

Body, gender, sexuality and subjectivity among men who practice cross-dressing

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Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.

Body, gender, sexuality and subjectivity among men who practice cross-dressing*

Anna Paula Vencato**

Introduction and some notes on vocabulary¹

Many people feel the desire to “dress up” in clothing that is socially linked to “the opposite sex”. In the testimonies of some of the men who do this, the desire to “be *en femme*” and the realisation of this desire are constituted in a singular experience which is significant for their self-esteem, self-image and their own perception of themselves as a “complete person”. This practice is still the target of prejudice, however. In this context, many of these people end up having to negotiate several obstacles, apart from having to negotiate their desires and pleasures linked to cross-dressing. These obstacles include managing something that should/must remain solely in the private sphere and, preferably, secret. In the present article, I aim to discuss how men who engage in this practice think of their experiences of dressing in clothing of the “opposite sex”; what the possibilities are for realising this desire and how it is negotiated in several different instances. To this end, I will use data from fieldwork, collected through virtual social sites and other data extracted from conversations with those cross-dressing men whom I was able to physically meet at specific times.

Certain words and concepts acquire a special meaning for my informants. These words and concepts are, in general, little known by people outside the “scene”. Although I do not intend to develop a glossary with clear cut or extensive definitions of the terms employed in the cross-dressing social context, I would like to provide readers with the meanings and uses which were presented to me during my research. These terms include “se montar”, to dress up, cross-dressing/cd and S/O (or supportive/opposite).

The expression “se montar” (to assemble oneself), or “montagem”, was often used by cross-dressers. As in the case of the drag queens I previously researched, cross-dressers do not dress themselves or put on make up: they “assemble themselves”. “Montar-se” is the “native” term that defines the act or process of cross-dressing or dressing up.

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The term “to dress oneself”, for some cross-dressers, means almost the same thing as “se montar”, although my informants understand the latter to be the more adequate term. There are cross-dressers who feel uncomfortable with the term “montagem”, however. As a participant in this research explained, “Personally I don’t like the term *montar*; I am not a wardrobe to be assembled [laughs]” (Conversation via MSN,² 30/04/2007).

Use of the English term “cross-dressing” is current among the people with whom I have spoken during my fieldwork, even though some feel uncomfortable using foreign words. Most of my informants report first coming across the term via the Internet. Some “clds” (short for cross-dresser, an abbreviation often used by people who share the practice of dressing up as the opposite sex) even report that they did not know how to refer to their desire to dress up as women until they had access to the term via Internet searches or chat rooms. “Cross-dressing” also marks a distinction, according to my informants, between what they do and what they imagine regarding the social practices of *travestis* who work as prostitutes. Throughout this article, the term cross-dressing will appear in two ways: spelt *crossdressing*, as my informants use the term; spelt *cross-dressing*, as the term is used in English speaking countries, found on the Internet and in the scientific literature on the topic.

A Supportive/Opposite or S/O is “a person of the opposite sex who supports the practice of cross-dressing. She can be a friend, girlfriend, spouse, sister, cousin... It’s important to note that it’s someone who SUPPPORTS; not someone who merely accepts”.³ Among my informants, their S/Os are commonly wives or girlfriends, though not all crossdressers have or want to have an S/O.

Crossdressers, crossdressing

There are different ways of practising cross-dressing and these variations have specific meanings for different groups.⁴ Moreover, these groups tend not to be homogeneous and sometimes the definitions of practices vary according to the social and subjective elements that a person who dresses as the “opposite sex” acquires. Although the meanings of the term may vary, in general a crossdresser can be defined as someone

² “MSN Messenger is an instant messaging program developed by Microsoft Corporation. The program allows Internet users to interact with others who have access to the same program in real time. One can develop a list of virtual ‘friends’ and be alerted when they go online and offline” (Old Wikipedia entry. http://pt.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=MSN_Messenger&oldid=10372192>. Accessed on: 20 June 2008.)

³ Definition taken from an Orkut S/O’s Community (accessed on 15/06/2008). Orkut is a virtual social media network linked to Google.com and available online via the site www.orkut.com. In order to be part of Orkut one must be invited by someone who is already registered in the network. Only registered persons have access to the site’s content. Once a person accepts the invitation, they can add people whether or not they are acquainted with them, reject invitations of friendship, become part of communities or create communities around a variety of issues. They can also check what is their connection to another person through looking at the network of common friends and the privacy options chosen by each user.

⁴ In this article, the term “group” is used in the way that my informants use it to refer to people they have met throughout their lives and with whom they practice crossdressing. It is not used in the same way as the sociological concept of *social group*.

who occasionally wears or dresses up in clothing and accessories that are seen as belonging to the “opposite” of their “biological sex”. The practice of cross-dressing is combined with a wide range of possibilities in terms of sexuality and “gender identity”.⁵ It is also used to refer to people who dress up as the “opposite sex” in order to engage in sexual practices.

