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The Feminine Reading Room: a separate space for women in a Portuguese public library

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Abstract: A quasi-fictional narrative, is constructed from the public event of the inauguration of the Feminine Reading Room in Porto Municipal Public Library, in 1945, based upon historical and sociological research. Biographical and historical data are crossed with those from literature, photography, and interviews to rebuild a holistic context of events within the frame of a qualitative approach, aiming to understand the significance of the use of such semi-public spaces by women. The invisibilisation of the presence of women is interpreted on the basis of women's status, shaped, in its turn, by local and historical situations. This case illustrates how separate, women-only spaces contributed to processes of women's appropriation of public space.

Keywords: public libraries; public space; women; gendered spaces; Portugal

1. Introduction

It all started when we heard that Porto's Municipal Public Library once had a special reading room for women only. A magazine article reporting on its inauguration was eventually located. The singularity and significance of this, hardly known, fact lead us to research it further. The aim was not to solely reconstruct the existence of such a specialised room but to understand its social significance in the context of public space use by women in those times and for that urban location. A qualitative approach was designed and diverse sourvces were used: the library's administrative archives and the municipality's historical archives, the Portugusese Centre of Photography, historical and sociological theory. Along with biographical documentation search in Portugal and Brazil on Virgínia de Castro Almeida, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a former user of the Room and three of Tília Dulce's relatives. A narrative, only partly fictionalised, was constructed of what a visit to the Feminine Reading Room might have been. As a portrait of one single moment. Additional context data are provided to set the social, historical landscape of such a portrait.

2. A historical-fictional narrative

The mayor, several councillors, the library's director, some intellectuality's representatives and several women gather to inaugurate the Feminine Reading Room in Porto's Municipal Public Library, the 24th November 1945 (Inauguração..., 1945). The director proclaims that if some “limpid, angelical figures”, might be seen reading behind those doors in the future, even if only to read The imitation of Christ, the mayor may be assured to have accomplished the best compensation for his administrative life.

Virgínia de Castro e Almeida (1874-1945)[1] has her name inscribed in a plaque at the entrance of the new Room. She is then evoked as a renowned novelist and a children’s books writer[2], not a revolutionary but a woman “leaning towards a calm beauty”; not an advocate of the current feminism, but of a kind which is that of “an educated, balanced woman's voice, pure, who aspires to a place by her male companion, to share his grieves, his works, his joys” (idem: 427).

Virgínia de Castro e Almeida, photo published in Illustração Portugueza, nr. 11, Nov. 1911.

These cautionary words contradict Virgínia's own's. She had been a feminist, only regretting to have mistaken feminism for a “grotesque and vague, maybe dangerous, utopia.” But then “'a great master, Life', harsh and prodigious [...] whose

1 see Virgínia Folque de Castro e Almeida Pimentel Sequeira e Abreu, in Fundação... 2000

2 according to França, 1983, the ABC magazine published in 1928 a list of the twelve most popular Portuguese authors, including Virgínia de Castro e Almeida

teachings never fail" taught her better (Almeida, 1913:14). Thus her passionate exhortation published in 1913, shortly after the republican revolution of 1910: "Women of my country!... Cinderellas with an empty brain, who wait, sitting by the fire-place and with morbid tremors, for the hypothetical appearance of prince charming, grave maid-servants, who spend their lives with the pantry keys and a needle in hand, without the slightest idea of domestic economy or hygiene, confusing honesty with the neglect of beauty; beasts of burden or reproduction, surrounded by children who they know not how to raise or educate; luxury dolls, dressed up like the ladies in Paris and all their intelligence absorbed in decoding fashions, incapable of any other interest or any other comprehension; [...] passive instruments in the skilful hands of Jesuitism which moulds them like wax; fervent servants of snobbery and gossipping; superficial imitators of models they barely know... Poor women of my country!" (idem:17).

