

A Man in the House: The Boyfriends of Brazilian Travesti Prostitutes

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A recurring and extremely serious problem with scholarly studies of prostitution is that they generally only ever tell us about the professional lives of the women who earn their living through sex work. Unlike most other people, who are readily acknowledged to have a life outside or beyond what they do at work, a prostitute tends to be defined completely in terms of the work that she does.¹ She is generally thought of as a prostitute twenty-four hours of the day, even when she is not working. This understanding of prostitutes is reinforced by study after study that either makes no mention of a prostitute's private life or that discusses her private life in a way that only serves to highlight her identity as a prostitute. Often we are told, or led to believe, for example, that the boyfriends of prostitutes are their pimps and that the prostitutes are together with them out of necessity, or delusion, or fear—or for all those reasons at once (e.g., Barry 1979, 86–120; Barry 1995, 198–219; Høigård and Finstad 1986, 203–69).

Even work that is sympathetic to prostitutes and committed to nuanced understandings about them and their lives tends to mention their private lives cursorily, and then primarily to draw contrasts with their professional lives.² So in Sophie Day's (1990) sensitive writing about London prostitutes, or in the careful monograph by McKeganey and Barnard (1996) on prostitutes in Glasgow, for example, discussion of boyfriends is restricted to an account of how the women interviewed reserve specific parts of their bodies (e.g., their mouths) and specific sexual activities (e.g., kissing and oral sex) for their boyfriends, whereas other parts and activities can be made available to clients. We are told nothing about how the prostitutes' boyfriends are chosen or how the women interact with them in nonsexual contexts. Similarly, in Shannon Bell's (1995) respectful and revealing interviews with prostitutes, in Gail Pheterson's (1989, 1996) theoretical and activist writings, and in the important special issue of this journal that concerned prostitutes (*Social Text*, no. 37 [winter 1993]), what is discussed is the practice and politics of sex work, not private lives.

What all this means is that in study after study, interview after interview, and book after book about prostitutes, we learn an enormous amount about how prostitutes think about, interact with, and relate to

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their clients. But with only a few exceptions—such as Serena Nanda's (1990) work on Indian *hijras*, Annick Prieur's (1994; in press) writings on Mexican *jotas*, or Jeferson Bacelar's (1982) monograph on the domestic lives of Brazilian female prostitutes—we learn next to nothing about how they think about their private relationships, how they make themselves attractive for the individuals they wish to have as partners, and what role those partners play in the prostitutes' lives more generally.

This essay explores the role that boyfriends play in the lives of transgendered prostitutes living in the city of Salvador, in northeastern Brazil. Transgendered prostitutes are called *travestis* in Brazilian Portuguese, a word derived from *transvestir* (cross-dress). Travestis are males who, sometimes at ages as young as eight or ten, begin modifying their bodies and their self-presentational styles in an increasingly feminine direction, through the use of cosmetics, feminine clothing, and, as they grow older, the ingestion of massive quantities of estrogen-based hormones. By the time they reach their mid-teens, many travestis have also begun paying other travestis to inject several liters of industrial silicone directly into their bodies, in order to give those bodies prominent hips, buttocks, thighs, and, sometimes, breasts. Most travestis in Salvador have injected between two to five liters of silicone, but one well-known travesti in the city had twelve liters, and there are reports among travestis of travestis in other cities who have injected up to twenty liters over the course of several years. All travestis self-identify as homosexual, and despite the dramatic and often irrevocable modifications they perform on their bodies, they do not consider themselves to be women. They want to be feminine, they maintain, not female.

Travestis exist in Brazilian cities of every size, and in the large southern cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro they number in the thousands. Salvador, which is Brazil's third largest city, with a population of over 2 million, has a population of travestis that fluctuates between about 80 to 250. Many of these travestis live together in the center of the city, in dilapidated houses that have been divided up into tiny cell-like rooms. During 1995 and 1996, I conducted anthropological fieldwork among travestis in Salvador, living with them in such a house and visiting them nightly at their various points of prostitution.

In my work with travestis, I discovered very quickly that boyfriends (generally referred to as *maridos*, which literally means "husbands," but also called *bofes*, *ocós*, *homens*, and *machos*) are a continual and central consideration in their lives. Boyfriends take up an enormous amount of a travesti's thought, time, and talk—not to mention her money. Travestis are forever orienting themselves to their current boyfriends, their ex-boyfriends, and their prospective boyfriends. The activities of boyfriends provide endless fodder for gossip and conflict among travestis. When talking to other travestis, they discuss various men, commenting on what

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qualities a male must possess in order to be considered eligible as a boyfriend. They are forever trying to figure out how to attract some male who they have decided has those qualities, or they are trying to get over their bitterness at having been left and possibly robbed by some male who they *thought* had those qualities. When they are courting a potential boyfriend, or have snagged one they want to keep, a great deal of their life and their income revolves around him and his comfort, and they shower him with money, presents, and drugs—until the day they tire of him, at which point they send him packing and install a new man in their room. If there is one topic about which all travestis have strong opinions, it is boyfriends. Without understanding the role that boyfriends play in the lives of travestis, it is impossible to understand any dimension of their lives.

Keila's Passion

Keila Simpsom, a robust and heavyset travesti in her early thirties, and my teacher and coworker in Salvador, was in the throes of passion. During Carnival week she had suddenly begun falling in love with Tiane, a tall, muscular, tattooed, illiterate, thirty-year-old man who looked and acted like a nineteen-year-old adolescent—spending every day playing soccer on a nearby beach and getting high with his friends. Keila knew Tiane well—for six years he had been the live-in boyfriend of her best friend Marilia, who had died after a long illness a few months previously—but she had never felt anything for him. She had lived in the same house with him, seen him daily, and spoken to him occasionally without contemplating the possibility of having him as her boyfriend. Now, though, for some completely inexplicable reason, she felt herself to be experiencing what she told me was desperate, sincere, and blind passion.

It had begun with an electric exchange of looks as they passed one another on the street during Carnival, and quickly progressed into brief, meaningful greetings as Tiane passed by Keila while she was working on the street at night. From Tiane's mother, who lived in a windowless room the size of a cupboard in the same house as Keila, Keila began hearing that Tiane wondered if Keila could spare a few *reais* (a few dollars) for him to buy himself food and beer on the street. Keila gave the mother the money to pass onto her son. She also bought him several new shirts and pairs of shorts, which she conveyed to him through his mother.

Tiane's mother was the intermediary between the two at this point because, initially, Keila's passion for Tiane had to be kept secret. The reason for this was partly because Keila shared her tiny room with Edilson, her boyfriend of the past seven years, and partly because Rita Lee, a toothless, older travesti living in a room in the same house as everyone

else, had recently let it be known that Tiane was hers. She demonstrated this by ostentatiously buying and preparing food for him and calling him into her room to eat, closing the door behind him, and emerging later with a content smile, even when it had been obvious to everyone living in the house that all she and Tiane had done in her room was argue.

For the first few weeks of her infatuation, Keila didn't know what to do—she couldn't openly speak to Tiane, not near the house where she lived, because her boyfriend Edilson or Rita Lee or someone else would surely see, nor could she talk to him on the street where she worked at night, because one of the other travestis working the same street would certainly observe such a conversation and report it to others. All she could do was keep sending him small sums of money and presents through his mother and exchange brief, coded words as they passed one another on their way to or from the communal bathroom, or to or from the communal refrigerator at the back of the house, where they both had rooms (Tiane had been sleeping in his mother's room since the death of his travesti girlfriend Marília). During these quick encounters, Keila twice whispered times and places for Tiane to pass by on backstreets near where she worked. Both times she waited in vain—once he didn't show, and once he passed by with friends saying he would return later, but never did. A third time she asked *him* to suggest a time when he knew he would be able to come. He didn't show up that time either.