During my PhD research (Vencato, 2009), my informants seldom spoke of their sexual practices, although there are examples of these in the literature. This is the case of Leandro de Oliveira’s work (2006) in a working class club in Rio de Janeiro. Here, we find gender performances that construct specific places for the men and crossdressers that frequent the club. In this club, given the value attached to a specific type of masculinity, men (not cross-dressers) do not pay to get in and are supposed to take certain precautions in order to avoid being contaminated by femininity, whether through sexual practices or gestures and attitudes.

The experiences of crossdressing I observed in my research differ from those described by Oliveira, especially concerning the specific occupation of spaces for the meeting of sexual partners. Although I have attempted to get close to some groups who practice cross-dressing in different ways, I did not encounter crossdressers who dress up with the sole objective of engaging in a sexual encounter. This does not mean, of course, that my informants did not sometimes have sexual relations while *en femme*.

I began to develop a network of contacts by gaining access to people who go *en femme*, “dress up”, are “in transition”⁶ or who are “clds”, and those who know people that share these practices. The groups I observed included cross-dressing members of the Brazilian Crossdresser Club (BCC).⁷ This group brings together members from several areas of Brazil and from different age groups, as well as men who “have fantasies of wearing clothing of the opposite sex (crossdressing)” or, who dress as women in general. According to the front page of the club’s website, the BCC was founded in 1997 and is “the first club devoted to crossdressers and transgenders in Brazil”. A warning emphasises the fact that it is not an erotic site:

⁵ According to Stoller, gender identity “refers to the mix of masculinity and femininity within an individual, meaning that both masculinity and femininity are to be found in every person, albeit to different degrees” (1993,p.11). This author works with a nuclear definition of gender identity, wherein gender identity is defined when a person is around two or three years old and does not change after that. Miriam Grossi explains that nuclear gender identity “is a set of convictions through which what is masculine and feminine is socially determined” (1998, .10). Moreover, gender identity “is constructed in our socialization from the moment one is labeled as a baby boy or girl.” (1998, p.11). Hall, on the other hand, and in consonance with post-modern theories, argues that there is no longer a “central” or a permanent, “fixed identity”. For him, the complexification of social and cultural relations produces a world full of symbols, which we can either identify with or reject. Thus, according to these theories, “a fully unified, complete, safe and coherent identity is a fantasy (1997, p.14). Applying this author’s conception of cultural identity to gender, we could say it opposes Stoller’s argument to the extent that there Hall sees no possibility of there being a “nuclear gender identity”, but only an identity measured by factors that are subjective, social and cultural.

⁶ This term is more often used by people who identify as transsexuals and who are going through a process of transitioning from the sex and gender they were born with to the sex and gender they identify with.

⁷ The excerpts that follow were extracted from the club’s website throughout April 2008, at the following address: www.bccclub.com.br

We hereby declare that the BCC and this site are not of a sexual character. This is not a dating site. Given the nature of the issues discussed here, we do not recommend that minors access this site, although they would be able to find answers here to many of their questions. Instead, we recommend that minors to be accompanied by an adult guardian when consulting our materials.

This definition of the club itself also appears on the website:

BCC does not have a physical office and its work of recruitment and communication is done online. Its main goal is to promote the social integration of people who fantasise about dressing up in the clothing of the opposite sex and to promote the understanding of this and related issues. We organise face-to-face meetings for members. After a process of security and screening, members can take part in cd-sessions, meetings, parties and general events. We do not request real names or personal data when a member signs up. This is to protect the privacy of the crossdresser. Such data may be solicited only when the member intends to take part in official club events.

Other crossdressers who were part of this research were those found in relevant communities in Orkut or those who write blogs. I also contacted crossdressers through Orkut communities who bring together the "Supportive Opposites" or "S/Os" of male crossdressers, that is, people who help these men in the process of crossdressing. Finally, I investigated Orkut communities and sites that focus on female domination (femdom)⁸ within BDSM.⁹ My fieldwork also included observations in places such as Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo bars and restaurants where crossdressers (BCC members or otherwise) go while "dressed up", as well as the hotels where private BCC events take place. The research also included, albeit in a casual and peripheral way, transsexuals and *travestis*, especially those linked to LGBT¹⁰ activism or linked to the "crossdresser scene".

LGBT activism influences the production, discussion and dissemination of identity categories that are appropriated (not always with the same meaning) by people who dress as the "opposite sex". The crossdressers who were part of my research are rarely linked to social movements and significantly differ from activists in the ways that they

⁸ Although I have not, strictly speaking, been observing the BDSM scene, this research is somewhat linked to it since some of my participants are also part of that scene. On FemDom practices in Brazil see the work of Regina Facchini (2008, 2012).

