

**Traveling Feminisms:
From Embodied Women to Gendered Citizenship**

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My project began with a feminist health organization in Recife, a coastal city in the northeastern region of Brazil. My goal was to study globalization—not the inexorable spread of capital and commercialized culture throughout the world, but the construction of a transnational social movement and the complex network of relationships that sustained it. As a point of entry, I chose a feminist nongovernmental organization known as SOS Corpo (SOS Body), which had a long history, global connections, and broad influence inside and outside Brazil. My research, which took place during three five-week trips to the country followed by ten months of fieldwork, combined interviews, archival work, and participant observation as a volunteer for the organization. I translated grant proposals and brochures, catalogued English-language library materials, attended meetings, seminars, and international conferences, drank cachaça, danced and went to the beach with members and former members of the organization, as well as with activists from a wide variety of women’s groups in the region. In between I interviewed many of them, as well as representatives of key institutions with which Recife feminists engaged.

But, for some time, the global eluded me. It was everywhere in organizational practice and discourse, and nowhere that I could pin down to study. E-mails winged silently across borders, SOS members flew off to international conferences, visiting researchers and activists appeared from abroad, the fax machine churned out a steady stream of global correspondence, and the daily mail produced bushels of feminist publications from everywhere imaginable. Early on I had thought I could delimit my subject by researching the links between SOS and a particular feminist institution in the United States, but I discovered that there was no single, prototypical relationship that incorporated the meanings of globalization for Brazilian feminism. Instead, there was a variegated web of transnational relations between SOS and international development agencies, foundations, academic feminists, women’s organizations, and other social movements around the world.

*Frustrated with the difficulties of drawing boundaries around the field, and unwilling to spend my time simply cataloging the multiple mechanisms of global connection, I began to listen to the ways SOS members talked about their work, the key meanings around which their practice was organized. Tracing the paths these discourses had followed in their travels led me back “home” to Boston, the city where I grew up, and where one of the earliest and best-known organizations in the U.S.-based women’s health movement was located. As a teenager in 1970, I had joined a pro-choice guerrilla theater group led by a member of the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective, the first edition of whose health manual, *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, had just hit the streets. As the decade wore on, the Collective’s book became a best seller and their influence spread around the world. In Brazil, a group of women heard and appropriated its message about women’s right to*

their own bodies, founding an organization called SOS Corpo: Grupo de Saúde da Mulher (SOS Body: Women's Health Group).

But, as these Brazilian feminists struggled and negotiated with institutions in their environment, the imported discourses of “women” and “body” took on distinctive meanings. In time, SOS's evolving practices outgrew their discursive foundations and “women's bodies” were eclipsed by reconstructed conceptions of “gender” and “citizenship,” the former with roots in the U.S. academy, the latter a creation of Brazilian social movements. The two new discourses were linked by feminists in a way that politicized gender struggles, locating them in the context of broader efforts for social transformation.

Many years after my first contact with the Boston Collective I went back, curious about how the U.S.-based organization had changed and what shape its discourses and practices had taken. I wondered whether any of the discursive innovations I had seen in Brazil had traveled North and how they had been received. I found an organization which, though its practices had touched the lives of nearly every woman I knew, and whose influence reached Congress and the Food and Drug Administration as well as movements around the world, had a discourse remarkably similar to that with which it was founded. “Gender” and “citizenship” were nowhere to be found; discursive travel, at least in this case, was a one-way affair.

During my time in Brazil, like most ethnographers, I felt permanently liminal—neither definitively outside, nor categorically inside the organization I was studying—a status that was simultaneously painful and privileged, humiliating and exhilarating. In my case, this unsteady location gave me useful insight into the very disjunctures in communications between people rooted in different sets of global and local hegemonies that I was writing about: I, within the orbit of the U.S. academy, engaged in specific funding relations, part of a particular kind of feminist political community, and SOS members, in their relationships with the state, international funders, local social movements, and women's health movements around the world. Like the traveling discourses I was studying, my questions and their answers often threatened to pass each other, without connection, in midair, though, as time went by, they increasingly swerved to meet awkwardly in some negotiated equivalence. Just as the members of SOS Corpo transposed and translated the discourses of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective and other Northern feminists in their own context, I have done my best to translate and transpose Brazilian feminist conceptions in mine, while recognizing that meanings never arrive quite intact from their global journeys.

In 1980, a small group of feminists in the city of Recife, in the northeast corner of Brazil, founded a women's health organization and gave it the name SOS Corpo–SOS Body.ⁱ For a decade, women's bodies had been situated at the focal point of feminist movements in Europe and the United States.ⁱⁱ In the United States, the Boston Women's Health Course Collective, founded in 1969 in the heyday of the women's liberation movement, was one of the earliest advocates of women's empowerment through knowledge of their own bodies.ⁱⁱⁱ “The information [about women's anatomy and physiology] is a weapon without which we cannot begin the collective struggle for control over our own bodies and lives,” the group wrote in its book, *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, first published in 1970.^{iv} The health manual sought to demystify medicine by equipping women with the tools to make informed choices about their medical care. At a time when knowledge about the female body was still seen as the province of male experts, topics such as sexuality, contraception, pregnancy, and childbirth, as well as women's feelings about them, were discussed openly in accessible language. The Boston Collective made the revolutionary claim that women themselves were the best source of knowledge about their own bodies, as well as the agents of change, through both individual empowerment and a collective process in which personal problems were transformed into political issues.

It was not long before this feminist approach to the politicization of women's bodies began to travel. In the latter half of the 1970s, Collective members began to take a leadership role in the incipient international women's health movement and to make contact with the many organizations that were beginning to emerge around the world. By 1976, *Our Bodies, Ourselves* had made the U.S. best-seller list, and, by 1980, it had been adapted and translated

by local women's groups from English into eleven other languages and had sold more than two million copies.^v The book was read and its influence felt on every continent. However, though feminists around the world seized on the message that knowledge of and control over the body were central to the project of women's liberation, this conception took distinctive forms in different places.

The discourses of women and the body reached Recife sometime in the mid- to late 1970s. A number of the women who founded SOS Corpo had read *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and others had participated in the feminist self-help movement as exiles in France. In the early 1980s, discourses of "women's bodies," similar to those of the women's health movement in Boston, predominated within SOS, and gynecological self-exams and discussions of their own sexuality gave internal coherence to the group. By the 1990s, however, a striking shift had occurred in the organization's discourses and practices. The privileged place of "women" had been seized by "gender relations," and the view had shifted outward from "the body" to "citizenship," while still remaining focused on health questions. Rather than practicing self-help, the organization engaged directly with the state in a quest for bodily rights.

How did these discursive changes come about, and how were they linked both to local institutions and to the global connections forged by groups such as SOS? What were the relations between traveling theories and discourses, and between movement discourses and the on-the-ground practices that expressed and were articulated by them? And, finally, how did global power relations constrain or facilitate theoretical and discursive migration?

Though the feminists of SOS Corpo participated in the conferences, networks, and alliances of the transnational feminist movement, the shifts in the discursive landscape in

northeast Brazil were not a simple matter of one-way transmission from the North and passive absorption in the South, but reflected significant departures from European and North American models.^{vi} Nor were these discourses and the practices related to them locked together in one to one correspondence, but rather operated in semi-autonomous relation to one another. The discourses of women and body "imported" in 1980 brought with them a certain set of practices based in feminist self-help movements in the United States and Europe. However, while the discourses remained essentially the same over the next decade, the practices quickly began to change, ultimately undermining a language and conception that could no longer make sense of them. After a decade, new discourses, this time with roots in academic theory, supplanted the old. Finally, while dramatic changes occurred in the discourse and practice of feminist movements in northeast Brazil, the same was not true for the women's health movement in Boston, where a discourse of women and the body persisted nearly three decades after its initial appearance.

Traveling Feminisms

There is a growing body of academic literature on "traveling theories," much of this work by feminists interested in untangling the complex and often disjunctive connections among feminisms in different geographical locations.^{vii} These authors treat theory as what Grewal and Kaplan call an "object of exchange," part of the transnational cultural flows in an increasingly globalized world.^{viii} It is a literature acutely aware of the significance of context, which looks at the way meanings meet resistance and shift as they cross different kinds of borders. John, who studied relations between feminist theorizing in the United States and India, argues that theory is a "composite," geological construction whose sedimentations reflect the locations in which it was

created or through which it has passed. Relocation and assimilation are not smooth processes, given the ways that fundamental assumptions embedded in the theory reflect its origins in different circumstances.

