arantes, the founders of the Unicamp Anthropology Group, young professors who were well-attuned to the contemporary issues of the urban world, launched the bases for approaches that innovated research in Brazil, going beyond the contributions from Marxist and Structuralist influences, as well as those from the rich arsenal of Symbolic Interactionism. Feminism, homosexualities, prostitution were subjects that were addressed and encouraged by approaches with an emphasis on social processes, structured by dynamics and scenarios of dispute,

conflict and discrimination. “Atos e Autos” is one of the first results of this lineage, a study that examined homicide case involving couples in the archives of the Campinas criminal courts between 1952 and 1972, as well as the meanderings of a complex institutionality that transforms violations of the law into court documents.

As the author emphasizes in the introduction to the book *Morte em Família*, the choice of crisis as the unit of analysis was inspired by Victor Turner and, in particular, by his conception of “social drama”: providential moments for observing society in its critical points and articulations.<sup>2</sup> The consideration of institutions from a processual and situational standpoint marked the interest of an entire new generation, which was also drawn to Michel Foucault’s approaches. Foucault’s works *Truth and Juridical Forms* (1974) and his edition of *Moi, Pierre Rivière...* (1973) are present among the book’s references and animated our studies.

I was closely touched by this reading, or rather readings, given the number of times I returned to the thesis and, later, to the book. In fact, the title “Atos e Autos” is more revealing of the architecture that structures the research and analysis than *Morte em Família*. In the former, there is a suggestion of an ongoing following, which the latter condenses and fixes. I view the thesis as one of the strongest inspirations for my decision to study SOS Mulher<sup>3</sup> and, through it, the dynamics that produce and maintain relations of violence within romantic and family life. Social dynamics thus considered from the standpoint of critical limits and

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<sup>2</sup> Among the references of *Death in the Family*, in addition to Victor Turner’s *Schism and Continuity in an African Society, a Study of a Ndembu Village* (1957) and *The Ritual Process* (1969), is also Max Gluckman’s *The Judicial Process among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia* (Zambia) (1955).

<sup>3</sup> The São Paulo SOS-Mulher was the first entity in Brazil created by several feminist groups, in October 1980, with the purpose of providing care for women who were victims of violence. This entity existed for three years, providing care for women in round-the-clock shifts, referring them for legal and psychological counseling and organizing awareness campaigns about the gravity of the problem. For more detail, see Pontes (1986) and Gregori (1993).

which reveal the operation that articulates certain differences – such as age, gender, class, color/race – into axes of inequality. The idea of ethnographically deciphering acts being turned into court documents was key, and the detailed examination of the versions produced through specific judicial procedures within a historical context taught me that all institutional or political operations that are the object of ethnographic treatment are dealing with metaphors or fabulations and their uses:

The death of one person by the hands of another is immediately rid of its concrete, thick weight, of the thickness that its sphere of action possesses, and transformed into a parable, a fable, which contains all deaths that can possibly happen in this universe to which legal action is turned, a vision that orders reality according to pre-established (written) legal rules, but also according to (unwritten) social norms, which will be debated before the judging group (Corrêa, 1983:24).

The suggestion of treating court documents as fabulations was inspired by Propp (1928), above all in their meaning as versions composed according to formal rules, within which invention happens. This opening up to interpretations which are, however, demarcated by (unwritten) social norms invested the study's approach with an innovative strength not often seen in the studies of the time. Additionally, the notion of fable was strategic for emphasizing two other important ideas: the first was that, when it comes to criminal court documents, facts are suspended and cannot be revived; the second was that a court case is always a conjunction of multiple versions, none of which can be absolutely defined as the truth. Rather than preaching relativism, characteristic of certain anthropological traditions, Mariza Corrêa wanted to draw out implications from the etymology of the word fable, which is the faculty of speaking. Court cases are constituted by acts of speech, which cannot be viewed as mere reflections of either laws or norms. They are, according to the author's terms, complex operations that seek to adapt social situations to legal

codes. Thus, court documents result from the act of fabricating, or speaking, leading narrative processes to be considered in the analysis and carefully detailed in their modes of formulation.

