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The Gender of Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes

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The Gender of Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes

MALES WHO ENJOY being anally penetrated by other males are, in many places in the world, an object of special cultural elaboration. Anywhere they occur as a culturally recognized type, it is usually they who are classified and named, not the males who penetrate them (who are often simply called "men"). Furthermore, to the extent that male same-sex sexual relations are stigmatized, the object of social vituperation is, again, usually those males who allow themselves to be penetrated, not the males who penetrate them. Anywhere they constitute a salient cultural category, men who enjoy being penetrated are believed to think, talk, and act in particular, identifiable, and often cross-gendered manners. What is more, a large number of such men do in fact behave in these culturally intelligible ways. So whether they are the *mahus*, *hijras*, *kathoeys*, *xaniths*, or *berdaches* of non-Western societies, or the mollies and fairies of our own history, links between habitual receptivity in anal sex and particular effeminate behavioral patterns structure the ways in which males who are regularly anally penetrated are perceived, and they structure the ways in which many of those males think about and live their lives.¹

One area of the world in which males who enjoy being anally penetrated receive a very high degree of cultural attention is Latin America. Any student of Latin America will be familiar with the effervescent figure of the effeminate male homosexual. Called *maricón*, *cochón*, *joto*, *marica*, *pajara*, *loca*, *frango*, *bicha*, or any number of other names depending on where one finds him (see Murray and Dynes 1987 and Dynes 1987 for a sampling), these males all appear to share certain behavioral characteristics and seem to be thought of, throughout Latin America, in quite similar ways.²

One of the basic things one quickly learns from any analysis of Latin American sexual categories is that sex between males in this part of the world does not necessarily result in both partners being perceived as homosexual. The crucial determinant of a homosexual classification is not so much the fact of sex as it is the role performed during the sexual act. A male who anally penetrates another male is generally not considered to be homosexual. He is considered, in all the various local idioms, to be a "man"; indeed, in some communities, penetrating another male and then bragging about it is one way in which men demonstrate their masculinity to others (Lancaster 1992:241; cf. Brandes 1981:234). Quite different associations attach themselves to a male who allows himself to be penetrated. That male has placed himself in what is understood to be an unmasculine, passive position. By doing so, he has forfeited manhood and becomes seen as something other than a man. This cultural classification as feminine is often reflected in the general comportment, speech practices, and dress patterns of such males, all of which tend to be recognizable to others as effeminate.

A conceptual system in which only males who are penetrated are homosexual is clearly very different from the modern heterosexual-homosexual dichotomy currently in place in countries such as the United States, where popular understanding generally maintains that a male who has sex with another male is gay, no matter how carefully he may restrict his behavior to the role of penetrator.³ This difference between Latin American and northern Euro-American understandings of sexuality is analyzed with great insight in the literature on male same-sex relations in Latin America, and one of the chief merits of that literature is its sensitive documentation of the ways in which erotic practices and sexual identities are culturally organized.

Somewhat surprisingly, the same sensitivity that informs the literature when it comes to sexuality does

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not extend to the realm of gender. A question not broached in this literature is whether the fundamental differences that exist between northern Euro-American and Latin American regimes of sexuality might also result in, or be reflective of, different regimes of gender. This oversight is odd in light of the obvious and important links between sexuality and gender in a system where a simple act of penetration has the power to profoundly alter a male's cultural definition and social status. Instead of exploring what the differences in the construction of sexuality might mean for differences in the construction of gender, however, analysis in this literature falls back on familiar concepts. So just as gender in northern Europe and North America consists of men and women, so does it consist of men and women in Latin America, we are told. The characteristics ascribed to and the behavior expected of those two different types of people are not exactly the same in these two different parts of the world, to be sure, but the basic gender categories are the same.

This article contests that view. I will argue that the *sexual division* that researchers have noted between those who penetrate and those who are penetrated extends far beyond sexual interactions between males to constitute the basis of the *gender division* in Latin America. Gender, in this particular elaboration, is grounded not so much in sex (like it is, for example, in modern northern European and North American cultures) as it is grounded in sexuality. This difference in grounding generates a gender configuration different from the one that researchers working in Latin America have postulated, and it allows and even encourages the elaboration of cultural spaces such as those inhabited by effeminate male homosexuals. Gender in Latin America should be seen not as consisting of men and women, but rather of men and not-men, the latter being a category into which both biological females and males who enjoy anal penetration are culturally situated. This specific situatedness provides individuals—not just men who enjoy anal penetration, but everyone—with a conceptual framework that they can draw on in order to understand and organize their own and others' desires, bodies, affective and physical relations, and social roles.

The Body in Question

The evidence for the arguments developed here will be drawn from my fieldwork in the Brazilian city of Salvador, among a group of males who enjoy anal penetration. These males are effeminized prostitutes known throughout Brazil as *travestis* (a word derived from *transvestir*, to cross-dress).⁴

