

Women with Knives in Their Boots: How Brazil's Gaúchas Turn 'Machismo' to Their Advantage

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ABSTRACT This article poses the question of whether a 'Culture of Equality' might emerge through a progression of moves which bring greater equality to existing structures of gender inequality, or if something altogether more radical is necessary? Considering *machismo* in the south of Brazil, it moves beyond an analysis of women's resistance to *machismo* and towards a focus on the ways in which women use *machismo* productively, even turning it to their advantage. In this formulation *machismo* becomes a productive site within which women who understand the rules of this folk model of patriarchy are able to not only play its games successfully, but also construct their own gendered, and in their view 'modern', lives. This however leaves us with the unanswered question of whether this is sufficient, or just a beginning?

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I will consider not what a 'culture of equality' might, could or should be, but rather what some measure of equal access for women to an oppressive gender regime within an extant unequal situation looks like, and the questions and possibilities that this produces. My aim here will not be to provide answers, but rather provoke questions about the desirability or otherwise of bringing a form of gender equality into a system of gender relations built on oppression. Put another way, I ask here whether women accessing and mobilising *machismo* against men, using the same logics under which men use it against women, represents an improvement in terms of 'gender equality'? In order to pose this question I will attempt to add further nuance our understanding of '*machismo*' in Latin America, drawing upon anthropological fieldwork¹ conducted in the city of Florianópolis, capital of the southern Brazilian state of Santa Catarina. From this empirical basis I will build an argument that not enough attention is paid to women's engagements with *machismo*, commonly considered to be the hegemonic form of masculinity across Latin America. I will discuss women's resistance to *machismo*, but more importantly I will focus on the ways in which women can use *machismo* productively and turn it to their advantage. In this formulation *machismo* becomes a productive site against which

women can construct their own gendered, and in their view 'modern', lives. This forces us to complicate our understandings of the ways in which women interact with *machismo* and cope with its consequences, but it also provokes the question of the extent to which this might be considered a positive example of equality within a culture of continuing inequality.

The clearest example of this that I encountered, and therefore the best way to introduce the idea of women productively using *machismo*, was related to me in a story told by Cira². She was originally from the southernmost Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Sul, the women of which are known as *gaúchas*, and the men *gaúchos*, and she had moved to neighbouring Santa Catarina some ten years previously, a middle-class migration made so commonly that Florianópolis at times feels like a *gaúcho* city (Kuhnen 2002; Leal 2011: 157; Lohn 2007). Cira, like many *gaúchas* I knew, often talked of the particular prevalence of *machismo* amongst *gaúchos*, detailing the '*machista*'³ attitudes and behaviours these men were commonly believed to hold and display. The story Cira told me began in a distinctly archetypal way, pointing to the insidious reach of *machismo* into so many of the everyday interactions between women and men, and describing the oppressive effects of *machista* men's views and actions for women:

Cira was born and raised in Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul, and had moved

to Curitiba in the nearby state of Paraná after graduating from university. In her first year away from home her cousin João had invited her to travel to the coast to see in the New Year with him and his friends, who had travelled up from Porto Alegre, she gladly accepted the invitation. On arrival she found nine young men all sharing a rented house with only one bedroom, and only one bed. They promised her the bed, saying that they were all going to sleep on the floor in the living room, or in hammocks on the porch. She realised straightaway this was less than ideal, and the likelihood of things not working out as promised was high. She had no other plans, and had driven the hour to the coast, so she decided that she should try to make the best of it. They went out to the bars and clubs, where the men began betting with each other who could *ficar* (make-out) with the most women, but she found that she was not allowed to participate. They had assigned themselves the status of her honorary kin, which then conferred upon them a duty to 'protect' her from the other men there, because, they told her, they were not to be trusted. They proceeded to operate a kind of rota whereby she was never without at least one unwanted bodyguard. She told me that she had found this both annoying and insulting, but had endeavoured to make the best of it and managed to enjoy herself by dancing and drinking until 4 am, at which point they decided to return home.