If it can be said that Mariza Corrêa taught my generation, and younger ones, to pay attention to the narrative forms of these court cases, she also made an enormous contribution to the development of feminist theories, not only in the documentation of the ways in which justice acts, but in the broader framework of interventions related to gender violence. “Atos e Autos” clearly showed, according to Verena Stolke’s foreword to the book *Morte em Família*, that, in most trials of husbands and partners who murdered their wives, they invoked the defense of their honor; while in most cases in which women murdered their partners, they claimed self-defense. The trials, despite operating according to a system of norms perceived to be universal, judge the previous behavior of victims and the accused according to different and unequal value criteria, or, as Stolke states (1983:13): “This value system makes a husband’s honor depend, to an important extent, on the conduct of another person, his wife, while women’s reputation depends entirely on themselves”. In a pioneer relational approach, Mariza highlights something that current debates warn against, including the critique I have formulated (Gregori, 1993) regarding the risks of victimization:

If the accused is a woman, in addition to having her past and the complexities within which she committed the act abstracted, there is a further expropriation of her aggressive act, of her action, which is usually transformed into a reaction, a passive act (Corrêa, 1983:311).

With astuteness and in a pioneer fashion, Mariza warned against the trap of victimizing women, whereby one risks removing from them their capacity for action, or agency. Despite this reflection, the studies on female victimization of the following decade still incurred in mechanistic ruses. All the specialized literature in the 1980s still qualified violence as the radical expression of the hierarchical relation between the sexes within the



family (in fact, the family was the primordial locus from which data was extracted). There was a set of ways of explaining the asymmetric relation and a set of stylistic and narrative conventions, such as: situations in which women are direct victims were highlighted and other manifestations of violence (against children, between women or against male partners) were viewed as acts of resistance, reactions, reproductions of behaviors instituted from without, seeing these acts as results of women's attitude of internalizing rules reiterated by customs and tradition. In this line of reasoning, women appear as passive beings, victimized by a situation that is determined by a given condition. Violence occurs as a manifestation by men against women, with no interpretation of the fact that the mobilized hierarchies push up against this dynamic within a set of attributes related to masculinity and femininity and the different contents that may be associated with each of these terms. In fact, sex was affixed to gender, forming rigid pairs of opposition. Between the extremes – woman and man – there is contrast and conflict. What explains sharing and coexistence between them is the idea of an ideological system, sexism, and, in this case, the notion of ideology as falsehood.

Closely following Mariza's teachings, in *Cenas e Queixas* (1993), I sought to point out the immense limitation of incurring in a vision that emphasizes the issue only from these explanatory conventions that reaffirm, instead of questioning, the duality between victim and aggressor, or of reducing women's representations to the dichotomy traditional/modern. These dichotomies are of no use as study instruments because they assume a coherence to each term of the opposition, which does not exist in the dynamic that makes up representations and social relations. Additionally, I questioned the political efficacy of this approach to domestic violence and the victimist way of treating women, which made it difficult to recognize their rights and their capacity for action.

If deciphering the enunciative and value strands of court operations was a valuable lesson for addressing interpersonal violence, Mariza Corrêa, in her studies on families, added a critical

perspective that had great impact and influenced us enormously. Her investigations, articles, as well as her intense participation in the Anpocs working group on family led not only to the creation of the Family and Gender Studies area of the Unicamp Doctorate Program in Social Sciences, but also to the creation of Pagu, Center for Gender Studies, and the launch of *cadernos pagu*.

When examining the current socio-anthropological and, to some extent, historiographic<sup>4</sup> literature on family, it becomes clear that Brazilian scholars insist on adopting a perspective attuned to the studies that have pointed out that Brazilian families should not be considered homogeneously, but as a multi-faceted universe with multiple arrangements and that, in addressing this universe, it is worth assuming class, social, gender and age differences.

