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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.



Sexual diversity in the erotic market: gender, interaction and subjectivities in a suburban nightclub in Rio de Janeiro*

Leandro de Oliveira **

In this article, based on fieldwork conducted between 2004 and 2005 (Oliveira, 2006),¹ I study the dynamics of erotic interaction at a nightclub located in the suburbs of the city of Rio de Janeiro, frequented by a predominantly lower class public, patronized by *travestis*, cross-dressing gays and their sexual partners.² This nightclub is unique in the *carioca* GLS circuit, recognized by its patrons as the only club where “men don’t pay a cover”. Door fees are only charged for patrons whose gender performances are classified as “feminine”. Within the club, there are relatively well-lit public areas, labeled “back alleys”, used by clients to engage in sexual practices with one or more partners. Paying (“feminine”) patrons claim they frequent the club because there it is possible to establish erotic interactions with individuals classified as “men” or “real men,” who are excused from paying entrance fees.

The social networks delineated at this space make different forms of exchange possible between the various patrons, involving the accrual of equivalent quantities of sex, money, prestige and other (in)tangible matters. In this sense, these networks can be metaphorically referred to as a “market”: a circuit where various categories of people act as givers and receivers of pleasurable experiences. In this article I seek to examine how codes of exchange and forms of participation are established within

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² I use the term *cross-dressing*, a category alien to the universe under study, to refer to the practice of wearing clothes of the opposite sex without a necessary association to specific manifestations of sexuality. Gays who practice cross-dressing in the context of this ethnography are called *bicha-boys* (literally, ‘teenage-like fags’) by *travestis*. The category encompasses 1) gays who adopt a masculine performance; 2) gays that dress like women; 3) individuals designated as male at birth who are taking their first steps along the moral career path of the *travesti*. The *bicha-boy* label can also appear in cross-dressers’ self-representation strategies, although those whom I talked to prefer to present themselves as “gays.” One can thus see how *bicha-boy* evolves through performance, the adoption of a feminine name in specific contexts and the employment of certain types of clothing and accessories. I employ the category “cross-dresser” here to refer to individuals who cross-dress but do not remodel their bodies in the manner typical of *travestis*, who in turn make use of use of hormones and silicone. In the present article, the term “cross-dresser” encompasses a broad range of self-representation strategies and manners of subjective investment.

Translator’s Note: *Travesti* is a Brazilian emic category. It references male-born individuals who live as female, engaging in more or less permanent body changes, usually involving the use of hormones and silicone, but who do not modify their genitals surgically.

these particular networks. I begin my analysis with a theoretical digression regarding erotic exchanges, which I then problematize utilizing ethnographic material. My goal is to explain the possible linkages between flows of exchange and the constitution of gendered subjects.

Markets, careers and “sexual” orientations

Towards the end of the 1970s, an article by sociologist Michel Pollak (1986) suggested that the networks formed by homosexual men in the years of “sexual liberation” apparently constituted a model for autonomized sex. According to Pollak, the networks employed to find sexual partners operated according to the logic of a market in which “orgasms were exchanged for orgasms.” This sexual market was understood by particular social segments as an idealized form of sexuality. Cut loose from considerations of kinship and social obligation, it furnished answers to the problem of how sexual and affective life could be managed outside of the framework and pressures of stable conjugal relationships. Assuming that “all clandestine life demands organization in order to reduce risks and maximize the efficiency of social action,” Pollak suggests that the stigma attached to homosexual practices exacerbated the separation between sexual and affective practices; making transactions in the homosexual market largely depend on rational calculations. The logic underlying these erotic exchanges would thus operate to minimize investments and maximize orgasmic return (Pollak, 1986, p. 57).

Networks of homosexual sociability can thus be considered as a privileged case wherein sexuality is “disembedded” and relatively freed from wider social concerns.³ Pollak expresses skepticism towards “sexological” explanations of sexuality that represent these networks as a form of “liberation” for the individuals enmeshed in them. He seeks to demonstrate how a process of collective rationalization, at play in the formation of these circuits, can generate a new set of social norms which can be just as restrictive or limiting as the older ones. Pollak’s formulation are persuasive to conceive the sociological outlines of networks of sexual exchange during the period when the “homosexual community” was gaining.⁴ However, Pollak does not take his critique of the sexological representation of sexuality as far as he might. He assumes that the exchanges he studies are regulated by “the accounting of pleasure that has the orgasm its basic unit” (Pollak, 1986, p. 57). He seems to presume that these units of measurement (orgasm, pleasure) are not in and of themselves plural, or capable of

³ Duarte (2004, English version in the volume) links this idea of “disembeddedness” modern Western historical process whereby the ideal of a subject disconnected and uprooted from social circuits is constituted. Anthropological studies of sexuality, expressing romantic influences, have a “disposition to re-embeddedness” in which the disembeddedness of sexuality, characteristic of Western thought, is criticized and displaced by confrontation with other cultural realities, yet not effectively suppressed.

⁴ Pollak’s empirical material comes from two quantitative studies, one in Germany and the other dealing with homosexuals in San Francisco in the 1960s-70s.

being invested with different erotic meanings in different situations as they interact with other social markers such as gender, age, class, etc.⁵ The author recognizes that other social factors (economic, cultural and esthetic) have an impact on erotic exchange, but only as “impurities” that somehow pollute erotic markets, whose functioning principles are held to be relatively similar in different contexts.

