

## “DAMA DE ESPADAS” – TRAJECTORY OF A RIO DE JANEIRO *BLUES*

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### ABSTRACT

The song “*Dama de Espadas*” [free translation: Queen of Spades], by Ilessi and Iara Ferreira, is a reference work by a new generation of songwriters from Rio de Janeiro. Both singer-songwriters inserted and acting in the contemporary artistic scene, they intend to build new narratives, in the literary and musical dimension of the song. We aim to understand the motivation behind the development of this song – in the context of production, performance and listening experience. In addition to that, we intend to look at the ways in which a dialog with blues as a musical genre from the United States among the African American was built, comprising two territories that witnessed the fight for women’s rights, roughly a century apart. The works of (1) Angela Davis, with her panorama on the formation of blues from Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, as well as (2) Silvia Federici, with her approach on the rise of capitalism and the multiple controlling mechanisms imposed on women to serve the ruling logic, were used as reference for this analysis.

### KEYWORDS

Brazilian songwriters;  
feminist ethnomusicology;  
feminism; Brazilian  
popular singing; Brazilian  
popular music.

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1. This study was financed in part by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - Brasil (CAPES) - Finance Code 001.

This paper is an initial investigation of the context behind the creation and the listening experience of the song “*Dama de Espadas*”, a joint work by Iara Ferreira and Ilessi, both singers and composers. To that end, I used as reference the works of (1) Angela Davis (1998) with the chapter “I Used to Be Your Sweet Mama: Ideology, Sexuality, and Domesticity”<sup>2</sup>, in which the writer recalls the history of blues from the perspective of the singers and songwriters Bessie Smith e Ma Rainey, the aesthetics and the themes that they used, as well as compare them to the song in this study; and (2) Silvia Federici (2017) with “Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation”<sup>3</sup>, in which Federici reveals the different controlling mechanisms to which women have been submitted since the 15<sup>th</sup> century, some of which appearing as a so-called ‘reverse complaint’ through the use of irony in the song “*Dama de Espadas*”, a feature existing in *blues* songs by the aforementioned writers.

Is there such a thing as feminist/feminine aesthetics? Have women’s perspective come forward as much as it should, in Brazilian urban popular music? If feminism is to offer an alternative to patriarchy, how can popular music help with that? The purpose of this analysis is to help answer these questions.

#### **GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF THE ANALYSIS**

When reading Davis (1998), there was an immediate connection with “*Dama de Espadas*”, a composition that is part of the ethnographic analysis of the musical practice by three groups formed exclusively by women in Rio de Janeiro. This type of organization has its main observation territory, reflection of a national and worldwide movement and is a phenomenon that has been growing exponentially all over the city.

In this analysis, I intend to use the work developed by Samuel Araújo (2018) as an epistemological reference, through the concept of ‘sound praxis’, where one can notice the interaction between thought, politics and action in musical production here. I intend to integrate Araújo’s proposal when the author highlights the importance of going beyond the construction of a field of knowledge and reflection about the world by bringing to the table contributions to an actual social change, through an epistemology that drives the emergence of movements that bring social equality, justice, pacific coexistence, and ecological balance.

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2. From the book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (Davis 1998).

3. This paper is part of the ongoing research carried out during the doctorate in The Ethnography of Musical Practice by the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO) which discusses composers that take part in groups of female musicians and artists. It is the first analysis of one of the compositions being brought to illustrate part of these women’s work. This research is funded by the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES).

This paper is part of a participatory and activist action research, whose militant engagement precedes the beginning of this academic reflection. It is worth highlighting its proximity to the agents in question, because we have all worked together in different contexts<sup>4</sup>. There is no hierarchy between the women taking part in this research.

Hence, Araújo (2018) does not permeate the analysis, but is present in the approach model of an ethnography that handles the themes ‘music and politics’ and ‘music and gender’, both during the conception of the paper (like the scientific foundation used, the relationship with the individuals in the interviews, and the involvement with the field) and in the theme (feminism, female composers and songwriters, collaboration networks in music through female collectives who seek non-hierarchical relations, and the reflection about musical practice); in addition to the sound material itself (referencing a music genre that aims to speak up against social injustices and the use of the voice from a combative aesthetic). I intend to find some sort of coherence in this research, making this process (writing and the dialog with the peers during the interview-writing process) another front of action in women’s fight, through a deeper look into the role of music in societal transformations, as well as a reflection of the transformations in course.

From that point, I analyze the supposed aesthetic dialog between this blues from Rio de Janeiro, from a perspective of the composition and the performance, and two of the biggest names in this style: Bessie Smith and Ma (as in Madam) Rainey (Davis 1998, Jones 1969, Schüller 1968).

#### **FIRST DIALOGUES IN “DAMA DE ESPADAS”**

Neither Ilessi<sup>5</sup> nor Iara Ferreira<sup>6</sup> had, even in a remote past, listened to blues as a habit. Although they were familiar with some of Bessie Smith

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4. Iara Ferreira is a partner in a song, and Ilessi was a member of the collective *Essa Mulher*, where we worked together for two years, promoting events around the topic of the female composer. The three of us had previously met through the 2016 edition of *Sonora – Women Composers International Festival* (in Rio de Janeiro), curated by Ilessi.

5. Ilessi Souza da Silva, a black singer and composer, was born in 1981 in Campo Grande, west zone of Rio de Janeiro. Her father, also a composer, compositor, was her staunchest supporter, and the one who encouraged her to pursue a career in music. Ilessi started singing professionally at 17. She had guitar lessons with Carlos Delmiro, Helio Delmiro’s brother, and later enrolled at EPM (*Escola Portátil de Música*), which stands for Portable Music School. At 16, she started taking singing lessons at *Escola Villa Lobos com Mirna Rubim* and with Amélia Rabello at EPM. She wrote her first song in 2010.

6. Iara C. S. Ferreira, a white singer and composer, was born in Itapira, in São Paulo state, in 1985. She first started her musical education in her own family, but Iara Ferreira was the first of her kin to actually pursue a career in music. Her father played guitar, her mother was a singer, her grandfather was a composer and she had Carlos Galhardo record one of her songs. Her paternal grandmother played the accordion and her great grandmother played the piano. Having always lived in a small town, the only presentations she had seen were limited to rodeo parties. It wasn’t before she was 20 years old that Iara attended her first concert: Gal Gosta was singing. In 2008, her senior year in college, she started singing in a circle of composers, having written only two songs. It was the year she completed her major in Social Sciences. Iara lived in Rio de Janeiro for 9 years. She moved to Rio in order to attend EPM (*Escola Portátil de Música*), where she studied under Amélia Rabello.

and Billie Holiday's works, they were not acquainted with most of the production by the North-American composers quoted by Davis, as well as their position in the constitution of this musical genre.

Bessie Smith was Ma Rainey's student, and both of them played a part in building the classic blues – the kind of blues with a relatively crystallized aesthetic when it comes to shape, harmony, melody, singing and lyrics – while bringing the emotional nature of the blues styles preceding it (Jones 1969, 118). The primitive blues, in turn, encompassed a vast portion of the black music in North America with songs like work songs, *spirituals*, and *shouts* (Schuller 1968, 271). The transition from the *blues*, which comprised a variant of the black music, to the specific music genre, owed itself to the change in mentality of the black population about their place in the world, following the abolition of slavery (Davis 1998, Jones 1969).

