

TRAVESTIS, STIGMA, VIOLENCE AND *ESCÂNDALOS*

Don Kulick
New York University

Talk given at CLAM/UERJ on 21 May 2008

I'm going to begin by describing a scene that happens every day, somewhere in Brazil:

In a small, dimly-lit hotel room, a man and a travesti have just had sex. The price of this transaction had been agreed on before the couple entered the room, and the man, now dressed and anxious to leave, removes his wallet from his back pocket.

The travesti straightens her bra-straps and eyes the man. "Não", she murmurs, as she sees him open the wallet and take out a few notes. "Mais. Eu quero mais".

The man is startled. "*Mais o que?*", he asks warily. "*A gente combinou de trinta reais, aí pegue os trinta reais. Tome*".

The travesti slips towards the door, in a swift, resolute gesture. "*Olha amor,*" she says calmly, blocking the man's exit, "*Sabe, o preço aumentou. Você queria o meu pau no seu cú. Você chupou a minha pica. Isso é mais caro. Iso não é trinta reais, amor. Isso é sessenta.*".

The man growls that the travesti can go fuck *herself* if she thinks she can rob him like that. He flings the notes in his hand at her and moves towards the door. But the travesti moves too. Practiced. Fast. She slams her purse on the floor and plants her feet firmly apart, in a stance that makes her seem thicker, stronger, more expansive. A pair of tiny nail scissors flash in her hand. Suddenly afraid, the man stops in his tracks. He stands in front of the travesti, staring at her and wondering what to do next. Suddenly, he sees her coral-red mouth open and he hears her begin to shout; to utter loud, harsh, venomous screams that fill the room, the hotel, and, horrifyingly, it seems to the man, the whole neighborhood:

Tome vergonha sua maricona safada! Se manca maricona desgraçada! Você veio, pra mim você era homem, mas você vem dar de puta, pior do que eu! Você chupou a minha pica! Botou o

*meu pau no seu cú! Maricona nojenta! Maricona sem vergonha!
 Você é mais mulher do que eu! É mais puta do que eu! O seu cú é
 mais aberto do que o meu!*

In travesti parlance, what is occurring here is *um escândalo*, *um rebucête*, a commotion, a scandal. *Um escândalo* is an example of what ethnographers of communication call a performative genre: it is a named act that has its own structure, dynamics, and intended consequences. Like all performatives, scandals have illocutionary force; that is, they announce a specific intention on the part of the speaker -- in this case, the intention is the conferral of shame. Scandals also ideally produce a set of perlocutionary effects, namely the surrender by the client of more money than he had agreed to pay in the first place.

Escândalos have recently made international news, when police were called to the Papillion Hotel here in Rio, and Ronaldo *o Fenômeno* was discovered in the company of three travestis. I want to discuss the Ronaldo case with you all, but I want to do it by contextualizing travesti *escândalos* and seeing them as more than performances, or as vulgar attempts at blackmail or extortion. *Escândalos* are much more interesting than that. I want to make the argument that *escândalos* are a kind of politics.

Now in order to make that clearer, we have to understand that scandals as performatives can only operate and make sense within structures of shame. They work to the extent that they elicit shame and channel it into service that benefits travestis. What is the specific configuration of this shame? In this case, it hinges on widespread and violently upheld sanctions against male homosexual relations. For the flame being fanned here is the fact that travestis are males. They are males who habitually consume estrogen-based hormones and who often have impressively feminine figures, due to those hormones and to the numerous liters of industrial silicone that they pay their colleagues to inject into their bodies. But they are males nonetheless. They have penises. These penises are usually kept tightly pressed against a travesti's perineum and well out of anyone's view. But in their professional lives as prostitutes, travestis remove their penis from concealment and frequently put it to use. And during a scandal, a travesti's penis is rhetorically unfurled and resoundingly brandished at anyone within hearing distance of her shouts.

The point of drawing dramatic attention to that part of the travesti's anatomy that she normally keeps concealed is to publicly reconfigure the social status of her client. The overwhelming majority of men who pay travestis for sex

are married or have girlfriends, and they identify themselves as heterosexual – people precisely like Ronaldo *o Fenômeno*. This of course is the irony: The clients of travestis are not gay men. They are all heterosexuals. So when Ronaldo tells Patrícia Poeta in his interview on *Fantástico* that he couldn't have chosen travestis because he is “*completamente heterosexual*”, he is in fact *confirming*, rather than casting doubt on, the possibility that he did desire travestis. A much more believable denial in this case would be for Ronaldo to say that he is gay – that would mean that he of course he didn't want to have sex with travestis.

