

**Abstract** Transgendered prostitutes (*travestis*) in the Brazilian city of Salvador have strong opinions about lesbians. Although individual travestis maintain cordial relationships with individual lesbians, whenever they discuss lesbians among themselves, travestis are always dismissive and condemnatory. This paper discusses three reasons for that attitude: the contention among travestis that 'God made woman for man and man for woman'; the conviction that lesbians actively pursue travestis as objects of desire; and the idea that lesbians share a (very different kind of) transgendered project with travestis. This paper investigates what might be gained by examining the ways in which one group of transgendered individuals thinks about other individuals whom it also sees as transgendered. The argument is that this kind of enquiry allows a more nuanced understanding of some of the underlying configurations of gender and sexuality that travestis draw on and reproduce in their own practices and subjectivities.

**Keywords** Brazil, homosexuality, lesbian, transgender

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## Fe/male Trouble: The Unsettling Place of Lesbians in the Self-images of Brazilian *Travesti* Prostitutes

In discussions and debates about the relationships between postmodernism, bodies, gender and sexuality, a number of recurring figures tend to attract a great deal of attention and discourse. Cyborgs, of course, are all the rage at the moment (Balsamo, 1996; Haraway, 1991), as are drag queens and cross-dressers (Butler, 1990; Ekins and King, 1996; Ferris, 1993), transsexuals (Feinberg, 1996; Halberstam, 1994; Hausman, 1995), freaks (Thomson, 1996), women who undergo cosmetic surgery (Davis, 1995, 1997), and butch/femme relationships (Case, 1993). Another character who has been the object of some thought from theorists pondering postmodernism is the male lesbian. The male lesbian has emerged in feminist and queer writing in two ways. One is as a hypothetical subject position.

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In her discussion of the theoretical writings of the French feminist Monique Wittig, for example, Diana Fuss has wondered whether Wittig's own admission that gay men disturb the 'straight mind' might not amount to a suggestion that the privileged, disruptive category 'lesbian' might be filled by a male subject (Fuss, 1989: 46).

The other way in which the male lesbian has been presented is as an actually occurring type of person – a man who seriously argues that he is a lesbian. The existence of this type of man is asserted in Jacquelyn N. Zita's essay 'Male Lesbians and the Postmodernist Body' (Zita, 1992). Zita tells us that her essay is a 'case study of . . . biological males who claim to be lesbians' (1992: 106). These are 'men who claim not merely to act like lesbians or to be lesbian-identified or to feel like lesbians, but *to be* lesbians' (1992: 107, emphasis in original). Zita uses these men to think about the possibilities and limits of postmodern perspectives on sexuality and gender. The essay is an interesting attempt to pursue the implications of theories that assert that not only gender but also material bodies are discursive constructions. From such a perspective, it is possible to 'read' male lesbians as lesbians as vanguards of a destabilizing postmodern sensibility (as, indeed, Zita seems to do). However, it is also possible to see them as reactionary 'Tootsie'-like handmaidens of the patriarchy (Walters, 1996: 853).

My own response to Zita's essay is not so much a theoretical disagreement as an empirical query. While I agree with Zita that the idea of the male lesbian is good to think with, I would like to know a bit more about the object of our thought. Unlike Fuss, who does not seem to require the actual existence of male lesbians to be able to think productively about them, Zita claims that 'male lesbian' constitutes an existing identity in our society. But do male lesbians exist? Are there really men out there who in all seriousness claim *to be* lesbians? Nothing is impossible, especially not these days; but one wonders. And one is not helped much by Zita here. The evidence that she presents for her claims about the existence of male lesbians is not exactly overwhelming. It consists of a couple of brief quotes from essays composed by undergraduate male students, one of whom writes, rather tentatively, 'I have often felt that I'm a lesbian trapped inside a man's body', (presumably the essays are from students whom Zita herself has taught – about male lesbianism?). Another quote is from the transsexual performer Kate Bornstein, who says she is lesbian, but who might object, given her current physiological status, to being called a 'male lesbian'. Apart from those quotes, the only other evidence that Zita offers for her claims about the existence of male lesbians is an 'I have heard a story about . . .' anecdote (1992: 114), and the assertion that 'I have met more than a few [male lesbians]. Other lesbians report similar encounters' (1992: 107). This is hardly a demographic survey.