Virgínia had also played a salient role in the history of filmmaking. She had been a counsellor with the Portuguese Popular University, a progressive institution (Associação..., 2001). She adhered to the regime's fascist ideology later, producing children's books glorifying nationalistic myths (Balça, 2007). This was surely the reason for such a public demonstration of appreciation from local authorities.

By that time, and in other countries, several public libraries had separate spaces, from ladies' reading rooms, or alcoves to ladies' tables. The scarce literature on this theme describes mainly USA and UK cases (van Slyck, 1996; Hoberman, 2002; Baggs, 2005). These areas were very popular among women in the United Kingdom, considering that about 36% of the 560 local government authorities who had adopted the Public Library Act by 1914, had made such provisions (Baggs, 2005). Women's reading clubs were relatively common in the USA, and some evolved later to municipal libraries with local government support (van Slyck, 2001). And we are also aware that Lisbon's Popular Library, dating from 1912, had "a general reading room for adults and children and a room reserved for ladies" (Melo, 2010: 49).

We could not find documentation on the rationale supporting the decision to open this room in the library's archives. Whether the idea was inspired by North-American practices, or by the centuries-old cultural ties linking Porto and the British Isles, is a matter we may only speculate about. The advocacy for this separatism sounds bizarre to the contemporary reader: not only were women thought of as needing to be protected from male readers, but women's presence was also esteemed to distract serious readers - a group they were thus not included in. "Of particular concern were 'library loafers', unredeemable working-class men whose loitering thwarted the noble purpose of the public library." (van Slyck, 1996). The mere presence of women was also supposed to "morally elevate" behaviours in such public spaces, or others like hotels or restaurants, on the grounds, we may guess, of their commonsensical and essentialized "purity" (van Slyck, 2001; Merrett, 2010).

It should be noted that, in the beginning of the 1950s, a single woman was listed among more than 20 regular staff members in this library; among a similar number of contracted workers the only females, would be the cleaning employees, most likely, the rest being attendants.

We were lucky enough to locate and interview one woman who had visited the Room in her youth, and conversed with others on how they occupied their spare time in those days. Crossing data from Virgínia's writings with those from collected readings, photographs, and personal statements - and female relatives' memories -, and with those from the library history, we built this narrative.

Portrait of a woman reader against a grey landscape

> The German Army's surrender, putting an end to the World War which left the country economically exhausted, has been announced May 8th. Public demonstrations followed the allies' victory, leading to the announcement of free elections in October, just a few a weeks before the Feminine Room's inauguration. The electoral process aimed to legitimise Salazar *vis-a-vis* the victorious regimes. As an electoral farce became clear, the only oppositional party withdrew from it. Afterwards, repression increased, and a librarian is - again - suspended from his duties on charges of political activities against the government, together with several other civil servants all over the country; he will be arrested in 1948, as he had been in 1939[3].

Adozinda lives near the library. Berta, her schoolmate, told her about this room, just for women. Adozinda had already read some articles by Virgínia in the feminine supplement to the newspaper *O Século* her father buys[4]. She feels excited with this new opportunity to leave home and maybe make new acquaintances. Going to the Faculty of Pharmacy

[3] administrative files, letter ref. 139/48, referring to Narciso de Silva José de Azevedo

[4] the supplement *Vida Feminina* (Feminine Life) was distributed with *O Século* (The Century) during the fifties; see Guimarães 2004

occupies most of her time now. Papa persuaded her: that is *such a nice graduation for a girl*[5].
She usually goes out with relatives or other female friends: she often accompanies Mama, who enjoys having tea with her friends downtown. Every now and then Adozinda goes to cinema matinées with Berta, Thursdays attendances are especially suitable for young ladies. When she gets bored, window-shopping is always welcome. She only has to avoid some streets, some sidewalks of cafés or pubs where men are known to gather to make flirtatious remarks at passing girls. She knows that she must keep her eyes down when crossing with men in the streets, not to be mistaken for the wrong kind of girl. And *that* kind of girls do show up in that nearby street with a bad reputation.