Sleep was not on anyone's mind however, and on getting back to the house she found herself confronting the very problem she had feared. Most had succeeded in their objective of bringing women back to the house, and they were now taking it in turns to make use of the only bed in the house, that in which she was supposed to sleep. She therefore had to wait on the veranda while they took turns to go in and have sex on the bed, all the while enduring the accompanying ribald commentary. After they had all finished it was suggested that they all go to another party on a nearby beach, so the men headed to their cars and Cira went with them, having given up by now on the idea of sleep. When they noticed that she planned to go with them they told her that she could not go, as all were either going with a woman, or had one lined up at the party. If she went with them they would feel duty-bound to 'look after' her, which no-one was prepared to do so. She

told them that she had not asked anyone, and did not want or need anyone, to look after her, but they frowned and said that the other men who would be there would have only one thing on their minds, and they would therefore be obliged to keep her safe from such unsavoury types—the irony and hypocrisy of this, given their own behaviour, was apparently lost on them. They left for the party, leaving her 'safely' behind at the house.

Cira's story so far is a familiar description of *machismo* as an archetype of a patriarchal and oppressive masculinity. We will rejoin her evening later, but first it is necessary to examine Latin American *machismo* generally, and explore the *gaúcho* variant in detail.

Machismo

Machismo is a familiar feature of the regional Latin American gender landscape, generally being understood as a 'cult' of masculinity or virility which is summarised by Sternberg (2000: 91) as consisting of "a heady mixture of paternalism, aggression, systematic subordination of women, fetishism of their bodies, and idolisation of their reproductive and nurturing capabilities". *Machismo* understood in this sense has come to be seen as an example of some of the worst excesses of masculinity, as a kind of pan-Latin American hegemonic masculinity within the framework developed by Connell (1995). As such it has been subject to sustained critique as both a patriarchal system of women's oppression and a form of hegemonic masculinity which also oppresses most men. Sex and seduction, the obsessions of João and his companions, lie at the heart of a *machismo* which "implies, above all, the ability to penetrate, and is associated with being active, closed, unyielding" (Melhuus 1996: 240). Lancaster (1992) and Prieur (1996) further this view with the observation that within *machismo* value is given to the man who penetrates, but is never himself penetrated, and conversely women and homosexuals are designated as 'other', the penetrated class who are inferior to the masculine male subject. Lancaster (1992: 236-237) argues that *machismo* is also a means of organising power between men, and that practice surrounding drinking, gambling, fighting and seduction, assumes a logic of active masculinity. This practical performance means that every action, gesture and word is

aimed at attaining, and retaining, masculinity, which is associated with violence and aggression⁴.

Analyses of *machismo* have since the 1990s become far more critical and nuanced, for example in terms of the tendency towards universalising Latin American men under a single *machista* hegemon and the overlooking of the plurality of masculinities (Gutmann 1996; Pardue 2010; Hames-García and Martínez 2011; Wentzell 2015; Ruehs 2017; Snider 2017), and when considering factors such as HIV/AIDS (Heckert 2017) and intersectionality (Hurtado and Sinha 2016). The same cannot however be said of the consideration of women's engagements with *machismo*. One of the key recommendations made by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 848) was that "research on hegemonic masculinity now needs to give much closer attention to the practices of women and to the historical interplay of femininities and masculinities", and although they did not specifically refer to Latin America, in her discussion of research into masculinities in that region Fonseca's (2001: 264) observation that "women, one might say, are pretty much left out of the picture" seems still, when considering the literature, to remain pertinent today.

This is not to say that there has been no consideration of women's roles and experiences in relation to *machismo* and gender relations in Latin America, but rather that the overwhelming tendency has been to focus predominantly on the deleterious effects of *machismo* on Latin American women's lives and on their strategies to avoid and evade its worst excesses (Fregoso and Bejarano 2010; Sutton 2010; Wilson 2014). This, I would stress, is completely understandable and I certainly am not calling for a lesser focus on these areas. What I will however argue here is that space remains to further nuance our understandings of women's relationships to *machismo*. To attempt this I will consider here the productive uses to which women can put *machismo*, as is demonstrated by some women's 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu 1992) of *machismo*, and utilisation of it as an undesirable Other against which middle-class *gaúchas* who identify as "*mulheres modernas*", modern women, construct their modernity. First however it is necessary to explore how *machismo* is constructed and understood in its *gaúcho* variant.

Gaúchas and Gaúchos

Gaúchos were frequently described to me by women and men from all over Brazil as being commonly associated with a particularly strong strain of *machismo*. Marcinha, one of my *gaúcha* interlocutors, told me once that she had never had a good experience dating a *gaúcho*, and when I asked why she replied that the culture of *machismo* is so strong there that the majority of men are openly unfaithful. She said that boys learn this from an early age, and women know that all the women they know and love have suffered infidelity, in an unbroken cycle they can do little to prevent. The state of Rio Grande do Sul, which she otherwise described as the most modern and developed in Brazil, is therefore caught in a paradox, wherein many continue to associate it with a highly conservative and archaic form of *machismo*.