⁹ According to Bruno Zilli, "BDSM is an acronym used by this identitary group to describe their activities. It synthesizes a variety of practices: B is for bondage, or immobilization, usually achieved through ropes or handcuffs. The pair B and D for bondage and discipline, the use of erotic fantasies of punishment are linked to the pair D and S which stand for domination and submission. These are fantasies of 'surrender' to a sexual partner and the role-playing of humiliation and rape. The pair S and M stand for sadism and masochism, or sadomasochism: the use of pain as an erotic stimulant. BDSM also involves practices linked to fetishism. This acronym was developed as an attempt to include a diverse variety of sexual activities which are linked by two defining characteristics: they are traditionally classified as sexual illnesses and, among their followers, are ruled and defined by respect for consent of partners to take part in these relations." (2007, p8-9) [See english version on this volume]

¹⁰ Acronym for Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, *travestis* and Transsexuals.

see and construct themselves and their bodies. They also differ in terms of the social and political place they occupy. Nevertheless, they are in dialogue with the categories that are produced by the LGBT social movement.

There are different ways of dressing up, both in terms of how public it is and the degree of body interventions and transformations that are involved. Participants' testimonies reveal that these facts are commonly encountered across several different groups. This implies that the categories of crossdressing are fluid and dynamic. They are also triggered in different ways at different times and contexts. Therefore, although my informants use a set of current classifications when talking about themselves, such classificatory categories are contingent and, I dare say, perhaps strategic.

A brief picture of the field of study on “cross-dressing” in Brazil

In this article I discuss crossdressers who “are” online and who discuss dressing up as the opposite sex via virtual sociability, regardless of whether they actually practice it outside this virtual space. Mostly, they are men who identify as crossdressers or cds, although sometimes they compare themselves to or use terms such as “*travesti*” or “transsexual”¹¹ and in some situations they talk about the practice without necessarily attributing to themselves any particular category. Some of them state that in a different period of their lives they thought they were “gays who liked to dress up as women” or saw themselves as “*travestis*”. Others (especially those who do not maintain sexual or affective relationships with people of the same gender) do not usually refer to themselves as gay. Although it is used to explain my informants' practices, the term “*travesti*” is emphatically rejected by them, especially due to the connotation this term has with the world of prostitution and a life marked by difficulties and lack of acceptance in the labour market, material and social deprivations and great vulnerability to violence and exclusion.

Throughout the research I identified other groups than “cds” who dress up as the “opposite sex”. Different groups, whose borders are not necessarily clear-cut, employ this practice differently. This creates the need to map out the academic production on “transgenders” in Brazil.

The term “transgender” became current at the end of the 1990s, emerging as a way to refer to different groups of people who practice cross-dressing, especially drag queens, drag kings, *travestis* and transexuals. The use of the term was particularly common among gay activists, referring mostly in this case to issues of gender identity

¹¹ These labels mean and represent different things in different contexts. They vary both in terms of ways of presenting oneself, how people think about themselves and the degree of corporeal intervention they submit to or wish to submit to. In this sense, the meanings discussed in this article should not be understood as fixed/immutable or as categories adopted and/or activated without a strategic meaning.

and aiming at addressing specific demands, including claims to a place within the movement as well as rights (Vencato, 2003). Within academia, the term gained popularity—especially within cultural studies and literature. In literary criticism, it was used to analyse fiction, autobiographical or journalistic writings regarding this kind of experience (Cunha Campos, 1999). Although these theories (heavily inspired by Michel Foucault) were criticized for lacking specificity, they served as a springboard for a whole range of work that followed (Spargo, 1999).

The term *transgender* has been used since to collectively define *travestis*, transsexuals, transformists, drags and the androgynous, taking into account the fact that there are differences that set these categories apart (Jayme, 2001). According to Márcia Aran (2010),

“Transgender” is a term commonly used in the United States and in parts of Europe. Here in Brazil the trans experiences, in general, are defined as transsexuality, transvestism and cross-dressing. There is a minority that defines itself as transgender. Nevertheless, I think that it still makes sense to speak of a male and female sex because these are gender norms that are heavily incorporated. However, what trans experiences clearly show is that those identities are not fixed. That is, they are neither a substance in the biological sense, nor even permanently sexed positions. There are many possible ways of constructing gender, identities and subjectivities that bypass the male/female binary.

Transgender therefore refers collectively to the different ways and manifestations of cross-dressing. Although such manifestations may occur only at the level of desire, they become recognised and acquire meaning (even in the literature on the topic) when cross-dressing is actually practised. The constant transition between the genders is another defining element of cross-dressing (Garcia, 2000). Evidently, not all cross-dressing practices presume the existence of a transgender individual, nor can one say that it is the transition between male and female that defines crossdressers. These people construct themselves by being a symbolic inscription of desire in a body; an inscription that needs to be constantly revised and reaffirmed (Maluf, 1999, 2002). More recently, some people and groups linked to the GLBTT movement have claimed the right to see *transgender* as a political identity, demanding the addition of a third “T” to the movement’s acronym. The name “gays, lesbians, bisexuals, *travestis* and transsexuals” would thus give way to “gays, lesbians, bisexuals, *travestis*, transsexuals and transgenders”.¹² This debate is still restricted to a few spaces/groups/individuals, however, and is not a hegemonic position within the movement.