Travestis occupy a strikingly visible place in both Brazilian social space and in the Brazilian cultural imaginary.⁵ All Brazilian cities of any size contain travestis, and in the large cities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, travestis number in the thousands. (In Salvador, travestis numbered between about 80 and 250, depending on the time of year.)⁶ Travestis are most exuberantly visible during Brazil's famous annual Carnival, and any depiction or analysis of the festival will inevitably include at least a passing reference to them, because their gender inversions are often invoked as embodiments of the Carnival spirit. But even in more mundane contexts and discourses, travestis figure prominently. A popular Saturday afternoon television show, for example, includes a spot in which female impersonators, some of whom are clearly travestis, get judged on how beautiful they are and on how well they mime the lyrics to songs sung by female vocalists. Another weekly television show regularly features Valéria, a well-known travesti. *Tieta*, one of the most popular television *novelas* in recent years, featured a special guest appearance by Rogéria, another famous travesti. And most telling of the special place reserved for travestis in the Brazilian popular imagination is the fact that the individual widely acclaimed to be most beautiful woman in Brazil in the mid-1980s was ... a travesti. That travesti, Roberta Close, became a household name throughout the country. She regularly appeared on national television, starred in a play in Rio, posed nude (with demurely crossed legs) in *Playboy* magazine, was continually interviewed and portrayed in virtually every magazine in the country, and had at least three songs written about her by well-known composers. Although her popularity declined when, at the end of the 1980s, she left Brazil to have a sex-change operation and live in Europe, Roberta Close remains extremely well-known. As recently as 1995, she appeared in a nationwide advertisement for Duloren lingerie, in which a photograph of her passport, bearing her male name, was transposed with a photograph of her looking sexy and chic in a black lace undergarment. The caption read, "Você não imagina do que uma Duloren é capaz" (You can't imagine what a Duloren can do).

Regrettably, the fact that a handful of travestis manage to achieve wealth, admiration, and, in the case of Roberta Close, an almost iconic cultural status says very little about the lives of the vast majority of travestis. Those travestis, the ones that most Brazilians only glimpse occasionally standing along highways or on dimly lit street corners at night or read about in the crime pages of their local newspapers, comprise one of the most marginalized, feared, and despised groups in Brazilian society. In most Brazilian cities, travestis are so discriminated against that many of them avoid venturing out onto the street during the day. They are

regularly the victims of violent police brutality and murder.⁷ The vast majority of them come from very poor backgrounds and remain poor throughout their lives, living a hand-to-mouth existence and dying before the age of 50 from violence, drug abuse, health problems caused or exacerbated by the silicone they inject into their bodies, or, increasingly, AIDS.

The single most characteristic thing about travestis is their bodies. Unlike the drag performers examined by Esther Newton (1972) and recently elevated to the status of theoretical paragons in the work of postmodernist queer scholars such as Judith Butler (1990), travestis do not merely don female attributes. They incorporate them. Sometimes starting at ages as young as 10 or 12, boys who self-identify as travestis begin ingesting or injecting themselves with massive doses of female hormones in order to give their bodies rounded features, broad hips, prominent buttocks, and breasts. The hormones these boys take either are medications designed to combat estrogen deficiency or are contraceptive preparations designed, like "the pill," to prevent pregnancy. In Brazil such hormones are cheap (a month's supply, which would be consumed by a travesti in a week or less, costs the equivalent of only a few dollars) and are sold over the counter in any pharmacy.

Boys discover hormones from a variety of sources. Most of my travesti friends told me that they learned about hormones by approaching adult travestis and asking them how they had achieved the bodies they had. Others were advised by admirers, boyfriends, or clients, who told them that they would look more attractive and make more money if they looked more like girls.

Hormones are valued by travestis because they are inexpensive, easy to obtain, and fast working. Most hormones produce visible results after only about two months of daily ingestion. A problem with them, however, is that they can, especially after prolonged consumption, result in chronic nausea, headaches, heart palpitations, burning sensations in the legs and chest, extreme weight gain, and allergic reactions. In addition, the doses of female hormones required to produce breasts and wide hips make it difficult for travestis to achieve erections. This can be quite a serious problem, since a great percentage of travestis' clients want to be penetrated by the travesti (a point to which I shall return below). What usually happens after several years of taking hormones is that most individuals stop, at least for a while, and begin injecting silicone into their bodies.

Just as hormones are procured by the individual travestis themselves, without any medical intervention or interference, so is silicone purchased from and administered by acquaintances or friends. The silicone available to the travestis in Salvador is industrial silicone, which is a kind of plastic normally used to manu-

facture automobile parts such as dashboards. Although it is widely thought to be illegal for industrial outlets to sell this silicone to private individuals, at least one or two travestis in any city containing a silicone manufacturing plant will be well connected enough to be able to buy it. Whenever they sense a demand, these travestis contact their supplier at the plant and travel there in great secrecy to buy several liters. They then resell this silicone (at a hefty profit) to other travestis, who in turn pay travestis who work as *bombadeiras* (pumpers) to inject it directly into their bodies.

Most travestis in Salvador over the age of 17 have some silicone in their bodies. The amount of silicone that individual travestis choose to inject ranges from a few glasses to up to 18 liters. (Travestis measure silicone in liters and water glasses (*copos*), six of which make up a liter.) Most have between two and five liters. The majority have it in their buttocks, hips, knees, and inner thighs. This strategic placement of silicone is in direct deference to Brazilian aesthetic ideals that consider fleshy thighs, expansive hips, and a prominent, teardrop-shaped *bunda* (buttocks) to be the hallmark of feminine beauty. The majority of travestis do *not* have silicone in their breasts, because they believe that silicone in breasts (but not elsewhere in the body) causes cancer, because they are satisfied with the size of the breasts they have achieved through hormone consumption, because they are convinced that silicone injections into the chest are risky and extremely painful, or because they are waiting for the day when they will have enough money to pay for silicone implants (*prótese*) surgically inserted by doctors. A final reason for a general disinclination to inject silicone into one's breasts is that everyone knows that this silicone shifts its position very easily. Every travesti is acquainted with several unfortunate others whose breasts have either merged in the middle, creating a pronounced undifferentiated swelling known as a "pigeon breast" (*peito de pomba*), or whose silicone has descended into lumpy protrusions just above the stomach.

The Body in Process

Why do they do it? One of the reasons habitually cited by travestis seems self-evident. Elizabeth, a 29-year-old travesti with 1½ liters of silicone in her hips and one water-glass of silicone in each breast, explained it to me this way: "To mold my body, you know, be more feminine, with the body of a woman." But why do travestis want the body of a woman?

