

Illegitimate pleasures: “tesão”, eroticism and guilt in sex between clients and travestis in prostitution

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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.

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Larissa Pelúcio **

A hot summer late night: at least 25°C after midnight. Along the way, one of our friends suggests that **we go poke fun at the *travecos* over at their traditional spot** in Rotary Park... So that's how I found myself in one of the alleys over there, in front of a *travesti*,¹ a beautiful dusky one in a **black leather mini-skirt, showing off her thick, well-formed thigh. She also wore a sort of metallic gold net-like top, which emphasized her delicious, medium-sized breasts** and flowing black mane which reached almost to her waist. She had a **face that made her look like she was ready to do the nasty right there and then...** Feeling panicky and all mad with *tesão*,² I follow into a small back alley that's **dirty and smells of piss and trash**. Its humid walls are whitewashed and a small ray of light only serves to illuminate the first meter of that small space... Rapidly and with a kind of hunger I'd never seen before, she pulled my member out from my pants and took it completely into her mouth... **I lean back against that rough and dirty wall and look up, seeing the incredibly clean sky of the city.** I try to not cum quickly by thinking of anything else. **She gets up and rubs my cock over her breasts and stomach. My cock hits hers. It's also hard and popping out of her panties. I feel her large, hard scrotum. She spins around on one high heel and, without further ado or any protection whatsoever, she starts to feed my cock into her asshole...** In a flash, **she shoves me up against the wall** and I'm suddenly deep in her delicious ass.... Already losing control, **my neck slams up against the wall, repeatedly, pain mixing with pleasure...** I can't breathe and **I feel like I'm dying, like my soul is abandoning my body...** I fall on my ass on the

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¹ Translator's note: *Travesti* is the current Brazilian category for a biological male engaging in female gender performance. The English “transvestite” is not an appropriate translation, as in English it refers to a non-permanent or semi-permanent gender performance, while a *travesti* generally lives as female permanently, and typically engages in some form of permanent body modification. Note local differences in the use of *transsexual* for persons who, unlike *travestis*, feel that they live in the wrong body and typically wish to have gender reassignment surgery. The appropriate use of these two terms, as well as *transgênero*, is hotly debated currently within the Brazilian LGBT movement. For the purposes of this article, however, we will use the Portuguese original, as it is an emic term, amply employed by the author's informants. “*Traveco*” is a derogatory form of “travesti”, also maintained here in its original Portuguese.

² Translator's note: We have found no convenient English translation for the colloquial term *tesão* other than, perhaps, “horniness.” It literally indicates an intense feeling of sexual desire. We have kept the Portuguese term throughout the article.

floor... She kneels down over me and kisses me, almost giving me mouth to mouth resuscitation. **We’re sweaty, wet. Her smell is strong, mixed with the scent of cheap perfume and this excites me more...** After a few minutes, **a desperate mixture of disgust, regret and shame washes over me.** I have to get up and run out of there. (Blog T, 09/07/2006. www.blogt.da.ru. Emphasis by the author)

“We are in the midst of obscenity” (Moraes and Lapeiz, 1986:08). Public sex, commercial sex, non-reproductive sex involving a man and a travesti who seduces him, who takes him to the limits of his self... these elements invoke interdiction, impurity, the obscene. The shift to the realm of obscenity³ begins with the protagonist wandering about the city, leaving behind the “respectable” urban areas and moving towards a symbolic borderland, where one can find a vast selection of marginalized urban types. This movement also involves danger, whether imagined or real, and fear, as an element causing arousal. CR_Tlover,⁴ the author of the above report, also crosses class boundaries in his journey to the travesti prostitution zone. This transgression results in the heightened tension and “*tesão*” which permeates relationships between travesti prostitutes and their clients. That is often narrated by the latter on specialized internet blogs and forums. This makes me think of Bataille’s (1987) views on eroticism and the rupturing movements that prepare bodies for pleasure.⁵

Let us return to the narrative above, however, and contemplate the almost-nudity of the travesti. Thick thighs, breasts almost exposed and the “face that made her look like she was ready to do the nasty” highlight the obscene and increase the narrator’s excitement and our own voyeurism. The travesti then takes matters into her own hands, and her female-incarnated body becomes the active partner in sexual intercourse. The place where this is carried out is public, dirty, dangerous—in contrast to “the clean sky of the city” where sex is domesticated, predictable, and procreative. In the midst of odors, pain mixes with pleasure as the travesti offers up her anus without protection.

³ According to Moraes and Lapeiz, “obscene” has two different semantic definitions. The first comes from Havelock Ellis, a 19th century English doctor, who suggested that the word means “outside of the scene”. The second, taken from the *Aurélio* Portuguese dictionary indicates an opposing meaning that, nevertheless, refers to the former. The obscene is something that appears in a scene but which should not be there (Moraes and Lapeiz, 1986, p. 08 and 09). According to the dictionary, that which is obscene also wounds our sense of decorum: it is impure, dishonest. This is the root of what I mean when I refer to the movement of something which should remain hidden behind the scenes, but which is nevertheless seen (ob = in front of; scene = scene). This is what the author of the report cited above does: he lives behind the world circumscribed by his class and gender and moves to another by transforming this erotic, personal and intimate experience into a public report and posting it on a blog dedicated to men who like to have sex with *travestis*.