Keila began to despair. After having unsuccessfully attempted to meet with Tiane three times, she was tired and annoyed. She was going to drop him, she told me firmly—well, maybe after she gave him one more chance. She would ask him straight out next time she saw him: Did he want her or not? She needed a definite answer. “It will hurt me if he says no,” she explained to me, “because I am impassioned with him—I'm going crazy, I think about him all the time. But the hurt will go away. And if he definitely says no, he doesn't want me, then I can stop thinking about him. If he gives me the answer I want, though,” she continued, “then he will have to stop playing with me.”

The next day, Keila, beaming, told me that she had asked Tiane straight out whether he wanted her. And he had given her, she laughed, “the correct answer.” With that much now decided, Keila told him that they needed to meet somewhere and have a real talk. So they had arranged to meet later that night outside a backstreet hotel to which Keila sometimes took clients.

I heard the denouement to Keila's passion the following day. Keila had arranged to meet Tiane outside the hotel at eight o'clock the previous evening. At nine o'clock, he passed by in the company of a friend. “Where are you going?” Keila hissed at him discretely. “Up the street for a drink,” he shrugged nonchalantly.

He returned at eleven o'clock. Keila was still waiting. They took a hotel room and sat talking for several hours. They did not have sex, Keila told me, they just talked about whether Tiane truly wanted to begin having a relationship with Keila. He assured her he did. He also told her, before they left the hotel room, that his birthday was coming up in a few weeks' time, and he would really like a present of an expensive pair of stylish overalls that he had had his eye on for quite some time.

The end of this story is both happy and sad. A few days after her discussion in the hotel room with Tiane, Keila announced to her boyfriend Edilson that it was over and that she was leaving him. She installed herself in another room in the same house for a couple of days, then she moved her belongings to a room in a house several blocks away from where she had been living. Tiane began to sleep and take his meals with her regularly. After several weeks of living isolated from other travestis, and from the milieu she had lived in for seven years, Keila decided that she wanted to return to her old house. She rented a small room right above Edilson, who was now her ex-boyfriend, and she moved in there with Tiane. Edilson took all this very badly, and he began to drink heavily and spread rumors that Keila had AIDS. He made several attempts to find another travesti girlfriend, but no one was interested. Edilson did what he could to make Keila's life miserable for a few months, then he had to move, because he had sold the last of his belongings and could no longer pay his rent. Rita Lee, who had only been together with Tiane for less than a week, but who continued to regard him as her boyfriend whom Keila had maliciously snatched from her, grew enormously bitter and began, too, to drink continually. Her health failed, she grew increasingly desiccated, and she was unable to work the streets at night. She too eventually became unable to pay her rent and was duly evicted. Unable to support herself, and unwanted by her family, who live in a suburb on the outskirts of Salvador, Rita Lee ended up in a hospice for AIDS patients, where she died in early 1996.

The Selection of Boyfriends

The story of Keila's passion reveals a number of characteristic features of travesti-boyfriend relationships. First of all, there is the object of Keila's passion—Tiane, a handsome young man with no apparent means of income, who spent all his days getting stoned and playing soccer on a nearby beach. For six years he had been the boyfriend of Marília, a travesti who had lived in the same house as Keila. This relationship ended only when Marília died in late 1994.

Tiane could be the pattern from which all other travesti boyfriends

are cut. The men that travestis choose to be their boyfriends are always handsome, muscular, and usually tattooed young men between the ages of about sixteen to thirty. They almost never work, and if they do, they virtually invariably seem to work as security guards for buildings or parking lots. Just as invariably, the majority of them who do work stop working soon after they establish a relationship with a travesti—sometimes they stop working at the insistence of the travesti; most often they don't need to be told, and they quit on their own accord.

Travestis usually meet these men because they live in the same area as the travesti herself, because they are the brother or the cousin or the friend of a man who is already the boyfriend of a travesti, or, finally, because the man is himself already the boyfriend of a travesti. Once a male becomes the boyfriend of a travesti, he immediately sparks the interest of the others, who will wonder what he has that his travesti girlfriend wants. If whatever he has is some quality or characteristic that other travestis also find attractive, then the boyfriend will be the object of much attention from other travestis, who may try to win him over by giving him presents and money. There is thus continual, and sometimes quite fierce and brutal, competition among travestis over a limited number of boyfriends. (The only fights I have witnessed between travestis have all been about boyfriends). Many of these boyfriends, once they have formed a relationship with a travesti, remain in the boyfriend pool for many years, where they circulate among travestis until they either settle down with one or, as in the case of Keila's ex-boyfriend Edilson, they grow too old and unattractive to be of much interest to anyone, in which case they disappear from the travesti milieu.

The most unusual way for a travesti to meet a male who later becomes her boyfriend is as a paying client. This apparently sometimes happens—in her recently published autobiography *a Princesa* [Princess], the Brazilian travesti Fernanda Farias de Albuquerque (1994) mentions that several of her boyfriends were men whom she first met on the streets as clients. But in this, Fernanda seems somewhat exceptional. I know of no travesti in Salvador who has formed a relationship with a man whom she met as a paying client. Travestis can meet their boyfriends while working on the street, but usually only in the capacity of what they call *vícios*, a word that means “vice” or “addiction,” and which signifies men with whom they have sex for free because they are attracted to them. A particularly manly and breathtaking *vício* can eventually become a boyfriend—it would seem, but not a man from whom the travesti has accepted money for sex.

There are three reasons why travestis are not interested in making their clients into boyfriends. The first is that they are suspicious of a man who has paid for sex and then attempts to develop a relationship with

them. They think that he is only interested in free sex and in ingratiating himself so that he will become part of the pool of boyfriends who circulate among travestis. In addition, the very fact that the travesti accepted money from him in the first place (instead of treating him as a *vicio* and having sex with him for free) means that she does not find him desirable enough to enter into consideration as a boyfriend. And finally, a great number of clients pay travestis to penetrate them. While travestis often enjoy penetrating clients and some of their *vicios*, they will not tolerate, for reasons to be discussed in detail below, a male who enjoys being anally penetrated *dentro de casa* (in the house).

Another very characteristic feature of Keila's passion for Tiane is the fact of her being *apaixonada* (impassioned). This is an emotion that travestis feel that they share with women. Like themselves, women can become *perdidamente apaixonadas* (desperately impassioned) with men and do anything and everything to attract and keep the object of their passion. Men, travestis say, rarely become impassioned, and when they do, it is always for a woman—never for a travesti. As far as I was able to determine, this is a viewpoint shared by all travestis; I never heard a travesti describe her boyfriend's feelings for her in terms of passion, even though they regularly used that word in talking about their own emotional engagement. Quite the opposite—I repeatedly heard travestis tell one another that, in fact, boyfriends don't even particularly like travestis. During a conversation that Keila had with a travesti friend right after she had left Edilson and had begun living with Tiane, the friend advised Keila to be careful: "Men don't love us," she warned Keila, "men don't love us" (*Homem não ama a gente, homem não ama a gente*). Another travesti, thirty-four-year-old Banana, told me something very similar. "Men don't like us," she said, "They like women. For a woman they'll go out and sell popsicles on the street if they have to, and for us, even if we're on our deathbed, they won't work." Forty-year-old Martinha bemoaned that "men are mean and spiteful [*maldoso*] to travestis. Unfortunately, we're homosexual, we like them. But they create a lot of malevolence [*maldade*] around us."

Travestis posit a concrete, tangible reason for this malevolence and for why men do not become impassioned with them. The reason habitually cited to explain this is: "God made woman for man and man for woman" (*Que Deus fez a mulher pro homem e o homem pra mulher*).