Now of course if any of these men like Ronaldo are publicly revealed to have been in the company of a travesti (for example, on the relatively rare occasions when they go to the police to report that a travesti robbed them, or on the relatively more frequent occasions when police arrest them for having shot a travesti), the majority – again, just like Ronaldo – will steadfastly maintain that they were unaware that the prostitute they picked up was a travesti. Travestis, however, know better. They know that the men who pay them for sex come to the specific streets on which they work looking for a travesti, not a woman. They know that the sexual service requested by many of the men (travestis say 'most of the men') is anal penetration, with the travesti assuming the role of penetrator. Finally, travestis also know that the last thing one of these men ever wants revealed in public is the fact that he has paid money to have a transgendered prostitute insert her penis in his ostensibly heterosexual ass.

So in order to scare her client into parting with more money than he would ever agree to, a travesti will "give a scandal" (*dar um escândalo*). Scandals constitute one of the everyday, mundane means by which individual travestis see to it that they earn enough money to support themselves. They are not collective actions. Although scandals can turn into brawls, in which other travestis within hearing distance will come to the aid of their colleague and help attack a particularly violent or recalcitrant client, for the most part, they are singular actions taken by individual travestis. Indeed, travestis actually prefer not to involve other travestis in scandals, since they know that they will have to split their takings with any travesti who helps them extract money from a client.

Despite their individualistic nature, scandals can be analyzed, as I say, as a kind of politics – a micropolitics certainly, and one that produces only small-scale and temporary crinkles in the overall social fabric. But these little crinkles are not altogether without interest. Or irony. For note this very interesting fact: in excoriating and abusing their allegedly heterosexual clients for being effeminate homosexuals, *travestis are drawing on the exact same language that is habitually invoked by others to condemn travestis and to justify violence*

against them. What is perhaps most striking about scandals is that they do not in any way correspond to the noble "hidden transcripts" of resistance that liberal scholars like James Scott expect to find among oppressed groups (Scott 1990). Scandals do nothing to contest or refute the socio-cultural basis of travestis' abject status in contemporary Brazilian society. Quite the opposite -- instead of challenging abjection, scandals cultivate it. And with a skill that is nothing short of dazzling, travestis use scandals as a way of extending the space of their own abjection. A scandal casts that abjection outward like a sticky web; one that ensnares a petrified client, completely against his will.

But not only do scandals compel their recipient to explicitly acknowledge his relationship to a travesti (and listen as his own ontological distance from travestis is challenged and mocked); scandals also force the client to part with more of his money than he had intended. In this way, scandals can be seen as resolutely political actions that result in both recognition *and* redistribution – to use the two terms continually bandied about and debated in philosophical and political science debates about recognition struggles. Furthermore, despite their locally-managed nature, scandals draw on large-scale structures for their intelligibility and their efficacy. The existence and salience of these large-scale structures suggests the possibility that scandals could be tapped and extended into larger, more organized and more collectivized spheres.

Now since the early 1990s, Brazilian travestis have been forming activist groups and making demands for recognition and rights. These demands -- which include protection from brutal police violence, the possibility of using their female names on certain official documents, and the right to appear in public space unharrassed – seem modest and I imagine even self-evident in the eyes of everyone in this room. However, I want to argue that there is something fundamentally *scandalous* about travesti demands. In emerging as a public voice and asserting entitlement to equal citizenship rights with others, we see travesti activism as building on the same kinds of principles as those which structure scandals. In both cases, travesti politics is a politics anchored in shame. It is a politics that invokes and activates specific structures of shame not in order to contest them, but, rather, in order to extend their scope, to imbricate others. In both scandals and their more recognizably activist modalities of political action, travestis transgress public decorum and civil society not by rejecting shame (and championing something like 'Travesti Pride'), but by inhabiting shame as a place from which to interpellate others and thereby incriminate those others. In doing this, travestis are deploying what the literature and queer scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called a "shame-conscious" and "shame-creative" vernacular; one

that uses shame to achieve political goals. This means, in turn, that travesti demands for more money from clients, or for uninhibited access to public space are not what the political philosopher Nancy Fraser has dubbed "affirmative" demands for redress. That is to say, they are not demands that build upon differences between groups in order to claim additional recognition. Instead, travesti demands are *transformative*, in Fraser's terms -- they work to undermine group differentiation (between normal, upstanding citizens, and low-life, perverse travestis) by foregrounding and challenging the generative structures that permit that differentiation to exist in the first place.