My interest in the empirical basis of Zita's claims about male lesbians arises from my experience of working among a group of males who might just qualify as 'male lesbians', even though they are not the kind of male lesbians that Zita has in mind. Instead of laying claim to a lesbian identity, the males among whom I have worked devote a not-inconsiderable amount of time to thinking about how they can *avoid* being identified as lesbians, and how they can avoid being lusted after as the objects of desire for women who are lesbians.

The males in question are Brazilian transgendered individuals, or *travestis*, as they are called in Portuguese. Travestis are males who, sometimes beginning at ages as young as 10, start adopting female names, clothing, hairstyles, cosmetic practices, and linguistic pronouns. By the time they are in their late teens, these males have also begun modifying their bodies through the ingestion of massive doses of estrogen-based hormones and the injection into their buttocks, thighs, hips, and breasts, of (on average) about 3–5 liters of industrial silicone (Figure 1). Despite the fact that they undertake such irreversible physiological modifications, the overwhelming majority of travestis do not self-identify as women – they all want to be feminine, not female. Nearly all travestis in Salvador work as prostitutes, and as prostitutes, they regularly take both the insertor and the insertee role in intercourse with clients.

This paper discusses the ways in which travestis in the city of Salvador think about lesbians.<sup>1</sup> I first became interested in the topic of lesbianism because I noticed that among my various travesti friends and acquaintances in Salvador, discussion of lesbians always provoked strong reactions. Although individual travestis maintain cordial relationships with individual lesbians, whenever they discuss lesbianism among themselves, travestis are always dismissive and condemnatory. These negative reactions have three interrelated roots that I discuss here. The first is the contention, not unusual in male or heterosexual discussions of lesbianism but somewhat surprising, perhaps, coming from a transgendered prostitute, that 'God made woman for man and man for woman', and the attendant idea that two women cannot possibly satisfy one another sexually, because neither of them is equipped with a penis.



Figure 1. Travestis modify their bodies through massive doses of estrogen-based hormones; here the buttocks are particularly modified. (Photo by Don Kulick)

The second is the somewhat more opaque assertion that lesbians pursue travestis as objects of desire – which is distasteful to travestis, who all self-identify as homosexual, and who have no interest in female sexuality. The third, theoretically most eye-opening, reason why travestis dislike lesbians is because they understand lesbians as sharing with them a transgendered project; a project, however, that has very different goals: whereas travestis wish to approximate feminine ideals and consider that they possess a feminine subjectivity, they see lesbians as attempting to distance themselves from feminine ideals and subjectivity. That a biological female should strive to evacuate femininity seems to imply, for travestis, that femininity is not ‘natural’, and that, therefore, their own attempts to claim it are unavoidably artificial. Through this logic, travestis interpret lesbians as commentaries not primarily on femininity, but rather as on travestis. They see lesbians as ‘caricatures of travestis’ (*uma caricatura do travesti*). The bodies and actions of lesbians are like mirrors that reveal, to the travestis who gaze at them, defects in the travesti’s own self image and gendered practices.

The argument I develop here is that it is not so much lesbians, as it is travesti thoughts about lesbians, that are commentaries about travestis. Travesti ideas about lesbians are generated from ideas about femininity, masculinity, sexuality and naturalness that lie at the heart of the travesti’s own gendered identity. By looking closely at how these transgendered individuals think about other individuals whom they also see as transgendered, it is possible to make explicit some of the underlying configurations of gender and sexuality that travestis draw on and reproduce in their own gendered practices and subjectivities. In doing so, it is also possible to gauge the extent to which travesti subjectivity questions and challenges those configurations of gender and sexuality, and the extent to which that subjectivity requires and reinforces those configurations.

