

Women, the sea, the bodies



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ABSTRACT

This article comes from my research with fisherwomen embarked in artisanal fishing in Santa Catarina, Southern Brazil, which resulted in my doctoral thesis in Social Anthropology at UFSC in 2013. On the occasion of my camp, I stayed six

months in Portugal and circulated among different fisherwomen. I talk about who are the fishermen on board, who work in small boats, going to sea and returning to land daily in periods ranging from three to 16 hours, depending on the type of fishing they perform. Afterwards, I dwell, on different topics, on the body in fishing, either as central in the exercise of being fished, as well as proof of the profession and the metamorphosis of the wear and tear imprinted in the exercise of becoming a fisherwoman.

Keywords: Fisherwomen, Fishing, Bodies, Sea.

1 INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on fishermen embarked in Santa Catarina, southern Brazil, who work in artisanal fishing. These are women who very early started in this plural world, either out of family necessity due to financial vulnerability, or because, allied to this situation, they fell in love with the world that was instigating in their eyes as a girl.

Anyone who wants to is involved in fishing. You need to have a body for fishing, a body that can withstand the elements, that doesn't get seasick and that retains urine as much as possible. Female bodies hide their shapes when wrapped in fishing overalls, made for men, because it is supposed that there, in the world of fishing that embarks, women could not be.

The body in fishing is memory and wear and tear of the profession and the hands are one of the parts that denotes: she is a fisherwoman; He's a fisherman. At the same time, the body is a necessary piece of evidence in cases of shipwrecks. Without a body, there is no dead. There is no fisherman's widow when he is still missing. There is no quick assistance, no permission to live through loss and grief. Such are bodies, and such is their centrality in this world, which is a source of survival, but also of passion. You have to like fishing to continue fishing, these "brave women" say.

2 THE FISHERWOMEN

The fisherwomen referred to in this article live in Santa Catarina, southern Brazil, and were the focus of my PhD in Social Anthropology at UFSC (Federal University of Santa Catarina) during 11



months of fieldwork. From this coexistence, I came to four central ways of being fishermen, which I called as: a) those who work on board daily; b) *stand-by*; c) those that collect at the water's edge; and (d) those who work on land.

In relation to the ships, there are those who work on the vessels in rivers, lagoons and sea, in the fishing of various fish, shrimp, crab, or specific fish. *Stand-by* are those that don't go to sea every day, but when necessary, they are ready. For example, when the comrade who works with her husband misses work. About the ones that collect at the water's edge, I found the ones that deal with cockles. Those who work on land are part of the process that makes fishing work, such as marketing, cleaning, processing, including shrimp shelling, fish filleting, mussel shelling, crab meat extraction, to name a few examples.

Most of the women I lived with started fishing at a very early age, 8, 9, 10 years old. Women whose trajectories are marked by economic difficulties and *poverty*. Girls who dropped out of school because they had to work. They were usually the eldest daughters and were called without being asked if they wanted to work in fishing. They were needed. And they were. Others imposed themselves on fishing, even though their parents did not want them to go out to sea. Their curiosity to know what it was like to fish instilled in them from an early age. Others have had their husbands as their masters of learning. Some were themselves the teachers of their companions. They told me that they have become *accustomed* to the activity, or that this is *all* they know how to do. In common, laughter, good humor and jocosity, combined with the use of expressions such as *liking*, loving, having passion, addiction *to life in/of the sea*.

3 ABOUT THE BODY IN FISHING

It is necessary to have a body for fishing, the fishermen with whom I lived told me, whether in Brazil, mainland Portugal or the Azores. This assertion refers to a body, which is constructed in and by fishing through body training that is done in daily repetition in which the discipline of the body in relation to physiological needs, the control of nausea, and the use of force are central. The body is fabricated on a continuum, in the experience of/in fishing: the strength, the hand, the spine, the legs, the shoulders, the eyes. The fisherwomen do the fishing. And fishing does them, and in their narratives emerge ponderings about the construction of their bodies, *molded* from a very early age to practices that simultaneously require flexibility, firmness, strength, tolerance to the movements of the vessel.

The fishermen tell me about a body that molds itself and therefore becomes different. The way they were able to define me about this difference was by saying that their bodies look like "a man's body." However, this definition could be a statement of theirs directed at me as a justification in view of the fact that, in a hierarchical society according to gender assumptions, they emerge as women who have a body for fishing. On the other hand, they told me about the perception of a difference between



them and women who live in other contexts: the different way of sitting, the way of walking, dressing, being. Although some say that fishing combines strength and skill, they also say that they are *stronger*, *brutish*, *rude*, *more for men*, in a direct allusion to the gender postulates that differentiate weakness, sweetness, fragility for women in contrast to what fisherwomen defined as being more for men.