The practice of cross-dressing—to dress up with clothing that is socially identified

¹² This demand was raised, for example, by those who do not identify either as *travestis* or transsexuals in the final plenary of the XIV National Meeting of *Travestis* and Transsexuals who are Active in AIDS Prevention and the Fight against AIDS (ENTLAIDS), that took place in São Paulo in June 2007.

with the opposite biological sex and gender—has been the object of anthropological research since the first studies of *berdaches* among native North-Americans (Mead, 2001). Studies include those conducted among the *hijras* of India (Nanda, 1996) and the *Guayaki* in Brazil (Clastres, 2003), as well as among other groups. It can be said that anthropology has always been aware of the different manifestations of cross-dressing (although not necessarily using this term to describe it) even in urban and other contexts. It has particularly focused upon the magical and ritual value cross-dressing has among some groups and upon the idea of inversion and the implicit marginality of this practice among others.

In studies conducted in urban spaces in Brazil, researchers have focused on different aspects of the social life of *travestis*, transsexuals¹³ and drag queens. The main focus of analysis, however, has involved defining the differences between transgenders, the specificities of their relationships with other people who practice some form of cross-dressing, the construction of bodies through hormones/silicone, the public performance of cross-dressing (especially relating to shows or sociability), the learning of certain bodily practices (feminizing), street prostitution and the issue of rights (most particularly in relation to genital surgery, name changes, body changes and the “transsexualizing process”). More recently, some studies have also looked at issues relating to conjugality and parenthood, specifically among *travestis*. These include the works of Larissa Pelúcio (2006) and Fernanda Cardozo (2006).

In Brazil, the oldest studies I was able to identify of people who practice cross-dressing were by Rosemary Lobert (1979) and Regina Erdmann (1981). Lobert analysed a theatre group that was famous in the 1970s, the Dzi Croquettes. The ambiguity of their texts and their attitudes towards gender roles, costumes and speeches formed the core of their plays. As usually happens in cross-dressing carried out as part of a show (see also Newton, 1979 and Vencato, 2002), the Dzi Croquettes incorporated elements of their daily routines into the development of their characters, often playing with uncertainty in the representation of gender and the place of the body “of the man” in relation to the aggregation, in aesthetic form, of elements that belong to the female symbolic universe. This reinforced the ambiguity these characters and practices represented, both within the fictional space of their plays and the “real lives” of the troupe members themselves. This can be seen in one of Dzi Croquettes’ most famous stage lines: “[We are] neither gentlemen nor ladies. People from here and there. We are not men, nor women either. We are people (...) people who should be counted like yourself. You would like a flower? We have one.” (Lobert, 1979, p.30)

¹³ The association between cross-dressing and transsexuality deserves a separate discussion. Although the term *cross-dressing* accounts for a fluctuation and construction of a person in terms of biological sex at some level, it is difficult to collapse cross-dressing into transsexuality without reflecting on the “natives’ point of view”, because transsexuals dress according to their gender identity. The idea of cross-dressing appears dislocated from this sense because a transsexual woman, for example, does not see herself as someone who dresses up as “the opposite sex”. To the contrary, she would say that she was born with a male biological body that she does not see as hers or as adequate to how she views herself.

Erdmann, on the other hand, focuses on the sociability that develops around what today we would call the sexual market, in which men who do not necessarily identify as gay (or “entendidos”) engage in sexual practices with younger boys and “*travestis*” around Square XV in downtown Florianópolis. Note that, at the time of the research, the term “*travesti*” was not used either by the author or researcher informants. Through the descriptions in her work, however, it is possible to infer that the cross-dressing practices of some of these persons seem to be close to our contemporary notion of the *travesti*.

In the early 1990s, Hélio Silva (1993) published the first ethnography of *travestis* in Brazil. He then went on to research *travestis* in Lapa, Rio de Janeiro. He began by following the different moments in a *travesti*'s day, which were organized into afternoon, night, morning, in this order. Discussing this organization, he reveals not only the *glamour* that can accrue from the decoration of bodies and the lustre and feathers of the costumes, but also the difficulties, such as lack of money, rejection by kin and/or lovers, illness, loneliness, hunger and violence to which *travestis* are daily submitted. Perhaps because of their methodologies trace, or perhaps because of the similarities in the lives of *travestis*' in different Brazilian cities, these themes are recurrent in several of the studies that focus on this group. This does not mean, however, that the *travestis*' universe is more or less sad than any other universe, or that they do not gain any satisfaction from the transformation they carry out. *Travestis*, with few exceptions, often tell their life stories as the story of the transformation of their bodies (see Maluf, 2002), as processes of continuous elaboration and attempts to fit into what they want to be and what they argue gives meaning to their life.