The *gaúcho* is an historically-constructed regional identity which draws heavily on a rural frontier imagery. This means that, as Campelo Bornholdt (2010: 25) describes,

in the eyes of Brazil as a whole, every Riograndian is a gaúcho. In the eyes of the rest of Rio Grande do Sul, anyone from the Campanha region is a gaúcho. In the eyes of the urban residents of the Campanha region, those from the countryside are gaúchos.

The urban centre of Porto Alegre, historically the bureaucratic and mercantile centre of the state, populated by civil servants, traders and liberal intellectuals, is not then seen in the cultural imaginary as being the heartland of a truly *gaúcho* identity. It is instead "a regional identity based on a partly imagined rural past" (Campelo Bornholdt 2010: 24-31) which was gradually constructed through regional elite efforts to resist national centralisation (Scheina 2003: 151-155; Campelo Bornholdt 2010: 26-39; Kent and Santos 2010: 347; Oliven 1996: 54, 2006). It is the imagery of the man from the *campanha* region, the *pampa*, which most informs the construction of the archetypal *gaúcho* of Rio Grande do Sul. He is a mythical frontiersman, a ranch working *peão* (peon) who wears spurs, boots, *bombacha* (baggy trousers), and *pala* (poncho), drinks *chimarrão* (mate tea) and loves barbecues (Kent and Santos 2010: 347). He is also associated with an aggressive masculinity, a hyper-masculine stereotype typified by virility, courage, loyalty, honour, and independence (Ol-

iven 1996: 34). Virility is of course a key element of understandings of Latin American *machismo*, and it was this that the influential modernist author Erico Veríssimo stressed in 1969 when he wrote that considering a history of armed conflict, the cold weather, and the harsh realities of ranch life “you will understand why virility became the most sought after and appreciated quality of the Gaúcho” (cited in Oliven 1996: 33). The *gaúcho* of literary and cultural imaginings is therefore represented as being the most hyper-masculine of Brazilians, the ultimate Brazilian *macho*.

In the last fifty years the key agent for the construction and transmission of this image of the rugged and macho rural *gaúcho* has been an organisation called the ‘*Movimento Tradicionalista Gaúcho*’ (Gaúcho Traditionalist Movement), which Oliven (2000: 129) describes as “an urban movement dedicated to preserving what its members claim is a rural tradition”. This ‘tradition’ draws upon a mythologised vision of *gaúcho* history to construct representations of the state, including a female counterpart based on a mythological ideal of the frontierswoman, a character called a ‘*prenda*’. Oliven (1996: 97) explains that ‘*prenda*’ “means adornment, jewellery, or an object that may be given as a gift. Thus women were reduced to the status of adornments in a process in which man was essentially active and woman was passive”, and her construction has involved an invented traditional dress which was designed around ideals of feminine grace and beauty, intended to control femininity and sexuality (Oliven 1996: 98). The *prenda* is thereby an ideal of passive femininity (Rossi 2006: 127), the quintessential adornment for the hyper-masculine and virile *gaúcho* man.

Within such a system women scarcely appear as people in their own right, and it is notable that the great author of the Rio Grandian *pampa* Erico Veríssimo could only find it in himself to say that “Rarely were our women not in mourning” (cited in Oliven 1996: 33). This leads Oliven (1996: 34) to say that women appear in this text in an indirect form as a consequence of men’s belligerent actions. But it is frequently up to them, in their condition of being orphans, widows, and mothers who lost their sons, to assume the responsibility of caring for the family.

So whilst *gaúcho* men are expected to embody an active masculinity, *gaúcha* women are

carers and domestic workers identified only through their kinship relationships with men, with a *prenda/gaúcha* expected to be “a modest, reserved, well-behaved, and submissive woman who is educated (about her culture) and who has the role to educate and to be a wife and mother” (Rossi 2006: 122, my translation). The *gaúcha* then is cast as the sorrowful oppressed figure who we encounter in Rubin and Sokoloff-Rubin’s (2013: 104) rural *gaúcha* interlocuter:

We, the women of the countryside of Rio Grande do Sul, we were very oppressed, because the head of the household is always the man, and this vision is really strong, even today. So we try to explain and educate at home, that everyone has to participate, to divide the responsibilities. But it’s still all around, this idea that the place of women is by the sink and the stove.