## God made woman for man

A great deal of contemporary writing about transgenderism highlights the challenges posed by transgendered persons to normative regimes of sex, gender and sexuality. Although the insights provided by current rethinkings have been profound, a weakness in discussions about transgenderism is that they are most often conducted in the absence of data on what transgendered individuals actually say and think about their lives. We have the works of articulate white transsexuals such as Jan Morris, Leslie Feinberg, Sandy Stone or Kate Bornstein, of course, but one can wonder whether they are particularly representative of transsexuals, even in places like Britain and the US. The absence of information about transgendered individuals who are not part of the educated white middle-class

is surely one of the main reasons why Jennie Livingston's (1990) film *Paris is Burning* has been so widely discussed by researchers interested in gender and transgender. In that film we hear the voices of people who do not explain their lives, as Kate Bornstein does, with reference to *Gender Trouble*. Instead, the people in the film seem to think and act in ways that appear to recuperate and retrench, not challenge, ideas and practices of racial denigration, patriarchal values, and hegemonic heterosexuality. To the extent they do this, they compel us to broaden the scope of our theorizing and engage with attitudes and identities that do not always neatly mesh with the liberal views of most scholars researching transgenderism today.

I thought a lot about *Paris is Burning* during my research in Salvador, because I found the travestis with whom I lived and worked to be generally conservative and steeped in the morals of their Roman Catholic upbringings.<sup>2</sup> I was first alerted to this conservatism early on in my stay, when Jô Mamãe, a buxom travesti in her late 30s or early 40s, with 12½ liters of silicone strategically injected into various parts of her body, announced during a discussion among travestis about gay marriage that she thought that the idea of marriage between homosexuals was 'ridiculous' (*ridículo*). 'Even though I'm homosexual myself', she said, 'I'm against it' (*Mesmo sendo homosexual, eu sou contra*). The reason? 'God made woman for man and man for woman' (*Que Deus fez a mulher pro homem e o homem pra mulher*).

This was one of the few times I heard this phrase used in the context of male homosexuality (whenever it was used, it always occurred either in discussions about gay marriage, which more travestis than Jô Mamãe found objectionable, or in discussions about why the boyfriends of travestis could never become impassioned with them – see Kulick, 1997b). Otherwise, the idea that 'God made woman for man and man for woman' was invoked only in the context of discussions about lesbianism. And here, the implication of the phrase that all homosexuality, not just lesbianism, was therefore unnatural was always mitigated by observing that male homosexuality was not problematic because men had the equipment needed to give one another pleasure. As Tina, a travesti friend, once put it in an interview with me:

*Entendeu como é? Que Deus fez a mulher pro homem e o homem pra mulher. Como aí tem a mulher sapatão e o homossexual [sic], entendeu como é? . . . Mas o homossexual tudo bem – um tem o negocio pra botar no outro, né? E a mulher? Fica aquela nojeira. Uma esfregando a buceta na outra, acho uma decepção.*

You understand how it is? God made woman for man and man for woman. And there's like lesbians and homosexuals, you know? . . . But homosexuals, there's no problem – one has the thing to stick into the other, you know? But women? They can just make gross suds. One rubbing against the cunt of the other, I think it's a fraud.

A 26-year-old travesti named Isa, interviewed in a Brazilian magazine, answers the question 'Do you travestis get along with lesbians?' (*Vocês travestis, se dão com as lésbicas?*) in almost exactly the same manner as Tina:<sup>3</sup>

*Eu não mexo com essa raça, Com puta eu me dou, com cafetão também, mas lésbica, não consigo entender, minha cabeça não chega a tanto. Um homem com outro homem ainda tem o que enfiar, ou você dá o cu ou o pau, tem contato. Agora mulher com mulher, língua, não dá, roçar testa com testa é muito, não acho normal.*

I don't have anything to do with that kind of person. I get along with women prostitutes, with pimps too, but lesbians, I just don't get it, my head can't wrap itself around that. A man with another man has what it takes to penetrate the other one – either you give your ass or you insert your dick, there's contact. But a woman with a woman, tongues, it won't work, rubbing together face to face – it's too much, I don't think it's normal.