⁴ People who use the internet commonly adopt “handles” or nicknames which they may maintain when moving from place to place online. Among men who identify as “T-lovers” (more on them below) it is common that these “handles” have some connection to the “T universe” (that is, the social world of men who enjoy having sex with *travestis*). Handles also typically highlight certain aspects of masculinity, such as being the “active” partner in sexual intercourse, the size of one’s penis, physical strength, etc.

⁵ According to Bataille (1987), genders are rigidly conceived, with the feminine/passive/violated set reserved for women and the active/aggressive/violator set reserved for men. This view of things runs into analytical limitations when dealing with the sorts of relations described in this article. Thus, I employ Bataille’s interesting theoretical arguments advisedly; in particular the way he thinks about the elements that eroticize sexual encounters. I employ that to discuss relationships between *travestis* and clients.

The hygiene implied by a condom would not fit in the dirty,⁶ urine-soaked alley and the smell of cheap perfume. The smells denote another space in terms of class, outside of the author’s normal experiences and routine. The author seems to almost die from the mute ecstasy of sexual intercourse.⁷

He then runs away

The report concludes with the protagonist telling his horror about what he has done, denying his pleasure and disdaining the “object” of his desire. To the travesti, it is here that another “faggot” is born.

Within the gender demarcation and sexual practices of travestis, the opposite of a “faggot” is a “real man;” that is, a man who is always “active”: penetrating and dominant. The range of travesti classifications of clients is much wider, however, and takes in such types as the “wholesale,” the “difficult,” the “trick,” and the “fine” client. These classifications are not predicated on sexual role alone, but also involve age, beauty, wealth, the manner in which the client approaches travestis—in short, a series of attributes which have little to do with sexuality. Such typologies serve the purpose of locating travestis orient thermo deal with their clients; helping them to protect themselves and practice sex in the manner they judge to be most adequate for each particular client. It also comes handy to find a steady sexual/affective partner.

Even within this wide array of classifications, travestis always see their clients, in principle, as “faggots”. Not because they like to have sex with travestis, but because by denying and hiding their desire, thus failing to display male courage and honor, clients act in a non-masculine fashion. That is why many travestis claim to be “more macho” than their clients, as they have the courage to “come out” and “face society.”

This need by clients to make public displays of masculinity and heterosexuality comes in response to the fact that a travesti is not commonly understood as legitimate expressions of the feminine, but rather seen as a travesty: a man dressed as a woman. This definition is based on her genitalia, which defines her body as essentially masculine. At the same time, however, it is precisely in her male genitalia that, to a large extent, the travesti’s erotic appeal resides.

Only part of this appeal, however, because it is not only a penis that clients are looking

⁶ Here I refer to the specific context of the narrative. It is not uncommon to find used condoms in the woods, bushes and parks of cities, indicating “public” furtive sex that is not necessarily “unprotected”.

⁷ Maria Filomena Gregori follows Jane Gallop’s suggestions regarding Bataille’s reading of Sade to discuss the association of eroticism with fantasies of sovereignty. According to Gregori, this “fantasy supposes that the desiring subject seeks ecstasy in the negation of social roles, in the negation of speech (silence being libertinism’s special condition) and in a fusion of differences between partners: differences which are heavily emphasized in order to later be negated or dissolved” (Gregori, 2003: 99).

for when they engage a travesti, but a certain kind of feminine performance associated with passivity and domination. These desires are made apparent in a form of play that is inverted and reverted during sexual intercourse, but which is almost never revealed by clients when they exchange information with one another on the internet. This sort of inversion is associated with passivity. Most of the travestis in prostitution that I have interviewed portray a fellow who lets her penetrate him as less than a man. Sometimes, travestis relate—resentfully—that they have to “play top” with their tricks, penetrate the client. To make them perform such “inversion” is something that literally has its price.

I charge 30 when I'm passive, when I'm the woman in bed. And there are those clients who...ask for me to be **active**. For me to be passive, it's 30 *reais*, but for me **to be active** [and here my informant changes the gender in her discourse from feminine to masculine—*ativo* instead of *ativa*] we have to discuss the price..... I have breasts, I have a body. I spent a lot of money on plastic surgery so I could look more feminine. And I like “**MEN**” [she highlights that]. So if I have to.... That's how I survive, like I said before. I sell what they want and what they're looking for. However, the moment I have to bring my boy out and forget... like, I can't be in bed with a man, **with me playing the active role** [once again, she uses the masculine term for “active” and emphasizes it] in front of a mirror. I think it's ridiculous that I have hips this big, breasts this big, this ass and I have to look in a mirror and see myself playing the role of a man! And the guy who's down on all fours in front of me, all hairy... he's a man! He's a man, yes! And that's why I charge more for that sort of thing (Sabrina Sheldon, 30 anos, interview with the author, August, 2003)

The emphatic tone of the conversation takes a new connotation in casual conversations about clients and sex where travestis talk about what gives them pleasure. There are a number of different favorite sexual practices, but “to cum,” as a temporal frame in sexual intercourse (marking its end), and also as a mark of its (good) quality is always referenced as a need at some point in the evening.