A number of these scholars call attention to the structural inequalities among the differently situated nodes of theoretical travel. As John comments, "The power of the West is manifested... in its ability to project its influence beyond its own geo-national borders--to render selectively permeable the boundaries of other states and nations."^x What were initially conceptions *local* to the richer, more developed countries, become, with the benefit of the material power at their points of origin, *global* forces as they travel to, and embed themselves in, the so-called "Third World."^x

But this body of literature lacks a concrete analysis of the dynamics involved in these relationships of unequal conceptual exchange. In part, this is because most of these theorists focus their attention on how academics transmit and receive new conceptions, rather than on how social movements selectively appropriate and transform global meanings, and materialize them in local practices.^{xi} The concern of the authors referred to here is with the transfer of theories--*intellectual systems of thought that are both coherent and explicit, and that have no necessary connection to concrete practices*. Through my study of SOS Corpo, I argue that, while social movements at times incorporate theories, more commonly it is discourses--*ways of conceiving of and talking about social experience that are often fragmentary, sometimes contradictory, and frequently founded on only partially conscious assumptions*--that movements draw on and that come to shape their thinking and action. Discourses are a much more flexible and easily assimilable weapon for tactical maneuver

and improvisation in the face of obstacles. When movements do call on more formal theories, they often dismantle and reconstruct them as discourses, which can then be linked, not only to other discourses, but to a variety of practices.

As means of conceptualizing the world, both theories and discourses can have important consequences for institutional and movement action. Unlike theories, however, discourses are always linked to a set of practices. But the practices inspired by a given discourse are not inextricably bound up with it in a seamless package; the two are semi-autonomous with respect to one another, change at different rhythms, and are capable of mutual influence, even as they present an apparently unified front. To understand the fate of traveling feminisms as they are transposed by movements outside their places of origin, discourses and practices must be pried apart and the relation of their respective rhythms revealed. Beyond that, analysis requires understanding the ways activist discourses and practices are shaped by the configuration of global and local institutions that constitute any particular movement's field of action.^{xii}

Theories and discourses are constructed and travel differently, as I have argued here, and they are appropriated by social movements at different points in their development, in the context of shifting fields of action and contrasting sets of power relations between local political actors and global influences. The relationship of social movements in the South to globally mobile meanings from the North is neither a matter of simple imposition of alien conceptions, nor of totally autonomous local innovation, but rather an ongoing process of negotiation with distinctive moments.

In the case described here, the first moment occurred in 1980, around the founding of SOS Corpo, at a time when both the organization itself and the larger Brazilian feminist

movement were still relatively new, lacking formal structures and established practices.

"Women's bodies" initially entered Brazil and reached SOS in Recife as a set of European and North American discourses linked to particular kinds of feminist practices. At this juncture, for a brief period, Northern feminism gone global imposed its outlines on feminism in northeast Brazil. But, as Recife women's health activists engaged with the forces around them--the state, international funding agencies, and local social movements, their practices developed in different directions from those initially imported, and ultimately outgrew the old discourses.

At a second moment, traveling feminisms once again played a catalyzing role, but this time SOS leaders drew, not on movement discourses, but on academic theory, to at least partially fill the discursive gap left by the obsolescence of "women" and "the body." Theories of "gender relations" had become pervasive in Northern academic feminist circles in the late 1980s and began to circulate as well among Brazilian intellectuals in the academy and in nongovernmental organizations. In 1990, SOS Corpo, now fully institutionalized, with a history of innovating its own practices, and a leadership role in the Brazilian feminist movement, as well as in international women's networks, organized discussions of Joan Scott's work on gender. At this historical juncture, Recife feminists negotiated with Northern theoretical conceptions from a position of relative strength and organizational maturity. Rather than simply adopting the language of gender, SOS members made a conscious choice to incorporate Scott's approach into their work, reconstructing the theory as discourse and linking its disaggregated elements to other local discursive constructions. The fact that the theory migrated South direct from the academy, unencumbered with activist methodology, facilitated the process of articulating "gender relations" to SOS's pre-existing organizational practices. In the process, responding to

the particular institutional configuration within which SOS carried out its work, like "women" and "the body" before it, the discourse of gender evolved differently in its new surroundings than it did in the United States.

The differences were crystallized in the links made by SOS between "gender" and another discourse, that of "citizenship." Brazilian feminist understandings of citizenship had a historical trajectory much more rooted in the local context than that of gender relations discourse. A product of social movements born in the struggle against dictatorship, "citizenship" became a rallying cry as the process of democratization unfolded. By coupling "gender" with demands for new kinds of rights, what had originated as academic theory became politicized as discourse in Brazil, becoming an organizing tool as well as an analytical category.

Embodying Women, 1980-1982

But why this silence? Why does the woman's body remain so unknown, so mysterious, so forbidden for the very owner of this body? Could it be that we never had the curiosity to know ourselves? How is that possible, if knowing oneself is an elementary right of human beings? Could it be that this right has always been denied to us? SOS Corpo, *Corpo de Mulher*, p. 5.^{xiii}

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The founders of SOS Corpo were, for the most part, white, well-educated, middle-class women with links to or sympathies with the left opposition to the dictatorship then in place.^{xiv} The majority had international connections or experiences: three had lived in France, one had traveled in the United States and Mexico, another was from Switzerland. A number of them had read and been influenced by *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, and some had had contact with gynecological self-help practices in France. Most had participated in an earlier feminist consciousness-raising group, Ação Mulher, which disbanded in 1980 as members' interests and

strategic visions diverged. Those who conceived SOS were united by their concern with sexuality and women's health.

The state of Pernambuco, where they launched their project, is located in the poorest region of a semi-peripheral country. But, even there, state-led economic development made itself felt in the 1960s and 1970s, stimulating urbanization and migration from rural areas to Recife and the new industrial centers in the southern part of the country, creating greater social and economic polarization, drawing women into the labor force in growing numbers, and offering new educational opportunities to women of the upper and middle classes who would become the social base of incipient feminism in Recife and around the country.^{xv}

In 1980, a dictatorship still ruled Brazil, but a gradual political opening begun five years earlier had loosened the regime's grip.^{xvi} What had been a dichotomous political field of state and opposition was breaking down, and new political subjects were beginning to appear. In the mid to late 1970s the hegemony of class discourses in the opposition was eroding, as movements around race, gender and sexuality began to challenge social, as well as political, authoritarianism.^{xvii}

Feminist movements in Brazil were galvanized by the activities around the United Nations World Conference of the International Women's Year in Mexico in 1975, whose ripple effects were felt throughout the Third World, but particularly in Latin America. A seminar held in Rio de Janeiro that year led to the formation of a number of Brazilian groups in southern cities. Most of these were consciousness-raising groups; to the extent that they took political action during the 1970s, their struggles were articulated with the broader movement for

democratization and what Molyneux called “strategic gender interests”^{xviii} were kept out of the public sphere.^{xix}

SOS was one of a number of new groups to take a different approach, putting the focus directly on women’s specificity. In a December 1980 fundraising letter written to a woman in France, its founders stated their goals:

Knowledge of our bodies, of our sexuality, of possible maladies, of their cure and prevention, in order to diminish the dependence which has tied us to doctors and allopathic medicines; to make this new knowledge known... [and], in the medium term, to form other groups of the same kind....^{xx}

Initially, like the Boston collective, their objectives were to educate themselves and to help other women develop the knowledge that they felt would change doctor-patient relations. Though they had ambitions to transform the institutions which affected women’s lives, they were not, at first, oriented toward pressuring the state, not least because of the dictatorship’s continuing power.

For ten months the group concentrated on conducting self-exams together and experimenting with herbs and other alternative cures. By the second meeting everyone had bought speculums and begun to explore the terrain of their own bodies. Their new knowledge represented a “great discovery” for SOS members, according to one participant, one which they were eager to share, particularly with women in poor neighborhoods who had little access to such information and faced wretched health conditions.^{xxi}

With this in mind, they produced a booklet, *Corpo de Mulher (Woman’s Body)*—a Brazilian version of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, written in popularized form—and began doing outreach in low-income areas where some members had contacts, using a theater piece

designed to stimulate discussions about women's lives and reproductive issues, offering workshops on sexuality, female anatomy, and the use of herbal remedies, and participating in a weekly radio call-in program.

