

History 160: Topics in Lesbian and Gay History
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.—Emma Sokoloff-Rubin

Silent Protection and the Burden of Silence

by Emma Sokoloff-Rubin

Ivone Bones and Vania Zambone live together in a white house with red shutters in Ibiraiaras, a town of seven thousand in southern Brazil.¹ Now in their late thirties, the two women spent most of their twenties leading a statewide women's movement that gained legal rights for women and transformed gender roles in rural homes. In the process, Ivone and Vania fell in love. Their story offers a window into how two women who didn't know any gay people, lived in towns where no one was openly gay, and had no framework for gay identity, shaped their lives as a couple in a small Catholic town.

Today, both women are close to their families and are well liked by their neighbors, but no one in Ibiraiaras talks about Ivone's and Vania's relationship, and the two women never hold hands in public. In this paper, I argue that in their families and in their community, Ivone and Vania face rules of engagement that both limit and make possible their lives as lesbian women. These rules are constructed, not inherent, and I suggest several explanations for the rules of engagement that govern Ivone and Vania's interactions with their friends, family, and neighbors.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, general statements about Ibiraiaras, the Brazilian Women's Movement, and Ivone and Vania's family are based on field research conducted in July and August of 2004, May and June of 2007, and August of 2008. In collaboration with Jeff Rubin, I conducted dozens of formal interviews with women's movement leaders and participants, as well as local priests and government officials. This paper also includes information I learned from talking to people around dinner tables, on long car rides, and at women's movement meetings, as well as observations made at movement meetings and mobilizations.

Silence is one of the unspoken rules Ivone and Vania have learned to follow. The two women can live together, travel together, and care for their niece and nephew, so long as they do not call themselves lesbian or speak in public about their relationship. In this paper, I draw on frameworks that historians have developed to understand the silence that surrounds many homosexual relationships. In some cases, these frameworks provide useful ways of understanding Ivone and Vania's story, and in others, Ivone and Vania's story pushes me to argue that historians who frame silence as purely protective overlook the fact that protective silence comes at a cost.

“A man and a woman can hug each other and two women can't”

Ivone and Vania grew up on small farms in Rio Grande do Sul, the southernmost state in Brazil. Gender roles were rigid and set. Women were responsible for all of the housework. At meals, only the men spoke. Men and women worked side-by-side on the farm, but when they retired, women didn't receive even the meager government pensions awarded to men, the only people seen as real workers in the eyes of the law. Men made the decisions, and women rarely left the house except to go to church.

Ivone and Vania came of age in the mid-1980s, just as Brazil's military dictatorship ended and a nationwide push for social change took hold. They first got involved in activism through youth groups run by local priests. The priests, part of the liberation theology branch of Brazil's Christian Church, believed that the church should play an active role in fighting the poverty and violence that endured in Brazil even after the dictatorship. Across Rio Grande do Sul, priests organized youth groups in which teenagers discussed issues of violence and inequality, grappling in new ways with the challenges they faced as a nation and in their daily lives. The priests encouraged rural teenagers to get involved in local social movements, such as a movement

against a dam that would put several towns underwater, and a landless workers' movement that mobilized for land reform.

Young women quickly realized that male leaders of local social movements expected them to participate, not to lead, and that the movements were unwilling to take on issues central to women's lives, such as legal rights for female farmworkers and gender roles in rural homes. Still in their teens and early twenties, Ivone, Vania, and other young women created a women's movement. They led demonstrations for legal rights like maternity leave and pensions, and they organized meetings where rural women gathered to plan nationwide demonstrations as well as ways to get their husbands to do the dishes.

Ivone and Vania met when they were working as full-time women's movement organizers. During the late 1980s, leaders traveled around rural parts of the state, knocking on doors, encouraging women to join the movement, and running meetings in small town church basements. Ivone and Vania were assigned to the same region. "In the first community," Vania remembers, "Ivone and I stayed in the same house. We had to share a bed." The next day, sitting in a circle with several other movement leaders:

We sat in a circle talking and she was next to me. I remember she put her arm on my knee.... It was nothing and yet it was significant.... The next night we were at the same house. She was in bed and I kind of jumped in, and Ivone laughed and said, 'Vania!' I wondered why a man and a woman can hug each other but two women can't.²

Though Porto Alegre, the capital of Rio Grande do Sul and a five hour drive from Ibiraiaras, has one of the most active gay rights movements in Latin America, the urban movement has yet to extend to rural areas. To the contrary, Catholic influence in towns like Ibiraiaras is such that when the women's movement began discussing sex and birth control in the