In fact, since the second half of the 1970s, historians and anthropologists have critically revised the notion that the Brazilian family was formed based on a hegemonic type, the “patriarchal family”, an organization located in large agricultural production units, as modeled in Gilberto Freyre’s book *Casa Grande e Senzala* (1933). This model assumes the extensive form of a clan, incorporating legitimate and illegitimate kinship. With the advent of industrialization, the “patriarchal family” would have given way to the “modern conjugal family”, an organization located in urban

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<sup>4</sup> The following articles formed the basis for these considerations: “Estudos e pesquisas sobre família no Brasil” (Fukui, 1980); “Repensando a família patriarcal brasileira” (Corrêa, 1994); “Para uma história social da família brasileira” (Corrêa, mimeo); “A história social no estudo da família: uma excursão interdisciplinar” (Fonseca, 1989); “Família e reprodução humana” (Durham, 1983); “Nas fronteiras do natural: gênero e parentesco” (Piscitelli, 1998); *A família como espelho: um estudo sobre a moral dos pobres* (Sarti, 1996); *O salário da Liberdade – profissão, maternidade, negociações para uma igualdade na diferença* (Ardaillon, 1997); *Dois é Par – gênero e identidade sexual em contexto igualitário* (Heilborn, 2004); *Família e Individualização* (Peixoto et alli, 2000); *Família em Processos Contemporâneos: inovações culturais na sociedade brasileira* (Torres et alli, 1995); *Tecendo por trás dos panos: a mulher brasileira nas relações familiares* (Rocha, 1994); *Uma nova família? O moderno e o arcaico na família de classe média brasileira* (Figueira, 1987); *A Família Brasileira* (Sâmara, 1998); *Retratos de Família* (Moreira Leite, 1993).

terrains as a consumer unit and basically comprised of the couple and their offspring. This second type, no less fixed than the previous one, according to a pointed commentary by Mariza Corrêa (1994), was established in the classic – though never translated – article by Antonio Cândido de Mello e Souza, “The Brazilian Family” (1951). Gilberto Freyre only discussed the “formation” of the Brazilian family, but Antonio Cândido took the model to its limits, stating that the patriarchal family had prevailed from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and would be the basis from which the country’s entire social formation was derived. The theoretical-methodological choice made by these two authors points toward studying a dominant group in order to understand the history of the forms of family organization in an extended period, from which follows a historical homogenization, as Corrêa’s (1994) critique points out. According to her, we need to complexify this picture, introducing to the data on Colonial Brazil the population that lived on the coast, the migratory mobility of plantation slaves to the mines, etc. Thus, we avoid reducing the Brazilian social formation to the plantation and the mill. On the other hand, she questioned a type of analysis which constructs a dual vision that divides the colonial Brazilian society: in the house, the patriarch – landowner –, the submissive wife and the terrified children (so well noted by Capistrano de Abreu), making up that which is designated a family; in the slave quarters, an anonymous mass of beings surrendered to the kingdom of needs. In this duality, encounters usually took place in the kitchen and on the bed. The rest of the population, excluded from this grid, is put in the condition of socially-degraded not-families.

Mariza Corrêa also suggested that we contest the notion that the direct descendant of the patriarchal family is the modern conjugal family, with the advent of (in Brazil’s case, late) industrialization and urbanization. This notion, formulated by Antonio Cândido, falls short because it assumes a mechanical relationship between a certain type of economic development and a form of family organization. In this model, diversities, different adaptations and permanences are not acknowledged and, as the

author concludes: “we cannot imagine the possibility of writing *THE* history of the Brazilian family, but only suggest the existence of a richer picture” (Corrêa, 1994:37).

In the historiography of the family, another contribution was made by Ana Fonseca (2001), our colleague and friend, who pointed out Brazilian social thought's emphasis, at an initial moment, on the relationship between race and family and, later, the substitution of race by sanitation, hygiene, education and housing conditions. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the controversy between Silvio Romero and Nina Rodrigues illustrates the period in which race was the central category of analysis and through which these characters wondered about the odds of integration and cohesion in the country resulting from the climate and the heightened miscegenation.<sup>5</sup> In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – until the 1930s, in particular – the nation was a central theme and its interface with the family appeared, according to the author, based on two main registers: the first “sought to know the prevailing marital practices among immigrants and propose measures intended to avoid enclaves in the national territory” (Medeiros da Fonseca, 2001:12); the second sought to create measures to support already extant families, from normalizing conjugal arrangements to organizing them according to hygiene and pediatric care criteria.