Pollak (1986) links transactions in the erotic marketplace to the elaboration of subjectivity, suggesting that this is where the *homosexual career* is constituted. Pollak applied the notion of “career” in order to speak about phenomena that can be grouped under the rubric of “sexuality,” as heuristic resource useful to reconstitute to those experiences qualified as “sexual” certain interpersonal elements which have tended to be erased by modern Western thought on the subject.⁶ By affirming that the homosexual career is delineated through participation in a “market,” Pollak emphasizes learning dimension involved in the recognition of specific sexual desires and in the assimilation of techniques designed to gain partners, both acquired by participation in these networks. Although cleavages are introduced by factors such as race and class, which imply different degrees of market participation and different reactions to its norms, subjects are generally supposed to enter the erotic market in conditions of formal equivalency as “consumers” and “suppliers” of “orgasms” within a relatively clandestine sphere of activity. In other words, Pollak’s model presumes that the *degree* of participation might vary from individual to individual, but the *ways* in which individuals participate are essentially the same. There would be a minimum level of shared experience around the recognition of desires, the maintenance of secrecy, and socialization towards a “collective” destiny which demarcates the specific nature of the *homosexual career*.

Attaching the prefix “homo” to the concept of sexual careers introduces a problem which I do not aspire to solve, but which is nevertheless relevant in the context of discussing exchanges in the erotic market. It is the dilemma encountered by Natividade (2003; 2007) in dealing with the “homosexual careers” of evangelical Christian men. Although Natividade’s informants in certain cases report that they mainly or exclusively engage in affective or bodily contact with persons of the same sex, some of them reject the label “homosexual,” defining themselves as “bisexual” or “heterosexuals struggling against homosexuality”. As that ethnographic case demonstrates, the elaboration of the self might also imply the construction of discourses regarding one’s own sexual

⁵ Pollak’s program could render productive insights in the light of recent research on consumption and market phenomena. The rise of consumption in modernity understood as an effect of cultural attention to the emotions, desires and imaginations of consumers. It intensifies subjects’ anxieties, feelings and sensibilities beyond rational calculation (Campbell, 1995; 2006). In this perspective, the recent apparent liberation of sexuality from traditional restrictions can be understood as part of a device for the incitement of sensibility, which operates by placing increased value on sensory experiences, excitement and the emotions (Duarte, 1999). This critique, however, goes beyond the objectives of the present article.

⁶ The genealogy of the notion of “career” for the analysis of relationships between individuals and society in different spheres of activity began with the Chicago School’s notion of *moral career*. This term refers to the transformations that take place in the construction of one’s sense of self in the course of a given biographical trajectory: “the regular sequence of changes that career entails in a person’s sense of self and in his frameworks of imagery schemes he uses to judge himself and others” (Goffman, 1961, p. 128). Further elaborations of the notion of *sexual careers* seek to circumscribe these changes in one’s relation to oneself, focusing on the subjective elaboration of events which are lived in the sphere of erotic interaction.

orientation which collide with the criteria employed by the researcher to classify their informants' biographical trajectories.⁷

As Heilborn emphasizes (1999), the analysis of sexual careers presupposes the recovery of “a path of experiences within the realm of affection and physical contact with people.” It makes possible comparisons between biographical trajectories and distinct cultural scenarios. One of the merits of this approach is that it allows shifting focus away from the problem of a subjects' sexual “identity” or orientation, and towards partial and contingent retrospective constructions of lived experience. Heilborn addresses the issue that “sexuality doesn't have the same degree of importance for all subjects,” arguing that “this variation is an effect of social processes that originate in the value that sexuality has in various social niches and in the specific social scripts that people employ” (Heilborn, 1999:40). The implications of this observation for the investigation of erotic forms that, up until recently, have been referred to as “expressions of sexual diversity” have yet to be explored. They point to a series of problems that are pertinent to the intersection of factors such as class, gender and erotic preference. How to deal with the incongruence all too often apparent between a given biographical trajectory and the subjective elaboration of that trajectory? And how to think about the relationship between sexual “careers” and “markets”?

This incongruence becomes more acute as the social field of sexual diversity gains substance and density, possibly projecting around itself new shadowed areas and “new marginalities.”⁸ For the past decade in Brazil one has witnessed the constitution of “sexual identities” in the political sphere, associated to the fragmentation of the domain of “non-heterosexual” erotic subjectivities, which had until then been encompassed by the rubric “homosexuality”. Gays, lesbians, travestis, transsexuals, transgenders and bisexuals (to name but a few of the more common categories) widened the arch of possible, recognizable market of possible subject positions intelligible within the universe of “peripheral” sexualities. They also brought increased complexity to the social scripts employed in the processes of elaborating subjectivity. This relative erosion of “homosexuality” as an all-encompassing category has presented a challenge to academic analysis. In the context of socio-anthropological understandings of “homosexuality,” something similar to the process identified by Lévi-Strauss (1962) with regards to totemism and hysteria is happening: at the very moment in which scholars are beginning to contemplate the phenomenon in all its socio-cultural complexity, the

⁷ Similar refractions of the norm of sexual orientation have already been noted in other works. Particularly illustrative in this respect is Soares' material (2002:137) regarding the trial of a Brazilian national in New Jersey charged with murdering a U.S. American [both males]. The accused admitted to maintaining sexual relations with the victim, but vehemently denied the prosecutor's claim that he was “homosexual”—a negation that is hardly intelligible according to the North American cultural codes that were in play during this case.

⁸ The use of the concept of “sexual diversity” to refer to “non-heterosexual” populations appears to have accompanied the dissemination of the category “GLS” (gays, lesbians and sympathizers) in the Brazilian market, beginning in 1994 (França, 2006). It would be pertinent to investigate the inflections that this expression takes in its contexts of use and what modalities of practice/people might be implicitly or explicitly excluded from the applications of this broad definition.

ethnographic “ground” is giving way beneath their feet. One no longer knows precisely which practices, subjectivities, or social networks can be included within the category “homosexuality,” given that an ever-more pluralist scenario is unfolding. Furthermore, new forms of erotic elaboration question the very boundaries between the sexes (man and woman) and genders (masculine and feminine).