² Unless otherwise noted, direct quotes from Ivone or Vania come from four long interviews conducted in June 2004, July 2004, May 2007, and August 2008. The first interview was done in collaboration with Jeff Rubin, and the other three I did on my own.

early 1990s, the church, which was instrumental in encouraging young activists to form an autonomous women's movement in the 1980s, quickly withdrew its support. Years later, Ivone and Vania got to know a lesbian feminist advisor from Porto Alegre. But when Ivone and Vania met in the late 1980s, they didn't know anyone who was openly gay. They had no lesbian role models and no framework in which to understand their feelings for each other. What they knew was that in their society, men and women slept together, but, as far as Ivone and Vania knew, women didn't sleep with other women.

Historian Ben Junge, who studies the gay rights movement in Porto Alegre, stresses the importance of “leaving conceptual room for configurations of desire, behavior and identity that don't conform to the Anglo LGBT framework—the possibility, notoriously common in Brazil, that same-sex behaviors happen in the absence of any reflexive LGBT identity.”³ The fact that Ivone and Vania first formed their relationship “in the absence of any reflexive LGBT identity” does not, in my opinion, mean that scholarly work on gays and lesbians in the United States cannot be useful in understanding Ivone and Vania's experience, but I draw on these texts with caution.

In this paper, I focus on how Ivone and Vania understood their relationship, and how they perceived the responses of their family and friends to a relationship that was distinctly different from the start. I draw on frameworks scholars have used to think about silence and family acceptance in other places, such as Elizabeth Kennedy's study of a lesbian woman in South Dakota in the 1930s and 40s,⁴ and John Howard's history of gay life in the South,⁵ but I try not to impose these frameworks on Ivone and Vania's story. Instead, I hope to bring their story into a

³ Junge, Ben. Email to the author, April 12, 2010.

⁴ Kennedy, Elizabeth Lapovsky. “But we would never talk about it: The Structures of Lesbian Discretion in South Dakota, 1928-1933,” in Lewin, ed., *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America* (Beacon, 1996).

⁵ Howard, John. *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago, 1999).

growing conversation about the kinds of behavior for which silence can allow, and the experience and consequences of having your sexuality accepted only on the condition that you don't talk about it.

Silent Acceptance

In my conversations with Ivone and Vania about their relationship, they talked a lot about how other people responded to their relationship. However, Ivone and Vania's answers to questions about how *they* reacted to their first feelings for each other were always brief. This may be because they were less comfortable talking to me about their own feelings than about other people's comments opinions. But it may also come from not having a sense of queer history or identity through which to understand their feelings for each other. "I think the relationship we created doesn't have an explanation," Vania said,

You can't say how it started, why it started. . . why does this happen, that two women like each other, that two women live together? There's psychology to explain some things, but the value of our relationship is the way we live and what happens between us.

How, in a small Catholic town in southern Brazil, did two women muster up the courage to move in together? "It wasn't everyone," Ivone said, "But people said things, like 'it won't work out, how can you even think of living together? You won't survive, you won't be able to live because society won't let you.'"

Ivone and Vania had good reason to think that society would not let them live as a lesbian couple. In church, a central social space in rural communities, they learned the homosexuality was wrong. They didn't know anyone who was gay, had no models for how family and friends might respond to two women living together and sharing a bed. Ivone's description of the

decision to move in together shows how uncertain she felt, not in her feelings for Vania, but in the decision to act on those feelings:

I remember that day we had a big training workshop, and you [Vania] said “I’m going to look for a house for us to live in.” And I said, “no, don’t do that, that’s pure madness.” “I’m going to sell my land,” Vania said. “No, don’t even think about it, it won’t work out” [I said]. I stayed at the meeting for four days and when I got back to the union hall a guy said, “Ivone, you need to call this number,” and then he said, “Vania, that crazy one made a change.” No sooner said than done, she’d brought all our things to one house, and we’ve been living there together for ten years . . .

Vania was the one who made the actual move. But the decision to move in together was not impulsive or one-sided. As Ivone and Vania’s relationship developed, and they watched other women struggle through their marriages, the two women decided that they didn’t want to live the same way everyone else did. Ivone traces the courage that allowed them to move in together to their experience in the women’s movement. “We always said that for us, the movement was an alternative way of being, a way to change our lives, to change how we behave, to free ourselves ... so why couldn’t we create something different, why couldn’t we create a different life for ourselves?” Ivone and Vania’s belief that laws, household dynamics, and expectations of women could change—and their commitment to fighting for those changes—was part of what gave them the courage to live differently from how people around them lived.