According to these women, it is part of and is in the requirements of the fishing profession to have strength *and courage* at some times, skill and agility at others. In my view, this body training causes a composition with the vessel of a single body, a body-vessel, in which the vessel appears, in my eyes, to be the continuity of the body of the one who fishes; And the body of the one who fishes, on the other hand, is also the continuity of the vessel.

On the trips to the sea, I noticed that the bodies of the fishermen adhere to the boat, as a continuity of it while I felt that mine was loose, but in an insecure release that related exactly to the rigidity of a body that did not mold itself in/for/by fishing. As the vessel advanced into the sea, their bodies followed the rhythm without any alteration of what I would define as an immobile mobility vessel/body while mine followed in a mobile immobility, vessel *versus* body, where I felt like clinging to the vessel so as not to fall when it, by swinging, threw me along. The fisherwoman was calm, sitting or standing. His body, unlike mine, was not thrown, but followed the movement of the vessel, a continuity of his own body.

In Maluf (2001) we find the proposal that the body be looked at "not only as an object of culture, but also as endowed with its own agency; not only as a receptacle of cultural symbols, but as a producer of meaning" (MALUF, 2001, p.88). In this aspect, the body of the fisherwomen is a producer of meaning constructed by, for and in fishing, in which fishing builds them and they build fishing. *It's been years like this!*

It is interesting to bring here Seeger, Da Matta and Viveiros de Castro (1979) who refer to Amerindian populations in which a central idea concerns the fabrication of the body in the trajectory of individuals. Citing lip and auricular perforation as an example, defining it as a graphic, physical penetration of society into the body, the authors affirm that it is this that creates the conditions to engender the space of corporality, which is at the same time individual and collective, social and natural (SEEGER, DA MATTA and VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, 1979, p. 15). As Maluf (2001) corroborates, "some examples of this embodiment of experience, or the centrality of the body in the collective and individual experience, are the way in which, in many of these groups, children's learning and socialization take place [...]" (MALUF, 2001, p. 93).

On the basis of these considerations on Amerindian societies, it seems to me possible to propose a rapprochement with fishing territories. If, on the one hand, fishing populations would be inserted in so-called Western societies, on the other hand, they would move away in the sense of denouncing what, in principle, would be a dichotomous Western view of the body. The field data of my research lead me



to assume a complex heterogeneity when we think of Western societies in the sense postulated by Maluf (2001) in relation to Amerindian societies.

If certain contemporary social experiences, as in Amerindian societies, are focused on the "fabrication of bodies" that – invested with agency and subjectivity – "fabricate culture", it is also the fabrication of people (and subjects) that is at stake. They are also, not being a "given thing", and are products and producers of meanings and new experiences (MALUF, 2001, p. 99).

According to Maluf (2001), it would be appropriate to ask whether we are dealing with the same body in the face of the innumerable phenomena with which we are confronted, in which questions about subjects, assemblages, fabrication, among others, need to be problematized. On the other hand, although we have to ask ourselves about which body and from which prism we are speaking when we speak, the discussions reverberate more and more deeply in the discussion spaces of anthropology. A fruitful example that I allude to here concerns Maluf (2001), who brings a rich material in which, after going through authors such as Mauss, Hertz, Leenhardt, Foucault, he engages in a discussion about contemporaneity and person, alluding to the fact that it is central to connect to a discussion about body and corporality, a reflection on people and their specific cultural forms, considering that we are products and producers of bodies, cultures, subjects.

It is interesting to think that fishing populations would have much more in common with Amerindian societies than one might initially suppose with regard to the collective and individual experiences that permeate the construction of bodies in the learning processes of fishing, where years are invested *in a row* for the body to mold itself. The learning process in fishing is painful when it requires the body to support more weight than it initially would; or when testing body limits, such as vomiting control. Some give up, can't continue, or aren't accepted because they don't learn how to deal with motion sickness, for example. The vast majority end up living with the sea after years of *training*. However, cases have been reported to me of having episodes of seasickness after years of fishing again, or having for the first time. I wonder if it would be the body pointing out signs of its level of exhaustion in a strenuous profession, whose tiredness would manifest itself in aversion embodied in the form of vomit.

Although some verbalize that *a fisherman* "is already when he has to be", I consider that one is not born, one learns to be in the construction of one's own body and a corporeality for fishing. Fishing invents and specialises the fisherwoman. And she (re)invents herself and invents fishing.