The enthusiastic response from the *bairros* confirmed their sense that those who claimed that “this business of the body is a middle-class women's thing” were entirely wrong. However, their plan to encourage low-income women to conduct their own gynecological self-exams fell flat, because, explained one SOS member, of the “cultural abyss” between the middle-class activists and their constituency.

As a means of making further contact with women in the *bairros*, and of better understanding their experiences, individuals in SOS acquired funding to conduct research, based largely on interviews with women, about sterilization, the causes and consequences of abortion, and the quality of medical attention they received. Their plan was to use the data to improve their organizing strategies and to disseminate the results in popularized form to the research subjects. Though the SOS founders considered setting up a women's clinic in a marginalized community, the idea was ultimately rejected as too restrictive in terms of the constituency that they would have the resources to serve.

Central to SOS's work in these early years was a discourse of the body, expressed also in the content of their practices. As one founder put it, “... the question of [the slogan] ‘Our Bodies Belong to Us!’ and of the body as a physical reality, as a metaphor, of the body as a symbol, ... as personal existence, was a very powerful thing which was emerging in the debate.” Empowerment for women, SOS members believed, would come through knowledge of their own bodies. Their first publication urged women to “get to know this body better, and to love

it,” and both their internal practices and their educational work in the poor communities on the periphery of the city reflected this exhortation.^{xxii}

This attention to matters of the body reflected, in large part, the long reach of feminism in the industrialized North. “We drank from that fountain,” said one of Recife’s early feminists, referring to the local influence of European and U.S. movements.^{xxiii} The transnationalized experiences and connections of many SOS founders had put them into contact with European and North American radical feminisms which focused on the body and on reproductive health, discourses to which they were especially receptive because these conceptions reached them at a time in their lives when sexuality and the bodily experience of reproduction were key personal issues, as they were for many other women.^{xxiv} But global feminism was only one of the institutions with which feminists in Recife were entangled: their relationship to the state, other social movements, and international funding agencies also played a part in the course of the organization’s discursive development.

SOS members’ literal inward turn toward their own bodies came at a time when the state was beginning to open up, and democratization of some sort had begun to seem inevitable, if not yet a reality. Unified opposition to and focus on the state no longer seemed imperative, and women, along with other social actors throughout Brazil, had begun to assert their own identities. Self-help for one’s own body was a discourse and tactic that befitted this brief moment of transition, when the regime still clung to power, new possibilities for intervention in the state had not yet solidified, and the class-based movements which had dominated the opposition struggled to adjust to the new political conjuncture. Then too, as the dictatorship sputtered to an end, the focus on the body by a political generation which had seen many of its

members physically “disappeared” may have also served as a means of reasserting ownership over their corporeal selves and their right to exist in the world.

The feminists of SOS defended women’s rights to make informed decisions about their own fertility and were openly critical of both the government’s official pro-natalist position in the early 1980s and the neo-Malthusian politics of population control being fomented by certain sectors of the Brazilian elite in alliance with USAID and other international interests.^{xxv} At the time that SOS founders launched their project and chose to structure their practices around a discourse of the body, there was little to suggest that their approach might win the approval of international funders. However, it was not long before international agencies, such as the Ford Foundation, which funded SOS’s first research project in 1982, offered support for this orientation.^{xxvi} Subsequently, the decision to focus on women’s health issues was consistently rewarded with funding, making possible institutional consolidation and expansion, as well as SOS’s growing hegemony within the local and national women’s movements.^{xxvii}

Similar factors influenced the appropriation of the discourse of “women” by SOS, as well as many other Brazilian feminists of the time. The 1980 letter describes the purpose of the group’s proposed research as follows: “[T]he research aims to know the voice of women...to understand how to describe their lived experience...to make known their testimonies...to try to let women speak....”^{xxviii} Women, in SOS discourse, were both victims of patriarchy and potential carriers of their own liberation through knowledge and self-awareness.

This was a discourse that reflected that of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and other Euro-American feminisms with which SOS founders had had contact, but, given the Brazilian political and social context, “women” came to have a particular meaning. For Recife activists, it meant,

not women in general, but the poor women of the urban periphery and their allies of the middle class. Rejecting “militancy for me,” SOS members saw themselves as sharing the knowledge that privilege had granted them.^{xxix} As one woman explained, unlike what she had seen in the United States, in Brazil the links between middle-class and low-income women:

...occurred immediately because there were women [in the group] who came from participating in the movement for direct elections, and for amnesty. So, there was already a concern with the democratization of the country and of information and a clarity that the majority of women lived in conditions of poverty and didn't have access to what we were experiencing.

SOS's discourse reflected the influence of the Marxist world view dominant in the opposition in other ways as well. “Women” was a category parallel to that of “working class” for the left; both represented groups whose oppression was seen as fundamental to the social structure and who were the potential carriers of transformation. Unlike “class,” however, the discourse of “women” (and of “the body”) offered a bridge across the “cultural abyss,” as well as across the stark economic differences, that separated the SOS founders from the women they sought to reach. Both groups of women shared, at least apparently, fundamental concerns about sexuality and reproductive health.

The state participated as well, though indirectly, in the construction of the discourse of “women.” Alvarez argues that its own machismo caused the dictatorial regime to conceive of women's organizing as non-political and therefore unthreatening. By tolerating women's activism around the cost of living, political prisoners, exiles, and other issues, the state allowed “women” as a category to consolidate itself in public discourse. Within a few years of SOS's founding, international funders too began to offer support for projects framed within this category.

During this first moment, the incipient Recife women's health movement looked abroad for discursive models, adopting a set of discourses and, along with them, particular practices, from movements in Europe and the United States whose early development and location in the Northern centers of power gave their conceptual frameworks global reach. But the ties between these imported discourses and the practices that had accompanied them soon began to unravel.

Indigenizing Practices, 1983-1989

Between 1983 and the end of the decade, though SOS discourse remained centered primarily on women and the body, the organization's practices began to shift as it engaged with a web of local and global institutions and expanded its arenas of action. Changes occurred in four areas: themes of organizing, tactics and strategy, constituency, and institutional structure. In each, the new forms of practice ultimately came to outgrow the discourses with which the organization was founded and to pose new kinds of risks and challenges.

In terms of broad themes, over the decade SOS moved from an initial emphasis on sexuality to questions of reproductive health, from pleasure to survival. One current staff member explained:

...[T]he door of entry was sexuality, and from sexuality you passed immediately to health issues or to issues of violence. Given that this NGO [non-governmental organization] works in Brazil, if you put a foot down in the field of health, you have no way to leave because health conditions are really very dramatic... [S]o we practically stopped working on sexuality... [and] health occupied a greater and greater place....

Working in the marginal *bairros* brought SOS members into contact with women's urgent health needs and the incapacity or unwillingness of the state to address them.

Reproductive health conditions, in particular, were alarming. As economic development and

urbanization restructured the labor market and changed values, many women entered the labor force and large families became economically disadvantageous. The state, meanwhile, maintained an official pro-natalist policy until the early 1980s, while allowing private family planning programs to operate without oversight and fostering sales of the pill through its pharmaceutical policy.^{xxx}

This attitude of planned omission meant that contraceptives were distributed indiscriminately with little or no education or medical supervision. SOS's research found that women, discouraged by the side effects and ineffectiveness of available methods, increasingly turned to clandestine abortion and sterilization promoted by "philanthropic" physicians. The result was a 50 percent drop in Brazilian fertility rates between 1970 and 1990^{xxxii}; by the mid-eighties 18 to 20 percent of women under twenty-five in the state of Pernambuco had been sterilized, according to an SOS estimate.^{xxxiii} Conditions such as these increasingly led SOS toward basic reproductive health concerns, an arena that was simultaneously becoming the object of interest for international funders concerned more with lowering birth rates than with the right of women in the Third World to sexual pleasure.