After Ivone and Vania moved in together, they found that even though people had said “the world won’t let you live that way,” their family, friends, and community *did* let them live as a lesbian couple—so long as they followed what George Chauncey calls “rules of engagement.”⁶ In this context, the term “rules of engagement” refers to the rules people follow in order to engage with family, friends, neighbors, and colleagues whose are opposed to or uncomfortable with homosexuality. Rules of engagement can also be thought of as a sort of unwritten code people follow in public spaces in order to live their private lives the way they choose.

⁶ Chauncey, George. Meeting with author, April 26, 2010.

In terms of behavior, Ivone and Vania's families are very accepting of their relationship. The two women live together and share a bedroom. Ivone's mother calls Vania her daughter, and Vania's mother does the same with Ivone. When the two women visit their parents' houses, they sleep together in a double bed. Accounts of bed-sharing also came up in historian Estelle Freedman's interviews with descendents of Miriam Van Waters, a prison reformer in the 1930s and 1940s. Waters's oldest grandchild told Freedman "with confidence that her grandmother had been a lesbian and that she was sure that Thompson and Van Waters were lovers, for they had shared a bed during family vacations."⁷ When Ivone and Vania's mothers make up a double bed, they acknowledge their daughters' relationship through their actions in a way they do not in speech.

Ivone and Vania live right next door to Ivone's sister, Gessi, and Gessi's husband and two kids. The whole family—four adults and two young children—eats most meals together in Gessi's kitchen. In Brazil, and particularly in small towns like Ibiraiaras, children often live with their parents until marriage and continue to live nearby even after they have families of their own. But given the central role children often play in fears about homosexuality, and the emphasis anti-gay campaigns have put on "protecting" children from the "threat" of gay influence,⁸ one might expect that Gessi would try to hide Ivone and Vania's relationship from her young children. Far from concealing Ivone and Vania's relationship from the kids, the four adults have integrated their family lives to the point that the kids often sleep in the guest room in their aunts' home. Since Gessi's first child was born nine years ago, the four adults have had various different jobs, including being a full-time women's movement organizer, a city council representative, a truck driver, a maid, and head of the local health department. Which of the three

⁷ Freedman, Estelle B., "'The Burning of Letters Continues': Elusive Identities and the Historical Construction of Sexuality," *Journal of Women's History* 9 (Winter, 1998): 193.

⁸ Documents from the 1977 Miami "Save Our Children" Campaign.

women prepares the meals and cares for Gessi's two kids at a given time has depended on each woman's employment, and food, laundry, and kids are constantly passed back and forth between the two houses.

I spent four months in Ibiraiaras between 2001 and 2008. I heard Ivone and Vania's name used in the same sentence hundreds of times. "Go ask your aunts if you can sleep there," or "Ivone and Vania will be here soon," or "Vania, where's Ivone?" But I never saw the two women hold hands, and I never heard their relationship spoken about in public. Once, over lunch in Gessi's kitchen, my father mentioned that gay marriage had just been passed in our state of Massachusetts.⁹ The conversation stopped there. No one said anything. Gessi got up to check something on the stove. Her husband pushed his chair back. Someone changed the subject. Later that night, when my dad and I were sitting with Ivone and Vania in their kitchen, the two women asked us all about gay marriage. What would it look like? How had it become legal? Alone in their kitchen, Ivone and Vania spoke openly about homosexuality. But outside of their house, they didn't talk about their relationship, and neither did anyone else.

It seems that Ivone and Vania's relationship was accepted on the condition that they not talk about it. Family, friends, and neighbors allowed them to live together, sleep together, and care for children together, so long as they didn't challenge that tolerance by naming their relationship.¹⁰ Why were these the rules of engagement? Social rules aren't a given, as Kennedy implies when she says that Julia Reinstein and her friends in South Dakota in the 1930s and 1940s "*constructed discretion* in order to live in a social environment that was hostile to intimate relationships between women."¹¹ Rules of engagement are constructed by the people who

⁹ My father was there because we were doing research together.

¹⁰ Chauncey, Meeting.

¹¹ Kennedy, "Never Talk," 19. Italics added.

enforce them, in this case, Ivone and Vania's family, friends, and neighbors, and by the people who abide by them each day.