So that is what I want to argue in this talk, and now I'm going to give you some background and context. I don't know how much detail you know about travesti lives, but of course being Brazilians, you all do know that travestis are males who refashion their appearance, their self-presentational styles, and their physical bodies in a markedly feminine direction. Sometimes beginning as early as eight or ten years old, males who self-identify as travestis begin growing their hair long, plucking their eyebrows, experimenting with cosmetics, and wearing, whenever they can, feminine or androgynous clothing such as tiny shorts exposing the bottom of their buttocks or T-shirts tied in a knot in above their navel. It is not unusual for boys of this age to also begin engaging in sexual relations with their peers and older males, always in the role of the one who is anally penetrated. By the time these boys are in their early teens, many of them have already either left home, or been expelled from their homes, because their sexual and gender transgressions are usually not tolerated, especially by the boys' fathers. Once they leave home, the overwhelming majority of travestis migrate to cities (if they do not already live in one), where they meet and form friendships with other travestis, and where they begin working as prostitutes. In the company of their travesti friends and colleagues, young travestis learn about estrogen-based hormones, which are available for inexpensive over-the-counter purchase at any of the numerous pharmacies that line the streets in Brazilian cities. At this point, young travestis often begin ingesting large quantities of these hormones. By the time they reach their late teens, many travestis have also begun paying their colleagues to inject numerous liters of industrial silicone into their bodies, in order to round out their knees, thighs, and calves, and in order to augment their breasts, hips, and, most importantly (since this is Brazil), their buttocks.

Despite irrevocable physiological modifications such as these, the overwhelming majority of travestis do not self-identify as women. That is, despite the fact that they live their lives in female clothing, call one another *ela*, and by

female names, and endure tremendous pain to acquire female bodily forms, travestis do not wish to remove their penis, and they do not consider themselves to *be* women. They are not transsexuals. They are, they say, homosexuals -- males who feel "like women" and who ardently desire "men" (i.e. masculine, non-homosexual males). Much of a travesti's time, thought and effort is spent fashioning and perfecting herself as an object of desire for those men.

You also all know that travestis occupy a remarkably visible place in both Brazilian social space and the national cultural imaginary. They exist in all Brazilian cities of any size, and in the large southern cities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, they number in the thousands. They are most flamboyantly visible during Carnival, but even in more mundane contexts and discourses, travestis figure prominently. I have no doubt that you all know a number of the more famous travestis by name, and that you can all cite numerous examples of travestis appearing on television shows, novelas, plays and in fashion spreads.

As it happens, though, famous individuals like Valéria, Rogéria, Thelma Lipp, and of course Roberta Close are not representative of Brazil's travestis. Instead, they are more like exceptions that prove the rule. And the rule is harsh discrimination and ugly public prejudice. The overwhelming majority of travestis live far from the protective glow of celebrity, and they constitute one of the most marginalized and despised groups in Brazilian society. Most travestis (like, of course, most Brazilians) come from working class or poor backgrounds, and many remain poor throughout their lives -- even though many, these days, also travel to Europe and earn enough money working there as prostitutes to return to Brazil and secure their own futures, and those of their mothers. In most Brazilian cities, travestis are harassed so routinely that many of them avoid venturing out onto the street during the day. And at night while at work, they are regularly the victims of violent police brutality and random assassinations by individuals or gangs of men who take it upon themselves to "clean up the streets", as local governments periodically order their police forces to do -- despite the fact that neither cross-dressing nor prostitution are criminal under the Brazilian legal code.

So the nature of the relationship between the Brazilian populace-at-large and travestis is hot-cold, and love-hate: hot and loving enough to propel a handful of travestis to national celebrity, and also to sustain a thriving market in which tens of thousands of travestis are able to support themselves through prostitution. But cold and hateful enough to ensure that the majority of those travestis live in continual anxiety that their right to occupy urban space will be publicly challenged and perhaps violently denied. Jovana Baby, founder and

president of Brazil's first travesti activist organization *Grupo Astral (Associação de Travestis e Liberados de Rio de Janeiro)*, gave me what I consider to be a very accurate summary of popular Brazilian sentiments towards travestis when she once told me that "Brazilians love travestis, as long as they stay on television or on the covers of magazines. A travesti on the street or, God forbid, in the family -- that is another story altogether".