At the same time, the organization made another transition, from an emphasis on practices of self-help and the autonomous development of knowledge in local communities to a growing engagement with the state at a national level, both from outside and from inside. One of the first tentative contacts occurred in 1984, in the twilight of the old regime, when a health ministry official sympathetic to feminism came to Recife. An SOS founder described the interaction:

... [H]e was Coordinator General of the Ministry, and he asked to visit SOS. We received him with a lot of interest... somewhat fearful of that invasion, all of us suspicious. We received him, but not very well. ... In the afternoon, there was a big debate here in a [state] government agency, the Pernambuco Development Council, ... and we were invited. SOS was there, but there were other people, from the union. It was the period when those moments of dialogue were beginning... and there was representation of civil society, but more as observers. [The Coordinator General] spoke about the importance of dialogue and said that it gave him enormous pleasure... to see seated there ‘my associates of SOS Corpo.’ He said that and we panicked. We left running to SOS and had an urgent meeting where we said that he had stated publicly that SOS was an associate [of the Ministry]. Girl, it was something. It caused chaos... [and people said] that we had to undo it. Earlier, [in the debate itself], during the period for comments, the other two pushed me—they said, ‘you have to speak.’ And I was very delicate... I spoke nicely, but I clarified that the partnership did not exist, and then ran to shelter myself among my autonomous comrades.

Despite their early misgivings, SOS became involved in designing a new, comprehensive women’s health program, initiated by feminists within the health ministry, and in training groups of state health professionals to increase their sensitivity to women’s needs. Unlike the earlier maternal-infant care models, in which women were seen as no more than a “reproductive apparatus,” the new Program for the Integral Protection of Women’s Health (PAISM) treated women as “citizens possessing rights and as whole beings, where the body’s history is linked to the life history...,” according to an analysis published by SOS.^{xxxiii} Approving of this framework, and seeing an opportunity to influence the medical care provided to the poor majority in the public health system, SOS members and other autonomous feminists put aside their doubts and launched into a collaborative relationship with the state.

In 1985, an activist from the organization was invited, as a representative of the broader feminist movement, to join the National Council for Women’s Rights, created by the newly elected government to channel demands from civil society. Again, SOS debated the issue, but again accepted the invitation, swayed by the urgings of other women’s organizations whose

members saw it as important to counteract the influence of the church on government policies. Three years later, the Recife women's health organization, along with most of Brazil's feminist movement, participated in a national effort to lobby for the inclusion of feminist concerns in the new national constitution. In the process, as with its involvement on the women's council, SOS was drawn into debates on issues, such as the rights of domestic workers and of female agricultural laborers, outside the more limited sphere of health. The move to the political arena in the context of democratization required developing proposals for change that went beyond knowledge of the body to claims for rights to citizenship.

The third process of realignment revolved around the nature of the group's constituency. Initially, SOS, in the tradition of radical feminism, was an organization explicitly devoted to working with women and fostering their identity and sense of power as women, as distinct from men.^{xxxiv} But, over the years, they increasingly found themselves working with mixed groups of men and women, as they began training state health professionals, holding workshops for other NGOs, working with women's organizations affiliated with mixed unions and neighborhood associations, and encountering the personal and familial networks in which their female constituents were embedded. All of this was a long way from SOS's beginnings when, as one staff member put it, "it was unthinkable for you to have feminists, both in the governmental and the nongovernmental spheres, training men."

In one final transition, over the decade, what had been a collective of eight volunteers working out of their homes, became a formal institution with a sizable office, some twenty-five staff members and a budget of several hundred thousand dollars a year. At the beginning, the group studied feminist theory and practiced self-exams together, everyone participated in all

projects, and all administrative tasks were rotated. There was an implicit philosophy of what one person called “spontaneous horizontality.” But growing public demands and personal differences led to painful internal strife:

You cannot imagine the level of internal conflict.... It [had] become the close house of the sisters, with the tensions deriving from... personal idiosyncrasies, deep conflicts... you bring from your previous life..., and the conflict with this original imaginary that women are good—we are the *bon sauvage* from the twentieth century, which is not exactly the case. So, we [had] that kind of mobilizing ideology from the beginning and we were struggling with the [drama] of internal conflict and being challenged by the fact that we were already very public.

For a time, tensions were so high that paralysis set in and the group brought in a psychoanalyst to help them repair their relationships and move forward.

But, by the late 1980s, in an effort to respond to the growing demands on their time, the group had begun a process of professionalization and institutionalization. Members specialized in certain tasks, group self-help practices were abandoned, and general discussions of theory became more sporadic. One participant explained her pragmatic view of collective decision-making:

It works when you don't have so many responsibilities. But you have to define priorities.... Institutions are complex and have division of labor and... hierarchy, not because they love power, but because it is necessary to make things work.

The process of institutionalization was both facilitated and demanded by the U.S. and European funding agencies that increasingly supported SOS's work. The first significant funding came from the Ford Foundation in 1982, in the form of a grant to one individual to carry out research. In the mid-1980s, European agencies, inspired by the 1985 United Nations Conference on the Decade for Women in Nairobi, began funding women's organizations in

Brazil, including SOS. It was one of them, a German institution, that insisted in 1989 that SOS put an end to administrative chaos in order to provide better financial accountability:

It was very clear. I went to Germany in '89 and they told me. They made a huge request about accounting.... They demanded... a full report for the three years of projects and this was real conditionality. It was, either you do it, [or] you won't have the money. When I got back, I came to Rio and I called [SOS]... and for three days I kept hearing screaming on the phone that I have submitted myself to the Germans, to the men, to whoever... and I said, OK, it is up to you. You decide. If you want to say no, for me that is OK. Just remember that seven people from this organization are getting their salaries from that [grant].

This incident led to the creation of a new, more professionalized structure with a specialized administrative department; what was once a collective of volunteers had become an institution.

The move both ratified and facilitated SOS's increasing involvement with state agencies, international funders, and the broader transnational network of allied feminist organizations.

These changes in SOS's practices both allowed the organization to extend its field of influence and put new perils in the path of a group of feminists who had set their sights on deep social changes—the perils of co-optation, bureaucratization, and loss of radical vision. At the same time, their evolving practices began to put questions on the table that could not be addressed by the discourses of women and body alone. Increasingly their work revolved implicitly around notions of corporal citizenship, rather than bodily knowledge, and around the creation of and participation in a new kind of polity as gendered beings, rather than as women per se. New discourses ultimately made this subterranean shift in conceptions explicit and gave SOS tools to confront the dangers that faced them as an expanding movement.

Engendering Feminism, 1990-1997

Gender is a useful concept to explain many of the behaviors of men and women in our society, helping us to understand a large part of the problems and

difficulties that women confront at work, in political life, in their sexual and reproductive lives, in the family. That is why the women's movement discusses gender so much. Camurça and Gouveia, *O Que É Gênero? Um Novo Desafio para a Ação das Mulheres Trabalhadoras Rurais*, p. 5.

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In 1990, SOS Corpo: Grupo de Saúde da Mulher (SOS Body: Women's Health Group) became SOS Corpo: Gênero e Cidadania (SOS Body: Gender and Citizenship), reflecting the incorporation of new discourses that had a better fit with the institution's modified practices and with their increasingly political vision. "Gender" had appeared in SOS documents some years earlier, soon after the 1985 United Nations Conference in Nairobi, where the term was already being used. It came into broader circulation among Brazilian feminists during the mobilization around the new national constitution in 1988, when they sought, through their proposals, to articulate women's concerns with broader social changes.

Though some feminists had begun to incorporate a gender analysis, in 1990 there was still little or no bibliography on or discussion of gender in the local universities in Pernambuco,^{xxxv} and debate on the concept was just beginning within the national social science association.^{xxxvi} "Gender" was starting to make its way into the language of mainstream development and funding agencies, but, with a few exceptions, had not yet been widely institutionalized or clearly theorized.

One SOS founding member read Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women" in 1980, but the concept of gender was not integrated into organizational discourse until 1990 when she read and translated Joan Scott's article, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," into

Portuguese. SOS subsequently organized both internal discussions and public debates for the Recife feminist community on Scott's theory.

The initial reaction to gender as an analytical category among participants in these discussions was mixed. One woman expressed the source of her frustration at the time:

I thought ["gender"] was very strange and it took me a long time to incorporate this concept. Since it was very complex, with different interpretations from different authors,...for me, not being a theoretician, this discussion was very complicated and I didn't identify much with it. And I was a little exasperated because in reality people began to use the term without knowing what they were talking about....

According to another SOS member, there were also political objections:

People didn't want to abandon the old categories--subordination and patriarchy--and...they were not convinced. The reaction was that this is much too abstract. It does not talk about women's suffering.... I think that feminists [were] more nervous about gender... [because] they had to start thinking about men again.... You cannot think of gender... without having to pay attention to men. And feminists reacted very quickly.