Rules of Engagement

What explains the rules of engagement Ivone and Vania follow? What makes two women who live and sleep together without ridicule feel that they cannot hold hands in public? Why was Ivone and Vania's relationship tolerated and their speech silenced? I don't know for sure.

Historian John Howard begins a book on the history of gay men in the South by saying, "My text is sprinkled liberally with words such as *perhaps*, *maybe*, *sometimes*, *likely*, and *probably*."¹²

This part of my text will be too. I know that Ivone and Vania live together. I know that they have jobs in town, and close relationships with family and friends. I don't know for sure how the rules of engagement Ivone and Vania follow developed, or why those rules are the way they are. As Howard does in *Men Like That*, I make educated guesses in hope of shedding light on Ivone's and Vania's experience without pretending to fully understand their lives.

One possible explanation for the codes of silence surrounding Ivone's and Vania's relationship is what Chauncey calls "calculated ambiguity."¹³ By not holding hands in public or talking about their relationship, Ivone and Vania may have made it possible for people who didn't know them well to stop short of assuming they were a couple just because they lived together. In a Catholic town in which people are taught that homosexuality is wrong, this ambiguity can make the difference between acceptance and ridicule. Kennedy argues that "using the word 'lesbian' would hasten the naming of themselves as a distinct kind of person..."¹⁴ and though Kennedy is talking about Julia Reinstein and her friends, the same applies to Ivone and Vania. If they aren't lesbians, they could be two single women sharing a house, a relationship with which Catholic residents of Ibiraiaras are much more comfortable.

¹² Howard, "Men Like That," 6.

¹³ Chauncey, *Meeting*.

¹⁴ Kennedy, "Never Talk," 35.

Howard's notion that silence can "foreclose the likelihood of censure"¹⁵ may be a better framework than "calculated ambiguity" for understanding the silence of people who know Ivone and Vania well and know about their relationship. Perhaps by censoring speech about Ivone's and Vania's actions, close family and friends who wanted to accept them were able to do so without explicitly going against religious and social codes. When Gessi moved into a house next door to her sister, she could frame her move as one that exposed her children to Ivone and Vania, two caring women, rather than to two "lesbian" women. Ivone's mother could feel more comfortable in public with her daughter and her daughter's partner if Ivone and Vania looked like any two women walking down the street, rather than like a lesbian couple, as holding hands would imply. Through their silence, Ivone's and Vania's family and friends were—in a sense—saying without saying: you can do what you want in your own home, but don't display your relationship in front of us. We can treat you like everyone else as long as you don't make us see the ways in which you are different.

Another possible explanation for the silence surrounding Ivone's and Vania's relationship is that their friends, family, and neighbors weren't comfortable talking about homosexuality. I feel more confident in this explanation than I do in the first, though the two explanations are not mutually exclusive, and may well be taking place at the same time. Speaking about any relationship, gay or straight, means navigating ambiguous territory between private and public. Which kinds of questions are seen as thoughtful, which are seen as intrusive, and which are simply never asked, varies by place, time, and individual. Conversations that residents of one town, or members of one family, have in the street or around the dinner table may in a neighboring town or family be seen as appropriate only in the bedroom. Talking about relationships is never straightforward, but in Ibiraiaras, as in many other places, people talk

¹⁵ Howard, "Men Like That," 32.

about heterosexual relationships all the time. This is in part because conventionalized narratives, or established patterns of conversation, make these conversations easier.

In Ibiraiaras, there are no conventionalized narratives about same-sex relationships aside from the narrative the Church presents, which frames homosexuality as wrong. This creates a double roadblock for conversations about homosexuality. The Church's narrative works against Ivone's and Vania's attempts to open conversations about their relationship, and the lack of conventionalized narratives about that kind of relationship makes it even harder for their family, friends, and neighbors to risk having those conversations.

Ivone and Vania know this. When you start a conversation, Ivone once told me, "You don't know where it will go. What it will lead to. And then you have to give your opinion."

When I asked Vania why the lunchtime conversation about gay marriage had fallen flat, she said,

If you speak, if you put the subject in the media, on the street, you're going to have to have an opinion. People are going to come and ask what you have to say about it. You [speaking to author] are already familiar with it [homosexuality], you have an opinion...people like Ivone, they like me, but they would never speak about homosexuality.