4 BODY-MANUFACTURING CLOTHING

The time spent in fishing imprints on the bodies and corporality of women fishermen specific ways of how the materiality of life in fishing is shown, whether in dressing, sitting, walking, in which they themselves recognize their own bodies as different compared to other women who do not work



in fishing. Oilcloth overalls,¹ boots that are larger than the foot to make it easier to remove them in the event of a shipwreck, hats, coats and short hair or always well tied up to avoid accidents are examples of the requirements and clothing of fishing. Hidden behind layers of fabric or the thick plastic of the overalls, their bodies undergo a fabrication and a body dissimulation that would equate them to men since, according to the fishermen, they would be "masculine" clothing; of a man."

Figure 1. Oilcloth overalls Figure 2. Man, woman, same clothes. Personal archive



"It's a woman's body in men's clothes", in which the clothing is composed of pants that allow bodily mobility, overlapped by oilcloth overalls made for men, whose front design, most of the time representing an opening to give vent to the penis, leaves no doubt. Cap, overalls, cape, gloves and boots transform the bodies and everyone is, more or less, the same. Men and women.

The fishermen consider that clothing contributes to the construction of the body for/in fishing and is one of the factors that makes one have a preconceived notion that there are no women who embark, given that female bodies disappear behind clothes made for men's bodies.

Who's to say we're at sea if those who look at it from afar look like men? It seems to be all the same body with the same clothes.

That's why they say there are no women in fishing. The clothes we wear are men's clothes. Our body becomes a man's body: it's baggy pants, overalls, big boots, gloves. Everything is men's clothing. There is no such thing as women's clothing in fishing.

When I questioned them about the reason for their statements, time emerged as central. They told me that these are years lived in and for fishing in which many started early and saw their bodies being so shaped by fishing, and fishing being shaped by them, that many can no longer dress or walk in clothes other than those that fishing requires, such as long pants, comfortable and wide. These are bodies that are recognized and that recognize themselves as different from what one would expect a woman's body to be on the ground. These are clothes made for men and that, when worn by women,

¹ Overalls made of a kind of thick plastic, whose name comes from past times when fishermen literally oiled their clothes so that it would have greater durability, according to oral testimony.



build bodies that, seen from afar and without closer attention, would give all bodies the same shape. Men and women wearing the same clothes would have only one body: that of a man.

If fishing has a diversity to be done, there is a common point in it that concerns what a body is for fishing, which implies a way of dressing in which skirts, dresses, tight clothes become impossible to be used. Beanies usually conceal the hair, gloves disguise the hands, overalls and boots transform the bodies and hide any longer bodies. All the bodies are more or less composed of overalls and capes. In other words, very much the same. Men and women.

If clothes, in principle, for men, also manufacture women's bodies, shaping ways of being and being, the bodies of these women also manufacture and invent clothes. From what the market (doesn't) offer. For example, there is only oilcloth overalls with a masculine cut, women create ways to live better with what they have and re-invent clothing for fishing and for their bodies. One fisherwoman, for example, came to the conclusion that she could put a malleable zipper between her legs, which would make it easier for women to urinate on the high seas.

On the other hand, some of the fishermen use expressions such as "to be naked; to feel naked" to talk about the difficulty of wearing skirts or dresses after years of building a body that learned to walk in pants. Imagining themselves without long pants makes the fishermen name this situation, alluding to nudity in which they speak of discomfort and the impossibility of imagining themselves in any other way than wearing clothing that, in principle, would shape bodies built in fishing.

5 BODIES: THE RISKS; DEATH

There is a wear and tear on the body, and on the corporeality in which the spine, legs, eyes, and, perhaps most obviously, the hands, are ostensibly used permanently. At the same time, this body, which bears witness to the know-how of the profession, is liable to the risk of disappearing on the high seas at any moment. The possibility of shipwrecks with which they live is closely linked to the unpredictability of the loss of life or the anticipation of accidents. Sudden inclement weather, unpredictable winds, tidal changes, changes in the fishing route, parts of the vessel that break unexpectedly can cause shipwrecks or moments of tension while adrift or waiting for help.

Sometimes shipwreck episodes lead to the death of fishermen, and the body is considered central for the confirmation of death to take place. As the body has this centrality, there are some precautions that must be observed in the recording of details, such as height and eye color.

In order for the recognition process to take place, the body would have to appear to prove death, making it possible to provide the death certificate. If the body does not appear, there is no evidence. If there is no evidence, the only thing left for the fisherman's wife, for example, to do is wait until the time defined as necessary to prove the absence has passed. In this regard, Law No. 10,406, of January



10, 2002, of the Civil Code, whose Chapter III, Absence, defines the necessary procedures when it is enacted.