But, for reasons discussed below, the concept was compelling, and the theory, reconstituted as discourse and linked to other discourses on gender, was increasingly integrated into the work of SOS, as well as that of many other feminist organizations around Brazil, in a way and to a degree unprecedented among feminist movements in the discourse's country of origin where "women" continued to dominate the field.

SOS staff members brought "gender" to constituencies as far removed as peasant women and international funders. In 1995, they wrote a pamphlet for and with the Rural Women Workers' Movement (MMTR) entitled *O Que É Gênero? (What Is Gender?)*,^{xxxvii} which required what they described as a very difficult process of translating Joan Scott for the realities of the Brazilian countryside. The MMTR supplemented the material with workshops in

which male and female agricultural workers analyzed the way gender relations were played out in institutions such as the union, family agriculture, and the Catholic Church.

In that same year, SOS organized a seminar which brought together Brazilian feminists and representatives of European, U.S., and United Nations funding agencies to discuss the relationship between development funding and gender politics. The organization also launched a new “Gender and Development Project” aimed at working with women involved in mixed community-based urban movements and, in 1997, SOS members planned a project to analyze the gender content of government communications on health issues. Throughout the 1990s, the Recife women’s health organization conducted “gender training” workshops and seminars for a wide variety of groups in Pernambuco and around the country, including mixed (male and female) NGOs oriented toward social change, feminist institutions, and grassroots women’s organizations.

Beyond the programs explicitly addressing the new conception, rather than signaling dramatic changes in practice, for the most part the move to “gender” facilitated those that were already occurring. By 1990, SOS was already working with mixed groups of men and women in workshops and other settings, though all of its work was intended to benefit women, and most projects continued to be directed at them. But gender offered a new tool for approaching these groups. Whereas, in the 1980s, health workers were trained to be more sensitive to women, in the 1990s, they were educated about the nature of gender relations and the ways they structured all aspects of life, including health care.

SOS had already begun working within the state before the discursive transition, but the language and meanings of gender gave the organization added legitimacy vis-à-vis government institutions, as one staff member explained:

Going to the government health service or in any other area of social policies and saying, ‘Listen, if you don’t deal with this question, you aren’t going to be doing anything.... [I]f you don’t take into account that the impacts of policies are differentiated for men and women, that policy won’t work.’ And for you to say that and be heard... I think that owes a lot both to the introduction of the concept and to the adoption of this perspective within Brazil in the form that it was adopted.... [H]ere in Brazil the impression I have is that we took... the gender perspective and used it to broaden political action.

In the 1980s, SOS had already expanded from its initial focus on sexuality to the broader field of health and reproductive rights. With the introduction of gender discourse, the institution moved into the arena of gender and development, while maintaining its central concern with health. This more encompassing approach gave legitimacy and greater capacity for negotiation with a wide variety of institutional counterparts— including funding agencies, and other NGOs, as well as the state. Given the widespread prejudices against feminism, the adoption of new language also created the potential for deepening alliances with other social movements, such as unions and community organizations, which had seen the pursuit of “women’s” interests as parochial and divisive.

Some feminist activists have critiqued “gender” as a technocratic discourse linked to the professionalization of feminism, as well as to the development industry.^{xxxviii} In the case of SOS, by 1990, when the new conception was adopted, the Recife organization had already begun to move away from “spontaneous horizontality” toward institutionalization and to extend its sphere of influence. However, the arrival of “gender” helped to further consolidate this process by

giving the organization expanded access to a development establishment alert to the latest trends in discourse.

Gender is a contested concept and the meanings associated with it in the academic literature as well as in activist practice are diverse. Joan Scott was cited repeatedly by SOS staff as the inspiration for their interpretation of “gender”:

SOS understands gender as a social relation of power, developed at the level of representations, and ... produced and reproduced through norms, laws, customs, institutions, [and] the ways individual action is structured. It therefore adopts Joan Scott’s perspective.^{xxxix}

Shifting their discourse from “women” to this particular approach to “gender” had a number of important theoretical implications for SOS. Whereas the earlier discourse, and the practices initially associated with it, implicitly placed both problem (patriarchy / women’s oppression) and solution (women’s knowledge of and control over their bodies) in the hands of one sex, “gender,” as the institution interpreted it in much of its work, focused on social relations as the problem and their transformation as the solution. Society as a whole, rather than women alone, was depicted as both object and agent of change. Women’s health and bodily knowledge became vehicles for promoting broader changes, as well as ends in themselves.

Just as the category of “women” had earlier been to feminism what “working class” was to Marxist analysis, in the 1990s “gender” paralleled “class” in its theoretical power and ability to embrace all of society. From the new discourse, groups like SOS drew theoretical justification for a much more ambitious political project than that originally constructed around “women.” Executive director Silvia Camurça described the universe they saw opened up by the

new conception: “Working with gender requires us to act at the level of social contradictions, in the subjective arena, the field of politics, relationships, institutions, norms, laws.”⁸¹

By stressing that gender relations were socially constructed, SOS moved away from an ahistorical conception of patriarchy as an entrenched system to an understanding of gender as potentially infinitely malleable. This allowed a shift in how men were conceived; from villains, they became victims and potential allies, albeit with power over women under current gender arrangements:

In our work with mixed NGOs, it gives a certain tranquillity to people...to show a...possibility that men—concrete men—are not the villains and that gender relations also create certain difficulties for them. It’s very interesting when we start to talk about norms: that men don’t cry...that men are violent, that men always have to be ready for sex.... [P]eople feel relieved, because it seems like we are going to accuse them and suddenly we show that everything is a cultural construction.

Finally, in contrast to the universal quality that had been bestowed on “women,” Scott’s conception of gender relations created the possibility of recognizing differences among women through acknowledging the ways gender was inflected by other experiences, such as class, race, and sexuality. Indeed, SOS pamphlets and workshops made reference to the “great web of differences” among women, as well as between women and men. But, in practice, SOS mainly addressed differences of class and gender, leaving others unexplored. None of their projects explicitly addressed either race or sexual preference, for example. One longtime SOS member commented:

... SOS Corpo never discussed lesbianism adequately, at least in the same depth that it discussed other themes, never. ... I think that it is really a resistance... a prejudice.... I think that race also was never discussed, though at certain moments there were certain choices of staff members to be contracted, choosing the black woman because it was necessary, it was good to have black people in the picture, but the issue of race... was never debated.

In the 1990s, these omissions were increasingly critiqued by black women and lesbians, as they began the process of constructing their own movements. Though some black and lesbian activists kept their distance from white feminism, others maintained a dialogue with SOS, seeking to expand the institution's practices around gender. One Afro-Brazilian activist and SOS ally remarked:

“I think that the organization should be looking more closely at this racial question. ...you can't work on things in an isolated way. The gender relation isn't so simple. There is something that differentiates a black woman and a white woman. What is this something? What can we do so that we advance as a group, as black, white and indigenous women?”

Though Scott's was their dominant interpretation of “gender,” SOS members at times drew strategically on other sources of meanings for the term, based on the work of feminists from Latin America, as well as the United States and Europe. Moser's operational approach to “gender planning,”^{xli} was used in their workshops with development professionals eager for ways to implement their new understandings. The conception of gender as a variable by which the impact of government policies could be measured surfaced in their work directed toward the state. In the context of SOS's organizing with grassroots constituencies, the work of Castro and Saffioti along with that of other Brazilian feminists, on the intersection of class and gender, was an important influence.^{xlii}

The process of theoretical appropriation and conversion to discourse took place in the context of SOS' relationships with three other dominant forces in their field of action at that particular historical moment, two of them “local” and one “global.” The characteristics of the existing social movement field in Pernambuco played an important part in shaping feminist

discourses. In particular, the early dominance of class-based movements in the struggle against dictatorship meant that SOS feminists who came of age in that period had absorbed radical inclinations toward social transformation and, when “gender” came on the scene, were receptive to Scott’s approach. One group member explained:

I think that ideas reach a certain place [from elsewhere], but they find a political, theoretical and cultural base where they either settle in or they don’t. ... I think Joan Scott caught on so much here because feminists..., in general, have a Marxist heritage. Even though... radical feminism was very strong in Brazil...it didn’t lose the commitment to a historical perspective on social transformation....