By referring to this population as subjects who express or live different manifestations of sexual diversity, we can avoid the problems that the erosion of “homosexuality” as a social category has created for the notion of sexual orientation. Certainly, we cannot lose sight of the political advantages of the expression “sexual orientation,” which make its reiteration a strategic necessity for actors engaged in the defense of the rights of sexual minorities. The legitimization of erotic behavior with same-sex partners as something beyond manipulation by free will, and not pathological, makes possible the formulation of demands for recognition in the political sphere, neutralizing the stigmas and asymmetries which have burdened the history of subjects who express their sexuality in these terms (Câmara, 2002). I suspect, however, that the uncritical use of the notion of “sexual orientation” may create more insidious forms of social control than pure and simple exclusion. In my attempt to explain some of these possible effects, I would like to address an inconvenient “epistemology” that has emerged in the uses of this concept, which makes it prone to a certain type of naturalization. In particular I refer here to the tendency to establish two or three different types of sexual orientation and the correlated belief that all adult subjects in a given culture possess one of these which, although it might change during an individual's life, while active is nevertheless solidly and immutably that one orientation.

Câmara (2002) observes that, in the political disputes over the inclusion of language seeking to eliminate discrimination based on “sexual orientation” in the Brazilian Constitution of the 1980s, this expression emphasized the socially constructed character of desire, in opposition to the perception that sexual behavior was the result of biological determination and individual will. Rhetorically, however, “sexual orientation” was presented as a neutral “fact” that should be taken for granted. As it appears in a document by *Triângulo Rosa* (Pink Triangle), a gay activist group, “orientation is a neutral term that expresses a fact, without further moral or medical implications. It signifies a direction. Nothing more, nothing less” (apud Câmara, 2002:97). “Sexual orientation” thus tends to be employed as if it expressed a state which can be objectively comprehended. In this sense, it becomes a common measure of erotic experience, leveling other distinctions between subjects and assuming the tone of evident fact. It does not consider the possibility that, in certain contexts, the sex of the chosen partners might be a detail created by interaction, invested with greater or lesser importance, but not necessarily the key sign through which a specific subjectivity is constituted. Underpinning this use of “sexual orientation” a very specific cultural assumption is implicit: the certainty that people possess a *single* and *true* sex (to employ Michel Foucault's (1980) expression).

The belief in the existence of two sexes, set apart by incommensurate difference and anchored in the physical facts of the body (Lacqueur, 1990) is implicit as a premise by the tripartite classificatory system of “heterosexual,” “homosexual” and “bisexual” (Costa, 1996). In this system, the preference for partners of a given “sex” (indelibly written upon the materiality of a body) is understood as the most relevant behavioral trait, regardless of how subjects elaborate their own erotic subjectivities. A rhetorical question might clarify the limitations of the indiscriminate projections cast by this classificatory system: what is the *true sex* of a travesti? And a second question might follow, pertinent to the erotic markets in which travestis circulate: what is the sexual orientation of their partners: homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual? Do they engage in “homosexual practices” without developing a homosexual “identity” or “subjectivity”? What can we gain from following this spiraling set of abstractions, based as it is upon the shards of dubious taxonomies?

To question a given subject’s sexual orientation is a performative act which produces this suspect object—anatomical-physiological “sex”—as a productive effect of the interrogation itself.⁹ Does this mean, then, that there are people with no sexual orientation? Once again, this sort of question is fatally compromised by forms of thinking that are problematic, at best. Sexual orientation should not be understood as a substantive attribute that can be “present” or “absent” in people, but rather as a normative apparatus, an alignment of distinct practices and discourses that converge upon a certain theme, constructing and regulating subjects. If we can employ it in this fashion today, it is only because of the paradoxes created by the increased visibility of subjects who expose certain fissures in the myth of human sexual dimorphism. The point that should interest us here is not whether this or that person “actually” has a “sexual orientation” (as if this expression were a neutral tool capable of objectively describing a certain set of phenomena), but whether or not social expectations exist that compel subjects to make elaborations about themselves using these terms.

This normativity which incites the subject to adopt a self definition according to their “true sex” and the “true sex” of their partners (a double injunction to tell the truth) is elaborated through specific networks of circulation of sexual partners, exercising an effect upon the perception and management of sexual conduct. In certain social networks, it is possible that the norm of sexual orientation is impacted by local forms of regulation of erotic exchange—circuits which can more or less be described by the metaphor of the “market” and which maybe constitute, as an effect of consumer-producer activity in this market, “careers” which cannot be adequately measured according to sexual criteria alone.

⁹ I have appropriated an elaboration of Judith Butler’s regarding performativity (1993): the hypothesis that subjects’ material and corporeal subjectivity are the sedimented effects of performances repeated in a flow of continuously re-contextualized citations (Oliveira, 2006; 2007).

My research into the erotic intentions of travestis, gay cross-dressers and their sexual partners furnishes material that can usefully illustrate this point. This was collected in a context where sociability was distinctively geared towards sex. In other situations and with other subjects, perhaps, the discourses regarding eroticism and erotic exchange, which I relate below, would be organized in a different manner. However, at least within the walls of the nightclub, the categories “homosexuality”, “heterosexuality” and “bisexuality” were not spontaneously referred to by informants. At the time, I felt that it would be difficult to investigate the meanings that those categories took on,¹⁰ as the following conversation with Fernanda,¹¹ a 30 year-old travesti, shows:

Leandro: You know that the *men* who come to this club are bisexual?