When I first began asking travestis that question, I expected them to tell me that they wanted the body of a woman because they felt themselves to be women. That was not the answer I received. No one ever offered the

explanation that they might be women trapped in male bodies, even when I suggested it. In fact, there is a strong consensus among travestis in Salvador that any travesti who claims to be a woman is mentally disturbed. A travesti is not a woman and can never be a woman, they tell one another, because God created them male. As individuals, they are free to embellish and augment what God has given them, but their sex cannot be changed. Any attempt to do so would be disastrous. Not only do sex-change operations not produce women (they produce, travestis say, only *bichas castradas*, castrated homosexuals), they also inevitably result in madness. I was told on numerous occasions that, without a penis, semen cannot leave the body. When trapped, it travels to the brain, where it collects and forms a "stone" that will continue to increase in size until it eventually causes insanity.

So Roberta Close notwithstanding, travestis modify their bodies not because they feel themselves to be women but because they feel themselves to be "feminine" (*feminino*) or "like a woman" (*se sentir mulher*), qualities most often talked about not in terms of inherent predispositions or essences but rather in terms of behaviors, appearances, and relationships to men.⁸ When I asked Elizabeth what it meant when she told me she felt feminine, for example, she answered, "I like to dress like a woman. I like when someone—when men—admire me, you know? . . . I like to be admired, when I go with a man who, like, says: 'Sheez, you're really pretty, you're really feminine.' That . . . makes me want to be more feminine and more beautiful every day, you see?" Similar themes emerged when travestis talked about when they first began to understand that they were travestis. A common response I received from many different people when I asked that question was that they made this discovery in connection with attraction and sexuality. Eighteen-year-old Cintia told me that she understood she was a travesti from the age of seven:

I already liked girls' things, I played with dolls, played with . . . girls' things; I only played with girls. I didn't play with boys. I just played with these two boys; during the afternoon I always played with them . . . well, you know, rubbing penises together, rubbing them, kissing on the mouth. [Laughs.]

Forty-one-year-old Gabriela says that she knew that she was a travesti early on largely because "since childhood I always liked men, hairy legs, things like that, you know?" Banana, a 34-year-old travesti, told me "the [understanding that I was a] travesti came after, you know, I, um, eight, nine years, ten years old, I felt attracted, really attracted to men."

The attraction that these individuals felt for males is thus perceived by them to be a major motivating force

behind their self-production as travestis, both privately and professionally. Travestis are quick to point out that, in addition to making them feel more feminine, female forms also help them earn more money as prostitutes. At night when they work on the street, those travestis who have acquired pronounced feminine features use them to attract the attention of passing motorists, and they dress (or rather, undress) to display those features prominently.

But if the goal of a travesti's bodily modifications is to feel feminine and be attractive to men, what does she think about her male genitals?

The most important point to be clear about is that virtually every travesti values her penis: "There's not a better thing in the whole world," 19-year-old Adriana once told me with a big smile. Any thought of having it amputated repels them. "Deus é mais" (God forbid), many of them interject whenever talk of sex-change operations arises. "What, and never cum (i.e., ejaculate, *gozar*) again?!" they gasp, horrified.

Despite the positive feelings that they express about their genitals, however, a travesti keeps her penis, for the most part, hidden, "imprisoned" (*presa*) between her legs. That is, travestis habitually pull their penises down between their legs and press them against their perineums with their underpants. This is known as "making a cunt" (*fazer uma buceta*). This cunt is an important bodily practice in a travesti's day-to-day public appearance. It is also crucial in another extremely important context of a travesti's life, namely in her relationship to her *marido* (live-in boyfriend). The *maridos* of travestis are typically attractive, muscular, tattooed young men with little or no education and no jobs. Although they are not pimps (travestis move them into their rooms because they are impassioned [*apaixonada*] with them, and they eject them when the passion wears thin), *maridos* are supported economically by their travesti girlfriends. All these boyfriends regard themselves, and are regarded by their travesti girlfriends, as *homens* (men) and, therefore, as nonhomosexual.

One of the defining attributes of being a *homem* (man) in the gender system that the travestis draw on and invoke is that a man will not be interested in another male's penis. A man, in this interpretative framework, will happily penetrate another male's anus. But he will not touch or express any desire for another male's penis. For him to do so would be tantamount to relinquishing his status as a man. He would stop being a man and be reclassified as a *viado* (homosexual, faggot), which is how the travestis are classified by others and how they see themselves.

Travestis want their boyfriends to be men, not *viados*. They require, in other words, their boyfriends to be symbolically and socially different from, not similar

to, themselves. Therefore, a travesti does not want her boyfriend to notice, comment on, or in any way concern himself with her penis, even during sex. Sex with a boyfriend, consists, for the most part, of the travesti sucking the boyfriend's penis and of her boyfriend penetrating her, most often from behind, with the travesti on all fours or lying on her stomach on the bed. If the boyfriend touches the travesti at all, he will caress her breasts and perhaps kiss her. But no contact with the travesti's penis will occur, which means, according to most travestis I have spoken to, that travestis do not usually have orgasms during sex with their boyfriends.

What surprised me most about this arrangement was that the ones who are the most adamant that it be maintained are the travestis themselves. They respect their boyfriends and maintain their relationships with them only as long as the boyfriends remain "men." If a boyfriend expresses interest in a travesti's penis, becomes concerned that the travesti ejaculate during sex, or worst of all, if the boyfriend expresses a desire to be anally penetrated by the travesti, the relationship, all travestis told me firmly, would be over. They would comply with the boyfriend's request, they all told me, "because if someone offers me their ass, you think I'm not gonna take it?" Afterward, however, they were agreed, they would lose respect for the boyfriend. "You'll feel disgust (*nojo*) toward him," one travesti put it pithily. The boyfriend would no longer be a man in their eyes. He would, instead, be reduced to a *viado*. And as such, he could no longer be a boyfriend. Travestis unfailingly terminate relationships with any boyfriend who deviates from what they consider to be proper manly sexuality.