The similarities are also clear in the oppressed woman we find in other Latin American countries, for example in Costa Rica (Piza Lopez 1991), Mexico (Stephen 1997: 137), Bolivia (Clisby 2005; Kimball 2017), and Guatemala (Duffy 2017).

I would frequently encounter this normative *gaúcha/gaúcho* relationship in Florianópolis, from Maria, a 60-year-old who lived in Porto Alegre, telling me when I offered to wash the dishes one evening that “men where I live generally don’t do anything...because of a thing they have called ‘*machismo*’”⁵⁵ This and all subsequent quotes are my translations from the original Portuguese transcript.

Why does this society privilege men? Because it does privilege them. Why don’t men do their share in the house? This thing of the double working day is real. You work in your job and you work in the house. And the men generally don’t. This is machismo, the root of all of this is machismo.

Even some men from Rio Grande do Sul expressed shame at their cultural patrimony, bemoaning the strong cultural expectation of *gaúcha* passivity whilst *gaúchos* are expected to be active agents.

Playing the Game of Machismo

Despite this, it was absolutely not the case that my *gaúcha* research participants passively accepted this *machista* status quo. Returning to the story of Cira, having left her earlier aban-

done by her cousin João and his friends as they set off in search of further conquests, helps to illustrate this point:

Cira told me that after they left she had decided to go take a swim in the sea before going to bed. At the beach she met a young man from Rio de Janeiro who, after a brief chat, she invited back to the now empty rented house, where they had sex. In her recollection this had less to do with any particular desire for him, and was more due to boredom. He told her that he and his friends were renting a house on a nearby beach, and offered to take her there for breakfast. She readily agreed, and went on to spend the whole of New Year's Day with him, before accepting a lift back to Curitiba. It was only that evening that she thought to switch on her phone to call her cousin João and see how he was. Straight away and was barraged with voice and text messages sent by him over the course of the day, all expressing concern for her. Apparently his group had got halfway to the party, but decided driving drunk in the dark was tantamount to suicide, and had instead returned to the house to go to sleep instead. When he got back and saw she wasn't there he had become worried and spent the rest of the day searching for her, gradually becoming more and frantic in his concern that she was safe.

Grinning from ear to ear Cira then delivered the denouement to her tale, describing how she had seen an opportunity for revenge for having been left with no option but to listen to them all have sex in her bed while she had been denied the opportunity herself by their 'protection'. She lied to him and told him that she had felt unsafe alone in the house had called a female acquaintance and gone to sleep in her beach house, before accepting a lift from her back to Curitiba. João's feelings of guilt at having abandoned her were compounded by the blow to his sense of honour; it had been his self-appointed role to look after her and safely return her to her home. The only way he could find to atone, and regain his masculine pride, was to tell her he would send her money to give to her (imaginary) female friend to cover the cost of the petrol. Cira, grin still in place and raising her shoulders and cocking her head in a faux apologetic manner, said to me "I took the money of course, it was the only way that he would feel better about it all".

Cira was able to circumvent the strictures of *machismo* in order to achieve what she wanted-

despite not being particularly attracted to her conquest she had liked the idea of some anonymous sex followed by sleep in a bed where she would not have to endure the antics of her cousin and his friends-and had taken advantage of it by casting herself as the chaste damsel who had been abandoned in her account to her cousin, knowing his sense of honour would cause him to feel guilty as a family member who had failed in discharging his patriarchal responsibilities.

Machismo was therefore not viewed by all the young middle-class *gaúchas* I encountered in Florianópolis as a straightforwardly oppressive system, and nor did they believe women are all powerless against it. They considered themselves to be *mulheres modernas*, modern women, and a key element of the modernity that they claimed for themselves was an ability to 'read' *machismo* and 'play' it their advantage. Therefore when João offered to pay Cira's imaginary friend's petrol money he was able to assuage his *machista* guilt and reclaim his lost pride, but she went further, knowing that she had played the *machista* game better than he, winning at every level. This we might understand in Bourdieu's (1992: 66) terms as having a better "feel for the game" within the social field constructed by *machismo*. Cira's better feel for the *machista* game than João's is then perhaps best understood as a result of her 'strong objectivity' as the member of a group suffering gender oppression (Harding 2004). *Gaúchas*' situated knowledge' (Haraway 1988) as women gives them an epistemological advantage when it comes to understanding the intricate workings of *machismo* which heterosexual men, being less victimised by its predations, are less likely to perceive. These younger women, in their twenties and thirties, observe and understand *machismo* through the lens of their own perceived modernity. *Machismo* is, for them, an anachronistic relic of a now defunct tradition, one which they often told me that they could understand through the experiences of their mothers and grandmothers. Their vision of modernity, which they believe most older women lack, gives them a model for alternative gender relations and gendered lives.