I like to be passive. I've always liked that. When I was a little boy, I bet with the boys as to who had the smallest cock... Mine was always the smallest [laughter]. I knew I'd always lose.... I could only give it [i.e., take the passive, receiving role in sex]. But working at night, I can be passive all the time, but sooner or later I need to touch myself, because if not, my daughter... ah, it keeps on going, going, going and sooner or later you need to cum, right? So, if a faggot shows up and wants me to fuck her [take the active role], you bet I'll do it! (*La Raia*, 22 years old, talking to friends in the presence of the researcher, April 2008)

I have collected many of such stories. More than simply reproducing them, however, I want to think about them and about how living these concrete experiences makes us perceive the fluidity of practices and “identities”—how those frequently escape the day-to-day classifications often assumed to be the definitive marks of gender; creating expectations for specific erotic performances.

Referring to the diversity of gender expressions, Jorge Leite Jr., claims:

[I]n the day-to-day lives of such people, segmentations mix, become confused and lose their meaning to create new meanings. When such labels are exclusively imposed and required, they often act as a limiting factor upon the flows and combinations of bodies, roles and desires (Leite, 2006:262).

I look at erotic practices in order to problematize the supposed concreteness of native classifications in the face of actual sexual practice. I want to demonstrate the anguished searches people embark on in order to find labels with enough explanatory strength to be able to socially translate their desires. This terminological lacuna is filled by a myriad of emic classifications which are, nevertheless, incapable of providing a full account of what happens in the flesh-and-blood encounters of the people who utilize them. My focus here is upon the relationship between travesti prostitutes and clients, the tensions between pleasures, which need to be located in the field of furtive commercial sex for men to be able to withstand them. Oriented by a heteronormative matrix that encapsulates their bodies, desires and pleasures, most clients seem to live out deep conflicts regarding their sexuality. At the other end of the relation, we find the travestis, who find pleasure and disappointment in these slippery and (almost always) nocturnal interactions. These objectify them and fail to recognize their sexual expression, which dissolves the restrictive categories of man/woman, as legitimate (Denizart, 1997:8).

Travestibilities

Living, sharing time with travestis brought to my attention what seemed to be a paradox: while they destabilize gender binarism, they stay within the bounds of a normalizing heterosexuality, leading many of them to see themselves as men who "wish to pass as women." This means more than simply stamping upon their bodies physical attributes understood as a legitimate part of biological women's bodies: it also means investing in a bodily and moral education which might be called an *ethos* (Miskolci and Pelúcio, 2006:09).

This paradox is also expressed in the ways in which the greater part of the Brazilian population sees travestis. Don Kulick and Charles Klein (2010:17) believe that public sentiment towards travestis is ambivalent in Brazil, given that people cannot even define what a travesti is. This inability to situate them within the boundaries of set definitions of gender and sexual orientation makes travestis fascinating and dangerous, appealing and polluting (with considerable emphasis being placed upon the second term of each of these dyads).

This indetermination has worked against travestis, as most people are oriented by the restrictive binary of gender and cannot, therefore, comprehend th travesti experience in

its full density and diversity. Constant furtive glances are not enough to allow travestis to recognize themselves in the often fascinated and almost always condemnatory permanent gaze that interrogates their existence. It is as if one cannot legitimately live the life of a travesti.

But who are travestis? To answer this question, one must follow many trails and decipher endless territorial codes, trying to pin down nomadic bodies. With the authority of someone who saw herself as “queer” at ten years of age, Melina says that “a travesti always has something of the woman about her, otherwise she’s not a travesti. She has to have silicone implants, breasts.”

This is also how Moema, one of Hélio Silva’s (1993) informants, defines the experience, emphasizing that travestis must constantly consume feminine hormones in order to be what they are. In the testimony collected by Marcos Benedetti, hormones appear as the fundamental basis for the construction of “*travestibility*,” the substance that, when mixed with blood, creates a “new condition in the body, that of the travesti” (Benedetti, 2005: 78).

“When I speak about travestis, it bothers me that I am simplifying such a complicated universe,” writes Suzana Lopes (1995:224), highlighting the plurality of that experience. I have been impressed by this phrase from my first contact with Lopes’ text, which acquired concrete meaning through my fieldwork.⁸ I met travestis who did not take hormones or insert silicone in their bodies, but who nevertheless saw themselves as travestis. They used women’s names, maintained an intense sociability with other travestis and adopted *bajubá* (Yoruba/Nagô-based slang spoken by Brazilian travestis). Although they neglected certain esthetic values (which are moral values as well⁹) common in the travesti universe, they still saw themselves as travestis.

I interacted regularly with people who identified as transsexuals but who lived (according to them) as travestis, given that they worked as prostitutes and made sexual use of their penises. I have also been with travestis who categorically state that they have never, ever, wanted to lose their penis, as well as others who have not even thought about the question, but who have begun to ponder it recently. It is thus important that we understand travesti experience as plural.