This absolute unwillingness to engage their own penises in sexual activity with their boyfriends stands in stark contrast to what travestis do with their penises when they are with their clients. On the street, travestis know they are valued for their possession of a penis. Clients will often request to see or feel a travesti's penis before agreeing to pay for sex with her, and travestis are agreed that those travestis who have large penises are more sought after than those with small ones. Similarly, several travestis told me that one of the reasons they stopped taking hormones was because they were losing clients. They realized that clients had begun avoiding them because they knew that the travesti could not achieve an erection. Travestis maintain that one of the most common sexual services they are paid to perform is to anally penetrate their clients.

Most travestis enjoy this. In fact, one of the more surprising findings of my study is that travestis, in significant and highly marked contrast to what is generally reported for other prostitutes, enjoy sex with clients.⁹ That is not to say they enjoy sex every time or with every client. But whenever they talk about thrilling, fulfilling,

or incredibly fun sex, their partner is always either a client or what they call a *vício*, a word that literally means "vice" or "addiction" and that refers to a male, often encountered on the street while they are working, with whom they have sex for free. Sometimes, if the *vício* is especially attractive, is known to have an especially large penis, or is known to be especially versatile in bed, the travesti will even pay *him*.

The Body in Context

At this point, having illustrated the way in which the body of a travesti is constructed, thought about, and used in a variety of contexts, I am ready to address the question of cultural intelligibility and personal desirability. Why do travestis want the kind of body they create for themselves? What is it about Brazilian culture that incites and sustains desire for a male body made feminine through hormones and silicone?

By phrasing that question primarily in terms of culture, I do not mean to deny that there are also social and economic considerations behind the production of travesti bodies and subjectivities. As I noted above, a body full of silicone translates into cash in the Brazilian sexual marketplace. It is important to understand, however—particularly because popular and academic discourses about prostitution tend to frame it so narrowly in terms of victimization, poverty, and exploitation—that males do not become travestis because they were sexually abused as children or just for economic gain. Only one of the approximately 40 travestis in my close circle of acquaintances was clearly the victim of childhood sexual abuse. And while the vast majority of travestis (like, one must realize, the vast majority of people in Brazil) come from working-class or poor backgrounds, it is far from impossible for poor, openly effeminate homosexual males to find employment, especially in the professions of hairdressers, cooks, and housecleaners, where they are quite heavily represented.

Another factor that makes it problematic to view travestis primarily in social or economic terms is the fact that the sexual marketplace does not require males who prostitute themselves to be travestis. Male prostitution (where the prostitutes, who are called *michês*, look and act like men) is widespread in Brazil and has been the topic of one published ethnographic study (Perlongher 1987). Also, even transgendered prostitution does not require the radical body modifications that travestis undertake. Before hormones and silicone became widely available (in the mid-1970s and mid-1980s, respectively) males dressed up as females, using wigs and foam-rubber padding (*pirelli*), and worked successfully as prostitutes. Some males still do this today.

Finally, it should be appreciated that travestis do not need to actually have sex with their clients to earn money as prostitutes. A large percentage (in some cases, the bulk) of a travesti's income from clients is derived from robbing them. In order to rob a client, all that is required is that a travesti come into close physical proximity with him. Once a travesti is in a client's car or once she has begun caressing a passerby's penis, asking him seductively if he "quer gozar" (wants to cum), the rest, for most travestis, is easy. Either by pickpocketing the client, assaulting him, or if she does have sex with him, by threatening afterward to create a public scandal, the travesti will often walk away with all the client's money (Kulick 1996a). Thus it is entirely possible to derive a respectable income from prostitution and still not consume hormones and inject silicone into one's body.

In addition to all those considerations, I also phrase the question of travestis in terms of culture because, even if it were possible to claim that males who become travestis do so because of poverty, early sexual exploitation, or some enigmatic inner psychic orientation, the mystery of travestis as a sociocultural phenomenon would remain unsolved. What is it about the understandings, representations, and definitions of sexuality, gender, and sex in Brazilian society that makes travesti subjectivity imaginable and intelligible?

Let me begin answering that question by noting an aspect of travesti language that initially puzzled me. In their talk to one another, travestis frequently refer to biological males by using feminine pronouns and feminine adjectival endings. Thus the common utterance "ela ficou doida" (she was furious) can refer to a travesti, a woman, a gay male, or a heterosexual male who has allowed himself to be penetrated by another male. All of these different people are classified by travestis in the same manner. This classificatory system is quite subtle, complex, and context sensitive; travestis narrating their life stories frequently use masculine pronouns and adjectival endings when talking about themselves as children but switch to feminine forms when discussing their present-day lives. In a similar way, clients are often referred to as "she," but the same client will be referred to with different gendered pronouns depending on the actions he performs. When a travesti recounts that she struggled with a client over money or when she describes him paying, for example, his gender will often change from feminine to masculine. The important point here is that the gender of males is subject to fluctuation and change in travesti talk. Males are sometimes referred to as "she" and sometimes as "he." Males, in other words, can shift gender depending on the context and the actions they perform. The same is not true for females. Females, even the several extremely brawny and conspicuously unfeminine lesbians who associate with the travestis I know, are never referred to as "he"

(Kulick 1996b). So whereas the gender of females remains fixed, the gender of males fluctuates and shifts continually.

Why can males be either male or female, but females can only be female? The answer, I believe, lies in the way that the gender system that the travestis draw on is constituted. Debates about transgendered individuals such as 18th-century mollies, Byzantine eunuchs, Indian hijras, Native American berdaches, U.S. transsexuals, and others often suggest that those individuals constitute a third, or intermediate, gender, one that is neither male or female or one that combines both male and female.¹⁰ Journalists and social commentators in Brazil sometimes take a similar line when they write about travestis, arguing that travestis transcend maleness and femaleness and constitute a kind of postmodern androgeny.