The Cost of Silence

In *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, Elizabeth Kennedy highlights Julia Reinstein's ability to "live an active and full lesbian life while not being public."¹⁶ Like Ivone and Vania, silence was a central part of the rules of engagement Julia followed. Julia didn't need to talk publicly about her relationships, Kennedy argues, in order to live her life the way she wanted to. For Julia, "coming out publicly, being more obvious, would have been more of a burden than a freedom."¹⁷ The family and friends who knew about Julia's sexuality didn't speak about it in

¹⁶ Kennedy, "Never Talk," 33.

¹⁷ Kennedy, "Never Talk," 34.

public. Their silence, Kennedy argues, “created a buffer zone between Julia and the judgments of the outside world.”¹⁸

Kennedy’s reading of silence as a protective mechanism is a reminder of the ways in which silence can make possible relationships that might otherwise be the subject of public ridicule. In a Catholic town with no visible gay rights movement, it’s remarkable that Ivone and Vania live with such relative freedom and acceptance. Their house has never been targeted, they have never been made fun of in public, and they care for Ivone’s sister’s kids as their own. When they stopped working full time for the women’s movement, they were hired by local businesses. Silence has acted as a sort of buffer, or protection, for Ivone and Vania. But silence can also be a form of judgment, something Kennedy’s positive take leaves out.

The consequences of the silence surrounding Ivone and Vania’s relationship are different from the ones I expected to find. Ivone and Vania didn’t feel that their families were using silence to hide the fact that they had lesbian daughters. Vania said that what’s hard about being in a relationship that people won’t talk about is not having anyone to talk to about a relationship that’s central to her life. People don’t exclude her from family gatherings or from friendships, but they don’t treat this like they would a relationship with a man. She explained,

If something happens between Ivone and me, there’s no one to talk to.... Like all couples, whether they’re homosexual or not, there are moments of divergence. And there are moments when you need to talk to someone: ‘We’re not seeing eye to eye because of this.’ But who am I going to talk to? To whom can I say why I’m annoyed? Who’s Ivone going to tell why she’s annoyed? So I go to work and I’m still angry ... if you have the ability to have a conversation, the next day things can already be different.

All relationships are subject to rules of engagement, to ideas about what’s acceptable to talk about in public and what’s not. The rules of engagement may be different for homosexual and

¹⁸ Kennedy, “Never Talk,” 35.

heterosexual couples in the same town, but both couples are subject to rules,¹⁹ and in many couples, private fights fall into the category of things that don't leave the home. Some of what Vania feels is missing in her relationship and conversation with others may not be specific to a silenced lesbian relationship, but some of it is. People do talk about relationships in daily life, whether or not they talk about the hard parts.

Vania says she has, at times, brought up her relationship with friends and family in private conversations, and no one told her to shut up or go away, but no one seemed interested in talking about it, and no one brought up the topic again. "It stopped there," Vania said. "A month, two months ... it didn't go on. I was going to have to insist again. But then I didn't feel the desire to speak." I think that in addition to wanting people with whom she can talk about problems in her relationship, something many people don't have, Vania wants something most heterosexual people do have: the ability to participate in daily banter about relationships, to have people ask her questions, express interest, and acknowledge a relationship that is a central part of her life.

Reading Silence

The silencing that Ivone and Vania experienced in Ibiraiaras, as well as the other rules of engagement surrounding their relationship, took away their ability to draw the line between public and private where they wanted it to be. Rather than making their own choices about what they felt comfortable sharing with others, Ivone and Vania received a clear message that they should not talk to people about anything connected to their relationship—not only sex, but also arguments, conversations, and shared experiences. In this case, silence made a strong statement. By not talking about homosexuality, Ivone's and Vania's family, friends, and neighbors

¹⁹ Chauncey, Meeting.

established silence as a rule of engagement, and marked the two women's relationship as something that could not be fully accepted in the public sphere.

Silence, as Howard notes in *Men Like That*, "is not unidirectional,"²⁰ and it "cannot be equated with absence."²¹ Silence is something people read into, learn from, and shape their lives around, particularly if, like Ivone and Vania, they are forced to remain silent about a central part of their lives. Just as speech can be interpreted many ways, silence does not mean any one thing. It can be protective and comfortable, but it can also, at the same time, be demanding and unwanted. Ivone and Vania's experience suggests a reading of silence that complicates Kennedy's argument that coming out is "more of a burden than a freedom."²² It's true that speaking more publicly about their relationship would threaten the fragile acceptance Ivone and Vania have experienced in their town, but not speaking also comes at a cost, and silence can be a burden to the very people it protects.

²⁰ Howard, "Men Like That," 31.

²¹ Howard, "Men Like That," 28.

²² Kennedy, "Never Talk," 35.

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