⁸ PhD dissertation research at the Graduate Program Social Sciences, Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar), conducted between 2003 and 2007 with support from State of São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP), published as *Abjeção e Desejo, uma etnografia travesti sobre o modelo preventivo de aids* (Annablume/Fapesp, 2009).

⁹ What this means is that *travestis* do not expect a novice to undertake body modifications that would make her look more feminine. Nevertheless, she must comport herself in a feminine manner. Lack of definition regarding one’s condition is likewise not tolerated: to become a *travesti*, one must adopt certain bodily disciplining and practice it daily. Like all *travesti* esthetic patterns, these are also linked to moral codes that orient the construction of travestilities. One can be a “little gay boy,” for example, but the androgynous and undefined is only tolerated at the beginning of the transformative process. After this, the person gets to be seen as lazy or even as a coward for not diving deep into the transformation.

Travestibilities¹⁰ can thus be seen as processes involving the construction of a certain type of feminine, often glamorized and historically linked to nightlife and the performing arts. according to Hélio Silva, This form of the feminine is increasingly constructed in ever-more diverse forms as “the historical fruit of the concrete jungle and great urban conglomerates.” This relationship with urban life is linked to the trajectories of many effeminate men who seek in the anonymity of the cities a space where they can make their lives more livable.¹¹

In the city of São Paulo, where I did most of my fieldwork, travestis who have undergone radical body transformations can be found on the corner of Major Sertório and Rego Freitas Streets. According to my informants, it is there that you can find “the most beautiful and transformed” travestis. Often one finds travestis “top” [successful] on this corner: people who perform in porn films or photo shoots for specialized magazines, or who are well known on social media. Many “European-style” travestis can also be found there. These are those who have already worked in international prostitution and who have usually saved a certain amount of money to buy cars and apartments, as well as to invest in the construction of a more feminine body. To be “European” in this universe is to also be “beautiful” (a term which generally indicates success in the transformation/feminization¹² of one’s body) and to be “fine”— i.e. more sophisticated precisely because one has travelled.

In the central region of São Paulo, divas and “nymphettes” tend to hang out in front of the Hotel Grant’s, on Major Sertório Street. The “veterans” are older travestis who can be found throughout the sex market,¹³ but who generally choose less busy spots to avoid competition and generate more profit. These older travestis are also often called

¹⁰ I use “travestibility” in a sense very similar to that proposed by William Peres (2004), not only to demarcate the heterogeneity of identity possibilities in the *travesti* universe, but also to avoid the suffix “-ism”, which indicates disease and pathology.

¹¹ The internet has expanded this possible “livable space,” with websites that teach one how to take feminine hormones and where the day-to-day life of travestis is discussed. *Travestis* are still drawn to cities, however, in order to find spaces where they can live their lives more fully.

¹² Travesti life is something of a never-ending road. A travesti career, however, can be divided into stages. The first of these stages is that of the “little gay” or “gayzinho” (an emic classification). This takes in men who have come out to their family and to “society” (i.e. a wider network of non-family members) but who do not yet use feminine clothes or take hormones. The second phase is “putting oneself together”. This means wearing feminine clothes and using make-up to hide one’s facial stubble, accent one’s cheeks, eyebrows, mouth and eyelashes. At this stage, one still wears feminine clothes furtively and only during moments of relaxation or leisure. The third step is the “transformation” and it is a more nuanced phase. It may involve hair removal and dressing as a woman more often. It may also indicate the use of hormones in such a way that they do not show many exterior effects. Finally, the fourth stage marks the adoption of travesti identity. Hormones are regularly ingested and the person uses a feminine wardrobe almost exclusively, down to underwear. Silicone may be injected in thighs and hips (Pelúcio, 2005, p. 225). The above is obviously a very close-ended schematic way of presenting the transformation process and should be understood like an ideal type, with empirical examples being somewhat different.

¹³ I work here with Laura Agustín’s broad notion of the sex market. This author sees the sex industry as taking in “brothels, apartments rented by the hour, escort clubs, certain bars, beer parlors, discos, cabarets, and cocktail lounges, erotic telephone lines, online sex, sex shops with private booths, massage parlors, health clubs, escort services (call girls), marriage agencies, a great number of hotels, hostels, and apartment rentals, commercial and semi-commercial ads in journals and magazines, stickers, flyers, and cards, porn cinemas and magazines, film and video rentals, erotic restaurants, domination and submission (S/M) services, and street prostitution: a great proliferation of possible ways to pay for sex or a sensual experience. It is clear then that ‘prostitution’ does not exist, but rather a diversity of sexual services”. (Agustín, 2000:03)

“*traveções*” to mark the exaggerated exuberance of their “Paris-style bodies.”¹⁴

São Paulo is a reference for all Brazilian travestis. There, they seek out efficient body transformation techniques. The city not only contains a large number of esthetic and prosthetic services, but also a numerous corps of *bombadeiras*.¹⁵ Furthermore, it offers many opportunities for travestis to collect the necessary financial resources needed for their transformation, generally through work in prostitution. It is in São Paulo that travestis can come into contact with a large number of men of diverse tastes, levels of wealth and bodily styles. Here, they can increase their sexual knowledge and thus improve their ability to gain money in prostitution and, perhaps, find love.