Mônica Siqueira (2004), who worked with *travestis* between 59 and 79 years of age, presents a different picture. Hélio Silva (1993) has already pointed to the presence of “elders” in *travesti* communities, attributing to some of them an “almost sad” end of career, marked by loneliness, lack of resources and low value in the sex market. Perhaps the main point of Siqueira's work is to show that this universe can be painted with different colours, that these people do not always or necessarily end up alone, rejected and poor. To the contrary, she describes a universe where older *travestis* have a higher degree of respectability within their group, marked by respect for their life stories. In particular, they are respected for having achieved recognition in careers other than prostitution, although many had practiced prostitution at some time in their lives. They are also respected for their ability to “care”, since they help other *travestis* financially by offering accommodation, food, health care, or advice. They “adopt”¹⁴ younger *travestis*, securing a space for them in the sex market and “the scene”. Moreover, according to this author, the universe of older *travestis* does not appear to be either more or less

¹⁴ The same type of “adoption” appears in the work of Larissa Pelúcio (2005) regarding a network of *travestis* who work in prostitution and of Fernanda Cardozo (2006), who studies *travestis* who adopt children within their social networks, bring up biological or adopted children. In both works, *travestis* “adopt” younger *travestis* who they call “daughters”.

problematic than that of women who grow old.¹⁵ Finally, Siqueira shows us that some of these *travestis* employ a discourse in which old age appears as a symbol of dignity.

The work of Marcos Benedetti (2005), similar to that of Hélio Silva (1993) and Larissa Pelúcio (2005, 2006), focuses on the experiences of *travestis* who practice prostitution, specifically street prostitution. The author begins by describing the *travesti* scene in Porto Alegre through a narrative of participant observation he carried out among this group, both on the “street” and in relation to the production of *travesti* bodies and gender. He focuses a great part of his work on the ways *travestis* construct their bodies through the use of hormones, silicone and body hair removal in order to be accepted as members of the group. He also discusses the value of clothing, shoes, make-up and the learning of a whole set of corporeal techniques which are seen as “feminine” by the group. This means that *travestis* reinvent their social roles through a type of new socialisation and through social processes of constructing subjects.¹⁶ This demonstrates the gender fluidity which becomes apparent in *travestis*’ daily social practices. The author points out that the same is not true for sexual practices in which men and women or men and *travestis* are at opposite poles of the sexual relationship with clearly defined active or passive roles.

By playing with gender, *travestis* reveal the game that exists between being a woman (“for real”) and feeling like a woman. The latter is more important than the former in their constitution as persons. The term “play”, here and elsewhere in this article, should not be understood as the most appropriate. It could be substituted by “discourse” or “dramatisation”. What I mean by this term is a type of “gender theatre” (Motta, 2002), where masculine and feminine are dramatized in a “theatre of the feminine”. This game can also be seen in the establishment of conjugal ties among *travestis*. Analysing three conjugal arrangements (*travesti*/working class man; *travesti*/*travesti* and *travesti*/middle class man), Larissa Pelúcio (2006) argues that the dynamics of conjugality contain certain notions of what it is to be a man or a woman. These are permeated by heteronormative values (in Judith Butler’s (2003) terms) related to gender. In this context, a couple needs necessarily to be formed by a man (masculine, a provider who has an active role in the sexual relation) and a woman (feminine, a home-maker, merely contributing to the domestic budget and passive in sexual relations).¹⁷

¹⁵ Two studies that raise central questions about women and ageing processes have been published by Flávia de Mattos Motta (1998) and Andrea Moraes Alves (2004). Both focus on the production of gender and sociability in a certain group of women. The first deals with a group of senior citizens in Porto Alegre and the second a taxi dance ball in Rio de Janeiro. Motta’s work, especially, accounts for the difficulties and strategies adopted by women in their ageing processes in order to guarantee that they “remain feminine” and “continue to be women” in spite of aging.

¹⁶ The transformation of the *travesti*’s body is also discussed by Suzana Helena Soares da Silva Lopes (1995) in an article that deals with the trajectory of a male sex worker who becomes a *travesti*, who she met during an STI/AIDS prevention project that took place in GAPA in Porto Alegre. The article, which is a report of an experience, includes the author’s observations about the transformation of bodies via hormones and silicone. It also discusses the difficulties posed by different decisions regarding work, health care, body intervention and family.

¹⁷ This hierarchical model of relationship defined by the model of activity and passivity is similar to the one found by Peter Fry in Belém (1982).

However, this idea of “woman” contains the notion that the biological body can be constructed and modified but that, in any case, the result of such construction does not produce a “real” woman—ultimately understood as one who can give birth. Moreover, when it comes to morality, a man who betrays a *travesti* with a “biological woman” emerges as a “less painful” and more legitimate experience than betrayal with another *travesti* would be. This is because, according to *travestis*, what a real man really likes is a woman and therefore it is inevitable that they desire to go out with a “real” woman. Nevertheless, although these rules that underlie discourses about relationships seem to be fairly rigid, practices are more fluid, containing some space for negotiation. Thus, people’s positions change according to context and relationship, both in terms of gender roles and in terms of sexual practices.