These beliefs were particularly clear in the narratives of two such young *gaúchas*, twenty-four year old Luciana and twenty-two year old Paula, narratives which summarise well the ways

in which women's relationships with *machismo* were influenced by age. Luciana was originally from rural Rio Grande do Sul, living for most of her childhood in a small town on the *pampa*, the archetypal *gaúcho* setting. It is perhaps no surprise that her narrative of her childhood therefore follows so closely the script of *machismo*. She told me that when she was a child her mother used to make her help with the cleaning in the house, but would excuse her brother. She told me that when she complained that this was unfair her mother

used to tell me that I had to help because "you are a girl, and your brother is a boy, it's different." I didn't think it was fair, that just because I was a girl I had to help with housework, but my brother didn't. If I have kids I won't do this!

She said that her mother 'should' have been more 'modern' than this, given that she had been to university, but instead was an adherent to a traditional *machista* ideology. Luciana saw it as her responsibility to break this cycle, to be the agent of change. Paula similarly explained to me that.

Brazil is machista, through men having control, but they're pretty scared nowadays because of the advances for women, it's a new era. But even so, if we take a traditional family, it's machista, it's the man that has the last word...but it is changing, with women working, earning more than men...I don't want to be a housewife, looking after my husband, our generation isn't like that.

This view was common amongst the younger cohort, who tended to think that they were the first generation to break free from the constraints of *machismo*.

Perhaps unsurprisingly this view was not shared by those *gaúchas* I knew who were of the same generation as Luciana and Paula's mothers. They certainly did not share the younger generation's analysis of them as being passive victims of *machismo* and patriarchal domination, trapped hopelessly in their repressive traditions. The 1960s saw a "Cultural Revolution that brought new lifestyles, drug experimentation, the pill, and the sexual revolution to Brazil" (Ferreira-Pinto 2004: 2), and many women told me of their roles in this revolution. As we sat outside her apartment drinking *chimarrão* (mate tea) together fifty-five year old Grazia told me with great pride how in the 1970s she had

been the first female manager in the company she worked for, at a time when there were very few women in similar positions. Starting as a secretary she had overcome the pervasive *machismo* in rural Rio Grande do Sul to work her way up to a position of authority. Her *machista* male subordinates, unaccustomed as they were to having a female boss, resisted and attempted to undermine her, but with visible relish she told me "I always had to think that it was me that was boss, me that gave the orders, and anyone that didn't like it could go fuck themselves!" She had learnt the male language of *machismo*, she had learnt how to adopt a dominant posture in their world, and she learnt *jeitinhos* (tricks and ruses) to get one over on them. She came out on top by playing the game of *machismo* better than they did, because, she asserted, she had never been prepared to be the *moçinha* (well-behaved young woman), and had instead always asserted her right to be her own person, dress her own way, act as she saw fit.

Financially independent since the age of 14 she had always had a job and had therefore never relied on men to pay the rent. She was certain that this, coupled with her grasp of the 'game' of *machismo* and the behaviours and patterns of thought that it inculcated in most men, is what made her successes possible. She was proud of this, valuing her independence and her status as a liberated woman, enabling her to divorce her husband some fifteen years earlier on her terms. Despite the marked differences between understandings of the younger and older generations—most notably that the older women tended to see the fight against *machismo* as one they had started and largely won, whereas their younger counterparts tended to see the fight against *machismo* as just beginning—what united them was a belief in their understanding of *machismo*, and their ability to not only counter it but even turn to their advantage and thrive in the culture it creates. They may not have agreed about who was able to resist *machismo*, but all did agree that although *machismo* certainly exists and exerts a powerful influence on the lives of women in Rio Grande do Sul, it was possible to resist this power with a good feel for the game.

A Game of Privilege?