“This is a perfect woman”

I leave Paulista Avenue corners behind me and dive into the internet. I wander through blogs and on-line spaces where men who like to have sex with travestis meet up. I begin my daily journey at Blog T.¹⁶ Among the chronicles, photos and commentaries posted there, I find a picture of a travesti with long blond hair, sensual and nude, lying with her legs open so that her erect penis is in the center of the shot. From this angle, it appears to be enormous, rising up over the firm scrotum which is also displayed for the delight of those who frequent the blog. The travesti’s face shows her being transported with pleasure. Beneath the photo the legend reads: “*this is a perfect woman!!!! Beautiful, sexy and with an additional delicious detail.... enough to make your mouth water!!!!*”

Photos like the one described are commonly found on Blog T. What draws my attention, however, is the legend describing the “perfect woman” with multiple exclamation marks. In it, genitalia appears dissociated from gender. As I visited these spaces daily, it quickly became clear to me that when sex and gender are detached from one another, as in the phrase above, that is often a strategy to affirm the clients’ masculinity in contrast to travesti femininity, rather than some sort of subversive take on the associations commonly drawn between sex, gender, desire and sexual practice. This chain, which Judith Butler calls the gender intelligibility matrix,¹⁷ orients the speech by clients and travesti admirers, guiding their perceptions regarding their own sexuality, and destabilizing those same understandings.

¹⁴ This expression, widely used among *travestis* to describe the exaggerated bodies which were in fashion in the 1980s when Paris was the foreign destination many *travestis* dreamed of visiting to have access to cosmopolitan experiences in that city’s sex market.

¹⁵ *Bombadeiras* (pump women) are travestis who “make the body” of other travestis by injecting industrial silicone in different parts of the body, making them rounder to approach what is socially referenced as feminine.

¹⁶ This *Blog* was interactive, i.e., it allowed visitors to insert comments to the contents uploaded, either pictures deemed sexy, or chronicles by collaborator. It was also a “meeting point” for travesti “admirers” who not only exchanged experiences, but kept up to date with news of what they called the “T world”. It offered links to other *blogs* fine-tuned with the T world, and the MSN addresses of blog users, either of travestis or of so-called *t-lovers*. The Blog was still online at the time this article was originally released, but its contents had not been updated for a while.

¹⁷ “Intelligible genders are those which, in some sense, institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practices, and desire” (Butler, 1990:23).

In their sexual practices, the men who enjoy sex with travestis express their pleasure regarding precisely that which understood to be masculine about travesti bodies and performances: the penis, semen, penetrative sex. This creates certain perturbations that become hard to administrate and which appear in many of the testimonies I collected from T lovers. As an example, this is an e-mail I received early on in my research:¹⁸

The last time I went out with a travesti, **I wanted to be fucked by her**. But let me tell you something first... The travesti I most enjoyed was the second one I went out with. She was beautiful and we spent all the time I paid for (a full hour) screwing and talking. We had fun. **She was always dying to fuck me**. But I never let her.

She liked licking my asshole, however (and I have to use these terms, I'm sorry, but I think we need to make everything really clear and without hypocrisy, OK?) I liked it ever since she did it for the first time. And she was really good at it. Well, from that moment on, I began to see another whole world open up for me in terms of sex. I began exploring myself in that region. I'd touch myself there when I was masturbating and I'd stick my finger in, etc... Now, returning to the story of how I got fucked for the first time... I wanted to and I asked the travesti to do it, but slow, calmly, because it was my first time. She said that I needed to blow her first, so she could get hard. I was kind of prejudiced about that, but it also made me horny. So I did it, without a rubber. Not for much time, but I did it.

But having blown her, I began to have my doubts. Given that I saw her penis as a part of her (a woman) which gives me pleasure, am I just exploring what gives me pleasure in sex or am I becoming a homosexual? I really don't feel any attraction to men, but obviously **everything is becoming confused... I don't want to be a homosexual or even a bisexual**. I want to continue liking women and, if I go with a travesti now and again, that's just another way of seeking sex (MM, 28/11/2004, emphasis by the author).

The presumed abnormality suggested by the category “homosexual” is countered by many of the men in repeated and systematic affirmations of their own heterosexuality. In this, they point to the “normality” of their behavior and not their desires and practices, even when these destabilize the certainties underpinning their supposed normality. On the other hand, it is precisely their behaviors and practices which can attest to their “normality”, given that “men can (and should) satisfy their desires. It is not expected that a man be reticent in fulfilling these, whether in terms of sex, food, drug use, exposure to risk, or expressing aggressiveness” (Villela, 2005:30).

¹⁸ For two and a half years I interacted with a group of *t-lovers* from the City of São Paulo, by attending T Day (offline gathering which took place in São Paulo and other capital cities for at least four years), barbecues, birthday parties, dinners, and going out to GLBTT clubs. This intense cohabitation meant an immersion in the night world inextricable from the travesti universe. Along these years of research I interviewed around 45 clients via *Messenger*; I organized 300 pages of e-mails in response to interactions initiated at the online social network Orkut; 300 pages of *e-mails* compiled while attending an online forum of self-identified *t-lovers*; and more than 30 files with texts and comments collected at Blog T.