What seems to permeate this and other studies of cross-dressing is the centrality of gender issues for the production of bodies and legitimacy of cross-dressing. The meanings attributed to gender reveal a complex construction of values that, through the appropriation of gender values (often naturalized in the conflation of men and masculinity, on the one hand, and women and femininity on the other) legitimizes or delegitimizes those involved. According to Mirian Goldenberg (2005) “Brazilian culture” constructs male and female bodies in an attempt to achieve a model of masculinity and femininity that is, in fact, unachievable. What studies of cross-dressing point to is that those who practice it challenge these models, not only because they do not intend to be faithful copies of the models themselves, but also because they challenge the very models they parody.

The body appears as a crucial element in all these analyses, perhaps because of the centrality not only of the production of cross-dressing itself, but also of what makes cross-dressing something “out of place”, leading to the performance of this incorporation of elements of “the opposite gender”. Learned corporeal techniques (in the sense given by Mauss 2005), whether directly related to dressing up or not, are also significant. Although the interpretation of “going out *en femme*” denotes something imperfect, this imperfection is apparently purposeful: it creates a space for questioning certain truths about gender.

In high heels. Or... a walk through the field.

I went with some friends to a party at a bar in an upper middle class neighbourhood in São Paulo, where “cads” usually meet, as the owner of the bar is herself a “cad”. That night, a “cabaret”-themed party was going on and several people were in fancy dress. The bar’s owner was dressed up “en femme”. There were another four or five “cads”. Only one of them was in fancy dress, relating to the party’s theme. She was with a group of about six friends (apparently gay) all in fancy dress. Her make-up was perfectly done, so it was difficult to know whether

she was a “cd” or not. It was only when she and one of her friends performed videoke did it become possible to tell she was a “biological male”. Given her rounded shape, I wondered whether she used hormones. She probably did. There was another “cd” at the party, in her 20s, who was there with two friends, also apparently gay. She didn’t stay at the front near the stage like the other one, but stood next to the bar, especially around the sides where the drinks are served. Two other “cd”, in their 30s or 40s were together in a corner of the bar, talking among themselves or with staff. These two, apart from being more “on their own”, wore more sober clothes. Their look was in the style of the 1980s: they wore dark brown wigs with ‘80s shapes. One of my friends commented that one of them “must have borrowed her mother’s clothes”. What I noticed as peculiar was that the “oldest cds” and, coincidentally, the “least passable” ones, circulated less around the bar. The ability to “pass” is an important asset for some people who practice crossdressing, though not for all. “Passing” means dressing up so successfully that the cross-dresser “passes as a woman” in the streets or different social situations. Transexuals also use this term. I asked myself whether there was a co-relation between “passability” and age, marked by the co-relation between “passability” and “heterosexuality” (in the sense that more heterosexuality would be equivalent to less hormones, less depilation and, consequently, less “passability”). But do the least “passable” really see themselves as such? Is passability important, or important to the same extent for all who dress as the “opposite sex”? Moreover, what do the styles people choose tell us about their understanding of the meaning of woman? (Excerpt from fieldwork diary – 22/09/2007)

This excerpt from my field diary refers to men who dress up as the “opposite sex” and who go out “*en femme*”. But not all who practice cross-dressing go out publicly “*en femme*”. The practice of cross-dressing assumes meanings that vary both in relation to the contingencies of opportunity and desires and to what one wants to achieve during or at the end of the process, as well as in terms of the degree of public exposure while “feminized”.

For some of the people who desire to dress with clothing socially associated with the “opposite sex/gender”, the desire to “dress up” and its realization constitute significant experiences. This is described as being unique and significant for their self-esteem, self-image and perception as a “full person”. The experience of seeing oneself dressed up is described by those who practice cross-dressing as incomparable to anything else and as something that offers a high degree of pleasure. However, cross-dressing attracts prejudice and many people therefore have to manage other difficulties aside from the desire and pleasure they accrue from the practice. These include keeping the practice of cross-dressing in the private sphere and, preferably, secret.¹⁸ It follows that

¹⁸ It is precisely through the idea of the secret (Simmel, 1906, 1999) that it is possible to understand the management of a double life, something which is very dear to my participants. Thus, it is the secret that allows a person to have a second world apart from the more visible one. These two worlds influence each other and are in dialogue. In the case of crossdressers, it appears very clearly in the way they manage the split in using pronouns.

doubts and anxieties will likely be generated. Some refer to what they do when they feel the desire to dress up as “the opposite sex”, how they behave so that this desire can be fulfilled, as well as deciding who can be told about it and how, the risks of lack of acceptance and the moral crises related to their desire and its fulfilment.