This phrase is a surprisingly recurrent one in travesti talk. I heard it used in discussions about gay marriage, which many travestis dismiss as a *safadeza* (a strongly condemnatory word meaning something like "an atrocity" or "an abomination"), and in discussions about lesbianism, which travestis find unnatural and threatening. It also regularly appears in discussions about boyfriends. At one point during the conversation that

Keila was having with her travesti friend about her fresh relationship with Tiane, for example, the friend told Keila not to delude herself into thinking that the relationship would last forever. Keila's response was:

I know it won't last [forever], I know it won't, I know that nothing lasts forever. When men and women, who were born for one another, since God determined that men should be for women, separate sooner or later, imagine two men with the same [male] head who think differently. I know it won't last [forever], of course not.

Because travestis believe that men were not "determined" for them and, hence, do not become impassioned with them, it is useless for them to try to appeal to a man's emotions when they are trying to hook him. In other words, a travesti does not assume that a man to whom she is attracted will also become attracted to her if she flirts demurely and tries to ingratiate herself with him. Her assumption is the opposite—that the man she is after will never fall in love with her. So instead of attempting to seduce him through sex appeal, a travesti will travel a much more direct road to her man's heart (to the extent that he has one, in this understanding of male emotions). That road is one paved with money and material goods.

From its inception, any travesti-boyfriend relationship will be characterized by the transfer of money and presents from the travesti to the male who is in the process of becoming the travesti's boyfriend. Money and gifts began to flow from Keila to Tiane, for example, via his mother, before the two had even had their first long conversation. Words were not needed at this point, however—the fact that Tiane requested money from Keila, and the fact that she gave it, signaled that a relationship was in the offing. Indeed, gift giving from a travesti to a male both marks a relationship and signals to others that a relationship is underway. After Keila had left him, Edilson, her ex-boyfriend, told me that he began to suspect something was amiss when he noticed that Tiane suddenly had begun sporting expensive-looking new clothes. Who bought them for him? he wondered to himself, suspecting that it might have been Keila. And when Keila was still in the very initial stages of her relationship with Tiane, before anyone actually knew that she was in fact interested in him, Rita Lee confided to me that she thought that Keila was after "her man." The reason she cited for this suspicion struck me as ridiculously trivial and paranoid, but I later realized that within the travesti framework for understanding relationships with boyfriends, it was actually profoundly meaningful. The reason was this: One evening when he was staying in Rita Lee's room, Tiane demanded a soda pop. Rita Lee had no money and told him so. He left the room, and returned a few minutes later with a soda pop. "Where did you get that?" she asked him; "Keila gave it to me" was his portentous response.

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How much a travesti gives her boyfriend depends entirely on what she earns. Rita Lee, who was too old and sick to earn much money on the street as a prostitute, courted Tiane by giving him the only thing she had to offer—a place to sleep and one cooked meal a day. At the other end of the continuum are travestis who spend enormous sums on their boyfriends. One travesti who had earned a sizeable amount of money working as a street prostitute in Italy bought her boyfriend of the time a car when she returned to Salvador. Another travesti, who was renowned for her daring assaults on clients, and who sometimes returned from an evening of prostitution with more than the equivalent of \$500—all of it stolen—showered the young men she was courting with beer and marijuana and clothes and cocaine. Keila was my coworker throughout the period of my fieldwork in Salvador; and, because I was working so intensely with her during the first few months of her relationship with Tiane, we talked a lot about the relationship. It quickly became very clear that she bought him some kind of present almost every single day. The present could be a slice of fancy cake for the equivalent of \$2, or it could be a little hand-held video game for \$5, or a shirt for \$10, or a wallet for \$12, or some soccer socks for \$15. In two particularly expansive weeks several months into their relationship, Keila bought Tiane a pair of soccer boots with spikes (\$60); a pair of pants and a shirt (\$60); another pair of tennis shoes that he had asked her for (\$119); a wallet and a baseball cap (\$30); several T-shirts and shirts (\$40); and a ticket to a rap concert (\$30). In other words, in two weeks, Keila spent the equivalent of over \$300 on Tiane—this in a country where the average salary at the time was just over \$100 *a month*, and this in addition to paying the rent for the room, washing Tiane's clothes, preparing him meals, and providing him pocket money for entertainment, beer, snacks, and marijuana.

It is important to note here that despite this unidirectional flow of money and goods from the travesti to her boyfriend, it would be misleading to view the boyfriends of travestis as their pimps. Boyfriends are not pimps. They do not force unwilling individuals out into a life of prostitution and out onto the street in order that they may live the high life. Nor do they keep tabs on their travesti girlfriends while the travestis are working; indeed, the vast majority of boyfriends maintain no active involvement at all in the professional life of the travesti. As long as the travesti keeps paying the bills, boyfriends seem happy to leave the work side of life completely to the discretion of their travesti girlfriends. Many boyfriends go so far as to get up, turn off the television, and leave the room they share with their travesti girlfriend if she suddenly enters with a man and announces, "I'm gonna work" (*vou trabalhar*). The only problems that can arise in this arrangement occur if a travesti claims to have no money despite the fact that she has been going to work nightly. At this point the

boyfriend will suspect either that his travesti girlfriend has been doing *vícios* and having sex for free with attractive males (something which in fact occurs quite frequently while travestis are on the streets working) or that she is paving the way for a relationship with another male by siphoning money off her income in order to begin the flow of presents and cash that will eventually result in a new boyfriend. In either case, the boyfriend will feel his own status threatened, and he will react and protest.

Socialization and Domination

Whenever travestis talk about their relationships with their boyfriends, and the presents and money that they give them, they always stress their own agency. They all emphasize that they chose their boyfriends, not vice versa, and they all maintain that they choose to support them and give them things because they want to, not because they feel forced to. “I *like* giving,” Keila insisted whenever I expressed dismay at the fact that she was forever buying Tiane presents. She and other travestis commonly denote their giving using the verb *agradar*, which means “to please”—they give to please their boyfriends, not because they feel forced to.

But is this magnanimity really entirely uncoerced? Are travestis really so generous by nature that they happily give a substantial amount of their hard-earned income to males who not only are not impassioned with them, but who don’t even do anything to help them either at work or around the house? An outsider coming from a culture where intimate relationships are supposed to be based on love, mutually felt emotions, and reciprocal efforts at generating incomes might easily see travesti accounts and practices of giving as delusions—fantasies of agency that travestis spin in order to mask the harsh fact that they are, in actual fact, being exploited by greedy, manipulative gigolos.

There are two reasons why a perspective that portrays travestis as the deluded victims of mercenary males would be too simplistic. The first is that travestis actively socialize young men into expecting money and goods from them. The majority of travestis I know in Salvador all have a great weakness for adolescent boys, whom they refer to as *boys*, or *boyzinhos*. The *boyzinhos* who are most attractive to travestis are often muscular youths between the ages of about fourteen to seventeen. There is no shortage of such youths in Salvador, and in any of the areas in which travestis live, there will be scores of shirtless, tough-looking young men hanging around on the streets, doing little except socializing with one another and smoking and/or selling marijuana and other drugs. In many cases, these young men have grown up in the area, and travestis may have known them since they were children. What happens when a travesti sees

a *boyzinho* to whom she feels attracted is that she will call him into her room and offer him a beer and/or some marijuana, and then she will have sex with him. Afterwards, she will give him the equivalent of a couple of dollars, to buy himself a *lanche*—a hot dog or some other light snack—or some marijuana.

Although not all *boyzinhos* whom the travestis beckon into their rooms follow them there, many do, often warning the travesti afterwards not to mention a word of the encounter to anyone else (she, of course, agrees, and then immediately blabs all the details to any other travesti willing to listen). Through interactions like these, travestis treat themselves to a steady supply of attractive young men. And those attractive young men come to learn at least two things. First, some of them undoubtedly learn that sex with a travesti can be erotically fulfilling. But second, they all learn that sex with travestis translates into cash. Keila's former boyfriend Edilson told me during an interview that he learned early on that "*viado dá dinheiro*" (homosexuals pay):³

Edilson: Eu sempre gostei de dinheiro. É porque, a gente, pobre—no bom sentido—sem formação. Viado pra a gente, é uma fonte de renda.