> During war time, food shortages were dramatic, rationing was enforced. Unemployment, wage cuts due to reduced working times were frequent. Increasing numbers of beggars and prostitutes, a rise in food thefts and assaults on bread distributors concern the police. In 1944, several *hunger marches* occurred in the city and its vicinities. Rents rose leading impoverished workers to build shacks. Most homes lack water supply or sewage. Epidemics are frequent and lethal (Rosas, 1990), specially tuberculosis. Several library workers were stroke by this disease and sanitary inspections are frequent among them[6].

Today there are some children playing in São Lázaro's park, across the street, watched over by their families' maids.

São Lázaro's park, 1950. Some women may be seen sitting; behind the children in the foreground, is a maid in white apron - former O Primeiro de Janeiro newspaper's photographic archive.

It's early, in a Winter morning, fishmongers are coming up from the river pier, balancing baskets upon their heads and shouting out the virtues of their produce. Other women come to sell vegetables from the near farms of Campanhã, in waggons[7]. Adozinda no longer meets the bread sellers and milkmaids visiting their regular costumers; that part of the city's routine is staged still at dusk, some hours before her breakfast is served to her in bed by Maria, the servant-maid.

> “Housewives are practically non-existent among the popular classes”, in 1950, 22.7% of total active population are women. Rich women dedicate to charity. Some young female aristocrats engage in learning “only to have some general notions of culture” (Lamas, 1950:460). Salazar, the fascist dictator, had ruled that men, if unemployed, should be preferred to women, decreasing the female workforce. Women might get two thirds of a man's pay for the same job.
>
> Rural women live in degrading conditions, making them “fall into a rude mysticism”. “A book or a newspaper never reaches their modest houses, nor is there a library in the hamlet, however modest, where to practise the little they have learned.” Yet, “the newspaper enters their houses and through it the rich and the well-off women constitute a culture which, unfortunately, is not always the best [...]. Feuilletons, hare-brained novels and complicated adventures 'turn them wild', leading them to create a non-existing world” (Ferreira, 1935:11-18)[8].

Maria acts a bit silly, always laughing, even when deep down she's in sorrow. She has a way of her own to deal with misfortune. Maria left her small village to escape famine at the age of fourteen.
At her own mother's request, Adozinda began teaching Maria to read. Three years in school had not enabled her to read

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5 Lamas, 1950

6 According to official correspondence 1937-1938

7 see Lamas 1950 for this and other aspects of working women lives; for the daily life in the parish of Campanhã, see life narratives in Pombo et al. 2005

8 this author provides a very vivid description of living conditions of working women, collected here, in the pages of *Vida Feminina*

the photonovels she so appreciates. For now, Maria has to settle with the radio novels aired in the afternoon.
Adozinda enters the library and finds her way into the Feminine Reading Room, conveniently placed by the front entrance, beside the cloister garden[9].

> The Public City Library of Porto was inaugurated in 1842. The collection consisted mainly of books expropriated from religious orders and aristocrats opposing the liberal revolution. The building, a former convent, looks austere. The town centre lies at fifteen minutes walking distance. Cinemas and theatres, fancy stores are concentrated in nearby quarters. The adjacent parish of Campanhã still has the traits of a rural community, although Porto is a leading region as far as industrialisation is concerned.

The Feminine Reading Room, undated, Alvão studio, ref. ALV004609, CPF/DGARQ/MC.