My contention is the opposite. Despite outward physical appearances and despite local claims to the contrary, there is no third or intermediate sex here; travestis only arise and are only culturally intelligible within a gender system based on a strict dichotomy. That gender system, however, is structured according to a dichotomy different from the one with which many of us are familiar, anchored in and arising from principles different from those that structure and give meaning to gender in northern Europe and North America.

The fundamental difference is that, whereas the northern Euro-American gender system is based on sex, the gender system that structures travestis' perceptions and actions is based on sexuality. The dominant idea in northern Euro-American societies is that one is a man or a woman because of the genitals one possesses. That biological difference is understood to accrete differences in behavior, language, sexuality, perception, emotion, and so on. As scholars such as Harold Garfinkel (1967), Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1985[1978]), and Janice Raymond (1979) have pointed out, it is within such a cultural system that a transsexual body can arise, because here biological males, for example, who do not feel or behave as men should, can make sense of that difference by reference to their genitals. They are not men; therefore they must be women, and to be a woman means to have the genitals of a female.

While the biological differences between men and women are certainly not ignored in Brazil, the possession of genitals is fundamentally conflated with what they can be used for, and in the particular configuration of sexuality, gender, and sex that has developed there, the determinative criterion in the identification of males and females is not so much the genitals as it is the role those genitals perform in sexual encounters. Here the locus of gender difference is the act of penetration. If one *only* penetrates, one is a man, but if one gets

penetrated, one is not a man, which, in this case, means that one is either a viado (a faggot) or a mulher (a woman). Tina, a 27-year-old travesti, makes the parallels clear in a story about why she eventually left one of her ex-boyfriends:

1. TINA: For three years [my marido] was a man for me. A total man (*foi homíssimo*). Then I was the man, and he was the faggot (viado).
2. DON: What?
3. TINA: Do you see?
4. DON: Yes. . . . But no, how?
5. TINA: For three years he was a man for me, and after those three years he became a woman (*ele foi mulher*). I was the man, and he was the woman. The first three years I was together with him, do you see, he penetrated me (*ele me comia*) and I sucked [his penis]. I was his woman.
6. DON: Yeah . . .
7. TINA: And after those three years, I was his man. Do you understand now? Now you get it.
8. DON: But what happened? What, what made him . . .
9. TINA: Change?
10. DON: Change, yeah.
11. TINA: It changed with him touching my penis. . . . He began doing other kinds of sex things. "You don't have to cum [i.e., have orgasms] on the street [with clients]" [he told me], "I can jerk you off (*eu bato uma punhetinha pra você*). And later on we can do other new things." He gives me his ass, he gave me his ass, started to suck [my penis], and well, there you are.

Note how Tina explains that she was her boyfriend's woman, in that "he penetrated me and I sucked [his penis]" (line 5). Note also how Tina uses the words *viado* (faggot) and *mulher* (woman) interchangeably (lines 1 and 5) to express what her boyfriend became after he started expressing an interest in her penis and after he started "giving his ass" to her. This discursive conflation is similar to that used when travestis talk about their clients, the vast majority of whom are believed by travestis to desire to be anally penetrated by the travesti—a desire that, as I just explained, disqualifies them from being men and makes them into viados, like the travestis themselves. Hence they are commonly referred to in travestis' talk by the feminine pronoun *ela* (she).

Anal penetration figures prominently as an engendering device in another important dimension of travestis' lives, namely, their self-discovery as travestis. When I asked travestis to tell me when they first began to understand that they were travestis, the most common response, as I noted earlier, was that they discovered this in connection with attraction to males. Sooner or later, this attraction always led to sexuality, which in practice means that the travesti began allowing herself to be penetrated anally. This act is always cited by travestis as crucial in their self-understanding as travestis.

A final example of the role that anal penetration plays as a determining factor in gender assignment is

the particular way in which travestis talk about gay men. Travestis frequently dismiss and disparage gay men for "pretending to be men" (*[andar/passar] como se fosse homem*), a phrase that initially confounded me, especially when it was used by travestis in reference to me. One Sunday afternoon, for example, I was standing with two travesti friends eating candy in one of Salvador's main plazas. As two policemen walked by, one travesti began to giggle. "They see you standing here with us," she said to me, "and they probably think you're a man." Both travestis then collapsed in laughter at the sheer outrageousness of such a profound misunderstanding. It took me, however, a long time to figure out what was so funny.

I finally came to realize that as a gay man, a viado, I am assumed by travestis to *dar* (be penetrated by men). I am, therefore, the same as them. But I and all other gay men who do not dress as women and modify their bodies to be more feminine disguise this sameness. We hide, we deceive, we pretend to be men, when we really are not men at all. It is in this sense that travestis can perceive themselves to be more honest, and much more radical, than "butch" (*machuda*) homosexuals like myself. It is also in this sense that travestis simply do not understand the discrimination that they face throughout Brazil at the hands of gay men, many of whom feel that travestis compromise the public image of homosexuals and give gay men a bad name.

What all these examples point to is that for travestis, as reflected in their actions and in all their talk about themselves, clients, boyfriends, vícios, gay men, women, and sexuality, there are two genders; there is a binary system of opposites very firmly in place and in operation. But the salient difference in this system is not between men and women. It is, instead, between those who penetrate (*comer*, literally "to eat" in Brazilian Portuguese) and those who get penetrated (*dar*, literally "to give"), in a system where the act of being penetrated has transformative force. Thus those who *only* "eat" (and *never* "give") in this system are culturally designated as "men"; those who give (even if they *also* eat) are classified as being something else, a something that I will call, partly for want of a culturally elaborated label and partly to foreground my conviction that the gender system that makes it possible for travestis to emerge and make sense is one massively oriented towards, if not determined by, male subjectivity, male desire, and male pleasure, as those are culturally elaborated in Brazil: "not men." What this particular binarity implies is that females and males who enjoy being penetrated belong to the same classificatory category, they are on the same side of the gendered binary. They share, in other words, a gender.