I later return to this idea of lesbians as 'abnormal' and as 'frauds', and argue that it is an important reason why travestis feel so uncomfortable about lesbianism. For now, though, I just want to note that the idea that two women cannot possibly satisfy one another sexually is grounded in an idea of female sexuality as fundamentally dependent on male sexuality. The general consensus among travestis (and, I would wager, among Brazilians generally) is that women need to be penetrated in order to experience orgasm. There is a physiological reason behind this, I have heard travestis tell one another; namely, that a woman's orgasm is internal. Hence, a woman needs to be penetrated in order that the spot that leads her to orgasm can be reached and stimulated. Furthermore, this penetration, in order to be truly satisfying, needs to be carried out by a penis. Penetration can be achieved by other means, but in the eyes of travestis, all those other means are nothing other than pathetic substitutes for 'the real thing'. This was made clear whenever I challenged travestis who claimed that women could not satisfy one another because neither of them could penetrate the other. Of course a woman can penetrate the vagina or the anus of another woman, I protested. If she wanted to, she could do so through the use of any number of objects – her fingers, a dildo, a carrot, whatever. The response to this criticism was always the same. 'Yeah sure, they can use their finger, or a dildo, or a carrot' my interlocutor would invariably answer in a bored voice, 'But what is that? A finger, a dildo or a carrot. It isn't a dick, is it?'

## Travestis as objects of lesbian desire

If the unsatisfying and ultimately fraudulent nature of sexuality between two women is the first root of travesti dismissal of lesbianism, the second root concerns how travestis imagine that lesbians see them. During a



discussion about lesbians, my travesti teacher and co-worker Keila Simpsom told me that she didn't really know all that much about lesbians. 'I don't have any curiosity about that type of person no, lesbian women. I don't know, I don't have any prejudices, but I don't feel very comfortable around lesbian women'. I wondered why – thinking of how many lesbians in North America and northern Europe react to drag queens and transvestites, I asked Keila if she perhaps didn't feel comfortable around lesbians because lesbians didn't like travestis. Her reply was completely unexpected: 'No', she said, 'the worse thing is that they like them more – I think that here in Salvador, lesbian women look at travestis as instruments of pleasure. They are turned on by travestis [*as mulheres lesbicas, elas olham o travesti como instrumento de prazer. Elas sentem tesão por travesti*]'.

Keila is here expressing an opinion that I found to be prevalent among travestis in Salvador. Numerous stories circulate among travestis about how lesbians are attracted to them. Almost any travesti can tell stories about how lesbians have come on to them. One travesti told me that several lesbians who lived on the same street as she were 'impassioned' (*apaixonadas*) with her, one so much so that she would 'go up to the sky and take down the moon' if the travesti wanted it. Another travesti once told me that she was having a clandestine relationship with a woman who she said was a lesbian. (This travesti was a notorious liar and other travestis to whom I mentioned this doubted that it was true. What is important in this context, however, is that the speaker stressed that the woman was a lesbian). Yet another individual who lived for years as a travesti, and who has prominent breasts from years of hormone consumption, but who now dresses in male clothing and considers himself to be 'bisexual', lived for 6 years with a woman who works as a prostitute and who is considered by everyone (including, I am told, by herself) to be a lesbian.<sup>4</sup> And the occasional woman who accompanies her husband when he seeks out the sexual services of travestis is always considered by travestis to have 'something lesbian in her disposition' (*um quê de lesbica na mente dela*).

I have discovered this same idea in published sources. Isa, the *travesti* interviewed in the Brazilian magazine who thought that two women together was abnormal, recounted, as the interview with her continued, that 'There are lesbians who have no shame, who invite travestis to fuck them and who pay' (*Mas tem paraíba sem-vergonha, que convida a gente para foder e pagam*). Another published source that elaborates the same sentiments is the recent book *a Princesa* (Princess), which is an autobiography of the Brazilian travesti Fernanda Farias de Albuquerque (De Albuquerque and Jannelli, 1995).<sup>5</sup> While she was living in a bordello in the city of Natal in northeastern Brazil, Fernanda recounts that Gilda, one of the prostitutes working in the bordello, 'was lesbian', and 'wanted me, wanted to have sex with me'. At first Fernanda thought that the prostitutes

who were telling her this were joking with her – ‘I didn’t understand that desire’, she writes. But everything became apparent one night when Fernanda discovered that Gilda was spying on her when she had sex with customers. ‘She confirmed this herself’, Fernanda writes, ‘when she declared her love: “you’re lesbian like me” [Gilda declared], “Stay with me”’. Fernanda, appalled at this revelation, broke a bottle and attempted to slash Gilda’s throat, only to be stopped by the proprietor of the bordello (1995: 67). Later, Gilda lied to a man whom Fernanda was attempting to procure as a boyfriend, telling him when he came to visit Fernanda that Fernanda wanted nothing to do with him. When one of the prostitutes living in the bordello overheard this and called Fernanda, ‘Gilda went crazy with jealousy and went for me, razor in hand, under the shower. “You are mine Fernando, I love you, I want you all for myself!”’ Fernanda screamed at Gilda: “I like men and not women. Get your hands off me. Leave me alone, lesbian witch”’ (1995: 69).