In order to understand the paths outlined in this unquestionable dialog, through Brazilian composers – a century after the work done by those blues pioneers – both of them were interviewed, when they resided in Rio de Janeiro city<sup>7</sup>.

See, below, the lyrics to “*Dama de Espadas*” and its translation into English, Queen of Spades, with a proposition to divide it, justified in detail later in this paper. Next, its creation is contextualized.

[A] Compreendo perfeitamente | As razões que ele teve | Mulheres assim, que vivem na noite | A cheirar sereno e a rondar botequim | São mulheres que trocam de macho | Qual trocam de roupa | Têm opinião sobre quase tudo | Carregam no ventre a mazela do mundo...

[B-transição] Ele foi um perfeito *lord* | Mas ficou de bode com a sua *lady* | Na hora da cama essas damas de espadas | Matam o homem de sede...

[Refrão] Mas sei que afinal | Ele não teve sequer qualquer culpa | Sangrou no punhal | Bebeu a cicuta | Do amor de mulheres assim | Iguazinhas a mim”

[Free Translation: [A] I totally understand | The reasons he's had | Women like this, who go out at night | Smelling the night dew and bar hopping| Are women who go through men | like underwear | Have a say on almost everything | They carry the afflictions of the world in their wombs...

[B-bridge] He was a perfect lord | But he was upset with his lady | On bedtime these queens of spades| Will make their men dehydrated | I know that, after all | He wasn't to blame | He bled on the dagger | He gulped the hemlock down| Drank the poison that is the love of women like this | Exactly like me|

7. Iara Ferreira gave the researcher this interview on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2017 at her house in Copacabana, Rio de Janeiro. In 2018 Iara Ferreira moved to the countryside of São Paulo. Ilessi granted her interview on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2017 at the UNIRIO campus in Urca, Rio de Janeiro.

Iara Ferreira wrote the lyrics to “*Dama de Espadas*” in 2014. As Iara pointed out, she would have needed to “live to 300 years old” to account for all the narratives in the songs she composes, but here, she speaks from personal experience, one of the few exceptions in her work. This song was composed after a suitor turned her down, feeling intimidated and scared by everything Iara stood for, both as a woman, and an artist. The young lad expressed his feelings in an e-mail where he spoke of his admiration and his fear, which rivaled his attraction to her. His words had an impact on Iara, who wondered what could have brought upon that situation. And thus, the narrative in ‘*dama de espadas*’ was born:

I wondered what I had done to scare him off like that [...] Then I went to a bar all by myself and I realized. ‘Here I am, alone, in a bar’ Then I started seeing myself as this queen of spades. How insane is it, that a woman can be perceived as such... [...] How come we can’t be like this? Does this make her a monster? Is she a beast? Does it make her some kind of man-eater?... It got me thinking about all this and I had a *bolero* playing in the back of my mind, by Maurício Tapajós and Aldir, over and over, I had that melody in my head, and I wrote “*Dama de Espadas*” on that table. I scribbled something down... Thinking of the metrics in that song, you know? The bolero’s lyrics, I don’t even remember, they didn’t matter... So, I sent these lyrics to Bené, Bernardo Diniz, my most frequent partner at the time. (Iara Ferreira in the interview to this researcher, November, 2017)

According to Iara, the lyrics did not strike a chord in her musical partner. After a year with no word from Bernardo Diniz, a lucky coincidence. Ilessi has asked her friend for a song to put to music. Iara Ferreira talked to her co-creator and, once she was cleared to do so, sent the text to the person who would, actually create the tune “*Dama de Espadas*”. Iara was astonished with the blues song she got in return, a first for her thus far, but she was pleased, nonetheless.

Ilessi was sick with the flu when she received the lyrics from Iara Ferreira, but that did not stop her from connecting to what she was reading, and she had completed the music in just two days, amidst short intervals caused by the virus that had her in bed rest. About that, she explained:

Iara sent me the lyrics and, I’ll tell you in detail because it is a funny story, [laughter] At the time, I wasn’t that used to put lyrics to songs. I would compose the music and then give it to someone to compose the lyrics. I didn’t have a lot of practice. I got the hang of it now. But I read those lyrics and I had this inspiration, like: ‘man I’m going to do this quickly...’ I had this feeling that it was going to be easy. Iara had told me she had composed the lyrics having a *bolero* in mind, ‘I will not tell you which one, I don’t want you to be influenced’, and then she told me it was a song by Aldir Blanc and Mauricio Tapajós, something like that. But as she said that, she didn’t tell me whose it was,

or the name of the song. She just told me ‘I would prefer if you composed a *bolero* because I think it was a reaction to the bolero and all... [...] I tried to compose a bolero, but I didn’t think it was the right *vibe* for the song. I felt there was something to it, I wasn’t sure what... Then I started strumming the guitar more brashly, raspier, I don’t know. I felt that in the lyrics. Next thing, I picked up my guitar and blues came out... It was so fast! Whenever I get some lyrics to a song, I try not to change anything. Even if you don’t think it has got such a precise structure, such clear metrics... But this one wasn’t like that. (...) Some parts of it, I thought rang like blues, like [sings] ‘] Mas sei que afinal | Ele não teve sequer qualquer culpa’ Something like [hums]. Which is... Samba has that as well; some samba songs do. Wording that sounds spoken. Since I did not want to alter any bit of the lyrics, I created this musical wording, sort of like [sings], a little imprecise, spoken, like this. I guess that is kind of the story of how this song was made. (Ilessi in interview to the researcher, in November, 2017)

In the book *Early Jazz*, Gunther Schuller (1968) states that, in blues, personal vocal expression comprised of words, meaning and sounds are “one and the same” (Schuller 1968, 273), an essential identity of the genre: What you hear is not a “polished voice”. According to the author, the beauty of the blues as sang by Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith lies precisely in the expression of everyday speech; natural, colloquial, with an individual artistic language. Ilessi sought to integrate the need to reproduce a singing quality akin to speech – given by the search for a corresponding rhythm in the verses, like the ones the composer notices in blues and some samba – in terms of the emotional demand of the lyrics, translated, sensorially speaking, as something with a “brassy” and “raspy” quality to it, through the guitar’s right-hand sound. We can see that these qualities seem to be translated once more through Ilessi’s vocal timbre when singing the song, as I will discuss further later on.

The characteristics preserved from bolero was the quadruple time. According to Mingote (apud Christianis 2011) bolero from Rio de Janeiro has a quadruple time, unlike Hispanic (triple) and Latin American (double). The poetics of the bolero music, so full of romance, comes from a melodramatic tradition. Christianis (2011) also quotes Jaime Pérez Dávila, a Mexican researcher, who divided bolero’s themes into the following categories (1) love for someone; (2) romantic demand; (3) lust; (4) angst and neediness related to love; (5) damage (unrequited love, betrayal), to which Acosta adds a sixth theme: class-crossed lovers, like in cases of romance that involves a rich woman and a poor man. Therefore, what Iara proposes is a ‘counter theme’ to traditional bolero, where the narrator expresses involvement with the male figure, from an autonomous, guilt-free viewpoint; in fact, she seems to take pleasure in his difficulty, even showing disdain for it. Iara’s lyrics go in the opposite direction from traditional bolero. As we do not know to which bolero the composer

wanted to oppose, we cannot make direct comparisons, although we can probably tell it was an attempt at subverting the tradition.