This perspective, along with the social inequalities in Brazil, led SOS to direct their message toward the popular majority from the beginning, and, later, to give class content to “gender.” At the same time, the absence of movements around sexual preference and the weakness of black women’s organizing in the region in the early 1990s meant that there was little pressure to incorporate these other differences among women more actively.

The shifting nature of the Brazilian state also influenced SOS’s discourse. The lack of resources for health in a context of political democratization, drew SOS’s attention back to the state, after a brief period of withdrawal into civil society. Simultaneously, the infiltration of the Ministry of Health, in the last years of the dictatorship, by a number of feminist bureaucrats, offered opportunities not available to feminists working on other issues for the women’s health organization to intervene in state policies. With feminist pressure from outside, other niches were created, such as the National Council on Women’s Rights, and the struggle to shape the new national constitution, in both of which SOS participated. Taking advantage of these openings meant working with both men and women, creating alliances, and developing proposals for

broader social change. Scott's notion of gender offered a theoretical means of making sense of this new political context.

Finally, international funding agencies also had a role in the emergence of a particular set of meanings around "gender." The early support they gave for SOS's focus on women's health made possible and accelerated institutionalization and professionalization. These developments, in turn, allowed SOS to maintain and expand its transnational connections through participation in global networks, attendance at international conferences, growing access to and use of the Internet, and so on, connections through which gender theories and discourse were propagated and reached Recife. Subsequently, international grants made possible SOS's visibility around gender issues and its capacity to respond to a new demand for gender training created by the pressure of funding agencies on all grant recipients for proposals with a gender component.

In the process, through its ability to use its legitimacy with each institution to strengthen its position with the others, SOS itself became a hegemonic force in its own right. It had begun to play a leadership role in feminist networks in Latin America and was much sought after to participate in transnational projects around health and reproductive rights coordinated in the North. Funding agencies increasingly looked to SOS to coordinate exchanges among foreign donors and their grantee organizations, and state institutions continued to invite the feminist health organization to collaborate on a variety of programs. This national and global networking gave the women's health organization the resources to hegemonize local women's movements. Not only did SOS act as translator of transnational feminist discourses and as broker for women's groups in Recife in dealing with international funding agencies, but it played a key role in setting the agenda for local feminist activity, a role not always appreciated by those, like some

of the black and working-class activists, who felt their perspective was sometimes marginalized in coalition efforts. Locally, then, SOS' global connections were a double-edged sword—both conferring and undermining its legitimacy.

In 1990, faced with the inadequacy of the organization's original discourse to articulate its evolving practices, SOS once again drew on feminism from the North as a resource. But, at this juncture in its history, as an established institution with a leadership role at the national and international levels, SOS negotiated with foreign influences from a position of strength. Rather than borrowing both discourses and practices directly from Northern feminist movements, the organization's leaders selectively appropriated academic theories of gender, rearticulating them as a set of activist discourses and integrating them with their own pre-existing practices, as well as with other more locally based discursive constructions.

Expanding Citizenship, 1990-1997

[O]ne of the fundamental elements in transformations of gender inequalities is precisely the recognition that by struggling to improve the concrete conditions of their lives, women [are] exercising their citizenship on a daily basis; they are acting in the political sphere and, beyond that, constructing through these actions a bridge between the public and the private.... Camurça and Gouveia, *Cidade, Cidadania: Um Olhar a partir das Mulheres*, p. 33.

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Gender did not stand alone in SOS discourse, but was closely linked to a much more indigenous idiom—that of citizenship. Placing gender in the context of this local discourse had a politicizing effect that opened up the possibility of navigating the treacherous shoals of success and maintaining commitments to social transformation.

Unlike “gender,” “citizenship” made no sudden, dramatic appearance among the feminists of SOS Corpo; rather it seemed to seep into their discourse, as if part of the surrounding air, its ensconcing in the organization’s name the first clear signal of its arrival. Though it appeared frequently in writings and political slogans, grant proposals, and seminars, the concept was not often the explicit focus of efforts aimed at demystification; instead, “citizenship” was incorporated as a broad framework, though one associated with certain practices.

The first practice was the dissemination of knowledge. In the 1990s, SOS grouped its documentation center, media liaison, and video distribution projects under the rubric, “Information for Citizenship.” Knowledge of the body and health practices took on new meaning; no longer only a vehicle for women’s autonomy and empowerment, now they were also a means to full participation in a new social order.

At the end of the decade of the 1980s, as political openings were closed and the national state retreated from earlier commitments, SOS, like other Brazilian feminist groups, also shifted its efforts from fighting for the formal recognition of social rights, to struggling for the implementation of those rights it had won in the previous decade. At the same time, its locus of political action moved away from direct involvement with the state on a national level, and toward, on the one hand, greater engagement with local government and, on the other, more concerted efforts to influence the national and local states through transnational organizing.

Thanks to changes in the laws which gave them greater autonomy and resources, “Municipalities become...the basic political setting in which the daily construction of democracy and citizenship takes place, through negotiation and local agreements among groups with diverse

interests,” according to a publication edited by SOS in 1997.^{xliii} With this understanding, the institution sent a representative to the Municipal Development Council, began working with women in neighborhood associations and launched a newsletter, *De Olho na Cidade*, (*With an Eye on the City*).

But it was also in the 1990s that SOS’s global involvement accelerated. By the end of the previous decade they were already participating in a raft of transnational feminist articulations and had attended manifold international events. In the 1990s, they assumed leadership of several networks and played an important role in the local, national, and international preparations for the 1995 United Nations women’s conference, using the latter as an opportunity to strengthen a local alliance among women’s organizations and articulate their demands. In the aftermath of Beijing, SOS worked with the Pernambuco Women’s Forum to publicize the Platform of Action and use it as a means to lobby for concrete legislative and policy changes at a municipal level, as well as participating in a similar effort at a national level through the Brazilian Women’s Network. Global participation became a vehicle for expanding women’s citizenship in Recife, as well as in the nation-state as a whole.

SOS’s conception of citizenship included both elements common to feminist analysis elsewhere and contributions particular to the Brazilian context. Their overall concern was with pushing the boundaries of citizenship outward to incorporate rights that would allow women equal participation in both society and polity. In particular, the Recife organization, like feminist movements in the United States and Europe, sought the inclusion of reproductive rights in a broader definition of citizenship, a move that would “make the sphere of reproduction a site of

the constitution of political subjects,” and contribute to the dissolution of boundaries between public and private.^{xliv}

Beyond a set of particular rights, for SOS:

... [C]itizenship [was] also a ‘conflictive practice linked to power, which reflects struggles about who can say what in defining what are common problems and how they will be treated.’ [Jelin 1994] In other words, the conquest of rights necessarily passes through the recognition and action of political subjects, male or female, and the ‘right to have rights’ [Arendt, cited in Jelin 1994]^{xlv}

In this sense, the concept was closely linked to overall struggles for democratization being carried on by a wide variety of social movements in Brazil at the time.

Finally, “citizenship” involved not only guaranteeing the right of women and other vulnerable groups to make decisions affecting their lives, but also ensuring the social conditions to guarantee their ability to take advantage of this right. Women who faced the dramatic conditions of poverty, illiteracy, poor health, and racism in Brazil, and in the Northeast in particular, would not have access to “free” political and reproductive choices without sweeping changes in social relations. In an article published in the academic journal, *Revista Estudos Feministas*, SOS coordinator Maria Betânia Ávila wrote: “Feminism... should constitute itself as a permanent site of redefinition and insertion of these [reproductive] rights in the broader dynamic of the transformation of social inequalities.”^{xlvi}

In this context, SOS’s discourse on citizenship implied firm opposition to the dominant economic and political model whose effects in terms of misery and marginalization were increasingly felt in the 1990s among the women with whom they worked. In Ávila’s words:

... [L]iberalism... where the market is perceived as the institution that promotes possibilities for choice, and accumulation and competition are basic values that support

it,... could never incorporate the implicit issues in the notion of reproductive rights in an integral way.^{xlvii}

Full citizenship and the competitive market economy being championed by successive Brazilian states were fundamentally incompatible.

The shift in SOS discourse from “the body” to the kind of “citizenship” described above had important theoretical and strategic implications. The discourse of the body had first been linked to practices based on an inward turn toward oneself as an autonomous being. As organizational practice evolved, however, the body was constituted as the carrier of (reproductive) rights and, therefore, a subject of politics. In both cases, the focus was on female specificity and the struggle was defined as the province of women.

