



“Direito à preguiça”, de Camila Betoni, 2021, acrílica sobre tela

## *Girl-Friday*\*

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“I mean”, she said, “that one can’t help growing older.” “**One** can’t, perhaps”, said Humpty Dumpty; “but **two** can.” With proper assistance, you might have left off at seven.”  
(Through the looking-glass and what Alice found there)

The reverend Charles Dodgson may not have meant that women should leave life at the age of seven - with a little help from their friends - but he certainly considered adult women to be uninteresting. Even if they don't go to this extreme, most men in Western societies have perceived women as children for a long time - and have treated them as such. They are not expected to have the same rights or responsibilities as men and, in this sense, they are or have been considered legally **minors**, just as much as they are considered a **minority**. A minority that they have shared with other tribal or ethnic minorities.

It is therefore ironic and perhaps significant that the expression **Girl-Friday** was coined (as the American Heritage Dictionary informs us) by analogy with the term **Man-Friday**, Robinson Crusoe's "devoted native servant".

Native to the domestic world, is a woman a natural Girl-Friday?

Helen Pierson felt that she was, and it is as such that she describes herself at the time she lived in Brazil in the 1940s, helping her husband, the sociologist and anthropologist Donald Pierson (and others) implement their careers. Her life story, her self-definition as a **helper**, also made me think about other women who did research in the country at the time, in a period that is perceived as the "infancy" of the discipline of anthropology.<sup>1</sup>

What Helen's story suggests is that there is a dilemma embedded in this self-representation and in the external representation, or fantasy, of women as eternal girls. Bearing in mind that in our society women only properly reach adulthood when they become wives and mothers, a woman who fails to do so may find that she is seen as an eternal adolescent - when viewed in a favorable light. On the other hand, we can ask ourselves whether women who don't conceive of themselves as future wives or mothers don't fall into the trap of defining themselves as adolescents for longer than their age allows.

Thus, the question posed by the conference ("is it possible to conceive of 'girlhood' in another way than as just a preparatory stage for adulthood in the case of women?") can be answered by studying an example in which girlhood will be considered as an alternative definition of adulthood for some women.

### Helen

I begin with the story of Helen, now ninety years old: I've never met her in person, but she wrote me a very affectionate letter two years ago, in which she told me something about her stay in Brazil. It

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\*\* *In memoriam* (1945-2016). Founder of the Núcleo de Estudos de Gênero-Pagu and professor in the anthropology department at the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Unicamp), Campinas, SP, Brazil. Editor's note: The list of bibliographic references does not constitute part of the original text, as it is a conference presentation. It was added at the insistence of ScIELO as a condition for publication.

<sup>1</sup> There were many of them, some almost forgotten today, and here I can only recall a few names: Dina Dreyfus, at the time Dina Lévi-Strauss, Frances Herskovits, Cecilia Wagley, Yolanda Murphy. What they all have in common is that they were their husbands' partners, even though many of them were professionally trained. However, the number of young women who started out as anthropologists and left it when they got married is higher.

was in this letter that she described herself as a "Girl-Friday", saying: "My husband was always so busy with the main aspects of his various programs that there was no time left for him to take care of certain small details about them, without taking time away from more important tasks."<sup>2</sup> She then lists an astonishing series of these "little details" ranging from her work as a wife, to helping her husband's students learn English, or to help him prepare bibliographies and references, to, most importantly, her activities as Pierson's companion in his fieldwork in the country.

We examine some excerpts from her diary from 1947 and 1948, when she, her husband and some students were doing research in a small town near São Paulo, preparing one of the famous "community studies" of the time.<sup>3</sup> Her observations are very vivid when compared to the more elaborate analyses made by sociologists in the period. But hadn't she defined herself as neither an anthropologist nor a sociologist and received her university degree in Home Economics? The entries from her diary that she chose to transcribe in the letter show an extremely capable woman - getting food for the researchers' house, interviewing people in the neighborhood, writing up these interviews and discussing the notes in the evenings, in what she called a "war council" - but above all, being the **jeep's muié**, that is, the person in charge of driving, and repairing, the jeep that the Smithsonian Institution had donated to its researchers.

Some of the difficulties she encountered in these tasks are still familiar to us: muddy roads, postponed appointments and interviews, rainy summer days... What is new is the way she faced them: in a determined way that in retrospect seems very "American" today, and which certainly also seemed strange to the locals, especially to rural women in the 1940s. There certainly wasn't another **jeep muié** in town.

She wrote on December 17, 1947: "Up at 6:45. Breakfast late because we have no milk. Alice finally got two liters and, with orange juice, bread, coffee with milk, and cereals for Donald and Carlos, we get ready. (...) A short rest after lunch and we're ready for work: Mirtes busy typing notes, Donald at his desk, Carlos off to visit Dona Ida and I doing 'one thing and another'. The rain began around 3:00 p.m. After dinner, D. Faustina came to visit us. When she left, we made notes."