Even so, it seems that it is important to them to repeatedly emphasize their essential heterosexuality for it is there that they somehow find “the truth of their self” (Foucault and Sennett, 1981). This truth appears to be centered upon the anus, an orifice with the power to reveal much about those who desire and enjoy it, often making them feel “dirty,” “perverted,” “violators.” “Given that it is a part of the lower rear of the body, directly linked to feces and dirt, providing pleasure with no reproductive ‘purpose,’ the anus is associated with untamed lust and unruly pleasures” (Leite, 2006:223). The asshole is illegitimate, even while it may be an indication of sophistication in terms of sexual pleasures, as the above e-mail suggests. This same point is reiterated by another informant:

With regards to anal sex... Look, not all women are into it. And since Ancient Rome, men have been engaging in this practice with the ephebe (I’m not sure that’s the right term) and today, I return to my thesis that they [referring to travestis in general] know what a man wants in terms of anal, from darting tongues up to a finger in one’s asshole! (Kero Rolla, 13/09/2004).¹⁹

“Travestis are a luxury. Assholes are a luxury. Only those who can do it fuck them” (Oliveira, 1994, quoted in Leite, op. cit.). And those who get fucked in the ass are only those who are courageous enough to reveal their desires. To declare that in virtual spaces amounts to compromising one’s masculinity. It is an ambiguity that few men talk about in serious terms. Jokes and deprecating, playful comments are employed by travestis’ clients in order reduce tensions. I once saw, for example, a frequent Blog T collaborator pass the blog e-mail to an interested person while laughing, saying “all you need to do is type in www.blogt-get-fucked-in-the-ass”, alluding to the blog’s domain (www.blogt.da.ru) which allows such a play on words in Portuguese.

On Blog T, photos of travestis displaying their anus tend to cause real thrill among blog commentators. The only other comparable photos are those in which *t-gatas* (the Portuguese translation for the term *t-girls*, used internationally to refer to travestis online) demonstrate their erect penises. On such “bullet hole” shots,²⁰ an online user commented: “What a delicious asshole.... The best thing in the world is when a foxy babe gets down on all fours and offers up her ass... so you can pump it hard.” Another spoke directly to the travesti in the photo:

Alana, I want to thank you for initiating me into this world. Now I want to meet up with you so you can take my rear-end virginity... Because two years ago we fucked so good and I’ve found no *t-gata* so nice and sincere with whom I can lose my virginity with! (16/02/2008).

¹⁹ The informants online nickname means “I want dick” in internet slang Portuguese.

²⁰ Expression largely used in Blog T and other similar forums to refer to the anus.

The use of the verb “lose” is to me symptomatic in this context. Men who have pleasurable “passive” anal relations end up “losing” their masculinity, or it will be at least seriously put in check.²¹ The fact that this “loss” occurs with a “nice and sincere” travesti who is, above all else, “feminine”, minimizes the loss of prestige.

Maria Filomena Gregori argues that “the concept of eroticism as the transgression of moral conventions is permeated by the positioning of the relationship between the masculine and the feminine as an active/passive dyad” (Gregori, 2004: 236). In the case of travestis, aside from the feminine body and the “inversion” of roles, there is another element that violates conventions: contact with the travesti’s semen.

Semen is a substance that generates much pleasure for some of the clients with whom I have interacted. To touch, feel and taste “cum” excites and pleases many of the men (...). Semen is a liquid that is heavily impregnated with symbolism, associated with masculinity, strength, reproduction and life.²² Seeking sex with travestis, touching their penises, having contact with their semen, taking on a sexual role understood as feminine are acts that are in themselves transgressive (Pelúcio, 2007: 90-91).

Pleasure and desire often operate precisely through the inversion of these hierarchies,²³ inciting men to seek out nocturnal adventures and “suspect” sites.

Rigid genders in fluid bodies

We are in São Carlos, a medium-sized city in the state of São Paulo, near Avenida Getúlio Vargas, the traditional location of the city’s sex market. One “difficult” night,²⁴

²¹ In her prologue to the Spanish edition of Guy Hocquenghem’s *Homosexual Desire*, Beatriz Preciado writes that “to homosexual men, the anus, understood exclusively as excreting orifice, is not an organ. It is a scar which leaves the body castrated. The closed anus is the price that the body pays to the heterosexual regime for the privilege of masculinity (Preciado, 2009:136 -137, our translation).

²² In *O Uso dos Prazeres*, Foucault (2012) several times mentions how the “waste” of semen has often been understood as pernicious and weakening at several points in the sexual history of the West. Both in the texts of classical antiquity and in those produced by the “*sciencias sexualis* of the 19th century”, semen was of great concern. Although obviously understood in different ways, in both contexts, semen and its “waste” were understood to have the same meaning: semen was understood to be linked to vitality and its waste was linked to weakness, disability and death. Although Foucault does not attempt to write a history of these representations, one cannot help but reflect upon them and on how certain symbolic structures permeate our values.

²³ This inversion also seems to operate in other contexts. Camilo Albuquerque de Braz, in his research on homoerotic relations in male sex clubs reproduces a conversation that he had with one of his collaborators regarding erotic practices and their intersections with markers of class and race:

“I think it’s a fetish to like black well-hung guys... I’m white, upper middle class...so that kind of guy is something that’s considered to be different in my universe.