The move to citizenship, which grew out of this change in practices, established a broader framework in which bodily rights were to be claimed. It implied, in fact required, the negotiation of alliances with diverse groups, both inside and outside Brazil, that shared an interest in this inclusive vision. And it meant understanding how, not only women, but men and women, and the reconstructed relations between them might be part of this vision. As with “the body,” the emphasis was on gender difference, rather than sameness, but, in this case, it was on the particular rights required to ensure that women, particularly poor women, had equal status as political subjects.

The new discourse of citizenship came, not from abroad, but from Brazilian movements struggling to push democratization beyond the narrow confines conceived by the elite. It began to circulate among the opposition in the 1980s, as defeat for the old regime became inevitable and formal democratic political institutions were established, and became a vehicle for a wide

diversity of heretofore suppressed aspirations for social rights, from employment and land, to racial pride and culture, to health and sexual pleasure. As an SOS staffperson explained, it was also a means of rejecting old clientelistic practices:

Citizenship, in the general discussion, means this: I am a person full of rights, that might not be recognized, but I have the right to be happy, to earn money, to study,... to have fun, to be healthy. I don't owe favors to anyone. I have to win this right for myself. To do that I have to have the right to participate, to express myself, to organize freely, to march, to carry out political pressure....

It was not surprising that the conception of citizenship constructed by an opposition with a Marxist legacy would also reject liberal policies and emphasize the importance of social transformation as a necessary condition of political participation.

But despite the indigenous origins of citizenship as an oppositional discourse, transnational feminism—and the international funding agencies that facilitated access to it—also played a part by shaping the specific content that feminists gave to citizenship. Both SOS founders' experiences with movements around reproductive issues in Europe and the United States and their participation in the international women's health movement during the 1980s, contributed to their conception of rights. Early struggles in the Northern countries around abortion and birth control as fundamental to women's right to sexuality, were broadened and reframed as reproductive rights in a 1984 International Tribunal in Amsterdam. According to Ávila, "In this new perspective, conception, birth, contraception and abortion are seen as interlinked events where the impossibility of access to any one of them puts the woman in a submissive position."^{xlvi} This approach, which defends the right of women to have, as well as not to have, children, is the one reflected in the meanings SOS gave to citizenship.

Finally, feminists' relationship to the state played a part in constructing the discourse of citizenship. During the 1980s, openings for feminist movements led SOS and other organizations to occupy spaces in the state and to participate in struggles for the formal recognition of social rights. Despite a series of victories, however, many of the programs that were won, including the women's health program, PAISM, were never effectively implemented. According to SOS analyses, this reflected intervention by the Church and private family planning agencies, political corruption, and a lack of political will to address women's needs, as well as structural ties between the state and economic elites whose interest lay in restrictions on social spending.^{xlix}

Meanwhile, an accelerating economic crisis deepened the reproductive health crisis. By 1992, one study found that 64.39 percent of those using a contraceptive method in the Northeast used sterilization, an increase of 16.49 percent over 1986.¹ This was one factor in what has been called the "demographic transition" expressed in plunging fertility rates. At the same time, maternal mortality showed a dramatic increase. Given their political commitments, the combination of worsening health conditions, the closing of doors to feminists at the national level, and the clear inadequacy of a democratization process that remained at the level of formal political institutions led SOS to adopt a conception of citizenship that embraced substantive social rights and that rested on an inclusive political vision.

Gender, as a discourse with academic roots far from Recife, offered much to local feminists. But it was only by fusing it with homegrown concepts of citizenship that its radical implications could be fully explored. By calling for the extension of democratization, citizenship tempered to some degree the disequilibria fostered by unequal access to global connections and provided a framework for alliances among movements based on class, race, sexual orientation,

and gender, among others. Whether these alliances could be forged, however, remained a subject of ongoing struggle and negotiation.

Dislocated Travel

The experience of SOS clearly shows that feminist theories and discourses sometimes follow trajectories from North to South, where they are selectively appropriated and idiosyncratically implemented in the context of new institutional configurations. But do they travel the other direction? Did “gender” linked to “citizenship” survive the journey North to be adapted and incorporated by activists in the United States just as “women’s bodies” and “gender” had earlier traveled South and been appropriated and transformed by feminists in Recife?

Revisiting the Boston Women’s Health Book Collective (BWHBC) nearly thirty years after its emergence revealed an organization quite changed in some respects, but, at the same time, quite faithful to its original discursive orientation. Women’s bodies remained central to its project; neither gender nor citizenship were anywhere apparent in its discourse. Where SOS used the language of “gender,” the Boston Collective continued to speak of “women;” where SOS fought social exclusion and targeted the state, BWHBC continued to struggle against the social control of women’s bodies and took aim at the institution of medicine; where SOS demanded citizenship and the right to have rights, the Boston Collective continued to seek consumer empowerment and the right to control one’s own body.

The experience of the BWHBC does not stand alone. Across the United States, few non-academic feminist activists have given discourses of gender and citizenship the central place in their work and thinking that SOS Corpo and many other Brazilian feminists have.^{li} Discursive

and theoretical travel between women's health activists in different parts of the globe has a dislocated quality, with flows from North to South occurring far more easily than in the reverse direction. On the one hand, it is clear that activists in different locations engage with different kinds of institutions. Organizing in the context of a newly democratizing state, for example, calls for distinctive discursive strategies, unlike those called for by organizing in the context of a vast private medical industry. On the other hand, despite these kinds of differences, Brazilian feminists were able to make use of discourses from the U.S. and European women's health movements, as well as theories from the Northern academy, even while adapting them to their own local conditions. How, then, is it that the opposite did not occur?

Here enter those dominant global forces that have the power to close borders and exclude, or to ensure their porosity to cultural imports. The barriers to South-North conceptual migration are both economic and discursive. On the one hand, the periphery and its intellectual products are constructed as both exotic and specific, while the center and its discourses and theories enjoy all-embracing, universal status. On the other, economic inequalities ensure that distribution networks for Brazilian academic—and activist—theorizing do not operate with the same insistence and power as those that disseminate Euro-American discourses and theories.^{lii} Despite its impressive accomplishments, the transnational feminist movement has only begun the process of constructing a social space where horizontal discursive travel could replace the fundamental asymmetries in global cultural flows, a space where women's movements in the North could benefit fully from the rich experience of feminists in the South.

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ⁱⁱ See Deborah A. Gerson, "Speculums and Small Groups," for a discussion of the body politics of early U.S. second-wave feminism.

ⁱⁱⁱ The group, which started by offering a women's health class, later changed its title to the Boston Women's Health Book Collective as their *raison d'être* shifted.

^{iv} Boston Women's Health Course Collective, *Our Bodies, Our Selves*, p. 4. The initial printing in 1970 was entitled *Women and their Bodies*, but the book was renamed the following year. In subsequent printings, "Our Selves" became "Ourselves."

^v By 1996, it had sold over four million copies in fifteen languages, including Braille; Madaline Feinberg, "The Boston Women's Health Book Collective Celebrates Its 25th Anniversary!"

^{vi} Although, along with capital, social movements of many kinds are stretching around the globe, the feminist movement is one of the most transnationalized, in part because of the United Nations conferences on women, which, beginning in Mexico in 1975, brought activists together at parallel gatherings. Out of these contacts have grown multiple feminist networks, global action campaigns, and transnational alliances—a "subaltern public" in which meanings are articulated, transmitted, contested, and reconstituted (Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere"). See Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders*, for a description of how what they call "transnational advocacy networks" were built around issues of women and violence.

^{vii} See James Clifford, "Notes on Travel and Theory"; Claudia Lima Costa, "Being There and Writing Here"; Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, "Introduction"; Mary E. John, *Discrepant Dislocations*; Lata Mani, "Multiple Mediations"; and Edward W. Said, "Traveling Theory."

^{viii} Grewal and Kaplan, "Introduction," p. 16.

^{ix} John, *Discrepant Dislocations*, p. 3.

^x recognize that much of the terminology available to characterize the differences in power and wealth among countries (*First World/Third World, center or core/periphery, developed/underdeveloped, industrialized/agricultural*) is laden with implicit hierarchies, as well as dichotomies that seem increasingly inadequate to describe the complexities of contemporary societies. Geographical labels are also problematic, but perhaps less value-ridden. While some authors refer to the "West," in this paper, writing from the perspective of Latin America, I have chosen to use the term "North" to describe the economically dominant Euro-American states/cultures from which feminists in countries of the "South," including Brazil, appropriated theories and discourses.