December 18: "The weather wasn't very conducive to visiting the sites. After breakfast we held a 'war council'. Working with questionnaires. In the afternoon, Mr. Honório makes a long visit. Mirtes takes notes on the road. I start making the curtains for our chest of drawers. Alice manages to make dinner despite having spent the afternoon 'extracting' bacon from a pig we bought. (...) In bed by nine, having woken up at 5:30."

December 23: "Alice arrives at 5:30. The day promises to be stable and she returns home to kill and bring back three chickens for Carlos. We pack and have coffee. We leave at 8:30. The road to São Roque is still very muddy in several places. Most of the time I have to drive in low and medium gear. It takes me exactly one hour to do 20 kilometers."

Most of the first notes are of this type: the hours of the day in a strange place marked by meals, household chores mixed with restful visits from the locals, interviews, and the work of registering and discussing them. Everything deserves to be registered because everything is new: the weather, the animals, the food, the people at church, at parties. People seem to make up this new scenario and in fact appear in it with the same regularity as the other items in the discourse. Nothing new in this: compare these observations, for example, with those made by a professionally trained anthropologist, Edith Turner, writing about her first visit to Africa with her husband Victor Turner.<sup>4</sup>

As the research progresses, however, people begin to dominate the scene and more and more we see Helen and the researchers, students of Professor Pierson, dedicating their time to visiting or helping the women of the "community".

January, 7: "The weather continues to be clear and very hot. (...) Today we got up early and went to the farm of Antonio Vieira e Goes a few kilometers in the direction of São João. Donald and Carlos had a long, hot walk in the countryside to talk to him, but they found him to be a good

<sup>2</sup> Dona Helen writes in Portuguese, but her diary entries are in English.

<sup>3</sup> See Donald Pierson, **Cruz das Almas, a Brazilian Village**, Smithsonian Institution of Social Anthropology, Publication no. 12, Washington D.C., 1951.

<sup>4</sup> See E. Turner, **The spirit and the drum**, a memoir of Africa, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1987.

informant. Mirtes and I also got some interesting information from D. Joaquina, D. Julieta and Tereza. We spent the afternoon as usual, taking notes."

January 23: "Lisette and I buy wide-brimmed straw hats and with Mirtes the three of us go to see D. Gertrudes and from there to D. Benedita, where we deliver the enlargement of the children's photo."

January 24: "A very good interview with Mrs. Francisca."

January 28: D. Carmelita needed to see a midwife in São Roque (...). Another of Honório's nieces also needed to see a midwife - could I take the two of them and a boy? We all left at 7:45."

**Interesting data:** to find out what is interesting about the data, we need to read the published work that resulted from this research - but there, all traces of her vivid prose disappear, and those experiences have been transformed into sentences such as:

"The role of women, almost without exception, is exercised within and as part of the family. Their status derives almost entirely from their activity there. The cases in which at least part of the female role extends beyond the confines of the family are few: the midwives; the two teachers; the *benzedouras* (who heal with blessings); the main helper of the town church, who has the pre-eminent role in preparing the processions; the two girls who sing in religious ceremonies; the mail carrier; the few women who wash clothes from time to time for other families; and the two girls who work as maids. (...) The expectation based on local customs is that all girls will marry." (Pierson, 1951:134; 140).

This is inevitable, reflecting the passage from lived experience to scientific discourse. And unlike many husband-authors of his time, Professor Donald Pierson acknowledged his wife's participation as a researcher, naming her not only for her help with typing or as his wife. Under his own name, in the published work, are listed the names of all his collaborators, including Helen Batchelor Pierson<sup>5</sup>. Helen's diary, written more than forty years ago, and Pierson's reminiscences about her life in São Paulo, written recently<sup>6</sup>, help us, however, to understand some features of the scientific community of the time, just as much as their work helps us to understand the communities that they both studied. With few exceptions, anthropological research was carried out by men: the female names that have survived in documents from the time were the wives, sisters or daughters of researchers who were or had since become known.

What Helen's letter helps to make clear is that to start a career as a researcher, you had to be (or be seen as) a girl - when you weren't yet a wife. Becoming a wife, however, did not guarantee continuity in this career. The testimonies of anthropologists of the time are full of names of women who began their careers as **girls** and who, once married, ended them.<sup>7</sup>

Two other quotes from Helen's diary make this clearer.

Sunday January 25th: "We slept late, Mirtes, Lisette and I went to Mass. Later the **girls** and Charles go to the Evangelistas' baptism ceremony."

Thursday, February 19: "We **girls** first went to Honorio Camargo's house. Only the two little girls were at home and we talked to them. Soon D. Antonia arrived. (...) I went back to visit D. Josefa and later the **girls** and I returned home (...)."

Notice that all the married ladies in the city are called **dona (D.)**, a sign of respect but also of their position in the houses visited by the researchers: wife and mother, **dona** is also short for (**dona de casa**) **housewife**. Alice, the maid, and other young women were always referred to by their names: Lisette, Mirtes and so on. Helen was probably called Dona by the townspeople, but she refers to herself as a **girl**, both at the time and forty years later, which seems to be a way of putting her work on an equal footing with that done by the students guided by her husband.