Fernanda: Ah, maybe some are. But most are *active*.

Leandro: How so? Aren't bisexuals active?

Fernanda: No. A bisexual doesn't *give* and *eat*.¹²

The cultural “misunderstanding” related above revolves around the fact that Fernanda seems to not relate the term *bisexual* to the “biological” sex of the partners of the men in question, but rather to their sexual practices. More troublesome than resignifications of this type were my suspicions as to the intensity of the performative effects caused by my attempts to draw the clubs' patrons into a discussion about their “sexual orientation.” Witness, for example, the following dialogue with Vanessa, a 35 year-old travesti:

Vanessa: When I started coming to the club, I wasn't a travesti yet.

Leandro: How did you see your sexuality then?

Vanessa: Ah... I was always like this: feminine.

Leandro: But before you became a travesti?

Vanessa: Then I was a *boy*.¹³

Leandro: So did you GO out with men back then?

¹⁰ The utterances reproduced in this article are reconstructed from conversations and interviews at the night club, therefore I was not able to use a recording device. They were registered as faithfully as possible in my field diary.

¹¹ All names given here are fictitious in order to preserve my informants' anonymity and privacy.

¹² In Brazilian sexual jargon the verb *to eat* (*comer*) is employed to designate penetrative vaginal or anal activity in sexual intercourse, while *to give* (*dar*) signifies receptive activity (Fry, 1982; Parker, 1991).

¹³ Translator's Note: Although “boy” is an English borrowing in the original, it does not merely signify “young male”. In Brazilian sexual slang, it highlights an immature form of masculinity with performative pretensions of one sort or another.

Vanessa: Yes.

Leandro: And what did you see yourself like? Did you consider yourself to be homosexual or gay?

[Vanessa is silent, as if she's thinking]

Vanessa: I don't know. Is a travesti a homossexual?

Leandro: I want to know your opinion...

Vanessa: Look, I think travestis are heterosexual because we like men, right? But if a travesti screws a closeted homosexual for money, turning a trick, even being active [playing the penetrative role] while she's turning it, then that's because the homosexuals like that sort of thing.

Leandro: So someone can be heterosexual and still screw homosexuals?

[She looks at me again, silent and vaguely perplexed. Finally, she answers:]

Vanessa: I don't know.

At the time, I was not able to give these small but disconcerting dialogues their proper weight. Aside from the fact that these terms circulated in the club in a way that I was not accustomed to hearing, I also felt that if I were to confront people with these hegemonic classificatory categories I might end up inducing them to edit out the forms they used to make sense of their own erotic experiences and conducts. In this, I was following the prudent advice of John Gagnon regarding the power effects that accompany the use of categories regarding sexual “orientation” or “preference:”

The routine use of terms such as *homosexuality* and *homosexual* in a variety of scientific and lay contexts expresses the widely held, perhaps near universal, belief that we know what these words instruct us to think and to study (Gagnon, 2004:99-100).

[...]

What is required is a constant recognition that acts of usage and explanation are acts of social control in the strong sense, that “homosexual” and “homosexuality” are names that have been imposed on some persons and their conduct by other persons—and that this imposition has carried the right of the latter to tell the former the origins, meaning and virtue of their conduct (Gagnon, 2004:105).

In the networks that I researched, the disembedding of sexuality seems intercepted by discourses and practices which converge to reiterate certain gender asymmetries. The emphasis conferred upon gender in the local *ethos* exposes certain fissures in

the domain unveiled by “sexual orientation” hidden domination, helping to retrace connections between different forms of participation in this erotic market. What slowly became clear to me was that, in the context under investigation, the masculine-feminine opposition seems to be the most relevant axis via which subjects measure each other in their interactions.

I asked Vanessa how she saw her sexuality when she was young and she replied that she had always been *feminine*. In this context, gender conventions gain greater relevance, credibility and efficacy than beliefs in sexual orientation. Two frequent remarks stood out in the speech by partners of travestis and gay cross-dressers, as regards to themselves: “I’m a man” and “I’m not a fag”. Duly referenced to the contexts in which these statements occur, they imply a rejection of a self-identification with homosexuality and femininity. What is emphasized in these self-definitions is a manifestation of gender via conventional signals that demonstrates (to my mind) a certain resistance to a world perception collated to an assumption of the species sexual dimorphism, and to the consequent pigeonholing of erotic conduct in terms of sexual “orientation”.

Gender and exchanges in the erotic market

The analytical key I propose means that we not consider eroticism as merely an elaboration of subjectivity, but also as a mode of social activity in which agents engage with one another—and shall inquire, first and foremost, about the networks in which this engagement occurs. Utilizing my ethnographic materials, it is possible to bring together scattered threads which link to ways in which the regulatory practices that emerge around the performance of gender qualify or disqualify certain experiences, make them more or less accessible to this or that subject, and point to possible consequences for these acts.