### **POLITICAL CONTEXT**

In the late 19th century, early 20th century, *blues* stood on its own right as a musical genre in the United States. At a time when idealization of a romantic love, heteronormativity and monogamy was the norm, blues dealt with themes such as with extramarital affairs, the fugacity of sexual relations and partners, domestic violence, homosexuality, and independent women who were the bosses of themselves, of their own sexuality, and their bodies. Reinforcing yet another aesthetic specificity of blues, most of the main performances and composers were women. Some of the biggest names amongst them were Bessie Smith, dubbed the “Empress of the blues”, and Ma Rainey, known as the “mother of the blues” (Davis 1998, 4).

According to Davis (1998) and Jones (1969), women established themselves as the main personalities in the classic blues, due to the distinct nature of the lives of women and men of African descent: in the aftermath of slavery, black men would travel often in search of work, while women took to raising their families and spending time together in churches, birthplace of negro spirituals (Jones 1969, 125). On the other hand, a large number of women also started taking part in troubadours and vaudevilles<sup>8</sup>, where many black female artists rose to stardom. The 1920’s witnessed a surge in feminist rallies, which had a direct impact on the career of these black female artists. Aside from becoming more professional, they also gained more prestige and independence, something unattainable in any other career path (domestic labor, church, prostitution) that they could pursue (Jones 1969, 127).

Davis (1998) pointed out the important and necessary role performed by blues composers in anticipating themes that would be part of contemporary feminist causes. Due to their lack of modesty when exposing the desires of women, they created the possibility of gender equality from sexuality and took in tow the cultural politics they experienced in their own careers, thus including new possibilities in their society’s historic path (Davis 1998, 24). In her analysis, Davis made use of the feminist approach and touched on a few points that we would like to look at, precisely against the backdrop of the creation of “*Dama de Espadas*”.

The author explained the meaning of sexuality in the lyrics of blues compositions, reflecting the freedom of black people in the United States, for it was in personal relations that the greatest changes took place, while

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8. North-American musical comedy.

economically, they did not see any major economic independence. For the first time, black men and women had some measure of autonomy in choosing their sexual partner, something that had always been denied to them by slave owners, in favor of creating better ‘offspring’ more suited to the workforce, not unlike domesticated animals (Davis 1998, 4).

Davis highlighted that, prior to the end of slavery, *spirituals* and other musical genres of African descent would express collective desires, whereas, with the rise of the blues, after the abolition, its content became more individual. At this time, there was increased importance given to the performance through the solo singer, as opposed to the choir or their group. The *blues*, then, was established as a music genre that met new-found individual needs and desires, repressed before (Davis 1998, 5-6).

This feature is also present in the performance of “*Dama de Espadas*”, having in mind how far women have come, in a society where sexual independence comes to be the main symbol of the conquest of freedom and autonomy; a topic that is still debated in many cultures around the globe. Reproductive rights, including the right to abortion, (preventive medical care, basic sexual education, prenatal care) are the main topics in their agenda (Hooks 2018), along with the debate about society’s definitions of women’s image and their sexual choice. (Adichie 2015, Hooks 2018).

The image of the singer or the composer who accompanies herself is updated once more in the contemporary musical scene. The process of female empowerment<sup>9</sup> is music involves encouraging singers to play instruments – particularly guitars, among harmonic instruments – and to sing the song they composed, building new careers in the image of the singer-songwriter (namely, a singer plays a harmonic instrument, as she interprets her own original composition). Thus, women representativity in music is marked through the composition and mastery of harmonic instruments, a performance achieved through solo singing, existing in western culture from epic poems that were part of the oral tradition (Tinhorão 2011, 54).

In Brazil, women were forbidden from playing certain musical instruments in formal musical education institutions until the early 20th century, and the disproportionate number of erudite singers, compared to orchestra instrumentalists is mainly due to the need for women to act as female characters of opera plays (Igayara-Souza 2011). Due to women’s

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9. It means ‘empowering someone’. According to the article in the page Instituto Hoffmann Brasil, the concept of empowering is “but a collective social action in which the individual — be it a woman, a migrant, physically disabled or any social construct commonly in disadvantage compared to others —, and the individual’s family is made aware of their rights and how to fight for them. Extracted from the website: <http://www.processohoffmanbrasil.com.br/blog/empoderamento-entenda-origem-desse-conceito/>



specific timbre, they were not forbidden from singing as well. I could not find a research that focused on popular music, yet I believe that it is a coherent process in the concert music scene. When Ilessi sings and accompanies herself on guitar, something she has started doing recently on her concerts, (2016), she is adding to the representativity of female guitar players and composers, reinforcing their presence in a field that, to women, remains so limited. The matter of female representativity in music is investigated by Verônica Doubleday (2008). The author states that the presence or absence, in a smaller number, of women playing an instrument – be it bass, percussion or metals, for instance – has a direct influence in the number of women playing that instrument. Gradually, this paradigm has been changing, and we can perceive a new generation of women in music, taking up spaces they had not, previously, like in military marching bands and orchestras, acting as orchestra conductors or arranger. Female composers and conductors were seldom seen, and great erudite composers were rapidly forgotten (Michelle Perrot 2017). Some sacrificed their careers for their families; when they weren't verbally forbidden from having a musical career by all the male figures in their lives, like their fathers or husbands. Perrot (2017) discusses the importance of restoring the history of female artists, from different fields, in order to restore collective memory for women.

Without a detailed knowledge of the history of the blues, Ilessi, herself a black woman, tried to understand the motives behind the choice of that genre for the lyrics, stating that, at first, it was not a rational choice, but that it was based on her experience, listening to jazz and blues:

I feel something in this style, that is almost like a confrontational manifestation. Blues has got a combative ring to it. Jazz has also got that! [...] I think it flows, through musical, artistic manifestation, there is a shout, it is cathartic, speaks of a freedom they didn't have before. They used to go through such violent confrontation before, you know? I think that is where they would show their culture's regal nature, and **I feel that in blues. There is a raw quality, a bitter, yet sexy quality to it at the same time, and so much irony. There is some irony in blues that had to do with the lyrics. But here, it wasn't calculated.** [emphasis added by researcher] I believe that it played out like that, and I saw that it was coherent, you know? In general, I guess that it is how I compose, as though I was listening to the music in those words." (Ilessi in the interview with the researcher, November 2017)