In her essay on male lesbians, Jacquelyn Zita (1992) suggests that one minimal defining criterion of lesbian might be the desire for the body of a woman. ‘A male body is not what most lesbians hope to find under the sheets or under “her” clothes’, Zita tells us (1992: 112). Needless to say, travestis would beg to differ. Far from imagining that lesbians want female bodies, Fernanda Farias de Albuquerque and my travesti acquaintances in Salvador draw on their own experiences to argue that what lesbians really hope to find under the sheets are – well, if not a male body, then at least one distinctive male body part.

In pursuing this kind of talk about lesbian attraction in the ways they do, travestis assert that they are part of the same erotic economy as lesbians. I had a great deal of trouble making any sense of this until I realized two things: first, as I have already noted, travestis believe that sexual satisfaction (even for lesbians) can only be achieved with the aid of a penis, which all travestis possess. And second, travestis think that when they are not dressed in flamboyantly feminine clothing, people often mistake them for lesbians.

Even when they are dressed in female clothing, the majority of travestis do not easily pass as women, and they seem to give an incongruent impression that compels people seeing them on the street to stare or to comment. In order to try to avoid these stares and comments, travestis venturing out into city streets during the day will sometimes remove their make-up and most of their jewellery, put on a big T-shirt, male shorts and sandals, and stuff their hair up into a baseball cap. This kind of attire does tend to ward off the kind of open gawking that a travesti in shorts and a halter top would attract. But a problem with dressing this way, travestis say, is that they are often mistaken for lesbians. As Tina told me once: ‘I can’t dress in men’s long pants, shorts, shirt – if I do, people think I’m a lesbian. Once I had a big fight with someone on the street because of that’.



I have no idea of the extent to which Brazilians seeing a travesti in male clothing will actually identify that travesti as a lesbian. The point is, however, that travestis themselves are convinced that they are seen in this way. What is more, there are occasions on which they see one another in this way: two travestis living together as a couple (something which in fact occurs only extremely rarely in Salvador) are talked about as a *lesbian* couple, and one of the words used to describe the kind of sex they are publicly imagined as having is *roça-roça* (rub-rub) – the same word used to describe lesbian sex (the other expression used to describe this kind of sex is *quebrar a louça* – literally ‘break the china’, an expression whose meaning I am still puzzling over).

A main reason why travestis imagine all these similarities between themselves and lesbians is because travestis understand lesbians to share a transgendered project with themselves – just as they are striving to become more feminine, they see lesbians as wanting to become more masculine. There is a continual slippage in travesti talk about lesbians between ‘lesbian’ and ‘wanting to be a man’. Now, travestis know that all women who have sex with other women do not wear male clothing and attempt to look masculine – just as they know that all men who have sex with other men do not wear female clothing and attempt to look feminine. However, in their talk about lesbians, effeminate women are not really recognized as being lesbians. They are, instead, generally considered to be heterosexual women who basically desire men; just as the boyfriends of travestis are thought of as heterosexual men who basically desire women (Kulick, 1997b; Prieur, this issue). The women whom travestis regard as being ‘truly lesbian’ (*sapatão mesmo* or *sapatona mesmo*) are women who attempt to look and act masculine.<sup>6</sup>

The problem for these women, from the point of view of travestis, is that they cannot become more masculine in any but the most superficial sense. They can dress as men, cut their hair short like men, and try to behave like men, but they cannot modify their bodily forms to be more like men. This inability stands in stark contrast to the possibilities open to travestis. ‘Lesbians are jealous of us because of this’, one travesti told me, ‘because travestis have more means of transforming themselves into women than lesbians have of transforming themselves into men’. Other travestis repeated this observation in other contexts, commenting that no matter how hard she tried, a lesbian would never be able to change her body – in stark contrast to travestis, whose access to female hormones and industrial silicone make it easy for them to acquire female forms. ‘Our good fortune (*A sorte da gente*)’, I heard repeated time and again by travestis, ‘is that we have silicone, so that we can make female attributes on our bodies’.