As I observed above, one of the attractions of this club, in the eyes of the paying public, is the possibility that patrons have to interact with erotic subjects classified as *real men* (or simply “men”) who show an erotic preference for people who look and behave feminine. A set of discourses and regulatory practices prescribe as norm sexual exchanges between partners who play contrasting gender roles, and disqualify sexual exchanges between partners who play symmetrical roles.¹⁴ In this erotic market in which “men do not pay,” travestis do not practice prostitution—the exchange of sex for money—but maintain “free” erotic interactions with their partners of choice. Being perceived as more “feminine” or “masculine” in these social networks (said perceptions

¹⁴ The perception of what is “masculine” or “feminine” or what is the “same” or an “other” gender varies according to the context of the interaction and the position that the subject occupies in this. Weighed in this assessment are the subject’s practices, how they perceive themselves and are perceived by others in situations of close physical presence. This process of mutual evaluation in socio-sexual interaction intertwines with processes of construction of the body and subjectivity in complex ways, often tending to effects of sedimentation so that, at any given juncture of these networks, there are certain positions more or less likely to be occupied by certain players depending on their personal history.

being formed by evaluations of clothing, gestures and other bodily practices according to a diffuse set of conventions) supposedly limits one's field of choice in erotic partners and desirable corporeal contacts. This frankly generalized norm regarding sexual behavior galvanize discourses and practices within this circuit of erotic exchanges, operating in such a way that individuals seek to maintain a consistent line of gender performance in the roles that they play at the club. The subjects labeled as "men" in principle only function as a penetrator in erotic interaction. This injunction acts almost as if it were a diacritical marker of gender distinction and the activity of gender demarcation intertwines directly with sexual exchanges, insofar as the strategies of partner selection favor the establishment of erotic interaction between people who play different and contrasting gender roles.

A good many of the subjects referred to as *men* are from 18 to 25 years old, some of whom show up at the nightclub in small groups towards the end of the evening. They are supposedly neighborhood residents returning from [Brazilian] funk parties in the region who come attracted by the possibility of "free" entertainment: not only or necessarily sex, but also the possibility of watching porn films shown at the club and having their drinks paid for by other patrons. Their level of education is generally up to a primary school and they work in the informal labor market. Many are represented as working for local drug trafficking networks. The gay cross-dressers are a bit older, in their 20s or 40s, generally claim to have not completed high school and work at jobs not requiring more than basic schooling. The travestis are also more or less in this same age range and often survive economically through prostitution, although some refuse to identify as sex workers. Unlike the *boys*, travestis and cross-dressers come from all parts of the city and from adjacent municipalities such as Itaguaí and Angra dos Reis. There is also a floating population of gays who do not practice cross-dressing, residents of the suburbs, who report having a higher level of education, usually high school or university degrees.

Forms of circulation through the urban environment can be connected to forms of participation in erotic exchanges. The circulation of feminine-performing subjects around the city seems to mirror a dynamic of inter-gender interactions in the nightclub: the "queers" "circulate" and "move" much more than their masculine-performing partners.¹⁵ This dynamic of interaction within the club is similar to the strategy of *footing*, as described by Azevedo (2004). This author discusses techniques of "heterosexual" dating established in Brazil at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, techniques which accompanied the spread of urbanization and have been preserved in smaller cities. Azevedo observes: "when walking alongside other young people, usually hand-in-hand or arm-in-arm, a girl interested in establishing a relationship would see many boys, evaluate them, trying to decipher their outer signs and symbols, comparing them and eventually deciding on one of them" (Azevedo, 2004:90). *Footing* was a

¹⁵ Similar interaction dynamics were observed by Terto Jr. (1989) at porn film theater in Rio de Janeiro in the 1980s.

practice in which women moved about in a context where the controls of the family network had become relatively more flexible. This allowed women a greater margin of autonomy in selecting partners.

In its sociological aspects, the practice of *footing* can be compared to the movement of subjects who take on different identities in the field of sexual diversity. Once relatively disengaged from their kinship and neighborhood networks, they travel extensively in other circuits, looking for sexual partners. Here we encounter an “organization of clandestine life,” as Pollak would have it, distinctively organized by the gender of its participants. Discourses regarding the places of residence of club regulars can be aligned to interactions at the club which revolve around an implicit norm as to how the erotic market functions: in principle, *real men* “spend” less (energy, time, resources) than their sexual partners in obtaining pleasurable experiences.¹⁶

The relevant signs of gender presentation that mark the distinction between *men* and the club’s paying customers are many. They include: sexual partners “preferences regarding gender;” the motivations at play in erotic interaction; the erotic practices performed in public; as well as other uses of the body, clothing, voice, speech and gesture. In this context, discourses circulate which suggest, for example; that *real men* “only like woman and travesti.” The possibility that these *men* can also engage in sexual practices with *gays* is explained as a “need for sex” or in exchange some material benefit (money, beer, or wine):

There are men who come here after *oti* [alcoholic beverages]. They know that a travesti won’t buy it for them, so they ask a *gay* to buy for them and they might even hook up with the *gay*. But they don’t like *gays*: they like women or travestis. (Luana, 24 years old, travesti)

Apparently, an additional value is attributed to the sex work that real men engage in. This allows them to expect a material reward from erotic interactions with gays who do not practice cross-dressing. This is explicitly referred to by some of the club regulars, who use metaphors to allude to the “economic” dimension of the exchanges. The financial factor is even higher for those gays who do not practice cross-dressing and who only occasionally frequent the club, given that erotic exchanges between them and the partners of travestis are only considered to be legitimate if mediated by money:

In order to hook up with one of those guys, you need to make an *investment*: buy him beer, let him tell you his story about how he isn’t really gay, about how he likes pussy

¹⁶ This norm for sexual behavior seems to impact upon the dynamics of condom-use negotiation: when condoms are employed, presumption of possession and initiative for their use tends to fall on the feminine-performing partners. Condoms (available for 1.00 R\$ (0.50 USD) at the first floor bar) are generally requested by feminine-performing patrons of other patrons likewise classified as female. On several occasions I witnessed a cross-dresser ask another if they had an extra condom to give them. Gay non-cross-dressers were also frequently approached for condoms. Feminine-performing subjects almost unilaterally agree that *real men* would not carry condoms in the club. Various arguments are employed to sustain this presumption.