E: I always liked money. It's because one is poor—don't get me wrong—without education. *Viados* [i.e., homosexuals] for us are a source of income.

Don: É.

D: Yeah.

E: Sempre, desde pequeno que eu aprendi, que me ensinaram assim, eu, eu aprendi assim—

E: Always, since I was little I knew, who taught me, that I learned that—

D: Quem ensinou você?

D: Who taught you?

E: Eu num sei, talvez outros colegas, talvez comentários, né? Viado pra a gente sempre foi uma fonte de renda, uma fonte, um jogo de interesse.

E: I don't know, maybe friends, maybe I just heard comments, you know? *Viados* for us were always a source of income, a source, a scheme.

D: An-rã, an-rã.

D: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

E: Desde pequeno que eu aprendi isso. Num sei se eu aprendi por mim próprio, mais sempre que alguns viados se interessava por mim, eu também, queria ganhar alguma coisa.

E: I learned this when I was a kid. I don't know if I just picked it up on my own, but whenever any *viados* were interested in me, I also wanted to get something out of it.

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- D: N-rã. Então sempre quando você transou com um viado, você recebeu algum. D: Uh-huh. So whenever you had sex with a *viado* you got something.
- E: Eu sempre recebi alguma coisa. E: I always got something.
- D: Algum, dinheiro, ou qual? D: Some money or what?
- E: É, alguma coisa, sempre procurando fazer um tipo de amizade pa poder ganhar uma camisa, um relógio, uma calça. E: Yeah, something, [I was] always trying to make some kind of friendship to be able to get a shirt, a watch, a pair of pants.
- D: É verdade? D: Really?
- E: É, sempre querendo exigir um presente, não exigindo, mas sabendo pedir, né? E: Yeah, always wanting to demand a present—not demand, but knowing how to ask, you know?

It is not merely coincidental that Edilson, knowing this, later formed attachments only to travestis.

The second, related, reason why it would not do justice to travestis to see their relationships with their boyfriends simply in terms of them being exploited or deluded (or both) is that travestis are not unaware of the power that they exert over *boyzinhos* and, later, their boyfriends, by virtue of the goods and money that they bestow on them. The coercive nature of the gifts that travestis bestow on their boyfriends was pointed out to me by Keila on many occasions. She maintained that travestis give in order to dominate their boyfriends. At first, I was surprised at this assertion. But when I objected to its stark Machiavellian undertones and suggested that many travestis perhaps gave out of affection, Keila—who at this point was, of course, herself deeply embroiled in the process of supporting Tiane and giving him some new present virtually every single day—was dismissive. “No, it’s not that,” she told me, “because with everyone I talk to, they say this: ‘Ah, I like to give money [to my boyfriend] because then I can humiliate him, I can order him around.’ So it’s something we do to feel good. To feel powerful in relation to another person.” She continued with a concrete example:

- Keila: Ele vai achar que não vai encontrar mais uma pessoa como eu pra ficar com ele, porque ele tinha Marília, Marília morreu, ficou K: He [Tiane] will think that he will never meet another person like me to be with him, because he had Marília, Marília died, then it was

eu, agora ele não vai encontrar uma outra pessoa, então ele não quer isso. É por esse motivo de ele se sentir assim, um pouco receoso de nos perder, eles ficam submissos à gente. A gente lá pode dominar eles um pouco, pode falar mais alto que ele, pode dar um ordem, e eles tem que aceitar.

Don: [laughs]

K: É. O problema todo é esse. . . . Por a gente ser uma classe muito humilhada na rua vítima de muitos preconceitos na rua—a gente tem que ter uma pessoa sempre pra a gente se montar em cima dela. E a gente procura botar em quem? Nos casos da gente. Como a gente pode montar em cima deles? Sustentando eles, dando dinheiro a eles, para que a gente possa dominá-los, pelo menos dizer assim: “Na rua eles podem me criticar, mas em casa, pelo menos, tem uma que eu mando nele, ele faz o que eu quero, na hora que eu quero.”

me, now he'll never meet another person—so he won't want [to lose everything]. This is the motive—for him to feel like that, a little afraid to lose us; they become submissive to us. We can dominate them a little, we can talk louder than them, give orders, and they have to listen.

D: [laughs]

K: Yeah. That's what it's all about. . . . Because we're a group that gets really humiliated on the street—really. We're the victims of a lot of prejudices on the street—we need to have a person who we can always straddle and be on top of. And we try to be on top of who? Our boyfriends. How to be on top of them? Supporting them, giving them money, so that we can dominate them, at least be able to say this: “On the street they can criticize me, but at home, at least, I have someone to boss around, he does what I want, when I want.”

Keila draws attention here to an important dimension of travesti-boyfriend relations that would be missed if one examined them only from the point of view of an outsider observing the flow of cash and presents from travestis to the men with whom they live. She foregrounds the respect and even fear that travestis feel that their boyfriends will have for them, because the boyfriends understand all they will lose if they do anything to displease the travesti. Keila also draws an explicit connection between boyfriends and a travesti's professional life as a prostitute, pointing out that their interactions on the street have a significant relation to the type of relationship that they wish to maintain at home with their boyfriends.

I suspect that in highlighting domination as austerely as she does here, Keila is enunciating an insight granted her by virtue of her relative age and maturity (she is in her early thirties). I am uncertain whether travestis in their late teens, for example, who support their boyfriends explicitly see themselves as dominating them in the manner Keila describes here. I also suspect that the majority of newly “impassioned” travestis, no matter what

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their age, do not interpret their giving of money and gifts in terms of domination. My guess is that they see their giving primarily in terms of being impassioned and wanting to “please” the object of that passion. As a relationship wears on, however, the subtext of dependency and domination that Keila foregrounds may become increasingly apparent—one older travesti regularly announces publicly to her boyfriend of many years, “I support you, I can humiliate you” (*Eu te sustento, eu te humilho*). And the awareness that giving implies power is never totally absent even in the case of young travestis, for during conflicts, even adolescent travestis will remind their boyfriends that they give them things: once during a fight with her boyfriend that had all of the house awake at three o’clock in the morning, nineteen-year-old Erica screamed at her boyfriend, “I took you off the street, sleeping in the gutter—you hear?! You’re a beggar!” (*Eu peguei você na rua, dormindo no relento, tá?! Você é mendigo!*).

In addition to not shying away from reminding their boyfriends that they are dependent on them, travestis know that they can stop giving whenever they want, and they do stop supporting their boyfriends when they tire of them or when their boyfriends betray them in some way (such as when the boyfriend has an affair with another travesti). Dismissing a boyfriend is not entirely without problems, however. One of the biggest risks for travestis within the framework in which they establish and maintain intimate relationships is that a boyfriend who is sent packing may not go. Having grown accustomed to a life of relative comfort and extreme ease, he may resist the travesti’s attempts to dislodge him, and it is not uncommon for boyfriends in this situation either to rob the travesti of everything she owns when she is out working (some boyfriends go so far as to haul off refrigerators) or to begin threatening and harassing the travesti. “If I can’t be with you, no one will” seems to be something that these soon-to-be-ex-boyfriends fairly often announce to their travesti girlfriends who tell them to get out.