Ilessi noted this identification with blues, and without really knowing it, associated the lyrics to this confrontation that she "felt", according to herself. Both the confrontation present in the *blues* and in Iara Ferreira and Ilessi's composition exist in the political context where it was created. In November 2015, women in Brazil staged a mass reaction, a series

of feminist rallies took over the streets, dubbed *Primavera das Mulheres*, or “Feminist Spring”. There was an increased number of debates about gender equality and the daily fight against gender-based violence and oppression in schools, universities and streets, causing an increased awareness and visibility for causes that permeate several feminisms, seeing as the feminist fights for social equality are as diverse as women, themselves. (Davis 2016, Hooks 2018)<sup>10</sup>. In that year, a series of actions against women – most notably Congressman Eduardo Cunha’s proposed bill 5069<sup>11</sup> as well as sexist comments of pedophile nature, directed to a 12 year old participant of a *reality show* at the time – stirred up social media and called for the creation of *hashtags* by feminist movements such as *#meuprimeiroassédio* [free translation: #myfirstsexual-harrassment], *#todascontracunha*, [free translation: #allagainstcunha] *#estupronuncamais* [free translation: #rapenomore], e *#mexeucomuma-mexeucomtodas* [free translation: #messwithonemesswithall]. In November 13<sup>th</sup>, 2015, El País had the headline “*Primavera feminista no Brasil: Em outras nações, as mulheres lutam por salários iguais. No Brasil, para não retrocederem em suas conquistas*”<sup>12</sup> [free translation: Feminist Spring in Brazil: In other countries, women fight for equal salaries. In Brazil, they fight not to lose their rights] and pinpointed the rallies in streets all over the country:

October 31<sup>st</sup>, around 15.000 Brazilian women took over the streets of São Paulo. In other cities of the country, thousands also marched. The protest happened again last Thursday, will happen again tomorrow and later this month. It is not common for Brazilian women to go out in the streets to say “no more” sexism. That is what made it so surprising. To the point that Brazilian magazines such as *Época*, dubbed it “Brazilian Feminist Spring.” (*Primavera Feminista no Brasil*, 2015, El País)

Since then, different actions have taken place in the music scene, some immediately following the street rallies. That is when the collective Rede Sonora – Música(s) e Feminismo(s) was created at University of São Paulo’s Music Department in 2015; the project “Meninas do Brasil”, a series of interviews and videos of composers and their compositions, created and centered on the composer Luiza Sales, as of January, 2015; the group LUA or Open Author’s Union (Livre União de Autoras), integrated by Ilessi, Iara Ferreira, Luana Dias, Carla Capalbo, and Milena Tibúrcio, in Rio de Janeiro; the group ANA – Nude Sample of Writers (Amostra

10. Feminist Spring was made into a documentary by Antonia Pellegrino and Isabel Nascimento Silva, and was launched in 2017, where they look at that historic moment. It also named a ‘collective’ that promotes a political concert in Rio de Janeiro. “*Dama de Espadas*” is part of the collective’s repertoire, whose members amount to over 30 female artists from different fields.

11. Proposed bill 5069, among other measures, created difficulties to the right of abortion in cases of rape.

12. Accessed in November, 2017 at: [https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2015/11/13/opinion/1447369533\\_406426.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2015/11/13/opinion/1447369533_406426.html)

Nua de Autoras), having as members Deh Mussulini, Laura Lopes, Luiza Brina, Luana Aires, Leonora Weissmann, and Leopoldina, in Belo Horizonte; the hashtag *#mulherescriando* [free translation: #womencreating], launched by Deh Mussulini, which dared women to show their art through Facebook videos. This campaign inspired the creation of Sonora – Women Composers International Festival conceived by composers from Belo Horizonte, São Paulo, Salvador, and Rio de Janeiro, which, in 2017 saw over 15 countries, 40 cities in Brazil, and 47 composers in Rio de Janeiro alone join it, reaching 80 around the world in 2018. Both the hashtag campaign *#mulherescriando* and Sonora – Women Composers International Festival were created in 2016. The year 2017 saw the creation of the collective *Essa Mulher*, which organizes exhibits by composers, and coordinates the Sonora festival in Rio de Janeiro. The collective *Músicas! Mulher e Música*, [free translation: Music! Women and Music] was created from the union of eight musicians (Aline Gonçalves, Antonilde Rosa, Karin Verthein, Marcela Velon, Maria Souto, Maria Clara Vale, Monica Ávila, and Tânia Rêgo) to write a joint letter in response to several discussions about Hermeto Pascoal's Big Band in October, 2017, which had taken place at Circo Voador, and involved 30 musicians, including guests, but not a single woman among them<sup>13</sup>. These are groups inserted in a restricted community, for they are part of a small circle.

Therefore, I can see similarities between this and the black women in the United States, who found, in blues, a way to make use of, as well as to express, their freedom and autonomy. In 2017, Ilessi, a black composer and singer; and Iara Ferreira, a white composer and singer, once more use the same artistic language to take a stand as women, both with a similar literary and musical work to the genuine blues composers, as though quoting from a reference forged a century before. Again, the woman is expressed by means of a non-normative narrative, which deviates from the common knowledge expected, with its use of irony and sarcasm. Here, musical language is, once more, expressed with the cutting and confrontational tone of the blues, be it in song and lyrics composed by women, be it through singing and playing the instrument, the guitar. If, at its birth, blues was an African American way to vent, and to put words and music to those newly freed individuals' newfound desires and needs, "*Dama de Espadas*" seems to be a work of art that showcases the recently promoted, or at the very least, publicly manifested, freedom by those women, with global outreach. If patriarchal society has no interest in acknowledging this autonomy, this song comes as a symbol of this response to such imposition, through a combative, challenging and freeing aesthetic.

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13. <http://catarinas.info/colunas/toca-que-nem-homem/>

Another political dimension to the song “*Dama de Espadas*” is the venues where it is played and promoted. Howard Becker discusses the cooperation network, as a series of closely-knit agents, in several levels of involvement, to make it possible to create a piece of art. The importance of this network becomes clear when we understand the scene of the original music by women within the *de mulheres dentro do* hegemonic music circulation system as a marginal scene for music distribution and access. If it were not for this network that involves composers, singers and public, circulation of the feminist song “*Dama de Espadas*” would not be possible. When observing, through the reports, how many interpreters got involved with bringing this to the public, and the way they did it, be it by means of live performances, or internet videos, we understand that, without this cooperative network, the distribution of “*Dama de Espadas*” would have been considerably more limited. Becker states that the work contains traces of this cooperation (Becker 2010, 27). Hence, I conclude that, if this work composes, and is offensive to, the hegemonic system due to its feminist nature, thus opposing the system’s ideological notions, it will be distributed through non-hegemonic venues (feminist protest concerts, composers’ project video, or the independent artist’s personal channel), interpreted by women in line with this pursuit of freedom and autonomy.

Becker also talks about the quality of the work, expressed from the listeners’ feedback. When questioning a few interpreters<sup>14</sup> of this song about what drove them to sing it, I noticed that the word ‘freedom’ was used by all of them, as a driving force. This element is of utmost importance in the empathic acknowledgement of “*Dama de Espadas*”. Its quality was in expressing the same feminine desire which is summed up by the need to break free, in terms of sexuality and being out in the streets. As noted by Becker, the accomplishment and the experience of listening to it “does not occur without the presence of an audience who can react to, and appreciate it” (Becker 2010, 29). If the work gets around, it means that there are women, and even men, listening to this song. If this empathic movement takes place, we must understand what moves public and interpreters. One of the points highlighted by Davis is that *the female blues* took on the important task of exposing personal ailments and making them public matters. What was personal became political. In this case, Iara Ferreira was moved from a personal experience and, on the other hand, exposed another facet of patriarchy. The theme resonated with other women, because it is not an individual’s experience, but part of the system that oppresses all of them. The taboo present in the image of a sexually active, independent woman that transits freely and unaccompanied around environments initially hostile to their

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14. Iara Ferreira, Ilessi, Elisa Addor, Luana Dias e Luisa Lacerda.

presence, especially when alone – bars at night – goes to show just how much the woman is threatened when she tries to exercise that freedom.