and all that. Then you go off with him somewhere else. He's not going to hook up with a gay with everyone watching; he doesn't want to lose face with the travestis [...] But if you do it right, there are some of them who'll suck you off for a mere ten bucks (Marcos, non-cross-dressing gay, 30 years old)

Marcos ironically refers here to the rejection of self-identification with homosexuality expressed by the *real men*, seeing it as a convention and not as reality. His views conflict with those expressed by many others in the club, for whom other factors (interest in money or drinks, or the need for sex) more or less efficiently explain this sort of conduct on the part of *real men* without calling into question their gender. In the eyes of the travestis and cross-dressers, the masculinity of a *man* is not necessarily damaged by his engaging in sexual practices with a *gay* whose performance is classified as masculine. This mode of interaction demands some sort of justification, however. There is always the possibility that the masculinity exercised by a *man* is questioned by an imputation of conduct incompatible with his gender performance. The *man* thus risks *losing face* [*perder o moral*] and having his status degraded. In this space of erotic interaction, uses of the body are subject to continual and mutual evaluation. The information that circulates regarding encounters between this or that actor is managed and has repercussions regarding how a particular actor is “seen” in the field. Public erotic performance is crucial for this evaluation.¹⁷

It is an interesting paradox that the practices of “consumption” by *real men* (who obtain money, drinks, entertainment and enjoyment for the sexual work they perform in this erotic market) confers them prestige, consolidating their masculinity. Implicit in this paradox is something that can help us link seemingly unconnected events and discourses: the equivalence between erotic flows and flows of prestige. Showing erotic attraction for subjects who express feminine mannerisms and appearances capitalizes the *men's* masculinity in such a way that the travestis (who practice prostitution in other contexts) can establish erotic exchanges with these men without financial involvement. Meanwhile, non-cross-dressing gay men (supposedly less desirable partners) need to offer some type of material reward in order to engage in erotic exchanges with the *real men*. Far from representing a universal equivalent for exchange relations, money operates as a sign marked by gender, gaining its significance in the context in which the interaction is triggered and expressing recognition of the masculine status that a *real man* displays.

Clothing, mannerisms, an erotic preference for “feminine” partners and an exclusively active role in sex are juxtaposed as marks of a masculinity that repeats and refers

¹⁷ I do not mean to imply that more private sexual encounters are irrelevant to other club patrons. However, in this network of “relatively clandestine behavior,” a distinction can be made between *hypovisible* and *hypervisible* encounters: between practices conducted in relative discretion and those that are publicly ostensive. A hypovisible act can reverberate in the public sphere, and be subjected to the same play of interpretations as a hypervisible act. Information that achieves a certain degree of repercussion, however, is invested with greater weight and density in terms of the gender assignment of those involved.

to itself, that is anchored in a normative representation of *men* and *queers* [*bicha*] as discontinuous entities—in spite of the fact that these attributions might not be unequivocally clear, or stable.¹⁸ In this context, erotic exchanges and other social interactions (which always refer to chains of gender conventions) impact heavily on processes of construction of the self. In other words, relationships with others hold significant weight on one's relationship with oneself. An example of the impact of interpersonal relationships on the development of sexual careers is the story of Lúcia, a 19 year old cross-dresser. This youth, who self-identifies as gay in spite of her use of a female name in presenting herself, claims to have begun receptive anal sex at 14 years of age with someone from her own sociability network. In Lúcia's words, this was a period in her life time when “I was a *boy*” and “I still thought I was a man.” Lucia says that “I only discovered I was *gay*” three years after her sexual initiation, when she befriended travestis:

Leandro: And when did you start going out with men?

Lúcia: Ah, that was back when I was a *boy*.

Leandro: Do you remember how old you were then?

Lúcia: Ah, I was a kid, I was 14.

Leandro: And how did it happen?

Lúcia: I had this friend, right? A buddy. We hooked up.

Leandro: How so, “hooked up”? What did you do?

Lúcia: He fucked me, right? We were like, wow! We went out with the girls, kissed them on the mouth and then in the wee hours of the morning, he'd want to cum and there I was... I didn't like it much at first, but I ended up liking it.

Leandro: And at that point, how did you define your sexuality?

Lúcia: Back then I still thought I was a man. I only found out I was gay after I began to get to know the travestis in the neighborhood, some three years later.

¹⁸ The discontinuity between *men* and *queers* is reiterated in various ways in the club, but particularly by the asymmetric application of a transformational principle. As the native rhetoric has it, a subject who is recognized as a *man* can, at a later point in their trajectory, become a *queer*. This rhetoric might suggest some level of continuity between *men* and *queers*. Such a transmutation, however, is non-reversible: it is not considered possible for a *queer* to become a *man*. The idea that a person can *become a queer* exists side by side with the idea that this particular person was *always queer*. In this case, the transformation only reveals in that particular person a *feminine nature* that is supposedly missing in *real men*. The classificatory activity of differentiating between *real men* and *queers that look like men* through the interpretation of the signals offered in interaction continuously materializes the discontinuity between a polymorphous and contradictory femininity and a supposedly unequivocal, clear and distinct masculinity.

Leandro: And how did you become friends with these travestis?

Lúcia: I thought they were pretty, right? They had hair, tits, ass... I got horny with men and there where I lived a man would never want to be with another men, only with women or travestis. So the travestis saw that I had this girly side and they said, "Kid, come here" and they started teaching stuff. They showed me all of this [gestures with his arm, taking in the nightclub].

Leandro: How did they teach you?