Elsewhere I have discussed the different ways in which middle-class women in the south

of Brazil can and do lay claim to a 'modern' gendered and sexual identity, and their belief that they are able to do so due in large measure to their social, educational and labour market capital (Turner 2014). There is no doubt that this can make it easier for them to avoid and resist the worst aspects of *machismo*, but there is also evidence of diverse resistances to *machismo* which mean we cannot reduce this to a question of class. Fonseca (2001), for example, researched working class women in Porto Alegre and found that they also knew how to 'game' the system of *machismo*, describing poor women who succeed in performing as *malandras*, the female version of the Brazilian archetype of the *malandro*, the rogue who is able to use cunning and skill to overcome an oppressed social position (DaMatta 1991). These women who occupy oppressed positions in terms of both class and gender were able to use men's deep fear of being labelled as cuckolds to game *machismo* in such a way as to construct active sexual identities, even within a working class culture that demands sexual decorum of women, and to do so in a way that was lauded by other women.

We also find that despite the rural pampa being the spiritual home of the *machista gaúcha/gaúcho* archetypes, poor rural *gaúchas*, such as those researched by Rubin and Sokoloff-Rubin (2013), have succeeded in constructing women's activist networks in even the rural *campanha*, supposedly the most repressive part of the state. This should not come as a great surprise because if we delve back into the history of Brazil's southern frontier we find that the female archetype of the *prenda* forwarded by the Gaúcho Traditionalist Movement is deeply mythologised. The ubiquity of such submissive women has been debunked by Muzart (2012) in her research into female writers and poets in 19th Century Rio Grande do Sul, women who she characterises as '*mulheres de faca na bota*' (women with knives in their boots), a southern Brazilian phrase used to refer to brave and indomitable women. These women of the frontier were tough and strong and more than capable of holding their own in the difficult frontier conditions in which they lived. They were never, as many modern-day *gaúchas* pointed out to me, simply 'good little housewives'. They actively shaped the frontier every bit as much as the men. The submissive *gaúcha* is therefore first and foremost a stereotype, and Rossi (2006: 123)

has even found that even those women who seem most to embody the stereotype, the contemporary *prendas* of the Gaúcho Traditionalist Movement, are not simply well-behaved and submissive, as they are expected to be, but instead use the strength and determination associated with the stereotypical *gaúcho* to shape the *prenda* role in a way that suits them. They often have a certain ambivalence towards *machismo*, with some expressing that they were unprepared to quit their jobs and become just housewives, and some refusing to abide by *prenda* clothing regulations and determined to dress as they saw fit.

What I found through my research to be a far more profoundly limiting factor than class and geography was the awful power that *machismo* can continue to exert, a power which can overcome even the strongest and most adept player of the system. When I met Claudia on my first period of fieldwork in 2008 she was married with three children and she came quickly to be one of women I admired the most. A successful professional woman, she displayed a strength, determination, and refusal to submit to anyone's will which made a profound impression on all she met. She told me many stories of the ways in which she had from childhood defied the strict catholic conservatism of her family and the small town in which she was raised. Fiercely independent as a teenager she had both boyfriends and girlfriends, the latter, she told me, not due to any particular desire, but instead primarily to have something that would shock the priests in the confessionals she was expected by her parents to take, the amusement this gave her making up for the non-consensual nature of her visits. She studied hard to pass the vestibular exam to study a male-dominated subject at university, defying the wishes of her parents and becoming one of the few women on her course. After graduation she left Rio Grande do Sul at the earliest possible opportunity for a job in Florianópolis, earning sufficient to support herself for the first five years there, in which time she had an active sexual life on her own terms, far from the judgemental gaze of her extended family back home.

When I returned in 2013 I had looked forward to seeing her again, but when I met with our mutual friend Cristiane, I was told that Claudia was a changed woman. Her husband had somehow become convinced a couple of years previously that she was having an affair, and

had banned her from socialising with any men. Cristiane began to cry when she told me that this previously most confident and active of women was now a shadow of her former self. I felt angry, but my predominant emotion was sadness. There is no-one I would have thought less likely to end up crushed by *machismo* than Claudia, and it led me to write in my field diary that evening that “if even Claudia cannot resist the force of *machismo* when it truly exerts itself, can anyone?” With time and reflection there is still no clear answer I could give to this question I asked of myself, but what remains clear is that no matter how good one may be at playing the game, losing is always a possibility.