Ana Fonseca was also suspicious of a line of thinking uniquely concerned with the notion of “patriarchal family”, which operates more as a cultural model than an institution requiring

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<sup>5</sup> Silvio Romero believed that an increase in the reproduction (but above all the interactions) between races would lead to population whitening and cultural assimilation. According to his convictions, this process would be guaranteed with the end of the black slave trafficking, the decimation of all Native Americans, and with a growing European immigration, provided that it was well distributed across the territory. Nina Rodrigues argued that science made that outcome impossible: racial perfecting is the result of a slow improvement of psychic activity – not yet reached by Native Americans and black individuals – so that they would be able, in contact with white individuals, to amalgamate, producing a comparable type, in intelligence and morals, to more vigorous races. For a more detailed description of Nina Rodrigues' thinking, see Corrêa (1998).

investigation. In a summary proposed by the author, in the 1930s and 1940s, in the debates surrounding the nation, the family appeared at times as an obstacle to the consolidation of republicanism – in this view that regarded the Brazilian family as a “patriarchal family” with values that were hardly attuned to a distinction between public and private spheres; at times as a means for evaluating or measuring the nation’s degree of integration – as Oliveira Vianna proposes for the investigation of “homogeneous families” or “heterogeneous families” from the point of view of the interaction between ethnic types and locals; and at times, in perspectives that become increasingly visible among engineers, architects, doctors and legal experts, of adopting families as an instrument of sound moral development for building the new nation. As the author emphasizes, the measures and laws of the 1930s proposed an “ideal family – man, woman and health children – to be formed, and sexual education, prenuptial exams or the prohibition of certain unions (as) vital to the family model” (Medeiros da Fonseca, 2001:86). It is therefore a notion of nuclear family that should be organized through the regulation of female work and through the control of sexuality.

Qualitative studies in Brazil gained greater visibility after these contributions and adopted various theoretical perspectives, but abandoned statistical models. Lia Fukui (1980), in an important survey of these contributions, indicates three lines of inquiry: community studies, stemming from the tradition of urban ecology; studies on social dynamics and workforce that inaugurated not only the unveiling of working class families, but also opened up the field, in a pioneer fashion, to the study of the impact of women’s insertion into the workforce and its consequences for family dynamics (an example of this lineage is Arakcy Martins Rodrigues’ study *Operário, Operária*); and, finally, social change studies. According to Clarice Peixoto (2000), these researchers formulated different types of “family”, still based on the thesis of a nuclear family: *favela* family, peasant family, working class family, middle class family etc.

Class divisions – understood not only in their strict sense, but in several orientations, as ethos or even as communities – came to be markers of the differences in motivations and meanings for family arrangements and dynamics. The studies' methodological choices showed the trend of treating the family as a social institution and, in their results, in the 1980s generation, as a value. One of the approaches discussed was that of treating class markers, linking to the popular classes a consideration of family as a moral value (Sarti, 1996), or based on hierarchical constraints consistent with the notion of person (Heilborn, 2004), and middle class arrangements as more affected by notions of individuality and by the search of egalitarian parameters (Ardaillon, 1997; Heilborn, 2004).

The importance of the focus adopted by Mariza Corrêa and Ana Fonseca lies in highlighting that change must not lead us to easy conclusions or to a perspective that contrasts or establishes an evolution between the traditional and modern ways of living. This justifies analyses based on a qualitative approach, such as the one present in the analyses we came to develop regarding violence that occurs within families, in which we work with the conviction that rather than a form of family – the Brazilian family –, we decipher family arrangements with complex, dynamic compositions associated with the fact that there is no necessarily coherent adequacy between values and practices. The equation of these elements of social life happens unequally, depending much on the context in which social agents are situated and on a true pleiad of meanings and motivations.

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