Lúcia: Like, the first time I dressed up [as a woman]. It was to come here. I came twice in my regular clothes and I didn't hook up with anyone. No one wanted me. So I let them dress me up the next time I went.

Leandro: How was it?

Lúcia: It was shameful and it made me shake so bad I can still remember it today [laughs]. They painted me up, loaned me a wig, a skirt... My friend thought I was going to become a travesti, but I was afraid. You need to be perfect to do that... And just imagine: how do you go look for a job, afterwards?

Lúcia's story suggests that her construction of herself was strongly affected by what she perceived as a need to adapt to the erotic market ("where I lived a man would never want to be with another men"), according to the evaluation of her performance as "feminine" by the network of her travesti friends and her acceptance of this evaluation. It also points to the relevance conferred to the expression of femininity as a strategy for obtaining partners within the travesti erotic market. The nightclub's patrons are relatively sensitive to the conventional character of the gender signs employed in the club and to the interpersonal play of evaluations to which these signs are subjected—however conventional, this does not make these signs any less "real". The adoption of feminine clothing and names by cross-dressing gays, for example, is on some level pertinent to a specific modeling of subjectivity as "feminine"; but it also expresses strategies to adequate to the norms of the travesti erotic market, which allows them to circulate and compete within it:

The first time I went dressed as a *boy* and I didn't hook up with anyone. The second time I put on a wig, but I was wearing jeans and a t-shirt, and this man called me "princess," "my queen", "my goddess"... You don't even have to dress yourself up much to get men here; you just have to give them a sign that you're queer. Let your hair grow a little long, and you'll pick up all you want. Because if you're dressed like a *boy*, he'll think you're a man like him and he won't want to have anything to do with you. (Sandra, 32 year old *crossdresser*)

A subject who “is” *queer* must “give a sign” of this: present their erotic preferences in a clearly recognizable fashion in order to participate in the erotic market that constitutes the *queer* body and subjectivity. These signs and acts are not considered to either mask or constitute the subjectivity of the person: they simply *signify* in public interactions. In a similar fashion, acts and signs deemed appropriate of the masculine gender will be taken as marks of masculinity pointing towards *real men*, except in those cases where masculine pretensions externalized by a specific subject are questioned. It is the preservation of this arrangement of markers that guarantees the intelligibility of genders in this context, which is constructed as a set of regulatory practices that make certain modes of interaction the focuses of intense repudiation.¹⁹

Many of the club’s patrons also claim that, in the absence of more desirable partners, *men* opt to receive oral sex from subjects who would not be their first preference. This belief appears in the discourses of club patrons as “liking to cum inside” or “not liking to cum outside.”²⁰ In order to illustrate this point, I can cite the words of a non-cross-dressing gay who is an occasional patron of the club: “Here, men like travestis and gays are never going to be the main dish. But when *xepa*²¹ time rolls around, they’ll eat whatever’s at hand. It’s natural selection”.

The metaphors of “*xepa*” and “natural selection” point to a dynamic at the level of interpersonal interaction. Many times during my fieldwork I noticed that the flow of young *men* coming into the club seemed to intensify around three in the morning, precisely the time that many of the travestis and cross-dressers were leaving.²² During this period I would repeatedly observe group sex practices, engaged in by multiple *men* and partners which were inferior in terms of the *mens*’ stated esthetic taste.

I would like to end by describing a scene that I registered in my field diary in August 2005, which illustrates the collective scrutiny that erotic interactions established in these networks are subjected to. The episode in question drew my attention at the time because it occurred outside of the territories that are usually reserved for sex among the club’s patrons.

¹⁹ An event representative of these regulatory devices occurred in one of the dark corners of the club, when a *travesti* and a cross-dresser engaged in anal sex with the latter penetrating the former. Towards the end of the night, I observed that a “fight” was taking place in the club’s exit area. The *travesti* who had participated in the earlier sexual scene was grabbed by the hair and being punched in the head by another, who shouted: “You bitch! You gave it up to that little gay! You’re gonna get beat until you learn how to be a queer!” The victim barely resisted timidly, begging the aggressor to stop while everyone else watching the scene laughed. The episode shows how behaviors that compromise the legibility of genders in that context are subjected to regulatory practices which attempt to preserve the apparent stability of dominant norms.

²⁰ These expressions appear in the discourses of several club patrons, who claim that men prefer to ejaculate via oral or anal sex than through masturbation.

²¹ A local slang term, “*xepa*” designates the end of a street fair, when perishable products are liquidated at prices significantly lower than regular.

²² It is possible that these variation in the supply of available partners for *men* during the course of an evening impact upon the dynamics of selection. Once *travestis* leave, *gays* become eligible sex partners and may try competing in the *travestis*’ erotic market. However, this type of erotic interaction seems to be rare in public spaces and its occasional occurrence seems to be perceived as relatively “scandalous” by many patrons.

Around three in the morning, a group of three youths entered the club, dressed in t-shirts and Bermuda shorts. The youths were about 18 years old and were thin and muscular. They stationed themselves on the first floor dance area, near the bar and, in the midst of intense corporeal interaction and gesticulation (involving low laughter, elbows to the ribs, light punches and arms lightly placed around one another's shoulders), they observed the scene. Their eyes flicked alternatively from the homosexual erotic videos being displayed on the club's T.V.s to the dance floor, where they watched a group of travestis dancing to Brazilian funk music. Finally, one of the *men* moved away from the group and went into the door-less bathroom next to the dance floor. I noted that he took quite a while to return, so I changed my angle of vision in order to see into the bathroom. The youth was leaning back against the wall, near the bathroom entrance—perfectly visible from the dance floor—being fellated by a cross-dresser who was crouched down in front of him. The cross-dresser was slightly obese, apparently 30 years old, wearing a tight baby-doll night gown and exaggerated, smeared make-up, with her relatively short hair pulled back by a hair band. A few instants later, one of the other young *men* approached the bathroom doorway and saw what was going on. He immediately called out to a third member of the group, waving him over with his hand. Both youths stood in the doorway, observing the scene and laughing. The first member of the group invited the other two to join in, waving them over while cackling loudly. Meanwhile, the cross-dresser continued to fellate him.