“[That the guy is Black and well-hung?]”

“Yeah... In reality, it’s a sort of inverted domination... Because the guy’s there for fucking... but not for being a boyfriend [laughter].” (CARLOS, 34 anos, São Paulo-SP)

“Social markers of difference do not only inform the way subjects are constituted and intelligible and desirable body types are produced in sex clubs. They also are, in some circumstances, perceived as elements through which possibilities for erotic transgression are created” (Braz, 2008, p. 21).

²⁴ In travesti slang, “difficult” refers to all that which is poor, glamourless and without financial resources. It may refer to both people and situations.

a client stops and talks to a travesti. We can clearly see that the client is “fine:” he has money, drives a nice car and wears imported cologne. He sticks his neck out the window and asks the travesti how much, what she does and then, suddenly, “Do you really have tits?” The travesti is offended, but since she hasn’t turned a trick yet that night, she smiles. The john is a “fine faggot” and getting into a luxury car is always good for some prestige.²⁵ She thus accepts the trick.

When she returns, she remarks to me: “Do you think he really cared about my tits? What he wanted was me to fuck him!” She laughs long and loud and jokes about the client who wanted to pass for a “butch”, a “real man”. According to the travestis, “These faggots are all rotten.” Travestis unite two negative classifications in describing their clients: they are not really men and, for this reason, they are morally degenerate for they publically hide their true desires.

The travestis also qualify these men as “rotten faggots” who do not know how to value the feminine attributes of “real travestis:” those who engage in transformative body practices. Shena, with her large breasts, long natural hair (dyed auburn) complains about the “faggots” who would rather pay less and end up with “dressed up queers” rather than pay for a trick with a “real travesti.” This prospect depresses Shena. Why go through the transformative process in the first place, making oneself beautiful and sweet-smelling “if the client is going to head over to General Jardim and pick up a queer in a wig?”

According to Márcia, this occurs because “what men really want is to cum.” “If a travesti from here doesn’t go with him, he’ll go farther down the avenue, pay \$5.00 and head off with a gay.”²⁶ This orgasmic imperative shifts the “faggot” within the male genderscape once again, because uncontainable desire is understood as being something that is typically masculine.

In the fluidity of these classifications, however, the desire for orgasm can also threaten the client’s masculinity, because this can also be associated to the travesti’s penis—even when the clients attempt to feminize or make it invisible by calling it a “big clitoris,” a “comma,” or a “grill.”

Men want travestis’ dicks! She can have tits, hips, but if she doesn’t have a dick she’s in trouble, understand? How many men are going to want to fuck with her each night? How many active partners is she going to find in a night? If at night what we mostly see are faggots? The active men are all at home with their girlfriends. At night,

²⁵ Perlongher also observed these sorts of material and symbolic values among Paulista male prostitutes. Cars and fine clothes are symbolic of luxury and this fascinates and “contaminates” the sex worker who is seen as desirable in accordance with the material possessions of their clients. (Perlongher, 1987, p. 146).

²⁶ *Travestis* refer to men who are openly homosexual as “as gays”, using the feminine article (“as” instead of “os” for “the”, in Portuguese) in order to mark homoerotic desires as feminine.

the streets are filled with faggots, understand? And what's the faggot's fantasy? He wants that woman to be fucking him up the ass, understand? (Márcia, 40+ year old travesti in an interview with the researcher on 14/11/2005).

This is an intricate network where temporality is a marker that confuses spaces, alters codes, and also changes peoples' bodies and their relationships. Not just the time involved in a life marked by bodily transformations, but also the dichotomous division between night and day. During the “night”—here understood as an abstract spatial and temporal category—it is okay to transgress and indulge in behaviors that would be seen negative or even unthinkable during the day. In the night, there is seduction, glamour, but also many codes and rules.

Bodily styles must, in a certain way, respond to the rules that orient the flows of commercial sexual encounters. These must, at least in terms of their discourse, avoid ambiguity. Androgyny is not well accepted among travestis, as we have seen in Shena's words, which separate “queers with tits” from “gays,” even while she suggests that the clients see the two groups as one and the same thing, engaged in sexual practices that may be as indefinite as their bodies—in fact, almost certainly are.²⁷

Bodily ambiguity is rare among clients. Generally, the men seeking travestis are more relaxed about their appearances. To perfume, worry about one's hair, skin and shape only reinforces the gender shift that their engagement with travestis creates. They are thus more likely to not take care of their bodies and are often criticized by the travestis in this respect, particularly with regards to their hygiene.²⁸ These criticisms become particularly strong on those occasions in which the client's “machoness” slips in bed and they end up turning over and offering their ass to the travesti. “The ass is always linked to the feminine, whether it is a boy's ass or a travesti's ass, just as penetration is always considered to be a masculine act, feminizing the penetrated person” (Pelúcio, 2006, p. 88). The “turn” here is both moral and physical. In the former sense, it refers to the act of offering up one's anus for penetration. It is a literal turn: the man who is in front and above, turns to a position considered passive and feminizing, inverting gender roles and hierarchies, destabilizing the relationship and staining his masculinity. And this, then, is the moral “turn”: he becomes something else, suddenly unclassifiable.