A fascinating dimension of all this is that ambivalent public sentiments toward travestis are mirrored in ambivalent public perceptions about the precise composition of travesti identity. One of the most striking dimensions of the Brazilian preoccupation with travestis is that despite the habitual presence of travestis in both what we might see as the 'high' contexts of popular culture and the 'low' contexts of seeing them on city streets and in the crime pages of the local newspaper, there appears to be no clear consensus about what exactly travestis are. In the press, travestis are sometimes referred to as 'he', and sometimes as 'she'. Some commentators insist that travestis want to be women; others insist that they self-identify as men. Still others, especially those commentators influenced by postmodernist ideas, claim that travestis reject identity altogether. They are usually depicted as homosexuals, but occasionally this identity is elided, and they are identified, instead, as transsexuals. Expressed in structuralist terms, the result of these various depictions of travesti identity is that the signifier 'travesti' is continually deferred and never finally coalesces with a specific signified. This means that the Brazilian public can never be certain that it knows what 'travesti' means from one context to the next.

All of this is evident from the language used to discuss travestis, and I want to briefly examine one example in detail to illustrate the kind of indeterminacy to which we are drawing attention here. On January 7, 1996 (de Carvalho 1996), the newspaper *A Tribuna*, from the city of Santos in the state of São Paulo, ran a full-page story about an individual named Márcia Muller. Muller is identified as a travesti in the headline, in a head-shot photo captioned "*O travesti Márcia Muller*", and throughout the text. The story appeared under the headline "*Travesti passa 45 dias preso na Cadeia Feminina*". In bold print and large lettering directly under the rubric, the following text appears (the underlining is mine, to highlight the gender ambiguity that is constructed throughout the article):

O que teria levado os policiais da DISE a imaginar que o travesti Márcia Muller fosse realmente mulher e a prendessem na Cadeia Feminina de Santos? O pseudo-hermafrodita parece mesmo com uma mulher ou

existe apenas uma pequena semelhança? O terrível engano cometido pela polícia já está sanado, mas teria desdobramentos desagradáveis se perdurasse. As presas, com certeza, protestaram contra a intimidade de freqüentar o mesmo sanitário do que Márcia, sendo ela homem. Pela primeira vez, na região, a Justiça se defronta com tamanho problema.

The article reports that thirty-eight year-old Márcia Muller was arrested with eighty grams of cocaine and taken to the local police station. According to the newspaper, “*Na delegacia, durante revista realizada por um policial, foi percebido o órgão sexual masculino do acusado, porém como ele foi convicto em dizer que era hermafrodita e apresentava RG, CNH e talão de cheques como Márcia Muller, seu destino for a cadeia feminina*”.

“*Na cadeia*” the article continues, “*ficou um clima de especulação. O assunto era discutida em todas as celas. Algumas presas acreditavam que ela era hermafrodita, mas a maioria desconfiava que a nova colega fosse mesmo um travesti*”.

One of the inmates who did not want Márcia in the jail contacted a criminal lawyer. This lawyer could do nothing, the newspaper explains, because “*a moça* [i.e. Márcia] *estava recolhida sob a custódia da Justiça*”. In order to move Márcia out of the Women’s Jail, a court order was needed. The lawyer brought the case to the attention of a judge, who had Márcia examined by a medical doctor.

“*O medico comprovou, após diversos exames, inclusive de toque, que Márcia era homem mesmo*”. But at this point, Márcia’s lawyer intervened and argued that if his client was transferred to a men’s jail, her life would be in danger. In the end, Márcia was moved to the men’s jail, but placed in a cell that contained “*mais dois travestis*”.

The final paragraph of the article contains the following coda, which, given the outcome of the doctor’s examination, does more to add to the mystery of Márcia’s identity than it does to resolve it:

Márcia Muller tem todos os trejeitos de mulher, apesar dos pés grandes e mãos grosseiras. Não fosse sua voz desafinada e um ligeiro requebro no andar, sua conduta se confundia com a de uma mulher.

So even by the end of this 1,400 word report, Márcia Muller’s sexed and gendered identity remains unresolved. Despite the fact that the article makes an explicit reference to Márcia’s “*órgão sexual masculino*”, and to the medical

examination that concluded that Márcia was “*era homem mesmo*”, she is referred to with a masculine pronoun only once throughout the entire text (in the context of having had her male sexual organ “*percibido*”). In all other cases where gendered grammatical pronouns, articles and adjectives are used, Márcia is consistently referred to with female forms. At one point she is even called “*a moça*”. In the series of questions prefacing the article, Márcia is called a “pseudo-hermaphrodite”, even though it is later determined that she is in fact not one. And even though it would seem that the issue of Márcia’s sex/gender is finally resolved with the Court order to transfer her to the Men’s Jail, the closing coda of the article reopens the issue, ending on a note of provocative indeterminacy.