The migration of the group towards the bathroom attracted the attention of other club patrons, whose reactions seemed of note. Some of the travestis on the dance floor watched the scene with an air of perplexity or indignation: wrinkled foreheads, hard looks, one or another with their mouths open. A cross-dresser who happened by the doorway crossed their arms and put on an air of disapproval, turning quickly to the stairs leading to the second floor. Two youths of apparently masculine appearance, sitting on wooden stools on the other side of the dance floor and facing the bathroom, watched the scene and laughed, commenting to each other. A travesti walked by, peered into the bathroom, made a sour face and quickly moved away.

After a while, the two young members of the group watching the scene began to masturbate. The first youth, who was in a certain fashion directing the scene, grabbed the cross-dressers' hands and pushed her away from himself and towards one of the other youths, offering her up, all the while laughing loudly. The three youths then took turns receiving oral sex from the cross-dresser, until the first one ejaculated and the other two tucked their penises back into their bermudas. The first youth then walked off towards the club's exit. "You two had better hurry up," he exclaimed over his shoulder. "Do it quick or I'll leave you here." The other two youths then went up the stairs to the second floor.

I briefly discussed what had happened with a travesti who had witnessed the scene from the dance floor and had demonstrated disapproval, along with other club patrons.

Her comment was that “in their hurry to *cum*, *men* will *do anything*.” In other words, she was saying that they would engage in sexual activities with partners who were not their preferential choice. Similar events occurred repeatedly in the dark corners of the club after a certain point in the evening. The assumptions implied in the scene, which would be reinforced in a series of like situations, state that *men* prefer women and travestis. Erotic interactions established with other sorts of sexual personages in the club seem to be legitimated as long as they occur towards the end of the evening, when the dynamic of supply and demand of sexual partners within the club begins to change. These discourses regarding *men’s* sexual conduct can be linked to Vanessa’s comments regarding the “heterosexuality” of the travestis who “fuck” homosexuals “for money.” By referring to factors other than desire as a motivation and justification for these erotic interactions between subjects who do not clearly perform genders judged to be the opposite of one another, the coherence of gender within this context of interaction is maintained, even when the anatomical-physiological sex of the participants is relatively stripped of meaning.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by pointing out that the erotic exchanges established in this social space appear to be significantly impacted by the style of participation an individual adopts in the erotic market. This intertwines directly with the gender performances individuals engage in. Although the conduct of those club patrons referred to as *real men* may not be adequately measured by the norm of sexual orientation, normative prescriptions regarding preferences of gender do indeed impact upon it. For the *men*, having one’s performance evaluated as *feminine* implies a loss of status which, in turn, translates to lesser access to sex, drinks, or money within these networks. In this normative level, the value attributed to the sexual activities of *real men* tends to be inversely proportional to their femininity. To be a *real man*, one must exhibit public erotic attraction for people whose appearance and gender performance is feminine. This practice accrues prestige and erotic value for *real men*, within these networks. This fact helps us to understand, for example, the recurrent practice of public group sex between one travesti or cross-dresser and multiple, masculine performing, partners.

In this we find one of the paradoxes of erotic exchange within this context. It is true that *real men’s* sexual performance tends to be endowed with intense erotic value, which (in theory at least) makes it possible for them to engage in sexual activities with a great number of partners and which brings them a series of benefits in terms of material goods and money given over to these *men* in exchange for sex. However, these men are inserted in the position of desirable subject-object *through* their circulation in the network of partners, precisely by being recognized as a potential partner for feminine persons. This state of affairs also allows us to understand why, in many cases of “public sex,” these men occasionally select partners who are situated as esthetically inferior in

the hierarchy of choice (the case of the “xepa”) and why these “agrammatical” choices are met with a certain degree of tolerance. In both cases, the explanation mobilized is that masculine *men* “need” sex. It is possible that *men*’s intense worries over the risk that they might become feminized is also linked to tactics to preserve the volatile erotic capital associated with masculinity in this erotic market. Analytically, the subjects who participate in this market do not exist prior to the exchanges conducted within it, but are in fact sedimented by the exchanges themselves. This not only applies to the careers sedimented through the succession of certain events, but also in a more radical sense: each situation in which the subjects participate reiterates or destabilizes their position as a subject in the erotic market.

The ethnographic arguments above justify two objections about the normativity operating at the logic of “sexual orientation.” First of all, in the networks studied, the subjects’ sexual conduct is not measured according to their attraction towards one or another “sex,” but by an attraction to certain gender performances. The relevance of the anatomical-physiological substrate of sex is repudiated in favor of a classificatory play which appears (at least to this ethnographer) as much more dynamic and, in some ways, subversive of, the social fiction that “sex” is more materially real than “gender”. On the other hand and from an analytical perspective, these performances appear as arbitrary conventions that demand an intense amount of work to sustain their material effects. From the point of view of the subjects themselves, they tend to be lived as a reality that does not contain flagrant contradictions and which thus challenges our capacity to understand the phenomena in question. It is my hope that this article has been able to present some questions regarding these paradoxes that might feed further debate regarding exchanges within erotic markets through comparison with other ethnographic contexts.

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