The song “*Dama de Espadas*” seems to be an inverted call against this oppression – by putting on the spot the man who is afraid of this so called ‘queen of spades, and in the freedom those women feel when they sing it, enabling them to put those thoughts into words in their mouths – when they timidly refrain from singing it, even when they can relate to it. These reactions exemplify just how intricate is patriarchal construct of women’s image.

As Davis (1998) summarizes, ““We should recognize that to sing the song at all was to rescue the issue of men’s violence toward women from the silent realm of the private sphere and reconstruct it as a public problem.” (Davis 1998, 32), a problem that is shared by their community. The song extrapolates the borders of desire and paves the way for women’s freedom.

If, like Becker, we understand that art, as an activity, is the result of a series of intricate, broad dialogs which aim to “attract an audience that is capable of understanding and appreciating the concert” (Becker 2010, 28); we understand that the artist seeks to reflect the listener’s inner self, so the dialogue can be possible. In a way, the artist seeks the creator and the listener within, in order to work on her song, thus expressing in their art a voice that is not only hers, including the voices of their peers. Iara Ferreira did not speak solely from her personal experience when she wrote the lyrics, but she channeled the voices of many women. Ilessi saw the angst and the irony in the lyrics and translated that feeling through the complexity present in musical language, by means of its ability to generate and alleviate tension through the rhetoric of desire, and the senses integrated to musical narratives, that often go unnoticed. The *blues* that she had listened to so seldom in her life was imprinted in her musical and emotional memory with such force that Ilessi was able to quickly access that expression through her creation, with free access to such tools.

Some composers will do that intentionally, rationally, when they first start creating. Others will do it emotionally, sensorially or figuratively. The conception of the artistic idea in Becker – which can come out of effort, but also appear spontaneously – provides more information about how Iara Ferreira and Ilessi built their *blues*. Both reported having composed music and lyrics almost cathartically, rapidly, such was their emotional involvement to the theme. On the other hand, almost invisible, is the crucially important aspect that is one’s “previous specific education, competence and sensitivity” (Becker 2010, 29) to understand a musical idea and the poetry behind it. It requires extra exercises,

technical exercises, that frequently require study and practice for years on end. So that the lyrics and music composition to be created with such speed, there had to be a previous investment, responsible for the rapid flow of artistic ideas.

Becker discusses the division of work and the hierarchy present in developing a piece of art. In this case, we question ourselves: What is more important? Composing or singing? We observe an equivalent relevance in these actions and, for this very reason, the growing action of the composer singer – namely, the individual who composes, sings and plays her own songs – contemporary alternative music scene (non-mainstream). In face of this, we question whether this phenomenon would have any association with some points we've brought here: (1) Saturation of the music industry, (2) A technologic development which enables a more democratic access to recording studios and home studios, (3) The lacking or inexistent state support in organizing spaces, and insufficient funding for arts and culture, especially for women. These are proposals for future investigations. As Becker points out, the state and the big corporations are not capable of stopping artistic creation, for it will continue to exist without the support. The patriarchal system does not have the power to detain musical and artistic feminist creation, as well as other counter normative aesthetics. They will go on writing their speeches, constantly renewing their cry for freedom, as they have done for over a century now.

#### **FROM THE SOUND TO THE SUBVERSIVE MEANING**

According to McClary (2002), when, in the 18th century, science discovered that female pleasure was not directly associated with procreation, patriarchal society started a process of controlling female desire. One of the tools used was, not only to deny “regular” women the knowledge of their need, but also their permission to feel desire. The study of their rhetoric is controlled as well, and women are forbidden access to this knowledge. The beginnings of a musical rhetoric about desire is developed from Monteverdi and music narratives now contain gender idealizations. The same is true for films, television shows and current popular music. With the introduction of the opera music, comes one of the main discourses where gender and sexuality are built (McClary 2002, 37-38). “*Dama de Espadas*” brings up female sexuality from a viewpoint from the normative and accepted by society. It reveals a woman that desires and who owns her own sexuality, who is not bound to servitude, thus reinventing her role in society.

If Ilessi's music came to life through a more sensitive channel with less awareness at its first stage of development, it was loaded with meanings acquired through the awareness of gender at a certain point of her life,

responsible for leading to affective, aesthetic and emotional responses to the blues. In her article “*Funções e modos de ouvir de crianças e adolescentes, em diferentes contextos*” [free translation: “Functions and modes of listening children and teenagers, in different contexts”], Graça Boal Palheiros (2006) carried out a review of literature that sought to answer the questions concerning the way these perceptions are inserted in individuals’ subjectivities, and stated that they vary, according to (1) musical characteristics; musical elements such as harmony, melody, dynamics, timbre, tempo; (2) the listener’s personal characteristics and (3) the socio-cultural context of the listening situation, associated to the cultural tradition of the one listening to the song, proving that the emotional response to certain types of music can in fact be learned (Palheiros 2006, 331-332). Focusing on the voice’s capability as a means of expression by nature, Johan Sundberg (2015) summarized a few researches about states of mind in speech and singing on chapter 7 of his book *A Ciência da Voz Cantada* [free translation: *The Science of the Singing Voice*], in which he provides the readers with the material to understand how lessli took in a few meanings of singing in blues. These investigations, carried out, in their majority, with the aid of control in charge of different kinds of listening, demonstrated that perception of feelings like sadness, anger, fear, happiness and neutrality is similar in speech and in singing, when it comes to its acoustic characteristics. The feeling listeners perceived the greatest difference in speech and singing voices was happiness. Emotions are coded through different combinations of elements like: pitch (notes), Amplitude (dynamics), timbre (tone color), phonation (variation in vocal fold thickness and more or less expanded laryngeal settings, according to the speaker’s different states of mind and attitudes), articulation (tongue and lip movements also displayed mood-related changes in the same person; their articulation of vowels was different, depending on their humor). In one of the researches, people from different countries managed to infer the same meaning from excerpts in a foreign language to all of them. Apparently, vocal gestures are similar, even in different cultures. Sundberg (2015) states:

[...] voice works as a robust “translator” from body to vocal gestures. In its essence, singing and speech can be seen as a sound projection of the gestures of the phonatory system. This correspondence seems to be crucial to singing and music. Voice provides us with the code through which music movements should be construed; from a broader perspective, the sound makes sense because it alludes to different types of movements. Finally, we could pose a reflection about a question that remains unanswered: would music have the same expressive effect if people didn’t have any voice? (Sundberg 2015, 214).

Emotional response to music, as well as the understanding of its meaning, is closely associated to speech and text. In other words, from the way speech and singing complete the meaning of the text, emotional content can be learned, even without full comprehension of the lyrics or without a more careful attention to that text.

Irony, a feature of Bessie Smith e Ma Rainey's blues, is also present in their voice. That is how it reappears in the song in question, and this vocal gesture can be observed especially in Ilessi's<sup>15</sup> own videos. Davis points out that even feminists misinterpreted this expressive tool, subjecting it to severe criticism when the figure of speech is not taken into consideration (Davis 1998, 28).