Adozinda wonders which book to request and glances around. English style furniture, a round table with a Wedgwood-like Greek vase, a chandelier, ceramic busts decorating the bookshelves, wallpaper, a carpet and curtains, all offer a distinguished touch to this small room[10]. Special care has been paid to it, an assistant explains, the general reading room has no such luxuries! - as a matter of fact it is the only room equipped with a heater.
Then Berta shows up, they don't have classes that day. Berta's parents both work, they consider themselves neither poor nor rich. Her mother works hard, teaching two, three or even four grades in the primary-school during a single year. Berta only occasionally goes to the cinema with her brother, "life being so hard!'". Every fortnight or so she goes to the café and meets her friends, she sometimes even ventures to enter alone, being a girl with a "bold mentality"[11].
She can easily catch the tramway to the library[12], and so she doesn't have to buy so many books for her study now.
Then, remembering she had read some books by Virgínia de Castro e Almeida as a child, Adozinda asked the assistant for the title *A mulher* [The woman]. It was a small book she quickly reads, stirring her imagination by the author's accounts of women's education in Switzerland.
Most of all, she was surprised by her statement:

> "In feminism, as in socialism, as in all grand beliefs and in all hopes that have ennobled the human spirit, and have taken it to the conquest of a redemptive ideal, there are the exalted, the fanatic, the non-understanding, the ones who go beyond the dream, the ones who do not measure the part that one must leave for time and who think they're able to realise, in a lifetime space, what the work of the centuries alone will one day do."

So Virgínia had been a feminist? She had no idea! And the text goes on:

> "Women of my country!... Cinderellas with an empty brain...; luxury dolls, dressed up like the 'ladies in Paris'...".

These ideas make her a bit uncomfortable. Times have changed, anyway, that book was written some time after her

[9] The Feminine Reading Room was located by the entrance, to the right, according to common oral knowledge among present professionals in the library and to archives.

[10] similar care and type of decoration for feminine parlours is referred by van Slyck 1996; on how décor may support the gendering of space, see Hoberman, 2002 and Merrett 2010

[11] based on the account of Fernanda, our interviewee

[12] Pacheco, 2003

mother was born.

> Pires de Lima declared, before being the National Education Minister: "Yes, young ladies who are listening to me, there is only one emancipation worthy and legitimate for you: wedding[13].
>
> Regressive legislative measures, altering the republican laws, allowed the husband to demand the delivery and judicial *deposit* of the wife, would she leave home. Women could not engage in commerce, sign contracts, administer assets, appear in court, travel abroad, publish writings nor leave the country with the husband's consent. The right to divorce had been denied, in practice. The right to vote or to be elected is granted only to single women over 21 with a personal income, to married women or heads of their families if holding secondary education diplomas or paying a certain amount of house tax (Pimentel, 2000; Pimentel, 2008). Female primary teachers may only marry upon authorisation from the minister; nurses, operators or air hostesses may not, at all (Rosas, 1990).

She is only surprised that books such as *A mulher* are kept in the library at all.
Arriving home she tells Mama about her experience: "I felt like one of those women living in Switzerland, reading and all, not being gazed at, not afraid of being named a 'literate' or a 'wiseacre'[14] as those boys in the street called me and my female colleagues when entering the faculty carrying our books.

3. Theoretical analysis and discussion of results

Women and space

The figurations of the Angel-Cinderella-Luxury Doll triptych are typically a bourgeois construct, as its latter fold most clearly shows, eroding individual, cultural, social-class or ethnicity differences among women. Deconstructing and overcoming those representations was a task to be inscribed in later feminists' agendas. Many of the contemporary Portuguese feminists shared a positivist faith in progress and in widespread teaching which would afford the end of many of the gender inequalities (Silva, 1983; Ferreira, 1935:46).

The home to women, the square to men[15], went the popular saying. As stated above, women are not absent from public space in the 1950s Portugal. Working-class women might be seen in the streets, in semi-public places such as stores, and public services facilities. They move more freely, out of economic necessity (Vicente, 2001), and these are the most silenced, and, most probably, the greatest pragmatic contributors to the securing of these spaces. Doors and windows begin to open up to higher social class women in the second half of the 19th century. The patriarchal gaze had, however, constructed a landscape through a selected reading of visual cues: on one hand, the presence of women in public space was symbolically erased - as some urban figures may be erased in present times - beggars, homeless persons; on the other hand, the sexually loaded figure of the woman was to be emphasised, though negatively. The mechanical eye of the photographic camera did register women in the streets, as we concluded from the analysed images.