In the *Fantastico* interview with Ronaldo, one sees this clearly – with only one exception, Ronaldo consistently refers to the travestis as ‘ela’ and with feminine grammatical forms saying things like ‘*a outra*’ and ‘*a terceira*’. Patrícia Poeta, in contrast, consistently uses masculine forms, and refers to the travestis as ‘*ele*’ throughout the interview. Neither Ronaldo or Poeta give any evidence of being aware of this discrepancy. I think we can all appreciate why Ronaldo might want to portray the travestis as female, although even this is interesting – he could just as easily have chosen masculine forms to highlight the deception that he claims he was subjected to.

This kind of public uncertainty or ambiguity about what travestis are and who qualifies as a travesti that newspaper articles like this promote lays the foundation for what scholars like Charles Taylor (1992) and Axel Honneth (1995, 1996) would identify as the “misrecognition” of travestis. In other words, by keeping the referent of ‘travesti’ vague, articles like the one about Márcia Muller encourage people to not recognize their particular identity. And such a lack of recognition is not trivial or merely insulting -- both Taylor and Honneth argue at length that it is pernicious and profoundly harmful.

When it comes to travestis, these scholars are, of course, in a sense, right. Uncertainty about Márcia Muller’s identity led to her being subjected to invasive physical examinations, and had her lawyer not succeeded in getting her placed in a cell with two other travestis, she would have been in real physical danger by being transferred to a men’s prison. A more politically significant example of the harmful nature of travesti misrecognition occurred several years ago, in an interview with the then-mayor of Rio de Janeiro, Luis Paulo Conde, in the monthly gay magazine *Sui Generis* (nr. 23, 1997). In an otherwise generally affirmative and sympathetic interview about homosexuality, the mayor suddenly announces that he finds travestis “offensive” (*O que agride é o travesti*). The reason? “A travesti doesn’t admit to being gay. He dresses in women’s clothes to

be accepted by society. When he puts on the clothes, it's to be accepted by society. Since society doesn't accept homosexuality, he creates a woman so that he will be accepted". Now, if leave aside the mayor's intriguing suggestion that Brazilians might be more tolerant of men in dresses than they are of homosexuals, here we have a case of misrecognition in which mayor Conde denies the homosexual component of travesti identity, thereby necessarily disqualifying them from any of the rights or protections that he might eventually be willing to grant homosexuals.

But while public ambivalence about travesti identity is indeed harmful in many of the ways discussed by Taylor and Honneth, it not *only* harmful; and this is a point that seems likely to be missed by the analytical frameworks elaborated by those scholars. For besides constituting damage, public uncertainty about the precise nature (and hence, the precise boundaries) of travesti identity *also* generates a space of ambiguity that travestis can use to their advantage. If travesti identity remains fuzzy, it becomes possible to suggest that the identity, or at least key dimensions of the identity, is/are not specific to travestis, but are, instead, shared by others who do not self-identify as travestis. Hence, ambivalence provides travestis with a wedge that they can use to insert themselves into the identificatory constellations of others, and, in doing so, compel a reconsideration and perhaps even a reconfiguration of those constellations.

A forced realignment of identity is what we believe travesti scandals accomplish. Scandals publicly accuse a travesti's client of being a depraved effeminate homosexual, one who is so pathetically abject that he actually pays money to be abased at the hands of a person who herself is at the very nadir of sociocultural hierarchy.

The reason why scandals work (that is, the reason why they nine times out of ten produce the desired result of more money) is because travestis are right. Or, rather, scandals work because travestis *might be right*. The great majority of a travesti's clients would certainly hotly disagree with travesti assertions that they are depraved effeminate perverts. However, because the boundaries of travesti identity are not neatly demarcated or entirely clear-cut for most people, the possibility remains open that travesti ontology does not occupy the place of the absolute Other, in relation to the public-at-large. On the contrary, because the contours of travesti identity are ambiguously outlined in relation to others, there is a distinct possibility that travestis might be right when they point a finger and assert affinity with a particular individual. Especially if that individual did what the travesti says he did (and he may or

may not have -- who can know for sure?), public perception of the man will change, and he will be resignified by anyone who hears (or hears about) the scandal as someone who does indeed share a(n until that moment) secret affiliation with his travesti accuser.