My selection of informants is not restricted in terms of social class, generation, sexuality, or ethnicity. However, most of the people I have talked to so far identify themselves as white (or “caucasian”: *Orkut*'s category for the same) and non-gay. Given the apparent consumption patterns of the “cads” I have been researching, it could be said they are mostly middle-class (in general, people with professional qualifications, in the liberal professions or holding senior roles in the public sector or in private companies). Their ages vary from eighteen to seventy, although the majority are in their fifties. Obviously, homosexuality is a topic that is always present in dialogues regarding cross-dressing. This can be seen in one of my first conversations with a participant, when she blurted out: “You can ask me whatever you want. What do you want to know? If we're all gay?” (Field Diary 01/12/2007). It can also be seen in the warning at the end of an informant's public profile on *Orkut*:

I'm a crossdresser, or “CD” if you prefer.. What is that? In fact, I don't much like these Americanized terms... but since there is no better word... We are normal people, thank God, with the difference that we are men in our daily lives (after all he is the one who supports our feminine side), but we like anything a woman likes. Ah...! It has nothing to do with our sexual preferences. (Accessed on 12/06/2008).

Although some crossdressers do have same sex relationships, preferentially or exclusively, most people I have met in the field identify as heterosexual. If they establish relationships both with men and woman, the usual denomination is bisexual, but “bi” is also used. Generally, they say they “like a bit of everything” or that “they have no preference”, but they don't attribute to themselves a particular category to describe what they do.

In terms of the relationship between cross-dressing and homosexuality, Marjorie Garber argues that the history of “transvestism” in Western culture goes hand in hand with the history of homosexuality and gay identity:

Just as to ignore the role played by homosexuality would be to risk a radical misunderstanding of the social and cultural implications of cross-dressing, so to restrict cross-dressing to the context of an emergent gay and lesbian identity is to risk ignoring, or setting aside, elements and incidents that seem to belong to quite different lexicons of self-definition and political and cultural display (1992, p. 4-5).

Homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality have been understood as orientations of sexual desire. This sexual [desire] orientation is, in the words of Fernando Cardoso,

...the many possibilities of pleasure. Therefore, sexual orientation is not the same as sexual practice (what people do when they have sex) nor is it the same as sexual identity (how people see themselves or are classified on the basis of their sexual practices: 1996, p.7).

A gay person is therefore someone whose sexual desire (but not necessarily their practices) is directed towards people of the same gender as themselves. A heterosexual person is someone whose sexual desire (but not necessarily their practices) is directed at people of the opposite gender. A bisexual person is someone whose sexual desire (but not necessarily their practices) is directed towards people of both genders.

Nevertheless, it is worth citing Peter Fry and Edward MacRae "...that there is no absolute truth about what constitutes homosexuality. The ideas and practices associated with homosexuality are historically constructed within concrete societies and they are intimately related with those societies as a whole (1983, p.3)".

The same argument can be applied to hetero- and bisexuality. If desire is something that can be seen as historically constructed, that "is done by being" (Maluf, 2002) it becomes difficult to speak about these categories without an understanding the specific meanings they occupy within a specific symbolic system. In this light, it seems to me that the fixed concept of sexual orientation does not account for the complexity and variety of possibilities that are inherent to actual sexual desires and practices.

Even if these terms are based on the idea of people who dress up as the "opposite sex" without including other categories, they are organised not only as tools to speak about oneself but also as keys that differentiate between different groups and people and, possibly, hierarchies. That is, besides talking about oneself these terms facilitate talking about the other. Obviously, this means that they can also be used to differentiate oneself from or become closer to the other.

As the classificatory categories used are not always fixed, it is necessary to think about them in relation to other categories with which these groups may or may not identify. It is common to find in informant's testimonies that the categories they use for themselves are not fixed throughout their individual life trajectory. Sometimes these terms lose strategic meaning, depending on the context in which they are used. This may vary more or less according to the level of access to information about dressing up as "the opposite sex" which a given informant may have, either through contact with activism, "academic" texts or the autobiographical texts of other cross-dressers that are available on the Internet. Sometimes, attempts to stabilize and fix the meaning of a certain identity category appear in the discourses of my informants as an attempt to normalize the practice of cross-dressing, which is not necessarily fixed through pre-established norms.

The production of femininity—or of “woman”—appears in these discourses as something which has an impact in the emotional lives of my informants, both in terms of family and friends and in terms of their romantic relationships. Obviously, the impact differs for each type of relationship. In relationships with family members, there generally exists a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. Crossdressers may also keep the practice completely secret. One of my informants reports that her favourite make-up belonged to her mother and sister. As these family members realised that items of make-up were “used more than they should be”, they stopped buying them.

In terms of friendships, revealing of the secret depends on their friend’s world-view and it may possibly lead to the end of the friendship if the practice becomes “open”. If the friends are not part of the cross-dressing circle, they are usually not told about this other life. There is always the possibility of making new friends through the Internet and other social spaces in which this practice is accepted (such as the one mentioned in my field diary excerpt).

In terms of intra-group relations, the Internet appears as a great facilitator in the development of ties with other people who share the same “desires or practices”. The Internet allows groups to form independent of physical limitations or the need to meet in person. The same is true for other groups, such as the T-lovers¹⁹ researched by Larissa Pelúcio (2006, 2009) and BDSM adepts researched by Bruno Zilli (2008, 2011). A significant amount of the interactions between people I researched are virtual and few of them ever meet in person.