Similarly, Ilessi takes Iara's elaboration and intensifies this gesture through melody, harmonic cadence and her singing. When singing, irony is present through the dynamics and vocal gestures used by Ilessi, such as a marked increase in change of the dynamics in the same sentence, a feature that is frequently used in the first part of the song (part A repeats twice, which comprises "I totally understand" to "They carry the afflictions of the world in their wombs...").

This recording was taken to Voz me Livre – Ensino e Pesquisa em Canto Popular, a study group of which I am a member, along with André Grabois, Anna Paes, Paula Santoro and Sueli Mesquita (advisor). While listening to it, a few characteristics were stressed, like the presence of a metallic timbre in the high notes performed with more pressure, like a belter<sup>16</sup>, reminding them of Elis Regina's voice in some aspects. In these parts, there are some instances of *drive* (a noise produced derived from the vibration of the false vocal folds), also present in Louis Armstrong's and Elza Soares's voices. Ilessi uses this resource more emphatically in the word "*punhal*", in Portuguese (with a high tone on the vowel 'a'). The nasal component is also observed as a tool to give it an extra something, in certain parts of verses, like "quase tudo". The low tones are smoother. The singer's voice takes turns from a more intimate tone (in the lows) and another that promotes expansion (in the high), also caused by the change in air pressure, varying from high to low pressure.

15. In 0'52": <https://www.facebook.com/Showprimaveradasmulheres/videos/526900661018707/>. In 5'10": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZ-bcFSYzI4>

16. According to Jeannie LoVetri, a highly acclaimed voice specialist from the United States, Belter is a genre within contemporary commercial music (CCM) in Musical Theater in the United States, in which projection of the chest voice is elevated to its limit with strong air pressure, requiring power, stridency and clarity of the lyrics. In the old days, quality of the belting rarely went over Do4. Nowadays it surpasses it, and sometimes is replaced with a strong mix (mixed register) (LoVetri, 2018, 66).



Ilessi varies timbre and resonance throughout the recording. This rich expressiveness that values interpreting by stressing the emotion present in the text, overlapping spoken and singing voices, makes the listener connect with the narrative. Ilessi is a singer who is speaking the words in the song, she has a relationship with the words, and that's why her singing has a spoken quality which can be noticed in different timbres. Her singing and her speaking intonation are closely related, which is also a characteristic existing in the work of Elis Regina, a singer whose repertoire was based on spoken words, and whose musical choices were made having in mind the song's literary narrative.

I would like to stress Voz me Livre's perception when they stated that Ilessi seems to have gained more freedom over her singing when she started singing her close friends' original songs, as well as her own.

Unlike in Ilessi's composition process, Iara had rational control over her message when she wrote her narrative. The lyricist has a background in Social Sciences from UFSC and has had an active role in gender studies and feminism, having worked with "therapeutic itineraries, subjectivity, modes of contemporary subjectification, women diagnosed with depression, as well as with the way they gave new meaning to their diagnostic, by creating therapeutic itineraries with herbs, teas and prayers" (Iara Ferreira, in interview to the researcher, in November 2017). When Iara writes the lyrics, she knows exactly which points to highlight in her narrative. We intend to discuss some of them, using the work of Silvia Federici (2017) as reference.

In "*Calibã e a bruxa: Mulheres, Corpo e Acumulação Primitiva*" [free translation: "Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation"], Federici (2017) analyses the process of domestication of women and redefinition of femininity during the transition to capitalism and attributes the success of this campaign to a 'sexual differentiation of space'. Federici (2017) contextualizes how women were denied public spaces, including the streets and the workplace, which they were discouraged from frequenting, even under threats of acts like ridicule or sexual assaults, were they to attend such places unaccompanied (Federici 2017, 200). Unfortunately, this is still a reality in Brazil. Women of the 21st century, particularly black women of colonized, submissive countries remain under the same shackles by which they were first tied, in this long process that started around the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Forbidden from attending public spaces, women who dared step a toe out of line risked their well-being and their life.

Federici (2017) described this process women experienced on the way to their social degradation through some layers. The 'process of legal

infantilization” occurred when patriarchy attempted to prove that women were mentally fragile, by completely depriving them of any agency over their own lives. Women, according to them, were incapable of rational and logical reasoning and of successfully controlling their lives, their own possessions and their family without a man (Federici 2017, cap. 2).

Having contextualized the backdrop against which “*Dama de Espadas*” is set, I would like to comment on the harmony of the song. “*Dama de Espadas*”<sup>17</sup> (in Eb) differs from classic blues in that the latter presents an established tonality, with a cadence between e I-IV-V. Ilessi developed a harmonic path more akin to jazz, resulting in a melody that was far from conventional, just like her textual narrative, as stated by one of the songs’ interpreters. Music and lyrics occasionally suggest an expectation that is misplaced, like in the verses that translate as “Women like this, who go out at night | Smelling the night dew and bar hopping”. “Women like this” seems to invoke an image of women as inferior, but that image is later torn apart by irony. The harmony in the fragment (F7(9) E7(9) \ A7(9) \ Bb7(13) \ Eb7(9) E7(9) \) reinforces the lyrics and fools the listener. At first, it seems to be modulated a certain way, towards D7 (at a moment of classic blues where harmony would lead it to a subdominant function that would be taken by Ab), but Ilessi steers it to A7(9) not as D7’s dominant, but as subV for the Eb dominant, the Bb7 chord. This process adds to the meaning of the lyrics, which, initially seemed to be another song that blames women, from a plausible logic in patriarchal culture, but instead it breaks the listener’s expectation, steering them away from common knowledge, as well as from harmony. Her “women like this” are not looked at from men’s viewpoint but from this freed woman. Repetition of A brings the surprise in this woman’s territory, with the verses “Smelling the night dew and bar hopping. It is a forbidden act of sorts, a nearly illicit activity, and a turf that is doubly ‘forbidden’ to women: streets and bars. Every setting this woman sets foot in is forbidden; including the night, present in ‘night dew’. This verse seems to express the boldness of woman who roams the streets at night, which configures an act of rebellion in this patriarchal society, where women risk being sexually abused, by daring ignore the unspoken rule against going to certain places, at certain times. Harmony/melody and lyrics destabilize the order. Irony appears again in the relationship between the so called ‘queen of spades’ and her peers, by means of the comparison between the use of the male, ‘macho’, and how fast she goes through her clothes, to illustrate the superficial nature of her relations. ‘Have a say on almost everything’ goes against patriarchal rule, against the expectation of a subservient being, opposite to the one Iara

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17. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCMs5noGdVM>

Ferreira brings here. Adichie (2015) points out that many men feel their personally attacked when they cannot exercise their dominant social behavior (Adichie 2015, 43-44), and this is one of the challenges women face to obtain acceptance of social proposals, and policies that serve feminist purposes, both by men and women. If a woman wants to 'have a say' she must be assertive and autonomous, and this attitude deviates from the *status quo*, Another statement that contradicts this system is raised when women's womb, considered sacred by Judeo-Christian tradition, is said to carry 'the afflictions of the world'.