This sharing is the reason why the overwhelming majority of travestis do not self-identify as women and

have no desire to have an operation to become a woman even though they spend their lives dramatically modifying their bodies to make them look more feminine. Culturally speaking, travestis, because they enjoy being penetrated, are structurally equivalent to, even if they are not biologically identical to, women. Because they already share a gender with women, a sex-change operation would (again, culturally speaking) give a travesti nothing that she does not already have. All a sex-change operation would do is rob her of a significant source of pleasure and income.

It is important to stress that the claim I am making here is that travestis share a gender with women, not that they *are* women (or that women are travestis). Individual travestis will not always or necessarily share individual women's roles, goals, or social status. Just as the worldviews, self-images, social statuses, and possibilities of, say, a poor black mother, a single mulatto prostitute, and a rich white businesswoman in Brazil differ dramatically, even though all those individuals share a gender, so will the goals, perspectives, and possibilities of individual travestis differ from those of individual women, even though all those individuals share a gender. But inasmuch as travestis share the same gender as women, they are understood to share (and feel themselves to share) a whole spectrum of tastes, perceptions, behaviors, styles, feelings, and desires. And one of the most important of those desires is understood and felt to be the desire to attract and be attractive for persons of the opposite gender.¹¹ The desire to be attractive for persons of the opposite gender puts pressure on individuals to attempt to approximate cultural ideals of beauty, thereby drawing them into patriarchal and heterosexual imperatives that guide aesthetic values and that frame the direction and the content of the erotic gaze.¹² And although attractive male bodies get quite a lot of attention and exposure in Brazil, the pressure to conform to cultural ideals of beauty, in Brazil as in northern Euro-American societies, is much stronger on females than on males. In all these societies, the ones who are culturally incited to look (with all the subtexts of power and control that that action can imply) are males, and the ones who are exhorted to desire to be looked *at* are females.

In Brazil, the paragon of beauty, the body that is held forth, disseminated, and extolled as desirable—in the media, on television, in popular music, during Carnival, and in the day-to-day public practices of both individual men and women (comments and catcalls from groups of males at women passing by, microscopic string bikinis, known throughout the country as *fio dental* [dental floss], worn by women at the beach)—is a feminine body with smallish breasts, ample buttocks, and high, wide hips. Anyone wishing to be considered desirable to a man should do what she can to approxi-

mate that ideal. And this, of course, is precisely what travestis do. They appropriate and incorporate the ideals of beauty that their culture offers them in order to be attractive to men: both real men (i.e., boyfriends, some clients, and *vícios*), and males who publicly “pretend to be men” (clients and *vícios* who enjoy being penetrated).

Conclusion: Penetrating Gender

What exactly is gender and what is the relationship between sex and gender? Despite several decades of research, discussion, and intense debate, there is still no agreed-upon, widely accepted answer to those basic questions. Researchers who discuss gender tend to either not define it or, if they do define it, do so by placing it in a seemingly necessary relationship to sex. But one of the main reasons for the great success of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (and in anthropology, Marilyn Strathern's *The Gender of the Gift*) is surely because those books called sharp critical attention to understandings of gender that see it as the cultural reading of a precultural, or prediscursive, sex. “And what is ‘sex’ anyway?” asks Butler in a key passage:

Is it natural, anatomical, chromosomal, or hormonal, and how is a feminist critic to assess the scientific discourses which purport to establish such “facts” for us? Does sex have a history? Does each sex have a different history, or histories? Is there a history of how the duality of sex was established, a genealogy that might expose the binary options as variable construction? Are the ostensibly natural facts of sex discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests? If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all. [1990:6–7]

It is only when one fully appreciates Butler's point and realizes that sex stands in no particularly privileged, or even necessary, relation to gender that one can begin to understand the various ways in which social groups can organize gender in different ways. My work among travestis has led me to define gender, more or less following Eve Sedgwick (1990:27–28), as a social and symbolic arena of ongoing contestation over specific identities, behaviors, rights, obligations, and sexualities. These identities and so forth are bound up with and productive of male and female persons, in a hierarchically ordered cultural system in which the male/female dichotomy functions as a primary and perhaps a model binarism for a wide range of values, processes, relationships, and behaviors. Gender, in this rendering, does not have to be about “men” and “women.” It can just as probably be about “men” and “not-men,” a slight but extremely significant difference in social

classification that opens up different social configurations and facilitates the production of different identities, understandings, relationships, and imaginings.

One of the main puzzles I have found myself having to solve about Brazilian travestis is why they exist at all. Turning to the rich and growing literature on homosexuality in Latin America was less helpful than I had hoped, because the arguments developed there cannot account for (1) the cultural forces at work that make it seem logical and reasonable for some males to permanently alter their bodies to make them look more like women, even though they do not consider themselves to be women and (2) the fact that travestis regularly (not to say daily) perform both the role of penetrator and penetrated in their various sexual interactions with clients, vícios, and boyfriends. In the first case the literature on homosexuality in Latin America indicates that it should not be necessary to go to the extremes that Brazilian travestis go to (they could simply live as effeminate, yet still clearly male, homosexuals), and in the second case, the literature leads one to expect that travestis would restrict their sexual roles, by and large, to that of being penetrated.¹³ Wrong on both counts.