Travestis deal with this threat in one of four ways: (1) they threaten the boyfriend right back, telling him they are not afraid of him and they will stab him if he tries anything; (2) they make sure that they already have established a relationship with another (bigger, stronger, and meaner) man, and hence can count on his support to eject the old boyfriend who refuses to go; (3) they skip town (an option that tends to hinge on how many belongings a travesti has and whether she wants to abandon them); or (4) they acquiesce to the boyfriend’s threats and remain living with him until they can either meet someone new or skip town. This latter option results in relationships that are clearly oppressive and abusive, and I know several travestis in Salvador who remain with their boyfriends only because they are afraid of them. Relationships like

this are not common, however, and when they do occur they are generally the object of much discussion among other travestis, who regard them with concern and distaste. Most travestis who find themselves in a conflict with an ex-boyfriend opt for the second or third options, and young travestis, especially, who have very little possessions and who rent their rooms by the week, will leave town at a moment's notice because of a dispute with a boyfriend. Nineteen-year-old Stefani's boyfriend Ulysses, for example, hit her one evening during a fight they were having over a rumor that Stefani had done a *vicio* with a *boyzinho* earlier in the day when he was away. In a rage, he left the room they shared. The next morning, when Ulysses returned to change his clothes and eat his breakfast, he found the room empty and Stefani gone.

Boyfriends and Sex

Travestis win their boyfriends over with money and material goods, and if we take Keila's arguments about domination seriously and grant that many travestis may construe their giving as a way of dominating their boyfriends (even if it may not always work out that way in practice), then it becomes somewhat clearer what they get out of a relationship that otherwise might appear rather empty and one-sided. In addition to domination, however, it quickly becomes very clear from the way that travestis talk about and interact with their boyfriends that boyfriends are also important for their own identity and self-esteem. Remember that travestis are biological males who live their lives in women's clothing, assume women's names, and dramatically alter their physiological forms to make their bodies look more feminine.

In doing all that, travestis are not trying to become women; indeed, there is a widespread conviction among travestis in Salvador that any biological male who claims to actually *be* a woman is mentally disturbed. Instead of considering themselves to be women, travestis feel that they are *like* (heterosexual) women in their feelings, tastes, emotions, interests, and erotic desires. These similarities between women and travestis are foregrounded through the modifications travestis undergo to make their bodies more feminine. And they are also underscored by the fact that travestis, like heterosexual women, maintain intimate relationships with men. Not just any men, however.

In order to enter into consideration as a boyfriend, a male has to meet certain specific criteria. The first thing he has to do is to look like a man. Travestis are drawn to men who are classically masculine in their appearance. When I asked various travestis what an ideal man was for

them, many responded by listing a number of stereotypically masculine physical traits that they found attractive, such as pronounced muscles and a big penis. Very soon after such a list, however, or even instead of it, another criterion immediately arose when travestis began talking about men. That criterion focused on how the man behaved in bed.

Fifty-eight-year-old Angélica told me that she likes “the type of man who is, like, macho (*retado*). Who has a woman. . . . Who fucks the cunt of a woman (*que fode tabaco de mulê*).” Twenty-seven-year-old Tina responded to my question about the kinds of men she liked by telling me that for her, the most important thing was “for him to be a man.” That meant, she explained, that he would not “turn into a woman at the Moment of Truth [*Hora H*].” When I pressed for clarification of that somewhat cryptic pronouncement, Tina elaborated. A “real man” (*um homem mesmo*), she told me, was a male who didn’t engage in “certain types of sex.” Chief among those prohibited types was receptive anal sex. There are men who you think are men, Tina recounted with distaste, and then you get them into bed, and what do they do? Give their ass. “This is a man?” she snorted dismissively. “This is no man. This is a *viado* [a homosexual].”

Erica: Eu gosto de comer. Eu nunca tive homem que me desse o cu, entendeu? Se por acaso ele me der eu vou achar uma coisa estranha, né, ficar com homem que dá cu dentro de casa, né?

E: I like to penetrate. I’ve never had a boyfriend who gave me his ass, you know? If by chance he did, I’d find it strange, you know, being with a man who gave his ass in the house, you know?

Don: É.

D: Yeah.

E: Eu vou achar uma coisa estranha, né? Porque ó—eu posso também comer, e no outro dia botar pra fora também, né? Eu vou achar uma coisa estranha, né? Um homem que dá cu dentro de casa é viado, né?

E: I’d find it strange, you know? Because, look—I can penetrate him, but the next day I’d probably put him out. I would find it strange, you know? A man who gives his ass in the house is a *viado*, right?

Erica told me something similar, explicitly ruling out a man who “gives his ass” from all consideration as a boyfriend:

Thirty-five-year-old Mabel, in her answer to my question about men, repeated many of the same themes that travestis like Angélica, Tina, and Erica developed when I interviewed them. She also suggested a reason why travestis are so appalled at the thought of having a boyfriend who “gives his ass.”

Mabel: Eu num gosto de ter homem pa morar comigo que seja bicha, seja maricona não. Prefiro homem galinha com mulher tá entendendo, do que ter . . . badalado por bicha, que a pior coisa é cê ter um homem badalado por viado.

Don: Verdade?

M: É

D: Por quê?

M: Porque é, porque uma chega: “A, aquele homem foi meu, eu fiz aquilo com aquele homem, eu botei na bundinha dele, ele fez uma pa mim, uma gulosa, ele bateu uma punhetinha pra mim. Saiu com a outra, fez aquela mesma coisa.” E o homem galinha, ele é aquele homem galinha que ele não dá a bunda, que ele não faz chupeta pa ninguém, que ele não bate punheta, não pega no pênis de ninguém. É aquele galinha que vai, cê vira, virou pra ele, tá pondo, POU, tá gozando, “intê, tchau.”

M: I don't like to have the man living with me be a *bicha* or a *maricona* [i.e., a homosexual]. I prefer a womanizer, you know, than to have . . . a man who is chased after by homosexuals, 'cause the worst thing is to have a man who is chased after by *viados* [homosexuals].

D: Really?

M: Yeah.

D: Why?

M: Because some fag will come to you and [say]: “That man was mine, I did that with that man, I stuck it in his little behind, he sucked my dick, he jerked me off. He went with another [homosexual], did the same thing.” And a man who chases after women, he's the kind of man who won't give his behind, he won't suck anyone's penis, he won't jerk anyone off, won't touch anyone's penis. [What I want] is a womanizer who goes [to bed with you], you turn, turn [your back to him], he puts it in, POW, cums, “Later on, bye.”

The concern expressed here by Mabel that a man who “gives his ass” will give it to any homosexual who wants it also emerged in a discussion between Angélica, me, and Angélica's female prostitute friend Boca Louca about the kind of man a travesti wants. Angélica insisted that a travesti would never live with a man who allowed anyone to penetrate him, because, she said, “if you live with a man, and you penetrate his ass, you'll feel disgust (*nojo*) towards him.” When I wanted to know why, Boca Louca spelled it out for me. “Because then he's a *viado*,” she enunciated clearly, “and he can give his ass to other people, too.”

All these responses indicate that travestis are extremely preoccupied with the sexual behavior of the men they take as their boyfriends. A male's status as a man, it would appear, is crucially dependent on what he does in bed. Even if he is in bed together with a *viado*, a travesti, or some other

homosexual, a man is someone who will always assume the penetrative role, and not suddenly “turn into a woman” at “the Moment of Truth.” This understanding of men is something shared by every travesti in Salvador.

Within the understandings of gender that travestis draw on to understand and create their relationships, males are thus not naturally and self-evidently men. Manhood is the result of particular interests and particular acts. And one of the defining attributes of being an *homem*, being a man, in the gendered conceptions that the travestis draw on and invoke is that a male classified as a man will not be interested in another male’s penis. A man, in this interpretive 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. The sexual act freighted with the most significance here is to *dar o cu*, as it is called in Brazilian Portuguese—to “give the ass,” to allow penetration. That act is transformative—it is like the wave of a magic wand, changing a man into a *viado*, a homosexual: a person who shares a sexuality with travestis.