What all this means is that travestis, who can alter their anatomy, walk around with female bodily attributes, but with speech styles, bodily

movements and, occasionally, styles of dress that they know are considered 'male'. Lesbians, who can't alter their anatomy, also walk around with female bodily attributes, and with 'male' styles of dress, speech, and movement. Lesbians, in other words, walk around looking like travestis. And vice versa (see Figure 2).

## Lesbians as caricatures of travestis

This mutual reflection is the sense in which lesbians are seen as commentaries on travestis. The best way to explain the dynamics involved here is to present an explanation of how travestis see lesbians that was provided for me by Keila Simpsom. After Keila had already explained once to me why travestis speak so negatively about lesbians, I threw up my hands and said: 'It's complicated!' Here is an edited version of her reply:

It's a little complicated because you still haven't got the clue to the puzzle. Look – a travesti generally doesn't like women who are too masculine because travestis see in women a mirror of themselves. A travesti always imagines beautiful women – whenever a travesti speaks of a woman, the travesti always talks about a beautiful woman, a perfect woman, a pretty woman. . . . In the head of a travesti, a woman has to be pretty, she has to be educated, she has to be elegant, in general. And the majority of lesbians aren't. They're not elegant, they have a loose and lazy way [*um modo desleixado*] of walking, of dressing, of comporting themselves, of talking, everything.

So, a woman who is lesbian, she is going to leave behind all her feminine characteristics and acquire masculine characteristics. And the moment a travesti begins to see those women being masculine, wanting to be masculine, what he imagines about women will come crashing to the ground . . . the moment he sees a lesbian, a man, he'll stop seeing a beautiful woman and he'll see a woman with masculine attributes – which is exactly what he is.<sup>7</sup> Because a travesti, no matter how feminine he is, will always have some masculine gestures . . . And when he sees that woman with masculine gestures, he'll think that that's what he is – he'll think that is a caricature of him. His dream will be destroyed [*o sonho dele todo vai por água abaixo*].



Figure 2. Travestis receiving condoms from the local gay organization (*Grupo Gay da Bahia*). The travesti standing second from the left and looking into the camera is wearing the kind of outfit that travestis think makes them look like lesbians. (Photo by Kristine Sommersten)

## Conclusion

What I interpret Keila as saying here is that lesbians compel travestis, quite against their will, to critically reflect on themselves as gendered subjects. Like other women, lesbians are seen by travestis as 'a mirror of themselves'. But whereas heterosexual women tell a travesti that she can at least dream of being the fairest of them all, what a travesti gazing into the lesbian mirror sees refracted back at her is only the futility and the artifice of her own body and her own dreams. In a lesbian's fraudulent and ultimately impossible attempt to appropriate masculinity, a travesti sees a travesty of her own attempts to appropriate femininity. She sees mannerisms and appearances that remind her of herself, and that she, confronted with them in this manner, finds ugly, distasteful and ridiculous.

Lesbians can constitute this kind of reflexive surface for travestis because travestis understand lesbians to be participating in the same phallic economy as themselves. Totally absent in travesti accounts of lesbians is a conceptual space for a gendered or sexual subjectivity that is not bound up with the phallus. Everyone, even women who only have relationships with other women, must desire a penis, travestis assume. And since travestis have both feminine bodily attributes *and* a penis, then, obviously, lesbians will find them irresistible.

Travestis thus place themselves at the center of the lesbian project. In this capacity, they might be volunteered as actually existing examples of Jacquelyn Zita's 'male lesbians'. They might also, from some perspectives, be seen to be the ultimate postmodern 'genderfuck'. However, in terms of such thinking about postmodern sexualities, what is most unexpected, and most ironic, about this positioning is that it is a place where travestis most decidedly do not want to be. Being at the center of the lesbian project severely undermines and mocks travestis' own gendered identities. In essence, that one group of transgendered individuals (travestis) are deeply disturbed by (what they consider to be) another group of transgendered individuals (lesbians) precisely *because* the latter are seen to be transgendered. Lesbians unsettle travestis because even though they are women, they do not look like or act like women ought to. They provoke condemnation because they reject the femininity that travestis work so hard to achieve. They disturb because they blur the normative binary modes of gender (but not, importantly, of sexuality) that travestis draw on to make sense of their own lives. Finally, they demonstrate, I think, the deep extent to which the transgendered identities of travestis in Salvador ultimately depend upon not postmodern *jouissance*, but, instead, on conservative social structures, morals and values for their existence and their meaning.