What is lacking in this literature, and what I hope this essay will help to provide, is a sharper understanding of the ways in which sexuality and gender configure with one another throughout Latin America. My main point is that for the travestis with whom I work in Salvador, gender identity is thought to be determined by one's sexual behavior.¹⁴ My contention is that travestis did not just pull this understanding out of thin air; on the contrary, I believe that they have distilled and clarified a relationship between sexuality and gender that seems to be widespread throughout Latin America. Past research on homosexual roles in Latin America (and by extension, since that literature builds on it, past research on male and female roles in Latin America) has perceived the links to sexuality and gender to which I have drawn attention (see, for example, Parker 1986: 157; 1991:43–53, 167), but it has been prevented from theorizing those links in the way I have done in this article because it has conflated sex and gender. Researchers have assumed that gender is a cultural reading of biological males and females and that there are, therefore, two genders: man and woman. Effeminate male homosexuals do not fit into this particular binary; they are clearly not women, but culturally speaking they are not men either. So what are they? Calling them “not quite men, not quite women,” as Roger Lancaster (1992: 274) does in his analysis of Nicaraguan cochones, is hedging: a slippage into “third gender” language to describe a society in which gender, as Lancaster so carefully documents, is structured according to a powerful and coercive binary. It is also not hearing what cochones, travestis, and other effeminate Latin American

homosexuals are saying. When travestis, maricas, or cochones call each other “she” or when they call men who have been anally penetrated “she,” they are not just being campy and subcultural, as analyses of the language of homosexual males usually conclude; I suggest that they are perceptively and incisively reading off and enunciating core messages generated by their cultures' arrangements of sexuality, gender, and sex.

I realize that this interpretation of travestis and other effeminate male homosexuals as belonging to the same gender as women will seem counterintuitive for many Latin Americans and students of Latin America. Certainly in Brazil, people generally do not refer to travestis as “she,” and many people, travestis will be the first to tell you, seem to enjoy going out of their way to offend travestis by addressing them loudly and mockingly as “o senhor” (sir or mister).¹⁵ The very word *travesti* is grammatically masculine in Brazilian Portuguese (*o travesti*), which makes it not only easy but logical to address the word's referent using masculine forms.¹⁶

There are certainly many reasons why Brazilians generally contest and mock individual travestis' claims to femininity, not least among them being travestis' strong associations with homosexuality, prostitution, and AIDS—all highly stigmatized issues that tend to elicit harsh condemnation and censure from many people. Refusal to acknowledge travestis' gender is one readily available way of refusing to acknowledge travestis' right to exist at all. It is a way of putting travestis back in their (decently gendered) place, a way of denying and defending against the possibilities that exist within the gender system itself for males to shift from one category to the other.¹⁷

During the time I have spent in Brazil, I have also noted that the harshest scorn is reserved for unattractive travestis. Travestis such as Roberta Close and some of my own acquaintances in Salvador who closely approximate cultural ideals of feminine beauty are generally not publicly insulted and mocked and addressed as men. On the contrary, such travestis are often admired and regarded with a kind of awe. One conclusion I draw from this is that the commonplace denial of travestis' gender as not-men may not be so much a reaction against them as gender crossers as it is a reaction against unattractiveness in people (women and other not-men), whose job it is to make themselves attractive for men. Seen in this light, some of the hostility against (unattractive) travestis becomes intelligible as a reaction against them as failed women, not failed men, as more orthodox interpretations have usually argued.

Whether or not I am correct in claiming that the patterns I have discussed here have a more widespread existence throughout Latin America remains to be seen. Some of what I argue here may be specific to Brazil, and some of it will inevitably be class specific. In a large,

extraordinarily divided, and complex area like Latin America, many different and competing discourses and understandings about sexuality and gender will be available in different ways to different individuals. Those differences need to be investigated and documented in detail. My purpose here is not to suggest a monolithic and immutable model of gender and sexuality for everyone in Latin America. I readily admit to having close firsthand understanding only of the travestis with whom I worked in Salvador, and the arguments presented in this essay have been developed in an ongoing attempt to make sense of their words, choices, actions, and relationships.

At the same time, though, I am struck by the close similarities in gender and sexual roles that I read in other anthropologists' reports about homosexuality and male-female relations in countries and places far away from Salvador, and I think that the points discussed here can be helpful in understanding a number of issues not explicitly analyzed, such as why males throughout Latin America so violently fear being anally penetrated, why men who have sex with or even live with effeminate homosexuals often consider themselves to be heterosexual, why societies like Brazil can grant star status to particularly fetching travestis (they are just like women in that they are not-men, and sometimes they are more beautiful than women), why women in a place like Brazil are generally not offended or outraged by the prominence in the popular imagination of travestis like Roberta Close (like women, travestis like Close are also not-men, and hence they share women's tastes, perceptions, feelings, and desires), why many males in Latin American countries appear to be able to relatively unproblematically enjoy sexual encounters with effeminate homosexuals and travestis (they are definitionally not-men, and hence sexual relations with them do not readily call into question one's self-identity as a man), and why such men even pay to be penetrated by these not-men (for some men being penetrated by a not-man is perhaps not as status- and identity-threatening as being penetrated by a man; for other men it is perhaps more threatening, and maybe, therefore, more exciting). If this essay makes any contribution to our understanding of gender and sexuality in Latin America, it will be in revitalizing exploration of the relationship between sexuality and gender and in providing a clearer framework within which we might be able to see connections that have not been visible before.

Notes

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1. Chauncey 1994; Crisp 1968; Jackson 1989; Nanda 1990; Trumbach 1989; Whitehead 1981; Wikan 1977.

2. See, for example, Almaguer 1991, Carrier 1995, Fry 1986, Guttman 1996, Lancaster 1992, Leiner 1994, Murray 1987, 1995, Parker 1991, Prieur 1994, and Trevisan 1986.