In terms of romantic interactions, especially secret ones, the management of the secret assumes different outlines—sometimes these are very tense. The desire to “dress up” sometimes clashes with “*tesão*”²⁰. “*Tesão*” mostly refers to the act of dressing up and being seen as a woman; to be seen (not necessarily by another person) as “truly feminine”. In the group that I have been researching, the idea of “*tesão*” does not imply that one “dresses up” as a woman with the aim of having sexual relations or achieving an orgasm. Many of my informants and people within Orkut’s crossdresser community reject the idea that one feels sexual excitation when “*en femme*”. According to one of the Orkut group members, it would be extremely inappropriate to become excited while dressing up in women’s clothing when one intends to go out in public (although this problem is specific to cds who wear “women’s dresses” in public). It would be at the very least embarrassing to have an erection at a party or in a shopping mall, for example. I hypothesise that the reason to this fear of sexual excitation is related to the

¹⁹ There is a group of middle class men who date ‘T-birds’ (*travestis*, transsexuals) and ‘ggs’ (genetic girls or biological women). They call themselves ‘T-Lovers’ and know each other from virtual discussion forums. In general the group meets on ‘T day’, when ‘t-lovers’ and ‘t-birds’ meet in a space of sociability such as bars and/or clubs, which become dating spaces. Physical meetings do not happen often and a significant part of the group’s sociability happens online, in discussion forums and websites created and managed by ‘t-lovers’ themselves or dating sites such as Orkut and some online chat rooms.

²⁰ Translator’s note: “*Tesão*” is an untranslatable term that refers to the state of feeling sexual arousal or excitement, akin to the idea of being horny.

fact that if sexual excitement appears when one is “*en femme*”, it reveals the existence of the “toad”, that is, the man who exists and who lends his body to the production of this other person, this princess-like woman. Sexual excitation as revealed by the erection of a penis can be seen as an “unmasking”, perhaps because “real women” do not experience this. Moreover, my participants’ testimonies constantly refuse to include cross-dressing in the framework of the psychiatric concept of the sexual fetish.

The idea of femininity or the model of woman that appears in the discourse of cds reveals that there are attributes and objects that constitute a “real woman”, as well as a set of desires and ways of being in the world. The idea of woman that permeates most discourses seems to be a type of femininity borrowed from women’s magazines such as “*Cosmopolitan*”. This is a very “girly” woman in the sense that she is produced by a certain type of clothes and make up; a woman who is poised and above all fragile, who needs to be protected and “groomed”.

For many of my informants, the idea of becoming “really feminine” includes taking hormones and removing body hair. While some routinely take hormones and remove body hair (permanently or not), others who might reveal the same desire and may carry it out temporarily, argue that it is very difficult to deal with the consequences of this type of bodily intervention. Sometimes, these men will not shape their eyebrows due to fear of the consequences which might arise when not “*en femme*”. However, it is easier to remove facial stubble through several laser sessions, as even men who do not cross-dress sometimes would like to remove facial hair completely. Other types of body hair are easier to remove without other people noticing, unless one is in a conjugal relationship with someone who is not aware of the cross-dressing practice.

The use of hormones raises a more delicate question, particularly for those who have heterosexual relations when not “*en femme*” and for those who are in a conjugal relationship with a woman. This is because taking female hormones, besides “making one’s body look more feminine” (developing “breasts” and giving the body a more rounded shape) impacts upon the ability to have an erection. Obviously, the lack of an erection may affect hetero- or homosexual relations equally, but homosexuality always appears as synonymous with sexual passivity (being penetrated by a partner) in my informants’ discourses. In light of this, my informants indicate that only women (“ggs” or “*en femme*”) are penetrable. Moreover, the transformation of one’s shape via hormones is both desired and feared, since it may give away the secret to someone who should not know about it.

In this light, the discourses of the people who practice cross-dressing with whom I have been talking sets out some themes for discussion. One of these refers to the body, its production and meaning, as well as the fundamental instances of negotiation and intervention involving the body. Another theme refers to gender, a field in which the production of oneself is linked to notions and practices of what is masculine and

feminine, sometimes via ideas about what it is to be a man or a woman that have become naturalized. Moreover, there is a third theme: sexuality, a field in which the feelings of passion, “*tesão*”, love, affection, and the targets of such feelings combine. All these fields appear in the discourses of my informants and they are permeated with ideas regarding desire and risk, ideas of what one wants to be and what one is afraid to be or to suffer.²¹ These concepts are constantly negotiated and mediated by the different forms of social interaction that crossdressers encounter in their daily lives.

²¹ The association between desire and risk has been discussed in my PhD thesis (Vencato, 2009). This discussion is very much developed in the work of Nestor Perlongher (1987) regarding São Paulo male sex workers in the 1980s.

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