So travesti scandals raise a specter of ontological similarity between the travesti and her client. But they depend for their effectiveness on the simultaneous assertion of the shameful nature of that ontology ("*Tome vergonha seu maricono safada! Se manca maricono desgraçada!*"). Shame here becomes the channel through which identification flows; the contours within which it takes form – it is very interesting to note how many times Ronaldo uses the words ‘*vergonha*’ and ‘*envergonhado*’ in his interview on Fantastico (4 times in 15 minutes).

The literature and queer scholar Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has addressed this identity-delineating power of shame in her essay on the politics of performativity. Sedgwick argues that whereas guilt is an affect that focuses on the suffering of another (and the self's blame for that suffering), shame concerns the suffering of the self at the hands of another. Furthermore, while guilt is a bad feeling attached to what one does, shame is a bad feeling attaching to what one is. "[O]ne therefore is *something*, in experiencing shame", Sedgwick explains (1993:12). But that is not all. For conferred by another, shame always responds. It *performs*, as Sedgwick phrases it. Often, embarrassment, a blush, an aversion of eyes, a turning away -- these are the responses, the performances, of shame. In the case of scandals, shame performs by compelling acquiescence to the travesti's demands for more money.

Sedgwick suggests that this performative dimension of shame has overtly political consequences. In order to better understand the import of this suggestion, let us first contrast it with the way in which shame has figured in the work of another scholar who has recently discussed shame and politics. In his writings on recognition struggles, philosopher Axel Honneth (1995:256-260; 1996:131-139) identifies shame as the "missing psychological link" (1996:135) that allows us to understand how economic privation or social repression can motivate people to engage in political struggle. Shame, in other words, explains how a subject can be moved from suffering to action. Honneth argues that shame is raised when one's interactional partners refuse to grant one the respect to which one believes oneself entitled. When this occurs, the disrespected subject is brutally brought up against the normally unreflected-upon fact that it is dependent on the recognition of others for its own sense of self. The realization that the other's view of the self is, in Honneth's terms, "distorted", constitutes the

motivational impetus to identify specific others as the source of oppression, and, hence, as the target of political struggle. In Honneth's framework, shame is thus the psychological bedrock of political action. And the psychological goal of political struggle is the elimination of shame.

Sedgwick's view is different. Like Honneth, Sedgwick argues that shame in the self is conferred by others, and that the experience of shame is a constitutive dimension of the identities of oppressed people. Unlike Honneth, however, Sedgwick stresses that shame is a crucial component in *all* identity formation. "[O]ne of the things that anyone's character or personality is", she insists, "is a record of the highly individual histories by which the fleeting emotion of shame has instituted far more durable, structural changes in one's relational and interpretive strategies toward both self and others" (1993: 12-13). In other words, all of our socializing experiences in which our behavior and expression was/is controlled with sharp reprimands like "People are looking at you!" are important nexuses in the construction of our identities. This implies that forms of shame cannot be considered as "distinct 'toxic' parts of groups or individual identity that can be excised" through consciousness raising or recognition struggles (1993: 13). Instead, shame is integral to the very processes by which identity itself is formed; which means that the extinction of shame would be, in effect, the extinction of identity itself. Therefore, instead of fantasizing about the end of shame, Sedgwick proposes that shame be acknowledged, embraced, and put to transformative political use. In this framework, the goal is not the end of shame. The goal is the refiguration of shame as "a near inexhaustible source of transformational energy" (1993: 4), and its creative deployment in political struggles.

This creative deployment can occur in a variety of registers, many of them, Sedgwick speculates, as yet unimagined. But travestis certainly hit on one of them when they began to claim shame as a place from which they might speak and hail others, asserting power to resignify those others, and compelling them to respond in wished-for ways. In scandals, what gets redesignated are the public (and sometimes perhaps also the privately-felt) identities of a number of individual men. For a long time it seems that this was enough for travestis. Nowadays, though, some travestis have decided that they have bigger fish to fry. Instead of contenting themselves with redefining the public perceptions of a few men who pay them for sex, these travestis are turning their attention to redefining the public perceptions of more consequential entities, such as the concept of Brazilian citizenship and the nature of human rights. These are the

targets that get focalized in travestis' more recognizably activist modes of political activism.