²⁷ In his book, based on his master's thesis, Tiago Duque (2010) shows significant changes in the constitution of the *travesti* esthetics. Duque points out these changes in his fieldwork in Campinas (State of São Paulo). At the same time that he identified a certain flexibility in travestis' feminization projects, which now tend to delay certain bodily investments such as hormone injections and silicon modifications, there have also been certain stabilities. These can be found in the continued association of *travestis* with prostitution and in the violence and prejudice still directed against them. Duque identifies a certain “strategic production” that *travestis* now engage in as a way to avoid gender conventions most commonly employed by older *travestis* while utilizing the “closet” as a resource. According to Duque, this “strategy” allows younger *travestis* greater agency in dealing with stigma and shame, allowing them to avoid violence and gain sexual partners.

²⁸ Keyla once told me, while we were drinking a beer in the Elenice, a bar where an off-line meeting of T-lovers was happening, “There was one dude here who was talking shit about all the travestis. ‘Ah, that one is like this, the other's tits are like that’, and laughing. I couldn't hold myself. I went up to him and said, ‘Wait a minute, honey, we are born men and have to become beautiful women so that you can lie down with us, smelly, unwashed, fat...’ I told him off. What the hell was he thinking?” (Keyla Zanetti, 23 year old travesti, *Field Journal*, 19/04/05).

By accentuating the characteristics understood as belonging to each gender and thus assuring their intelligibility, travestis thus assert their humanity.²⁹

The corporeal subversion of the travesti is thus in counterpoint to the client's normative body, molded by social expectations regarding hegemonic masculinity. It is in the junction of these two bodies that desires and transgressions flourish. The paradox of desire becomes installed here, among the curves sculpted by liquid silicon and the travesti's erect penis. This transgressive body, associated with evil, deviance and impurity should not be so desired or loved by men who see themselves as “good,” married, heterosexual, and thus “normal.” For this reason, perhaps, many of these men classify this aspect of their lives as a “vice” or an “addiction:” something pernicious, degrading and dangerous, but which they cannot leave behind without abdicating something that is profoundly their own.³⁰

...After some minutes, a desperate sense of disgust, regret and fear, all mixed together, took hold of me and I tried to run away. Pulling my clothes together any old way, I jumped up and ran out, hearing the curses of my recent partner behind me.

I ran and ran, like a 100 meter dash runner, without direction, without thinking, overtaken by remorse and regret. I come to a deserted park and try to hide. I can't look at my friends. No one can know. I lay there for hours, ashamed of myself, sobbing and promising that I would never do something like that again, if I can only get out of this situation alive, without having caught anything. I tell myself I'm a man and nothing else, it was a moment of craziness that had taken hold of me. It will never happen again. Little did I know, however, that it was only the beginning... CV_Tlover, Blog T, 09/07/2006. www.blogt.da.ru)

Eroticism and pornography,³¹ forcibly kept apart by some thinkers, appear united in these reports of illegitimate pleasures. Paid sex, impregnated with erotic passions, causes as much anguish as pleasure, while pornographic desires makes pleasure

²⁹ The norms of intelligibility compulsorily reiterate and reinforce heterosexuality and relegate to the margins of society those people who do not correspond to these norms. These bodies which “do not matter”, because they are imperfectly engendered, are also socially absolutely necessary, however. It is only through these abject bodies, after all, that the frontiers of normality can be clearly demarcated. Those who are relegated by hegemonic discourse to the “invisible and uninhabitable zones” are, according to Butler (1993) beings who have not really “materialized” and, for this reason, are of no import. Those who live outside of the heterosexual imperative serve to stabilize the frontiers of normality and are thus the fruit of this normalizing discourse that institutes heterosexuality as natural. Normality is circumscribed through the fixing of these abject territories, which are strictly understood to be inhabited by non-humans (Butler, 1993, p. 20).

³⁰ “According to Cutileiro (1977, p. 128) vice is a ‘predisposition to the potential social perils that come from (...) women’s active social lives’. Piña-Cabral (1989) adds that the word also refers to anti-social and autodestructive tendencies and that the fusion between ‘vigor’ and ‘vice’ in everyday Portuguese has to do with the association between bodily vigor, fertility, sex and sexuality ‘and that these qualities take on a morally pejorative connotation’” (1989, p. 126). (Vale de Almeida, 2002, p. 64, footnote 14).

³¹ Jorge Leite Jr. in *Das Maravilhas e Prodigios Sexuais...*, dedicates an entire chapter to discussing eroticism and pornography, seeking to show how this division becomes established by a symbolic negotiation in which pornography is associated with the carnal, natural and animal, in a counterpoint to that which is culturally established and sexually sophisticated. Through this derivative chain, pornography also becomes associated with the sex of the lower classes while eroticism is linked to bourgeois sexuality, understood to be healthy and esthetically refined (Leite, 2006, pp. 34-35).

blossom at the site of bodies exposed on websites and street corners, inciting delicate existential dramas.

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