Between part A and the chorus, there is a bridge (which I called B) and encompasses the verse "He was a perfect *lord*" to "Will make their men dehydrated". It is worth noting that, while in part A Ilessi and Iara paint a picture of this woman, during the bridge there is a harmonic path that does not have a fixed tone and is not defined. The process of showing what actually happened starts. This blues has greater harmonic and melodic complexity, with a frequent use of subV, of 'dominants to dominants', causing a delay in resolution of the tensions that are always expanded in part A, as well as the bridge to the chorus. What did cause this instability (present in the lyrics, in the harmony, and in the melody) of the male image? The answer is: The woman is a man eater. The "*lord*", is upset (*de bode*) because he cannot deal with this woman's autonomy, generating a discrepancy between these two antagonist images *lord/bode* in the song in Portuguese. It is the moment of greatest distancing from the tone and of greatest expectations, with increased tension and resulting expansion of the desire for conclusion ("He was a perfect *lord* | But he was upset with his *lady* | On bedtime these queens of spades| Will make their men dehydrated"), where we observe the progression: \\ Esus \ E7(9) \ Fsus \ F7(9) \ F#sus \ F#7(9) \ C7(13) F7(9) \ Bb7(9)(13) \). It is Worth noting that the transition describes the path of the man who was a victim of the queen of spades. This man's fragility is present in the harmonic instability that does not come near the tone again until the last two compasses of this fragment, returning the dominant for Eb, Bb7 chord, preparing for the chorus that is developed with the harmonic sequence of the classic blues and which is announced and which is announced with the verse "Will make their men dehydrated". The female body thus loses its sacred quality and the woman is portrayed as sexually voracious, a passage that is highlighted by the peak of the relationship between melody and harmony.

The chorus is, as expressed by Ilessi, a cry for freedom, sung with the singer's highest vocal power, narrating the story of the queen of spades' lethal love which is finally described as "women like this | Exactly like me", at a lower volume and with an intent to be a peacemaker. Women no longer die from a heartbreak, from waiting for their lovers or the love

of their lives, they imply go on with their lives, as the autonomous and empowered beings they are.

In “Sam Jones Blues”, Davis (1998) observes the musical contrast used by Bessie Smith in that song to translate a real contrast between two cultures, white hegemonic and black. The ideas of marriage disseminated in white culture show a difference from the place black women occupy in their culture. In “*Dama de Espadas*” or *Queen of Spades*, this theme is brought also through the use of the titles in English; “*lord*” and “*lady*”, opposing, with irony, the wild woman, who is the so-called queen of spades, to the white civility, a male normativity. There is no romance, women are not treated as inferior. The ones who are used here are men, as are men the ones who die from a heartbreak, and the ones who are the boss in bed are the women. “The female figures evoked in women’s blues are independent women free of the domestic orthodoxy of the prevailing representations of womanhood through which female subjects of the era were constructed.” (Davis 1998, 13). Sexuality is, as in classic blues, the key to this ‘queen of spades’ transformation and freedom, a new generation of women in the world.

About this, Davis states: “The new music had old roots, and the old music reflected a new ideological grounding of Black religion. Both were deeply rooted in a shared history and culture”. (Davis 1998, 6). The author states that, what we perceive to be ‘God’ and the ‘Devil’ used to coexist in the same semantic universe during slavery, for they were no longer seen as opposing elements, but as complex characteristics that represented different powers that integrated human relations. With the creation of the *blues*, the secular content of the spirituals (i.e. everyday lives and human relations) join this new genre, leaving to spirituals the sacred aspect of the lyrics (praise) and the sound (harmony, melody and vocalization). From then on, the blues is popularly seen as the ‘Devil’s song’, being the primary genre that uses the lyrics to tell the story of the everyday lives of the African American population, but still reproducing its sacred aspect by means of its element of sound, in charge of representing the search for connection with the sacred inherited by African beliefs. Davis (1998) stated:

They are secular in the same sense that they confine their attention solely to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of Black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience” (Davis 1998, p. 8).

Davis understands that the blues were condemned as the Devil's music: it was because they drew upon and incorporated sacred consciousness and thereby posed a serious threat to religious attitudes." (Davis 1998, 8). Blues composers experienced the connection with the sacred through their sexual freedom and autonomy. There was no separation between these two forms of existence. Such experience is also upgraded in "*Dama de Espadas*", as well as by means of similar, as well as in similar songs, seeing as there is a growing group of Evangelical congressmen seizing more political power in Brazil, and on the streets, with the people. The blues now treats sexuality as a tangible expression of freedom.

When the chorus states, an octave above the start of the melody, "I know that, after all | He wasn't to blame | He bled on the dagger | He gulped the hemlock down", which represents the power of these 'queens of spades', music transposes this narrative to a sacred relationship that is present in the melodic/harmonic construct, which translates a sense of worship like in spirituals. It is a final cry whose feeling behind is intensified through the interval leap: the woman, who is the boss of her own body, reaffirms and seeks her own freedom.

Such observation seems to find confirmation in Ilessi's line, when she discusses her relationship with music, as a singer:

[Question: What would you say is an important point when choosing a song to sing?] I choose it for the music, if I like the melody, the harmony, if has something that moves me... This is very important, it is crucial to me. I also feel like I'm wearing a piece of clothing that fits just right. I'm very picky in that way. I may love a certain song, that I will not sing, nevertheless. I may find that it doesn't fit me well. Just like I can judge that a song fits me right, and it doesn't matter if someone else does not think so, still, it is my judgement. And the lyrics, I... I like it when I can relate to the lyrics, somehow. It's not about what they say in the lyrics, objectively, but sometimes the meaning of things that, in real life, I don't get to be, or that I don't have the room to be. I believe singing has always been a space that is so... There is no way not to talk about it, is there? But I believe that, because of my color, singing has a very central importance to me, because it has something... Besides being a way for me to vent, like something spiritual, of putting it all out... I don't know... The racism that I suffered, the struggle that I have been, that I go through. There is something about the vibration of the song that also helps unload all this, every mishap that I faced, but I think that there is also the place music gets me, that life doesn't. I feel it very clearly when I am singing. Sometimes, I will find myself singing certain songs, and the sound, the vibration, and the melody, along with the lyrics, everything gets me in such a proud state, in such a place that, you know... Like: they may have got me down, but when I am singing, I get there... I guess I used to feel self-conscious

talking about it, but now I feel like royalty, in a way. (Ilessi in interview to the researcher, in November 2017)

Ilessi's observation about how music helps her recognize and assert her personality, bringing elements of autonomy and pride becomes very noticeable in her rendition of "*Dama de Espadas*" and even more aligned to Davis' idea. (1998), Davis saw the blues as "communal channels of relief<sup>18</sup> (Davis 1998, 9) and expression for black people, particularly black women. Davis states that "The blues woman challenges in her own way the imposition of gender-based inferiority." (Davis 1998, 36) and that "the female portraits created by the early women served as reminders of the African-American women's tradition of womanhood, a tradition that directly challenged prevailing notions of femininity." (Davis 1998, 37), thus redefining women's place in that society.