The disturbing nature of this transformation for travestis hinges on the fact that they are uninterested in males who share their own sexual desire. This is one of the profound differences between travestis and the people who travestis refer to as *os gays* or as *as bichas gay* (gay males). Whereas gay relationships are understood to be based on sameness (both partners in a relationship desire males), travesti-boyfriend relationships, in order to function and exist at all, must be founded on deep and dividing *difference*. Here, one partner will desire males and the other will desire females. This configuration of desire is not merely a Brazilian version of the insistence of North American and European male-to-female transsexuals that the relationships they maintain with men are definitionally heterosexual even before they undergo sex reassignment surgery, because they feel themselves to be women. As I have already made clear, travestis do not define themselves as women, and, hence, they do not define their relationships with their boyfriends as heterosexual. To the extent that they would apply such terminology at all to their relationships, they would say that their boyfriends are heterosexual, but that they themselves are homosexual. Or, as Keila’s ex-boyfriend Edilson put it succinctly when I asked him to define his own sexuality, “I’m heterosexual. I won’t feel love for another heterosexual, because, to do that [i.e., for two males to be able to feel love], one of the two has to be gay. . . . Between a heterosexual and a gay there can exist a kind of sincere love.”

Edilson articulates the basis of the gender system with which travestis and their boyfriends understand and coordinate their relationships. In this system, a heterosexual male—that is, a male who desires the “opposite sex”—is definitionally a man. And a homosexual male—that is, a male

who desires the “same sex”—is definitionally the “opposite sex” in relation to a “man.” “Between a heterosexual and a gay there can exist a kind of sincere love,” Edilson says, which is a statement that can only make sense from the point of view of a set of understandings that perceives such love as generated from two completely different natures and perspectives. Furthermore, it can only make sense from the point of view of a system that conceptualizes desire as meaningful only in relation to difference. The underlying assumption that gives this system form and makes it sensible is that it configures *all* desire as heterosexual desire. Homosexual desire in the sense of desire between two males *as males* (or between two females, as females) is not recognized here, or is only recognized as an aberration, a farce, and it is regarded as vaguely repellent by many travestis (many travestis find gay male pornography offensive and “disgusting” (*nojento*), for example, because images of two stereotypically macho men engaging in intercourse make no sense to them). Desire, here, is only meaningful in relation to difference. Desire is also what *produces* that difference—a male is a man *because* he desires a female; a travesti can feel like a woman *to the extent that* she desires a man and is desired, in return, by a man. It is this relationship between desire and the production of difference that excludes other homosexuals from consideration as partners for travestis. It takes a man to make a travesti feel like a woman. A homosexual would short-circuit the conceptual system and make a travesti feel like—what? (The answer: a lesbian).⁴

What all this means is that the gendered status of males is not given but must be produced through the appropriate desires, which are manifested through the appropriate practices. And the single most significant of these practices is sexual behavior. The bed is the arena where some males make themselves into “men,” by penetrating their partner, and where other males make themselves “women,” by allowing themselves to be penetrated by those men. It is thus in bed where gender is truly established. But it is also in bed where the risk for gender slippage is most acute. It is in bed where one experiences, as Tina so poignantly put it, *Hora H*—the “Moment of Truth.” Edilson, as the boyfriend of a travesti, was aware of this: He told me that he has never, in all his fifteen years of sex with various travestis, touched a travesti’s penis or allowed a travesti to penetrate him. He believes that “if I did that type of thing, I’d stop being a man, right?” And in order to prevent such a fate, Edilson explained that “I have to control myself.”

Edilson has had two long-term relationships with travestis, one that lasted for six years, and one, with Keila, that lasted for seven. One of the main reasons for the longevity of both these relationships was precisely his ability to “control himself.” Because when it comes to the sexual behavior of boyfriends, travestis have eyes as sharp as hawks, and they are alert to any lapse of self-control. While they enjoy penetrating other males, and do

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so regularly while they are working, or when a *boyzinho* they have called into their room makes it clear that he is willing to “give his ass,” no travesti will tolerate a male who is interested in her penis at home (*dentro de casa*). As Erica explained, “I’d find it strange, you know, being together with a man who gave his ass in the house.” Nineteen-year-old Adriana was even more decided. She told me that the only reason her current boyfriend was still *dentro de casa* was because “he’s penetrating me” (*ele tá me comendo*). If he had wanted Adriana to penetrate him, she would have already sent him away: “I’d look at his face and I’d keep seeing that he isn’t a man. I’d see that he is a *viado* just like us, and I’d think ‘I’m having sex with, supporting, giving food to, all that—a *viado*?’ No.”

Travestis feel so strongly about not wanting men who “give their ass in the house” that they will act as Adriana says she would do and expel any boyfriend who begins to do so. The reasons that they themselves give for ridding themselves of such a male are several.

First, they will, as they say, “lose respect” (*perder respeito*) for their boyfriend. From being held in high esteem as a man, a boyfriend who expresses interest in his travesti girlfriend’s penis becomes nothing more than *um viado igual a gente* (a viado, just like us). And this change in gendered status is accompanied by a plunge in respect; I have heard many travestis express how they would feel in relation to such males in very strong affective terms, including *nojo* (disgust), as Angélica puts it in the quote above, and *vergonha* (shame). One travesti told me that a man who expressed an interest in her penis would, in her estimation, be “*reduzido a nada*” (reduced to nothing). This reduction to “nothing” will be expressed in the way that the travesti addresses her boyfriend. Many different travestis told me that they were certain that they would begin publicly humiliating their boyfriend the moment he allowed them to penetrate him. They would *jogar na cara dele* (throw it in his face) that he was a *maricona*, a soft faggot. “The whole house will know the day my boyfriend gives me his ass,” Erica told me. “I already call him *maricona*, even though he isn’t one—imagine what I would call him if he really did give me his ass!”

Second, if a boyfriend whom they thought was a man turns out to be a *viado* just like themselves, travestis will wonder why they should support him. Why should they be out on the streets working to support someone who desires the same thing (sex with men) as they do? What is preventing that person from working the streets as well?

Third, travestis strongly believe that boyfriends who begin to allow themselves to be penetrated will never again want to penetrate. Travestis are unanimous in agreeing that they would never decline a boyfriend’s offer to be penetrated. “Who would pass up an ass?” they all ask (*Quem é que dispensa um cu?*). Banana even told me that she has requested her past boyfriends to give her their ass. “Come on daddy, let mommy penetrate

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your ass” she urged them (*Vá pãinho, deixa mainha comer teu cu*). But this request was a kind of test. Because the concern is that a boyfriend who begins to *dar*, to “give” (i.e., allow penetration), will become so smitten with the joys of anal penetration that he will never want to return to his old ways. And some travestis can happily penetrate their boyfriends for several weeks, or months, or in exceptional cases even years, but they will all eventually *enjoar*—a word that all travestis use when talking about this situation, and which means they will “grow tired of” or “get sick of” this sexual behavior. “It would be like eating chicken every day,” one travesti told me with an expression of repugnance on her lips. (It is both interesting and significant that the reverse situation—that is, the desired state of affairs, in which the boyfriend only ever penetrates the travesti—is never spoken about in this way. No one ever suggested that they would *enjoar* of only ever being penetrated by their boyfriend, and whenever I suggested that I would find such behavior tiresomely repetitive, they looked at me with curiosity and surprise, then waved my objections aside, saying, “Ah, that’s because you’re a gay.”)

The belief that boyfriends who begin to “give” won’t be able to stop giving is also tied to the idea, expressed by both Mabel and Angélica, that a male who begins to *dar* will engage in a frenzy of anal promiscuity and seek out travestis everywhere to penetrate him. One travesti said she wouldn’t dare bring clients to her room if her boyfriend was interested in “giving,” because the boyfriend would probably want to have sex with the client.