I really only want to say a few words about this, so that you'll understand the links I want to make between *escândalos* and activism. To understand this, we need to understand the relationship between travesti political activism and AIDS. Jovana Baby, whom I mentioned earlier, and who used to be the single most visible travesti spokesperson in Brazil, once told me that travesti activism has "ridden on the back of AIDS". By that she meant partly that it was only in the wake of the AIDS epidemic that travestis began to organize politically. But more importantly, what Jovana Baby was drawing attention to by saying that travesti activism has "ridden on the back of AIDS" was that travesti groups who receive any kind of funding for staff, programs or venues receive that funding because of AIDS.

In a crucial sense, this is entirely appropriate, because as sex workers, travestis were particularly hard hit by the AIDS epidemic. It is difficult to estimate the number of travestis who have died of HIV-related illness since statistics on AIDS in Brazil do not report on travestis – travestis are subsumed under the category "men" and "homosexual transmission." Travestis are agreed, however, that they have lost innumerable friends and colleagues to AIDS, and they are emphatic that the transmission of HIV continues to constitute a profound threat.

Travesti involvement in the Brazilian response to AIDS dates to the mid-1980s, when the travesti Brenda Lee founded a support house/hospice for travestis living with HIV and AIDS in São Paulo. The National AIDS Program expanded dramatically during the in the early 1990s, and it also had a commitment to the distribution of condoms and safer-sex education within "special populations" such as men who sex with men and sexworkers. In this context and with this money, the number of travesti-led and travesti-related programs in Brazil has grown from a handful in the early 1990s to approximately fifty today.

Now an association in the public mind between travestis and AIDS dates to the beginnings of the Brazilian AIDS epidemic. One of the first published reports about AIDS in Brazil, reported the research of a Brazilian clinician who claimed that the recently discovered epidemic could be traced to the injection of female hormones and "infected" silicone by travestis (Daniel 1993:33). As a result of this history, an already well-established connection between travestis and AIDS is reinforced every time a travesti group receives government funding, since these resources are inevitably tied to HIV prevention work. In political

activist contexts, this continually foregrounded link between travestis and AIDS is obviously restricting in some ways. But the fact that travesti claims are channeled and heard through an AIDS discourse gives travesti political actions a particular character and potential in which shame emerges as a key position from which travestis speak and demand hearing.

Travesti political strategies have largely been centered upon highlighting and reterritorializing shame. Whenever travestis organize a protest march, which they do for example at the conclusion of every annual meeting called the *Encontro Nacional de Travestis e Liberados que Trabalham com AIDS*, and which local groups occasionally do in their home cities to protest police brutality – whenever these protest marches are organized, many of the protestors take care to wear their most outrageous attire—revealing lingerie-style clothing that they would normally only display while working the street late at night. In other words, in these contexts travestis play up, rather than down, their difference from others, and fill public space with their most scandalous avatars. Just like a scandal turns space inside out by making the most intimate interactions public, travestis walking down a city’s main stream in broad daylight in tight bodices and miniscule shorts resignify that space and saturate it with an intimacy that refuses to be contained by normative, oppressive notions of privacy. This kind of public manifestation of normally concealed persons and intimacies is a striking example of what sociologist Steven Seidman calls queer politics. “Queer politics is scandalous politics,” Seidman argues, writing generally, but in language that is highly felicitous to the point we are making here, “queers materialize as the dreaded homosexual other imagined by straight society that had invisibly and silently shaped straight life but now do so openly, loudly, and unapologetically.”

In travesti protest marches, this loud unapologetic body of the homosexual other is significantly juxtaposed with a particular kind of linguistic form. What in my experience is interestingly absent from travesti street demonstrations is language and placards asserting things like “*Travesti Orgulho*” or “*Orgulhosa de Ser Travesti*.” On the contrary, on the surface of things, the language of travesti public protests is not particularly outrageous: “*Travestis são seres humanos*” a placard might propose, modestly. “*Travesti é cidadão*,” a chant might proclaim. Nothing seriously scandalous here, one might think. However, the scandal in this case lies precisely in the very straightforwardness and simplicity of the message. For if travestis are human beings, they deserve to be accorded respect and human rights, like other human beings. And if they are citizens, then the very concept of citizenship has been revised. Linguistically, what gets foregrounded in these activist manifestations is sameness with non-

travestis. Non-linguistically, however, stark difference from non-travestis is conveyed through dress, demeanor, and the sheer fact that so many travestis gather together in one place at one time. So what is happening here is that at their most different, their most shameless, travestis assert that they are most *like* everyone else.