3. One of the few contexts in which ideas similar to Latin American ones are preserved in North American and northern European understandings of male sexuality is prisons. See, for example, Wooden and Parker 1982.

4. This article is based on 11 months of anthropological fieldwork and archival research and more than 50 hours of recorded speech and interviews with travestis between the ages of 11 and 60 in Salvador, Brazil's third-largest city, with a population of over 2 million people. Details about the fieldwork and the transcriptions are in Kulick n.d.

5. Travestis are also the subject of two short anthropological monographs in Portuguese: de Oliveira 1994 and Silva 1993. There is also an article in English on travestis in Salvador: Cornwall 1994. As far as I can see, however, all the ethnographic data on travestis in that article are drawn from de Oliveira's unpublished master's thesis, which later became her monograph, and from other published sources. Some of the information in the article, such as the author's claim that 90 percent of the travestis in Salvador are devotees of the Afro-Brazilian religion *candomblé*, is also hugely inaccurate.

6. In the summer months leading up to Carnival, travestis from other Brazilian cities flock to Salvador to cash in on the fact that the many popular festivals preceding Carnival put men in festive moods and predispose them to spend their money on prostitutes.

7. de Oliveira 1994; Kulick 1996a; Mott and Assunção 1987; Silva 1993.

8. The literal translation of *se sentir mulher* is "to feel woman," and taken out of context, it could be read as meaning that travestis feel themselves to be women. In all instances in which it is used by travestis, however, the phrase means "to feel like a woman," "to feel as if one were a woman (even though one is not)." Its contrastive opposite is *ser mulher* (to be woman).

9. In her study of female prostitutes in London, for example, Day explains that "a prostitute creates distinctions with her body so that work involves very little physical contact in contrast to private sexual contacts. Thus . . . at work . . . only certain types of sex are acceptable while sex outside work involves neither physical barriers nor forbidden zones" (1990:98). The distinctions to which Day refers here are inverted in travesti sexual relationships.

10. Bornstein 1994; Elkins and King 1996; Herdt 1994.

11. One gendered, absolutely central, and culturally inherited desire that is almost entirely absent from this picture is the desire for motherhood. Although some readers of this

article have suggested to me that the absence of maternal desires negates my thesis that travestis share a gender with women, I am more inclined to see the absence of such desire as yet another reflex of the famous Madonna-Whore complex: travestis align themselves, exuberantly and literally, with the Whore avatar of Latin womanhood, not the Mother incarnation. Also, note again that my claim here is not that travestis *are* women. The claim is that the particular configurations of sex, gender, and sexuality in Brazil and other Latin American societies differ from the dominant configurations in northern Europe and North America, and generate different arrangements of gender, those that I am calling men and not-men. Motherhood is indisputably a crucial component of female roles and desires, in that a female may not be considered to have achieved full womanhood without it (and in this sense, travestis [like female prostitutes?] can only ever remain incomplete, or failed, women). I contend, however, that motherhood is not *determinative* of gender in the way that I am claiming sexuality is.

12. I use the word *heterosexuality* purposely because travesti-boyfriend relationships are generally considered, by travestis and their boyfriends, to be *heterosexual*. I once asked Edilson, a 35-year-old marido who has had two long-term relationships in his life, both of them with travestis, whether he considered himself to be heterosexual, bisexual, or homosexual. "I'm heterosexual; I'm a man," was his immediate reply. "I won't feel love for another heterosexual," he continued, significantly, demonstrating how very lightly the northern Euro-American classificatory system has been grafted onto more meaningful Brazilian ways of organizing erotic relationships: "[For two males to be able to feel love], one of the two has to be gay."

13. One important exception to this is the Norwegian sociologist Annick Prieur's (1994) sensitive work on Mexican *jotas*.

14. Note that this relationship between sexuality and gender is the *opposite* of what George Chauncey reports for early-20th-century New York. Whereas Chauncey argues that sexuality and gender in that place and time were organized so that "one's sexual behavior was necessarily thought to be determined by one's gender identity" (1994:48), my argument is that for travestis in Salvador, and possibly for many people throughout Latin America, one's gender identity is necessarily thought to be determined by one's sexual behavior.

One more point here. I wish to note that Unni Wikan, upon reading this paper as a reviewer for the *American Anthropologist*, pointed out that she made a similar claim to the one I argue for here in her 1977 article on the Omani xanith. Rereading that article, I discovered this to be true (see Wikan 1977:309), and I acknowledge that here. A major difference between Wikan's argument and my own, however, is that it is never entirely clear whether Omanis (or Wikan) conceptualize(s) xaniths as men, women, or as a third gender. (For a summary of the xanith debate, see Murray 1997.)

15. The exceptions to this are boyfriends, who often—but, interestingly, not always—use feminine grammatical forms when speaking to and about their travesti girlfriends, and clients, who invariably use feminine forms when negotiating sex with travestis.

16. In their day-to-day language practices, travestis subvert these grammatical strictures by most often using the

grammatically feminine words *mona* and *bicha* instead of *travesti*.

17. The possibility for males to shift gender—at least temporarily, in (hopefully) hidden, private encounters—seems to be one of the major attractions that travestis have for clients. From what many different travestis told me, it seems clear that the erotic pleasure that clients derive from being anally penetrated is frequently expressed in very specific, heavily gender-saturated, ways. I heard numerous stories of clients who not only wanted to be penetrated but also, as they were being penetrated, wanted the travesti to call them *gostosa* (delicious/sexy, using the feminine grammatical ending) and address them by female names. Stories of this kind are so common that I find it hard to escape the conclusion that a significant measure of the erotic delight that many clients derive from anal penetration is traceable to the fact that the sexual act is an engendering act that shifts their gender and transforms them from men into not-men.

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