Travestis also suspect that a male who begins to “give” has always really wanted to “give” all along, which means that he has probably been “giving” to other travestis in secret. And that her boyfriend has “given” to other travestis, but not to her, is the gravest and most bitter humiliation that a travesti can face, as Mabel makes clear in her comments about boyfriends. The extreme mortification a travesti feels upon hearing news that her boyfriend has “given” to others does not hinge on the fact that the boyfriend has been unfaithful. On the contrary, part of the expectations that travestis have of their boyfriends as men—as both Mabel and Angélica underscore—is that the boyfriends will be sexually promiscuous with women. Travestis are fully aware that some of the money they give to their boyfriends gets spent by them entertaining their girlfriends. The disgrace centers entirely on the fact that the travesti has been deceived—she has been supporting someone whom she thought was a man, but who in reality suddenly turns out not to be a man at all, but instead a *viado* just like her, a person who “gives his ass on the street,” just like her. Fernanda Farias de Albuquerque calls this *a pior das traições* (the worst of treasons) in her book *a Princesa* (1994, 74–75). The extreme power of this “treason” seems to derive from the gender configuration that travestis draw on and elaborate: the revelation that one’s boyfriend is not a man

also implies that one is not as much of a woman as one would like to believe.

A final reason why travestis will end relationships with males who allow themselves to be penetrated is because they feel as though the boyfriend, by “giving his ass,” has desperately played out the last card in his hand to try to hold on to a travesti who is on her way out. Erica expressed this understanding when she told me one night on the street that one of her most recent boyfriends, a young man universally referred to and addressed as *Negão*—“Big Black Man”—had “given his ass” to her early on in their brief relationship. She pondered this for some time, and came to the conclusion that he did it in order to try to prolong the relationship that he somehow sensed was doomed. Keila also elaborated this thought, asserting that any boyfriend who “gives his ass” always does so with *segundas intenções*—with a hidden agenda. She told me many times that boyfriends who suddenly begin to *dar* do so because they realize they are losing their travesti girlfriend:

Men, because they have a head that is more . . . mistaken [*errada*] than a travesti’s, will think that a travesti will only be happy when things are going his [the travesti’s] way—which, in the majority of times, is true—and so he’ll think what?⁵ “I have a travesti and I have everything he gives me—everything I want he gives me. But we’re not 100 percent OK sexually. So sooner or later I’m gonna lose the travesti. So what do I do? To not lose the travesti? I’m gonna try to do something for him, that I can, that it’s possible for me to do, so that I’ll succeed in being with him [the travesti] always. So that I won’t lose my comfort, the advantages [*minha mordomia*] that I have.” And so what does he do? To try to make the travesti dependent on him? He goes to bed with the travesti and inverts the roles [*inverte os papéis*], lets the travesti penetrate him [*deixa que o travesti coma ele*], sucks the travesti’s penis], and sure—at that exact moment, that month, for the days to follow, the travesti, because it’s a new thing, because it’s a new experience—because every travesti is curious—will like the new arrangement. But there will come a certain moment when the travesti will get sick of it [*vai enjoar daquilo*]. And then he [the boyfriend] won’t have another chance to win over the travesti again, because he already did the last thing that he had left to do [*a última coisa que ele tinha que fazer*].

As soon as the boyfriend starts misunderstanding the situation [*perde a noção da coisa*] and starts thinking that by being passive in bed he’ll be able to dominate the travesti more than he could when he was active—as soon as he thinks he can secure the travesti through sex—he’s roundly mistaken, because that way he’ll end up falling out of the picture completely. A travesti doesn’t get attached to anyone for sex, because a travesti doesn’t need a boyfriend to cum [i.e., ejaculate (*O travesti não vai se prender a ninguém por sexo, porque o travesti não precisa de homem em casa pra gozar*)].

What emerges very clearly from the ways in which travestis talk about and interact with their boyfriends is that relationships between them are structured along a very strictly upheld schema. Brazilian Portuguese is felicitous here, because the verbs it uses to denote socioeconomic relationships of giving and consuming are *dar* (give) and *comer* (eat). These exact same verbs are used to denote the sexual practices of being penetrated (*dar*) and penetrating (*comer*). Thus, a male who penetrates another person (male or female) is said to *comer* (eat) that person, and that person is said to *dar* (give) to the male who is penetrating him or her.

The schema along which travesti-boyfriend relationships are structured is one in which travestis should “give,” in both the economic and the sexual sense, and the boyfriends should “eat”—again, in both the sense of consumption and the sense of sexual penetration. The boundary between giving and eating is very heavily patrolled and upheld by travestis, and any boyfriend who “starts misunderstanding the situation,” as Keila so slyly expresses it, and attempts to “invert the roles,” does so at the cost of his relationship with his travesti girlfriend.⁶

In both the economic and the sexual senses, the controlling agent here is the “giver,” because she can, at any moment, decide to cut off the flow of goods and services that she supplies to the “eater.” She may not always be successful in achieving this, and travestis’ predilection for tough, strong, macho men can result in them having to leave town to escape them, or, in the worst cases, it can result in them discovering themselves to be entangled in an oppressive and abusive relationship. In the vast majority of cases, however, travestis can and do sever relationships with boyfriends that they wish to be rid of.

If one examines travesti-boyfriend relations in terms of the normative gender expectations that exist in Brazil, what one sees very clearly is that boyfriends, for all their masculine props, are feminized. Rather than working and supporting their spouse, as Brazilian males are normatively exhorted to do, the boyfriends of travestis are supported by their spouses. They are economically dependent on them, living in their rooms, eating food bought with their money, and wearing clothes purchased by them. Furthermore, it is they who are expected to (and often do) stay at home while their spouses are out making a living on the street. Once when I was walking home with Tina after a night on the streets, and before I realized the extent to which travestis support their boyfriends, I asked her if her boyfriend worked. She looked at me incredulously and laughed out loud. “No,” she told me, “he’s laying in my room, watching television, waiting for me to come home from work.” And Keila’s ex-boyfriend Edilson complained to me that whereas the boyfriends and husbands of women “sleep away from home, have other women, hang out with other men and every-

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thing,” travestis want “to have a man in the house, always at their disposal” (*o todo tempo à disposição*).⁷ In addition, in stark contrast to the majority of heterosexual relationships in Brazil, where it appears that the one in a relationship who runs the greatest risk of being abandoned is the woman, in travesti-boyfriend relationships, the one who runs this risk is the “man”: both the travesti and her boyfriend are aware that the travesti can up and go anytime she wants to—leaving the boyfriend, unless he has managed to rob her before she leaves, with nothing.

It is perhaps because boyfriends are so undisguisedly feminized in relation to travestis (and travestis, hence, so clearly masculinized in relation to their boyfriends) that many travestis regularly employ a number of pronouncements and practices that encourage misrecognition of this fact. It is the case very frequently, for example, that a travesti will publicly proclaim to everybody that her boyfriend has not allowed her to do something or go somewhere or wear some particular article of revealing clothing. Erica once told me, for example, with a proud smile on her face, that because of her boyfriend’s objections, “I can’t wear short skirts, I can’t wear off-the-shoulder blouses because they show my breasts, I can’t go to any parties, he won’t let me go to the beach.” Even more dramatically, Chica spent the entire week of Carnival 1995 inside the house on São Francisco Street. She couldn’t go out, she told everybody who wondered, because “the man won’t allow it” (*o bofe não deixa*).

I was dumbfounded at announcements like this, because I knew that travestis like Erica and Chica were economically supporting the men who were issuing such restrictive edicts. What did they mean their boyfriends wouldn’t allow them to do something they wanted to do?

It was Keila who, in her usually incisive way, cut to the heart of the matter for me. Travestis, she told me, love for boyfriends to order them around, because when they do, they can *se sentir amapô*—they can feel like a woman. Travestis think that men should dominate women, Keila explained, “so how are they going to feel like a woman? With a man dominating her.” And with this in mind, travestis can broadcast this domination to other travestis, who, they reckon, will envy them because they have a boyfriend who cares enough about them to order them around and make pronouncements about their clothing and their behavior.