Space was in fact, as Lefèbvre might say, not only scenery for women's struggle but also its object (1991). In Kerber's words "the evidence that the woman's sphere is a social construction lies in part in the hard and constant work required to build and repair its boundaries" (1997). Along with it, women's new role as public library readers also reinforced women's identity in a positive way, in a period when it was clearly being re-constructed, through the incorporation of new experiences in their everyday life (Alcoff, 1994).

Contradictions in representing women's role as public space users are evident: as contributors to the "moral uplifting" of public space their presence is tolerated (van Slyck, 2001; Merrett, 2010); they were sometimes accused of ignoring the implicit social code of conduct for such spaces: there were complaints about women giggling and talking in the British Library, ripping plates off fashion magazines, about young girls eating strawberries in the company of male students (Baggs, 2005) or simply for disrupting spaces conceived of as male (Hoberman, 2002).

A similar form of separatism, according to ethnicity, grounded the creation of rooms for U.S. black readers (van Slyck, 2001).

No record of separatism in other public or semi-public spaces in Portugal is known to us. The only exceptions we encountered, in those decades, were those of public primary and grammar schools (Neves and Calado, 2001); similarly, when attending mass, women were supposed to occupy the benches in one aisle of the church and men the other, a practice observed in the countryside in the 1940-50's, and still for some years on. And the sole documented cases for public libraries are Lisbon's Popular Library and Porto's Municipal Public Library. In the U.K. or the U.S., there were women parlours in post-offices, public transportation waiting-rooms, banks, restaurants, etc., from the end of the 19th to

[13] speaking in a conference entitled 'Feminism and feminists', held in 1932; in Neves and Calado 2001: 17-18
[14] Silva, 1983
[15] popular saying cited by Neves and Calado 2001, 25

mid-20th centuries (van Slyck, 2001).

According to Landes “women's public silence in the post-revolutionary West [French Revolution] is an imposed condition of relatively recent origin”, tied to industrialisation. And so “the structures of modern republican politics can be construed as part of an elaborate defence against women's power and public presence” (1988:203-204). Portugal, an incipiently industrialised country, had, for this matter, different economic, cultural, historical conditions: women had soon, and in great numbers, left the home to work for a wage; women's status could be high in some rural regions (Durães, 2000).

Accordingly, we adopted the concept of gendered spaces, instead of the dual spheres binary, which oversimplifies the relations between private and public, or female and male, as a more realistic analytical tool to deal with spatial gender differences and relations (Kerber 1997; Merrett 2010). But we also stress the need not to erase other issues such as, for the case under analysis, social class, and situational issues such as history, culture or economics.
Another sort of invisibility emerged during this research: the lack of women's biographies, even those outstanding women such as Virgínia or Tília Dulce. Was it not for Tília Dulce's marriage to a prominent man, documentation would surely be even more difficult to locate.

The Feminine Reading Room
Is should be noted that this library's space was itself the object of moral vigilance and police surveillance: the meeting of “creatures of different sexes” in the cloister, had been reported as leading to “scandalous scenes”[16].

Two photos in the article on the inauguration (Inauguração... 1945) show an empty room from different angles, and one portraits some of the persons intervening in the ceremony. The above photo of the Room is undated. It may have been staged to show a group of young girl students accompanied by a female teacher (on the far right).