According to the experience of fishermen who lost their husbands, sons or fathers, it took about three or five years of waiting to receive any assistance from the government, given that the central evidence that proved the fact of death was missing: the body.

It is a matter of years of waiting for it to be considered that the time of the disappearance has been sufficient and for the right to receive the pensioner's benefit as a fisherman's widow to be realized, considering that the law that regulates this issue of missing persons is a federal law that treats all Brazilians in an indiscriminate way. Not taking into account peculiarities such as that of the fishermen who would disappear, not for other reasons, but only for an accident at work. If there is no body, there is no way to prove death. In the absence of this proof, the fisherman's family is in a more vulnerable situation than any other they have ever experienced, considering that there are years of waiting and lack of assistance, combined with the grieving process that has no end.

Butler (2006) refers to grief by questioning whether there is a way to know "when a grief is elaborated, or when someone finishes mourning another human being [...]" (BUTLER, 2006, p.46). And he adds that "perhaps a grief will be elaborated when it is accepted that we are going to change the cause of the loss suffered, probably forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with accepting to undergo a change (perhaps one should say *submitting* to a change) whose outcome cannot be known in advance" (BUTLER, 2006, p.47).

In my view, there is a double obligation with regard to fishermen's widows . First, because of what applies to all humans, and what Butler defined as a *nosotros*. That is, the fact that we are implicated in the imminence of losses at any time. On the other hand, when she submits to a situation that we could call a widow's *becoming* in which she does not stop living the grieving process, although she guards the hope that the other will return, she also lives a situation of extreme vulnerability while they do not recognize her as such. She is no longer a "fisherman's wife," but neither can she declare herself a widow. Somehow, she disappears with the tie by which she recognized herself. As Butler (2006) sums it up: "What 'am' I am without you? When we lose some of the ties that constitute us, we don't know who we are or what to do. On one level, I discover that I have lost 'you' only to find that 'I' also disappear." (BUTLER, 2006, p.48).

Continuing in dialogue with Butler, I corroborate his assertion that "we should evaluate and oppose the conditions under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others, and certain deaths more painful than others" (BUTLER, 2006, p.57). While every human life is vulnerable, some are more so than others. It is necessary to consider central differences that go beyond common human vulnerability, taking into account that there are more painful lives, deaths, and grief.



6 THE BODY AS A MEMORY OF THE PROFESSION

In addition to the constant possibility of shipwrecks, accidents are common in fishing, which is extremely dangerous because of working at sea, but also because of the equipment with which it is handled, such as hooks, irons, motors, nylon lines, among others, combined with accidents with fish, such as fish bites, punctures with bones and bones, cuts or loss of body parts in parts of the vessel.

Fisherwomen have many narratives about accidents, scares, unforeseen events. When narrating me, in addition to triggering their memories of the episodes experienced, they also trigger the body as evidence materialized in the form of scars, failures or mutilation of fingers, legs, arms. The memory activated with a wealth of details has in its body the proof of what happened. After the accidents, they had to take breaks, but continued fishing in view of financial need. Over time, the episodes of accidents have been partially forgotten since it is in the mutilated, deformed body itself that the materialization of these memories was recorded and that, therefore, you do not let them forget at all.

One of the fishermen, for example, went bald years ago when her hair got caught in the boat's shaft. According to her, it was the most difficult experience in her career as a fisherwoman, as she was deprived of her hair, which is very important for her, as she considers it a "complement to the face". As she narrated her experience to me, I was struck by the details of the accident she recalled: the perception of the strange noise in a part of the vessel, the brief hesitation, the total loss of her hair, and the hint of bleeding. "Lucky you didn't rip the leather off." When I heard this sentence, images of facial deformities came to mind, but it was only in Portugal that I realized the dimension of what she had narrated when a Brazilian who was attending a lecture I gave about my research, suggested that I look for information about an association of scalped women in the northern region of Brazil. Right there I started an investigation on the internet, coming across images of women and girls who were victims of scalping.

According to the Sarapó Association's website², scalp is the scientific name for the scalp, and scalpelization in vessels occurs when the human scalp is pulled out abruptly with a large amount of hair, which is pulled unexpectedly quickly when it is wrapped around motors at high speed. In the vast majority of cases, in addition to the scalp, ears, eyebrows and part of the skin of the face and neck are torn off, leading to severe deformities, or even death. This type of accident usually occurs on boats, with long-haired people, when approaching moving parts of the boat, such as the engine or axle, and happens very frequently in the North Region, where transport by boats is more common. Also according to the website, in order to eradicate scalping, Law 11,970 was approved on July 6, 2009.