Once again, this brings up back to scandals. In the same way they do when they challenge the ontological difference between their clients and themselves by shouting that the client is just as abject as they are, travesti political activism refuses what Nancy Fraser calls “affirmative” demands for redress. That is, travesti activism refuses to build upon and cement the difference between groups in order to claim additional recognition without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them. Instead, travesti demands subvert group differentiation by declaring sameness from a position of difference. In this way, they draw attention to and challenge the generative structures that produce particular configurations of hierarchically ranked differentiation in the first place. In the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s terminology, this is a “political act proper”, which he defines as “not simply something that works well within the framework of existing relations, but something that *changes the very framework that determines how things work*”

The question that remains to be asked is whether the scandalous acts of travesti activists constitute a politically effective strategy. Are travesti assertions of shared ontology politically transformative? Do they produce desirable results? Do they work?

That, I think, is difficult to say, and this is what I would like to discuss with you. Travesti political activism is still nascent and developing in Brazil, and it is still far too bound up with the initiatives and actions of charismatic individuals to constitute anything even approaching a coherent political movement. The overwhelming majority of travestis have little political consciousness, and they are much more concerned with being beautiful, earning money, and travelling to Italy to become what they call *européias* (that is, rich and sophisticated “European” travestis) than they are in participating in activist protest marches or travesti political organizations. Furthermore, despite the enormous visibility accorded them in the Brazilian press (which is sometimes positive, even though it does remain heavily slanted towards images of travestis as vaguely comic, but hard-nosed and dangerous criminals), travestis continue to face grave discrimination from politicians like the mayor of Rio de Janeiro, who, it will be recalled, is of the opinion that travestis are confused cowards who dress in women’s clothes only to be accepted by society. Travestis are also openly

disparaged and discriminated by Christian churches of all denominations, and by large segments of the Brazilian population who find them scary and shameless.

It is also a problem for travesti political organizing that travestis continue to face grave discrimination from some of their seemingly most likely political allies, namely gay men and lesbians. Travestis are at the margins of Brazil's gay culture, pink economy, and gay political movement. And as you all know or can easily guess, many Brazilian gay men and lesbians are hostile toward travestis because they think travestis give homosexuals a bad name.

Given the often antagonistic nature of travesti/gay interactions, it remains to be seen whether the realities of travesti difference and the goal of full citizenship can be reconciled. And if travestis face major challenges in working with gay groups with whom they share certain affinities and previous collaborations, then what is the likelihood that they will be able to reach out and form new partnerships with other socially oppressed groups, many of whom hold travestis in even more disdain? Even if those political alliances could be formed in ways that respect the autonomy of travestis and travesti activist organizations, what will happen to the kind of scandals – the small-scale kind of mundane, everyday scandals that are so important to individual travestis as a means of securing their income? Will travesti political activism, as it becomes more successful, move away from scandal and towards respectability? What consequences will this have for those travestis who can least afford to give up scandals and the income that they provide? Will travesti political activism come to require travestis to renounce—or at a minimum downplay—the very qualities (i.e. gender/sexual ambivalence, scandalous acts) that are central to travesti social identities and scandals? What will this matter, and to whom?

A longer version of this talk, co-authored with Charles Klein, has appeared in the book Recognition Struggles and Social Movements: Contested Identities, Agency and Power, edited by Barbara Hobson. 2003, Cambridge: CUP, 215-38. A shorter version will also appear in Gay Shame, edited by David Halperin and Valerie Traub, University of Chicago Press. This is the only version that contains the Portuguese original of the newspaper article about Márcia Muller.

References mentioned in talk

- de Carvalho, Antonio Maria Pires 1996. Travesti passa 45 dias preso na Cadeia Feminina, *A Tribuna*, 7 de Janeiro. Santos, São Paulo, D-4.
- Fraser, Nancy 1997. *Justice interruptus: critical reflections on the "postsocialist" condition*. London & New York: Routledge.

- Honneth, Axel 1995. *The fragmented world of the social: essays in social and political philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
1996. *The struggle for recognition: the moral grammar of social conflicts*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Scott, James 1990. *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky 1993. Queer performativity: Henry James's 'Art of the novel'. *GLQ* 1(1): 1-16.
- Seidman, Steven 1997. *Difference troubles: queering social theory and sexual politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Charles 1992. *Multiculturalism and the "politics of recognition"*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Žižek, Slavoj 1999. *The ticklish subject: the absent center of political ontology*. Verso: London and New York.