Tília Dulce Machado Martins, photograph owned by the family, dated 1894

The topographic card catalogue produced for this Room still exists. Analysing the catalogue and the related books, we concluded that most of them were not to be considered “appropriate” for a feminine readership then, as discussed further. These books exhibit a special stamp: Donated by Tília Dulce[17]. According to her goddaughter and second niece, she was a rich woman (1876?[18]-1937), born in Brazil, from a family of broad-minded republicans, whose third husband was a colonial governor of India and minister of the first Republic. She donated 2992 books to the library in her will, which were incorporated in 1938 (Biblioteca Pública Municipal do Porto, 1984). Her name also shows up as a donator to a national museum in Lisbon (Pinto, 1939). This was, undoubtedly, a bibliophile's collection and one characterised by progressive ideas. However, we could not confirm whether this donation was purposefully made for the new Feminine Reading Room. Virgínia was the daughter of the 1st Count of Nova Goa (India) which made her acquaintance with Tília Dulce very likely, and an interviewee came to confirm that they were friends.

Her legacy holds, predominantly, titles by authors associated to the French Revolution (e.g., Lamartine); by French writers (Daudet, Baudelaire, Balzac, Molière, Verne, Hugo, but also Zola and Proudhon); by Portuguese 19th century

16 report dated 13th July 1944, in the Library's administrative archives

17 see Tília Dulce Machado Cardoso in GeneAll.net – Portugal; she became Tília Dulce Machado Nogueira, following her first marriage; she took her third husband's surname, Martins, later.

18 according to a relative's recollection she was 18 years-old when the picture was taken; so this a likely date for her birth

novelists, many also liberal politicians (Herculano, Castilho, Oliveira Martins, Garrett, Camilo, Teófilo Braga, Eça); by Conan Doyle or by Boccacio. Many were certainly blacklisted by the censorship – as Marx's and Engel's Manifest or Kropotkine; there are books on parliamentary matters and hygienism, but also technical books on oenology, chemistry and physics; a few bound newspaper titles are also included, those of a humoristic genre exhibiting popular caricaturists' works. Several novels by Virgínia, by Stefan Zweig and Emilio Salgari, were added to the collection later, as well as approximately two hundred titles authored, prefaced or translated by Camilo Castelo Branco[19]. These latter titles, on the contrary, correspond to an expectable selection to be made by the municipality appointed commission. Tília Dulce's collection must have been integrated as a whole, following the usual process with legacies. However, it should be noted that free-access to those books was not granted, in those days.

During the first weeks of existence, visitors were, predominantly, what appears to be groups of students accompanied by one teacher, which came to coincide with our interpretation of the Room's picture. Later on, female visitors' occupations become more diversified, and housewives, painters, writers, a civil engineer, an architect, seamstresses, a fishmonger, may be found in the registry book, although students largely outnumber them. It became evident that there were frequent visitors, including dyads, some on a daily basis, which was confirmed by our interviewee. Visits totalled an average of 20 female readers per day, although some women were also registered in the General Reading Room by day and even by night, as the feminine room was open only from 11 a.m. until 5 p.m. Comparatively, the General Reading Room received much more socially diversified readers, including several manual workers.

No statistical registers were made on readers' sex prior to the opening of the Room, and so we can only guess that it encouraged female visits.

The Feminine Reading Room was the object of extension works in 1947 and in 1952. Its visitors increased significantly between 1948 (3.3% of in-room readers) and 1950/51 (more than 10%). The Room closed, most likely, after August 1953, as no more statistical data were collected on it. However, it should be noted that, from that moment on, women were required to seat in a separate ally of the General Reading Room, requirement which ended only in the 1960's.

3. Final reflections

Women were not absent from public space then, their presence was frequently forced into social invisibility. Separate spaces eventually contributed to processes of women's appropriation of public or semi-public space. Their attendance made women's presence customary, allowing them a previously unacknowledged visibility.

Biographical research on two prominent women's lives was documented only at much effort, with all the traits of another form of gender invisibilisation.

The provision of literature in the Feminine Reading Room does not appear to have been so ideologically controlled as might be expected; the fact that many titles were donated by a woman from a notorious family, along with the tradition of incorporating legacies as a whole, may be a partial answer to this.

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[19] (1825-1890), Camilo was popular a Romantic Portuguese novelist with an extense production

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