Some testimonies of scalped women from states such as Pará and Amapá say they do not see a major problem in hair loss, because the use of wigs makes up for this lack. What afflicts them the most is facial deformity due to the loss of ears and parts of the face. The fisherwoman who told me this fact,

² <http://www.sarapo.com.br>



in turn, although with her scalp preserved, when she realized that her hair had been pulled out, found herself so fragile that she triggered a process of depression. Both women in the northern region of Brazil and this example, in Santa Catarina, point to the need for more forceful actions in terms of preventing accidents on vessels. Keeping in mind the proportions of body deformities among bald men, whose hair loss is reversible; and scalped, in which the replacement of parts of the face is done partially and after successive reconstructive surgeries, the repercussions on their lives are irreversible, emotionally, affectively, psychologically and economically.

7 BODY-HANDS: PROOF OF PROFESSION

It is possible to affirm that the body points to the felt bodies: seeing, hearing, touching, feeling, and serves as proof of the trajectory of life, in the body in agility and speed when doing what they do, and especially, according to them, in the body-hands, on which I will pause below.

The body is central as a subject in which the affectations we encounter leave marks in the process of making ourselves. Latour (2004) understands that the body is the opposite of being dead and that to build a body is to be affected, to be able and to learn about affectations in the sense that it is through it, the body, relational, that we learn to learn. Thus, according to Latour, there is gradually the construction of bodies that react in different ways to odors, images, sounds in which the body/subject is where learning to be affected is shown. In short, our bodies are made in learning to be affected (LATOUR, 2004).

To be affected by/in fishing is to construct bodies where what we could call body-hands is central. The use and wear of fishing are in the hand-body, used frantically by fishermen to pull, throw, mend nets and nets; and by the vast majority of women on land, to eviscerate fish, clean crabs, peel shrimp, make or mend nets, in a specialization of the speed that did not allow the anthropologist any photographic record other than the one requested in the form of *pause*.

The hand-body, on the one hand, is evoked by the fisherwomen, as sufficient proof of their trajectories in fishing and, therefore, for the conquest of rights, such as retirement. Scarred, worn hands. On the other hand, it concerns the materialization of a memory of the profession embedded in physical exhaustion, where the body presents furrows and marks formed by the sun and the salt with which one lives daily, which results in a kind of more accelerated metamorphosis in the aging process. In this aspect, Vasseur (2004) refers to the perception of the process of metamorphosis that the body undergoes over time, in which photographs would be a medium with which we would be faced with the vision of the very bodily metamorphosis that aging and the wear and tear of time imprint without us immediately giving ourselves account.

[...] There is finally a metamorphosis from which it cannot escape: that of time which deforms and alters the flesh [...] our body is, in life, in perpetual metamorphosis. But it is, for the most part, an imperceptible metamorphosis whose effects are only visible from a distance; through



the eyes of the one who, for a long time, no longer saw us. In the photographs where it was possible to capture, forever, an instant that has already passed (VASSEUR, 2004, p. 185).

Not only when they came across the photographs I was taking, but my own body proved to be the focus of estrangement about the metamorphosis in the form of aging visualized in the accelerated wear and tear of their bodies. When they asked my age, they verbalized the perception of what they called ending faster: "You are older than me in age, but in your face, in your hands, look at me! I'm much more finished. That's life in fishing." A perception that spoke of a rapid physical wear and tear in which fishing leaves irreversible marks on their bodies, whether on the face creased by the daily exposure to saltpeter, the wind, the sun, which, in general, fixes on their faces more age than that recorded in their documents; whether it's back pain and swollen legs from long periods of standing. However, the most visible form shows itself in the hands.

The hand-body that has aged in fishing no longer has the same elasticity as juvenile hands or hands from other contexts and tasks. Body-hand that no longer stretches completely, becoming more inward-looking, dry, calloused and thick; or too thin and fragile. Body-hand that was molded in the daily life of the sea. A body that bears witness to the course of life trajectories differentiated from city contexts, and that emerges in the materiality that that body-hand, in a very peculiar way, records. Unlike Latour's (2004) perfumer, whose learning takes place through and from a kit, it is the fisherwoman's own body that serves and supports the learning of *being affected*. On the other hand, if we are to think of the sea as the one that has the ability to teach, then it would itself be a kind of kit that allows the fisherwoman's body to specialize. Materiality of the effects of difference (social, symbolic, and political) on women's bodies, lives, and trajectories and daily experiences (MALUF, 2009, p. 14) that need to be addressed, understood, and considered. The materialization that fishing registers in its own body over time, a body that, because it was affected (LATOURE, 2004) as it became specialized, constitutes irrefutable proof of a profession that tells who and why they are.



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