## Notes

1. I stress that the topic of this paper is *not* the lives of lesbians. The paper concerns *travesti ideas about lesbians*. I have no idea to what extent travesti thoughts about lesbians correspond to how individual lesbians actually think about and live their lives. While I was in Salvador, I considered attempting to interview a few of the lesbians who maintained cordial relationships with some of the travestis I knew. However, none of those women spent enough time with travestis for me to get to know them well. And if I learned one thing from my work among travestis, it is that interviews with stigmatized individuals are a waste of everybody's time, unless the person doing the interviewing has already established strong social ties with the person being interviewed. Because I had such limited contact with lesbians, I would have had no way of evaluating the responses I received to any question I might have wanted to pose. For that reason, I decided to confine my data to *travestis'* ideas about lesbians. To my knowledge, there are no in-depth ethnographic studies that describe the lives of lesbians in Brazil (or any other Latin American country). I hope that this essay might inspire (or provoke) lesbian anthropologists to devote more attention to documenting and theorizing those lives.
2. Arguments made in this paper are based on 12 months of anthropological fieldwork in Salvador, which is the home of between about 80–250 travestis, depending on the time of year. During my fieldwork in Salvador, I lived with a group of travestis and visited them and others nightly at their various points of prostitution. In addition, I recorded 16 in-depth interviews, lasting between 90 minutes and 11 hours, and approximately 20 hours of naturally occurring conversation among travestis.
3. I found this detailed, 5-page interview among the piles of newspaper and magazine clippings stuffed into cardboard boxes at the local gay organization, the *Grupo Gay da Bahia*, in Salvador. The author of the article is Isabel T. Reis. No date or source were noted on it.
4. I know the woman in question, but I have been unable to ask her whether she considers herself to be lesbian, because for the past few years she has been in Italy, working there as a prostitute.
5. This gracefully written book is, in my opinion, a truly 'Brazilian' transgendered autobiography. It has very little in common with the autobiographies of transgendered individuals growing up in North America or northern Europe. The narrator, Fernanda Farias de Albuquerque, grew up in a working-class home in northeastern Brazil, and in her thoughts, opinions and experiences, I recognize much of what I know to be common among travestis in Salvador.
6. The words *sapatão* and *sapatona* both literally mean 'big shoe'.
7. Note that Keila uses the masculine pronoun (he – in Portuguese '*ele*') when talking about travestis, whereas I consistently use the feminine pronoun (she – in Portuguese '*ela*'). Pronoun usage among travestis is an extremely complicated issue, but in a nutshell the principle is this: when travestis talk about *travestis* as an impersonal, general phenomenon, they use the masculine pronoun, certainly because the word *travesti* is grammatically masculine in Portuguese (*o travesti*). Whenever they discuss any particular travesti, however, they use feminine pronouns, articles, and adjectival

agreements. Here is an example of this taken from the book *a Princesa*: discussing Elisa, a travesti who forced others to pay for the right to stand on a particular street in Paris, the narrator Fernanda Farias de Albuquerque recounts that: '*Ela [Elisa] já ficava sabendo quando um trans [Fernanda's word for travesti, not used in Salvador] saía do Brasil e sabia quando ele chegava em Paris. Caso ele não aceitasse as suas condições, ela fazia que ele fosse expulso*' (1995:156) ['She already knew when a travesti left Brazil, and knew when he arrived in Paris. If he didn't accept her conditions, she saw to it that he was deported'].

I consistently use feminine forms when I write about travestis, partly to avoid confusion, and partly out of deference to travesti usage; mostly because I believe that travestis' linguistic practices perceptively and incisively enunciate core messages that are generated by their culture's arrangements of sexuality, gender and biological sex. A detailed discussion of this is developed in Kulick (1997a, 1997b, 1998).

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