In the political concert "Feminist Spring", comprising over 30 female musicians, actresses, dancers, producers, and visual artists, and highly attended by the female public, "*Dama de Espadas*" is part of the repertoire and is seen as one of the concert's highlights. Regarding this praise and empathy by women, Iara Ferreira recalled the first time she heard her lyrics in a song:

"Holy shit, this is some fucking great blues!" I didn't realize it when I first heard the song. Then I kept listening to it nonstop. And it is a hard melody, it's not easy. [...] [sings the part "ele foi um perfeito lord, mas ficou de bode com a sua lady"] Ya know? It's not easy! It is not the most common path. And people can relate to it, and they just start singing! I think this is the most amazing part! And then Luisa Lacerda started singing, Luana too, Luana Dias. Julieta sings... It was from the "Feminist Spring". [We talked about Elisa Addor who started singing at the Feminist Spring, in Ilessi's absence, and I commented on how excited she was to be singing that song.] It is not easy to be putting these words into song. Many people can't relate. There was [composer X], who said ... "Oh I can't sing this! I think it is great, but I am not singing it!" [researcher: "it is not an easy place to be at".] [...] It depends greatly on your life experience, if that hits home for you... Luisa said that she went was singing in Belém. She sang this song there and brought the house down. Women were shouting! [laughter] Women in Belém are iffy about it, people are super sexist there. (Iara Ferreira in interview to the researcher, in November 2017).

18. "Blues was threatening because its spokesmen and its ritual too frequently provided the expressive communal channels of relief that had been largely the province of religious in the past." (Davis 1998, p. 8-9)

Elisa Addor started singing this *blues* at the “Feminist Spring” in Ilessi’s absence. When asked what made her want to sing that song, she explained:

I was introduced to the song “*Dama de Espadas*” amidst the work done in Feminist Spring, our feminist group, and it is a song that makes me feel free, very much the boss of myself when I sing it. It speaks with irony and wittiness of many situations that we experience as women, in our relationship with the world, with our partners, and with how it is seen. I feel like it is a shout for freedom. I always get happy, whenever I can sing this brilliant song by Ilessi and Iara. (Elisa Addor in interview to the researcher in December 2017).

Elisa once again commented on reaffirming her freedom and on how elated she felt for singing it, she same relief that Woolf (2018) seems to have felt when silencing the intermediate voice that bothered her so, and that falsely drove her to be someone she wasn’t (Woolf 2018, 14).

Another person who commented on the challenge of affirming the personality in the song was Luana Dias. Also, a singer composer, Luana said that Iara Ferreira and Ilessi showed the song to her right after composing it, with the intention that she sang at LUA [Livre União de Autoras], a composer collective the three of them were members of. Luana stated that rock and blues had a strong influence on her, and for that reason they offered her the chance to sing it. About her relationship with “*Dama de Espadas*” she also said:

It is such a wonderful song, with such force! I can relate to several points, others, not so much [laughter]... I am experiencing my feminine self, my capacity, not in such a complete way, like the characters in this song. But I believe that there are things in it that I can see in my life, in my voice, in the steps I took, and I believe that is what we are walking towards, to experience our freedom. So, we can feel like equals. I feel like it is the most important part (Luana Dias in interview to the researcher, in December 2017)

In her book “Professions for women” Virginia Woolf (2018) confesses she embarked on two adventures in her career. One of them was “killing the Angel in the House”, which was deconstructing the idealized image of the woman. She tells of a situation where the personification of this “Angel in the House”, this social model, manifested through an internal voice, interjecting in a review, and it “said”: “My dear, you are a woman. You are writing about a book by a male author. Be kind; be sweet; be flattering; mislead him; make use of every art and craft of our gender. Don’t let anyone realize that you have your own opinion Above all, be pure” (Woolf 2018, 12). Woolf (2018) tells that would struggle against this voice, and there were many struggles until that voice was silenced for good. This episode, retold with a certain degree of irony and

sarcasm, represents the same challenge in singing “*Dama de Espadas*”, taking over the voice of an autonomous woman who made her own decisions, with her own identity, contrary to *status quo*. This image of the “Angel of Light” will always be in the back of women’s minds and actions. Breaking free from it is an exercise of liberation, attention and experimenting of a different way of wearing this other woman’s skin and being the woman who does not have to please anyone but herself first and foremost (Adichie 2017).

We have noted, through the voices of four women who are active in the Rio de Janeiro music scene (Iara Ferreira, Ilessi, Luana Dias and Elisa Addor), as well as possible relationships established through listening and experiencing this song. We have commented on Ilessi’s video where she interprets the song in the series produced by Luiza in the project *Meninas do Brasil*<sup>19</sup>, the video of a presentation carried out by Luisa Lacerda and Luana Dias<sup>20</sup>, the *Feminist Spring*<sup>21</sup> video, which gets more agents involved in this music distribution, and more recently, of Ilessi singing at the 6th *Mostra Cantautores* in Belo Horizonte<sup>22</sup>. These voices are part of the same cooperative network in the music world.

### CONCLUSION

We have seen the power of music, more specifically, of the song, to promote transformations in society. We have highlighted its importance, presenting a feminist content, for its project’s themes to society themes that otherwise would not have visibility, making public different forms of female oppression, exploring what hasn’t been said, exposing the violence to change it through the pursuit of justice and gender equality.

“*Dama de Espadas*” seems to be a milestone in a new era for women’s music in Brazil, maybe a new phase in urban popular music, where composers and instrumentalists are increasingly engaged in outlining their aesthetics and territory, long despised or even forbidden to them. In this sense, “*Feminist Spring*” also promoted a possible ‘Brazilian Music Spring.’

TRANSLATION  
Larissa Rumiantzef

19. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OZ-bcFSYzI4>

20. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sWCavDRzcTI>

21. <https://www.facebook.com/Showprimaveradasmulheres/videos/526900661018707/>

22. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCMs5noGdVM>



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#### **INTERVIEWS**

Addor, Elisa. Interview conducted over the telephone Rio de Janeiro, December 16th, 2017. One audio file with one-minute duration.

Dias, Luana. Interview conducted over the telephone. Rio de Janeiro, December 13h, de 2017. Two audio files with 3 minutes total.

Ferreira, Iara. Interview conducted at the composer's residence in Copacabana. Rio de Janeiro, November 3rd, 2017. One audio file, 32 minutes.

Ilessi. Interview conducted at Instituto Villa Lobos, Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro (UNIRIO). Rio de Janeiro, November 8th, 2017. 5 audio files with 53 minutes, total.

**MARCELA VELON** has a master's Degree in Musicology/Historical Documentation from UNIRIO and has carried out the research "*Elizeth Cardoso e o canto popular urbano brasileiro – Cinco décadas em cinco momentos*" [Free Translation: Elizeth Cardoso and the Brazilian urban popular music – five decades in five moments]. She is a member of *Essa Mulher (This woman)*, an all-female collective who seeks to promote, to motivate and to record female musical production, Sonora – International Festival of Women Composers and Songwriters (a joint effort involving Rio de Janeiro and its nearby towns); and *Primavera das Mulheres* [free translation: Feminist Spring], a series of feminist rallies and performances all in one, among other actions. Marcela Velon is a Rio de Janeiro-based singer and composer, a singing voice researcher, singing instructor (Somatic Voicework The LoVetri Method™, Formação Integrada em Voz at CEV-SP), a coordinator and arranger in Corallua, an all-female choir. E-mail: marcelavelon@gmail.com

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