CONCLUSION

A good feel for the game is therefore no guarantor of beating *machismo*. This does not however mean that we should only consider the latter half of Claudia’s story. I argue that it is also important to consider the earlier part of Claudia’s story. No woman I spoke with was unaware of the power of *machismo*, and even those who believed themselves to be able to live without significant impediment from it could never forget its potential effects on their lives. However, even as its threat remained at the forefront of their minds, it was also a negative gender hegemon which they understood as a kind of folk model of patriarchy. Their awareness and understanding meant that they could, with luck and skill, use a form of gendered ju-jitsu to turn its power against those men who sought to deploy it.

Furthermore, the women who they saw as operating in a traditional gender regime, like the stereotypically passive and submissive *gaúcha* in the form of the *prenda*, were cited less frequently by them—instead it was the ideology of the gender regime itself, *machismo*, that they focused upon in their construction of the *mulher moderna*. This vision of a ‘modern’ gender and sexual identity stems from an ideal of independence, which was measured by the extent to which they felt that they have overcome *gaúcho machismo*. When Marcinha told me one day that “I don’t think that professionally this *machismo* crops up, and in relationships I reckon you can do whatever you want” it was not that she believed this in absolute terms, it reflects more her stance and determination that *machismo* would

not rule her life. When she had talked to me earlier about the ubiquity of infidelity and women’s powerlessness she was therefore invoking an extreme and imagined patriarchal gender regime against which she could measure her own life conditions. She and her friends needed this *machismo* as an Other reality, an undesirable possibility against which they could construct their own gendered selves. Not being subject to *machismo* was their statement of success. I would suggest then that *Gaúcho machismo* operates as a symbolic yardstick against which they gauged their ‘modernity’—measured by the distance they feel they are from it, regardless of what they understand it to be. In this sense it really doesn’t matter that their understandings of *machismo* were all different, or that no man, living or dead, perfectly embodies it. They rely on *machismo*, or, more accurately, on feeling that they have overcome it, in order to gauge the extent to which they have overcome tradition, and it therefore does not matter so much that this tradition can be every bit as mythical as the *peão* and *prenda* of the Gaúcho Traditionalist Movement. That *gaúchas* have always had knives in their boots is less important to them than the knowledge that they themselves are ‘modern’ women who carry knives in their metaphorical boots, and will therefore not allow themselves to fall prey to *machismo*.

If *machismo* can perform this role then this forces us to consider a role for *machismo* wherein it is not purely negative and destructive, but also has, albeit in a limited sense, a constructive element for (some) women. This also brings us full circle back to the question I posed at the beginning, namely whether women accessing and mobilising *machismo* against men, using the same logics under which men use it against women, represents an improvement in terms of ‘gender equality’? It is for good reason that I promised no definitive answer to this question, as there is no completely satisfactory answer to give. I would argue that their ability in using *machismo*, derived from their situated knowledge as women within a patriarchal system, certainly helps them ameliorate the effects of the oppression they face as women, but would have to consider that in so doing the system of *machismo* is only slightly challenged, and even arguably strengthened through iteration, with all the attendant ill-effects this has for other(ed) women. One might look to find a means of calcu-

lating the balance of these effects, seeking to establish whether net gains or losses are made for women, but even if that were possible what we would eventually be left with would be not a 'Culture of Equality', but rather, at best, a slightly less unequal 'Culture of Inequality'. Such realisation then should force us into confronting the question, with which I will leave you, of whether a 'Culture of Equality' might emerge through a progression of such moves, or if something altogether more radical is necessary?

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NOTES

- 1 I conducted two periods of ethnographic fieldwork in Florianópolis, one of fifteen months in 2008-2009 (funded by an ESRC 1+3 Studentship - PTA-030-2006-00356), and one of three months in 2013 (funded by the School of Social Sciences at the University of Hull, UK).
- 2 This and all further informant names cited here is a pseudonym, and in addition to names some of the other information about informants has been altered to preserve anonymity.
- 3 This is the adjective form of *machismo*.
- 4 The contrasting submissive and passive female figure has been conceptualised under *machismo*'s feminine counterpoint *marianismo* (Stevens 1973). For critiques see Ehlers (1991) and Navarro (2002), and for interesting reworkings see Derks and Heesels (2011) and Murray (2014).
- 5 This and all subsequent quotes are my translations from the original Portuguese transcript.

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