^{xi} While many academics, both North and South, identify with and participate in feminist movements, the literature on traveling theories does not analyze the ways theories/discourses are integrated into and shape the strategies and tactics of these movements.

^{xii} Grewal and Kaplan, in a critique of universalist conceptions of women's oppression, refer to this diverse array of dominant forces with which different movements engage as "scattered hegemonies."

^{xiii} All citations originally in Portuguese translated by the author.

^{xiv} They were a doctor, a body movement teacher, a sociologist, an architect, a photographer, two social workers, and a student; Maria Betânia Ávila, in Estela de Aquino and Dina C. Costa, "Entrevista Realizada com Betânia."

^{xv} Sonia E. Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil*.

^{xvi} Maria Helena Moreira Alves, *State and Opposition in Military Brazil*; and Thomas E. Skidmore, “Brazil’s Slow Road to Democratization.”

^{xvii} Sonia E. Alvarez and Evelina Dagnino, “Para Além da ‘Democracia Realmente Existente.’”

^{xviii} Maxine Molyneux, “Mobilization without Emancipation?”

^{xix} Alvarez, *Engendering Democracy in Brazil*; Elizabeth Lobo, “Mulheres, Feminismo e Novas Práticas Sociais.”

^{xx} Ação Mulher/Brasil Mulher, Letter, p. 4.

^{xxi} Unless otherwise noted, all cited material is from the author’s interviews conducted in March and April, 1997, and between February and December, 1998.

^{xxii} SOS Corpo, SOS, p. 7.

^{xxiii} Though feminism in the cities of southern Brazil also had an influence in Recife, in the interview I conducted with her, this woman argued that, to some degree, feminists in northeast Brazil looked abroad for inspiration as a means to assert the independence and innovative capacity of a region often disparaged by intellectuals in the more developed southern part of the country.

^{xxiv} Perhaps because of their roots in the left, SOS members were less responsive to the liberal feminism which predominated in the United States and which was influential among development workers in the 1970s who became advocates of “Women in Development” (WID). This approach, which focused on women in production, rather than on reproductive or welfare issues, was reflected in USAID programs as well as in United Nations conferences and projects during the UN Decade for Women; Eva M. Rathgeber, “WID, WAD GAD”; Shahrashoub Razavi and Carol Miller, “From WID to GAD.”

^{xxv} Sonia Corrêa, “Uma Recusa da Maternidade?” and “Direitos Reprodutivos como Direitos Humanos”; Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*.

^{xxvi} Ford had funded international population-control research and activities since the early 1950s and made a transition to supporting “reproductive health” programs in the mid-1980s; Elizabeth Coleman, “From Population Control to Reproductive Health”; Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*.

^{xxvii} SOS’s success contrasted with the experience of feminist projects around other issues, such as violence and income generation, which reported greater difficulty generating funding. On this issue, see Maria Cecilia MacDowell dos Santos, “The Battle for a Feminist State within a Context of Globalization,” p. 12.

^{xxviii} Ação Mulher/Brasil Mulher, Letter, p. 5.

^{xxix} Ávila in Aquino and Costa, “Entrevista Realizada com Betânia,” p. 16.

^{xxx} The “private” programs were often largely funded by foreign government agencies such as USAID, which thereby avoided accusations of imperialist interference. In the 1970s, half of the budget of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) came from USAID; Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*. Bemfam, the Brazilian IPPF affiliate, was one of the largest agencies operating in the Northeast.

^{xxxi} George Martine, cited in Ana Paula Portella et al., “‘Not Like Our Mothers,’” p. 13.

^{xxxii} Corrêa, “Direitos Reprodutivos como Direitos Humanos,” p. 6.

^{xxxiii} Maria Betânia Ávila, “PAISM,” p. 7.

^{xxxiv} The value placed on being an all-women’s institution was such that there was even controversy when a proposal was made to hire a man to guard the building at night.

^{xxxv} Universities in the region suffered from lack of resources and the “brain drain” of academics who had had opportunities for study abroad to more prestigious and better-endowed institutions in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. In the Northeast, NGOs produce as much, if not more, theory than the local academy, given that they frequently have greater resources and more international contacts than the university, and staff members are often intellectuals whose political commitments, developed in the opposition to dictatorship, have led them into community-oriented work.

^{xxxvi} Mary Garcia Castro and Lena Lavinias, “Do Feminino ao Gênero.” The first women’s studies program was founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1980. After 1990, when gender “arrived” in local theorizing, there was a dramatic increase in the numbers of programs established, mainly in the southern part of the country. Six were created in one year, all with “gender,” rather than “women,” in the title. Gender work groups were created in eight different professional organizations, and the Ford Foundation began funding scholarships for “gender studies”; Ana Alice A. Costa and Cecilia M. B. Sardenberg, “Teoria e Praxis Feministas na Academia,” p. 6.

^{xxxvii} Sílvia Camurça and Taciana Gouveia, *O Que É Gênero?*

^{xxxviii} See Sally Baden and Anne Marie Goetz, “Who Needs [Sex] When You Can Have [Gender]?”

^{xxxix} Cida Fernandez and Sílvia Camurça, *Relações de Cooperação ao Desenvolvimento e a Política de Gênero*, p. 41. This interpretation of gender offered far more possibilities from a feminist perspective than the one being implemented in the development world, where gender came to represent an inert, depoliticized category, rather than a power relation reproduced through a wide variety of institutions. In the context of development work, “gender” was often disconnected from the feminist transformatory project and became a static variable used to measure policy impacts; Baden and Goetz, “Who Needs [Sex] When You Can Have [Gender]?”; Caroline O. Moser, *Gender Planning and Development*. Moser reported in 1993 that, where Gender and Development (GAD) units had been established, “gender” had all too often merely replaced “women” without any change in substance from the efficiency-based approach of earlier Women in Development (WID) programs. A similar process occurred in the Brazilian academy, where, according to Costa and Sardenberg, gender lost its initial meaning, often becoming a synonym for “women” that functioned to make feminist work seem more respectable and scientific. The result was growing distance between the academy and women’s movements, with some activists giving the pejorative label of “*genericas*” to those academics who tried to hide their politics behind a “gender” shield and some *genericas* criticizing the feminist scholars who sought to maintain their activist commitments; Costa and Sardenberg, “Teoria e Praxis Feministas na Academia.” See Costa, “Being There and Writing Here,” for a discussion of the factors that made it difficult for Brazilian feminist academics to develop a gender analysis with more radical implications as well as for references to those who did.

^{xl} Cited in Fernandez and Camurça, *Relações de Cooperação ao Desenvolvimento e a Política de Gênero*, p. 41.

^{xli} Moser, *Gender Planning and Development*.

^{xlii} See, for example, Mary Garcia Castro, “A Dinâmica entre Classe e Gênero na América Latina,” and Heleieth I.B. Saffioti, “Rearticulando Gênero e Classe Social.” Other authors cited by SOS members were: Teresa Barbieri (Mexico), Françoise Collin (France), Elizabeth Lobo (Brazil), and Gayle Rubin (United States).

^{xliii} SOS Corpo, *O Que as Mulheres de Pernambuco Querem como Políticas Públicas Municipais de 1997 ao Ano 2000*.

^{xliv} Maria Betânia Ávila, “Modernidade e Cidadania Reprodutiva,” p. 392.

^{xlv} Camurça and Gouveia, *Cidade, Cidadania*, p. 7.

^{xlvi} Ávila, “Modernidade e Cidadania Reprodutiva,” p. 391.

^{xlvii} *Ibid*, p. 387.

^{xlviii} *Ibid*, p. 383.

^{xlix} Ávila, “PAISM”; Sonia Corrêa, “PAISM.”

^l DSH/Bemfam, cited in Corrêa, “PAISM,” p. 5.

^{li} The situation in the U.S. academy is, of course, quite different, with gender theories and discourses pervading many disciplines and debates around citizenship proliferating. The fact that these trends are not reflected among feminist activists in the United States is testimony to the gap in this country between the academy and women’s movements, a gap that is, for historical reasons, far less significant in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America.

^{lii} Costa, “Being There and Writing Here.”