<sup>5</sup> See GERTRUDE, "Postface a quelques préface", Cahiers d'Étude Africaines/65, XVIII (1), 1979, work in which a collective of authors makes ironic observations about the use (then) common of thanking wives in the prefaces of their books.

<sup>6</sup> See M. Corrêa (org.), **História da Antropologia**, vol.1, Donald Pierson e Emilio Willems: depoimentos. Ed. Vértice/Ed. da Unicamp, São Paulo/Campinas, 1987.

<sup>7</sup> Examining the list of female names that Professor Pierson and other anthropologists of the time remember as members of their research teams, it is easy to see that most of them were related to, or became wives of, the men who accompanied them on the initial fieldwork. To mention just a few names, Mirtes was the sister of one of the researchers and Lisette married another.

Before affirming that I'm reading too much into a single letter (even though it's twelve pages long), let's look at another story before going back to the beginning.

## Helena

Helena Morley, whose real name was Alice Dayrell Caldeira Brant, is the famous author of a single book: **Minha vida de menina**.<sup>8</sup> It was first published in 1942 and is a beautiful memoir of the life of a thirteen-year-old girl in a small town in rural Brazil at the end of the last century. Her book is a kind of counterpoint to Helen's diary as she records situations very similar to those noted by Helen, but she records them from the point of view of those who were observed by Pierson's wife. She is also an excellent observer and some of her observations are surprising coming from a girl of her time and place: living in a rural society exactly as described by Pierson and others, she portrays it as an outsider like Helen might have, with the advantage of being a local. The book begins when she is thirteen and ends when she turns fifteen and begins to learn the manners of a **young girl** who will end up marrying as do most others.

But in the book she is always a girl and even though the photo on the back cover is of a woman in her seventies, it is as a **girl** that she survives in our memory. A girl very different from the others she describes and perhaps this is the reason for the privileged place this book occupies in Brazilian literature by and about women. Her nickname at school was **tempestade** (storm) and her mother used to repeat a popular saying when she came home, since she spent most of her time on the street: "A woman and a chicken/ should never go for a walk;/ the chicken is eaten,/ the woman is the talk of the town." She replied that no one could really talk about someone who stayed at home...

I mention this book here because it seems to represent everything that is allowed to a girl in contrast to everything that is **not** allowed to a woman: in this sense, this book, authored by an Alice, has a meaning similar to that of **Alice in Wonderland**.

So back to the beginning. Even though childhood is a preparatory stage for adulthood for women in most cases, it is **also** seen as a time of freedom from the dictates of adult life - which is not very different from what happens with boys, except that the literature about them is broader and more widely disseminated. But there is a difference: in Peter Pan's world everything seems to be in line with the real world, even gender definitions; in Alice's world everything is unreal, including gender relations.

This is not the place to develop this comparison, which is best left to literary critics, but the reference suggests that the escape to adulthood for women - with all that goes with it: marriage, motherhood, housework - is seen as a logical impossibility and must be presented in fiction in accordance with reality, only to a lesser extent, unless it is a world as illogical as Alice's.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, if in the fantasy world produced by men, with the possible exception of **Alice**, a girl is always a miniature woman (like those painted by Debret in colonial Brazil), in the "real world", a woman who doesn't grow up until she reaches adult status, assuming everything that goes with it, is always a girl. (The theme of "growing and shrinking" is too well known to Carroll's readers to need further emphasis). This may explain why it was also easier to accept **girls** - even though their real age was around twenty - as field research assistants: when they grew up, that is marry, but especially became mothers, most would abandon the field to their male colleagues. Which may explain why Helen called herself and the students she worked with girls in her diary, but described herself, to an outsider's eye, as a **Girl-Friday** - not quite a girl, but still part of that collective of people who were not quite adults. Which may explain why we are still enchanted by Helena's book, or by **Alice**: texts that open up a world of possibilities that only Dodgson's illogical logic allows us to glimpse. That is, in a world different from this one, even gender classifications will have to be subject to other logics. Or, as

<sup>8</sup> The book was translated into English by the poet Elisabeth Bishop as *The Diary of Helen Morley* and, by coincidence, it is on display at the book fair held during the conference where this work was presented.

<sup>9</sup> I do not know the work of Jean Wyatt, **Reconstructing desire: the role of unconscious in women's reading and writing** (U. of N. Carolina Press, 1990), but it seems that in her analysis of **Little Women**, **Heidi** and **The Wizard of Oz** she attempts precisely to capture indications of a rebellion against that definition.

the Unicorn said to Alice: "Well, now that we have seen each other, if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?"<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The quotations are from **The Annotated Alice-** *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll, with Introduction and notes by Martin Gardner, Forum Books, N.Y., 1970.