But even infinitely perceptive Keila did not identify the misrecognition involved in the sexual relationships between travestis and their boyfriends. One of the main reasons why travestis insist that their boyfriends restrict themselves to the role of penetrator, Keila explained to me, is that travestis are so dominating in every other dimension of their relationship that they enjoy relinquishing their dominance when they are in bed. Sex is the one context in which boyfriends *really* dominate travestis, Keila said.

As ought to be clear by now from the way in which travestis police the sexual conduct of their boyfriends, however, it would perhaps be more reasonable to interpret sex between a boyfriend and a travesti not as a case where the travesti relinquishes her dominance over her boyfriend, but, on the contrary, as a case where the travesti resolutely and absolutely *exerts* her dominance, even in bed. Especially in bed. Rather than constituting an exception to the rule of travesti control of boyfriends, sexual behavior in bed is an enactment of the rule; indeed, it is a concentration of it.

One important practical outcome of this exertion of power in bed is that the majority of travestis do not normally have orgasms when they have sex with their boyfriends. 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. Several travestis I know wear panties whenever they have sex with their boyfriends and whenever they sleep next to their boyfriends, so that the boyfriends will not be confronted with the fact that the travesti has a penis. One travesti told me that she had been living with her boyfriend for almost two years, but that the only way he could possibly have seen her penis is if he peeked under her panties at night while she slept.

Whatever else travestis may get out of their boyfriends, then, it is not sexual fulfillment.⁸ As Mabel explained in her description of what kind of man she wants, sex with a boyfriend involves him “go[ing to bed with you], you turn, turn [your back to him], he puts it in, POW, cums, ‘Later on, bye.’” And as Keila stated explicitly, “A travesti doesn't get attached to anyone for sex, because a travesti doesn't need a boyfriend to cum.” The point of having a boyfriend, instead, is to help a travesti feel like a woman, by looking like a man, and most of all, by upholding the sexual behavior of a man in bed. The reasons why boyfriends of travestis do little else than that is because that is all they are supposed to do. And as long as they continue looking like men and being men, boyfriends can remain relatively secure, and travestis can remain happy (until the time, of course, when they find somebody else who does it better). That these rigid expectations and demands result in relationships in which travestis get very little sexual fulfillment is, for them, beside the point. They do not want boyfriends for sex. They don't get sex from their men—what they get, instead, is gender. Sexual pleasure is something that travestis obtain elsewhere, with their *boyzinhos*, their *vicios*, and the clients they meet on the street at night.⁹

This paper has been adapted from Chapter 3 of the author's forthcoming monograph *Practically Woman: The Lives, Loves, and Work of Brazilian Travesti Prostitutes* (University of Chicago, in press).

1. This is not quite true for the literature on male prostitution (e.g., West 1993; McNamara 1994; Davies and Feldman 1997). Indeed, one of the most significant differences between how male and female prostitution is treated in the literature is that whereas female prostitution is portrayed as an identity, male prostitution is often seen as an activity. Even though the transgendered prostitutes I discuss in this essay are biologically male, this essay builds on and draws contrasts primarily with the literature on female prostitutes. This choice has to do partly with the fact that travestis self-identify and live as feminine homosexuals, and partly with the fact that it is in the literature on female prostitution where one finds the strongest claims made about the partners of prostitutes.

2. This is not to suggest that researchers like Barry and Høigård and Finstad are unsympathetic to prostitutes as individuals. It is just that their vocal political opposition to prostitution naturally influences the way in which they understand the private relationships of prostitutes, and it results in them classifying boyfriends almost definitionally as pimps. Høigård and Finstad's (1986, 215) typology of pimps, for example, which ranges from "boyfriend-pimp" (*kjæreste-hallik*) to "sex club pimp" (*sexklubbhallik*), leaves it unclear whether it is ever possible for a boyfriend of a prostitute to *not* be a pimp.

3. Travestis refer to themselves, and are commonly referred to throughout Brazil, by this word *viado*, but the word also signifies "male homosexual" in the broadest sense of the term. Edilson is speaking about travestis here, but his use of the word *viado* should be understood in its broad sense of "homosexual," and not just as travesti. It would seem that the system to which Edilson refers is widespread throughout Brazil. Teresa Adada Sell's 1987 book *Identidade Homossexual e Normas Sociais* [Homosexual identity and social norms], for example, is a series of interviews with homosexual men living in Florianópolis, a city located at the opposite end of the country from Salvador. Many of those men mention that macho men often expect to be (and usually are) paid if they have sex with a *viado* (35, 51–52, 155).

4. Two travestis living together as a couple 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. Travesti understandings of, and opinions about, lesbianism are discussed in detail in Kulick (in press).

5. Although travestis habitually use feminine pronouns, articles, and adjectival endings when referring to themselves and one another, Keila uses masculine forms here. Pronoun usage among travestis is a complicated issue, but in a nutshell the principle is this: when Keila discusses travestis as an impersonal, general phenomenon, she uses the masculine pronoun, because the word *travesti* is grammatically masculine in Portuguese (*o travesti*). Whenever she discusses any particular travesti, however, she uses feminine grammatical forms. I consistently use feminine forms, partly out of deference to travesti usage, but also 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 (Kulick 1997).

6. At least some boyfriends are aware of this. When we were talking about whether he would ever allow a travesti to penetrate him, Edilson told me that “one likes travestis, right? And so one wants to make that person happy, too, make them feel pleasure. But at the same time, one holds oneself back (*a gente se segura*) because if one does that [i.e., “gives” to a travesti], that person [i.e., the travesti to whom one has “given”] is gonna discriminate against one, think that one is a *viado* too (*vai discriminar a gente, achar que a gente é viado também*). And then one will be seen in a bad light by them (*já fica mal visto por elas mesmos*).” And here, Edilson began quoting abuse that he had heard many travestis hurl at boyfriends they were in the process of leaving: “Ah, who do you think you are? You gave me your ass! I penetrated your ass, you sucked my dick! You think you’re so great, but the other day you were on top of my dick! Giving all night long!” (*Ah quem é você? Você me deu o cu! Comi seu cu, cê chupou minha pica! Porque você é muito bom, mas um dia desse cê tava na minha pica! Deu toda noite!*).

7. In an interesting choice of words, Edilson explained that this was a sign that travestis wanted to be “more than women” (*elas quer ser mais do que uma mulher*). By this, he meant that whereas a woman would accept (or would be forced to accept) the infidelities and social life of her man, travestis don’t. I think that Edilson here comes intriguingly (and, for him, probably, dangerously) close to articulating my own argument that boyfriends are feminized in their relationships with travestis.

8. Stephen O. Murray has pointed out to me that this formulation equates sexual pleasure with ejaculation and seems to disallow the possibility that travestis might derive great pleasure from being anally penetrated, whether they actually ejaculate or not. Let me therefore state explicitly that my discussion of sexual pleasure here is based on how travestis talk about sex, not on my own personal assessment about what constitutes good sex. Although individual travestis undoubtedly derive erotic pleasure from being penetrated, even when they don’t ejaculate, whenever travestis talk among themselves about thrilling or fulfilling or incredibly fun sex, that talk usually focuses on how they *penetrated* their sexual partner, and it unfailingly includes detailed descriptions of how many times they themselves ejaculated.

9. Travestis differ dramatically from most other prostitutes described in the literature in that they regularly derive sexual pleasure from their contacts with their clients. They invert the division between “private” and “commercial” sexuality that researchers on prostitution hold to be virtually axiomatic. (For a recent summary of the arguments for such a division see McKeganey and Barnard 1996, 83–98). The sexual pleasure that travestis derive from their clients is mentioned in Kulick 1997 and discussed in detail in Kulick (in press).

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