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THE DICTATORSHIP OF MASCULINITY

LUCIANO MARTÍNEZ

1. The Seventies: A Time of Pure Possibility...¹

The seventies brought a profound transformation to Latin American socio-cultural imaginary. It was a time of social upheaval following the trail of the big sociopolitical movements of the end of the sixties—among others, May 1968; the protest movement against the Vietnam War; the Cuban Revolution; the massacre of Tlatelolco and the emergence of the Latin American student movement. All these events strongly influenced a new generation. However, it became the revolutionary utopia that tended to monopolize and articulate the debate of the times. This occurred partly because of the revolution's promise of emancipation, a way out of the dead end—characterized by economic crisis and the disruption of democratic processes—in which the region was submerged.²

Although there had been political parties with communist affiliation and a labor union tradition since the beginning of the twenties, it was the Cuban experience that proved it was possible to stage a revolution in a Latin American way. Indeed, far from the exotic origins of communism, the Cuban Revolution transcended the threshold of utopia. After more than ten years in power, it became the paradigm of revolution, a viable project that could be replicated in other parts of the continent.³ The most radical illusion that nested in the imagination of the time, as Tomás Moulian stated, was the belief that the socialist revolution was not an end in itself, but the necessary passage to arrive to a more harmonious society (243-6). The revolutionary goal did not only consist of the elimination of classes and the change in the means and relations of production, it sought to change the *status quo* by creating a new society, headed by a New Man (el Hombre Nuevo), completely emancipated and liberated. Consequently, the revolutionaries were not interested in being part of the system of political parties; by definition, they were anti-institutional with a strong conviction that the armed fight—with guerrilla warfare as their combat strategy—was the motor that would carry on the revolution.

However, there was another set of ideas that also gained relevance in the public sphere, those surrounding the sexual liberation movement. Given the magnitude and the radicalism of the changes that this movement promoted, it was also labeled a “revolution.” The emergence of Latin American feminism at the beginning of the seventies, supported by the United Nations since 1975, initiated the discussion of sexuality and promoted the first debates about homosexuality and lesbianism.⁴ As the revolution subsided, the sexual revolution pursued the utopia of a better world, in the conviction that the individual and collective agency could reconfigure the current social norms.

The period of the late sixties and the early seventies marks the beginning of homosexual liberation in Latin America. The first attempt at gay political organization in Latin America occurred in Argentina by a group called Our World (Nuestro Mundo). Founded in 1969 and formed largely by postal workers, it published a newsletter of the same name that was avant-garde for its time.⁵ Nevertheless, the conventional date that marks the start of the Latin American gay movement is August 1971. Surprisingly, the coincidence was as much in date as in name: the Homosexual Liberation Front (Frente de Liberación Homosexual) arose in Argentina and a group with the same name was also created in Mexico (Mogrovejo 63). At the end of 1977, several intellectuals, journalists and gay artists of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro met at the home of writer and painter Darcy Penteado. The purpose of their gathering was to comment on and discuss a recent anthology on Latin American gay literature that Winston Leyland, founder of the editorial Gay Sunshine Press of San Francisco, had recently published. In this meeting, the idea of creating a Brazilian homosexual magazine came up, and in April of 1978 the first issue of *Lampião* appeared, seeking to configure gay identity as a differentiated social group, following the model of the American gay consciousness-raising group.⁶

Even though the Brazilian case was slower to be established than its Argentinean and Mexican counterparts, the common denominator was the ideological alliance with Anglo-Saxon narratives, which were appropriated and reconfigured. However, one of the clearest deviations between Latin American homosexuality and its American compeer takes place in relation to the political ideology. Although initially an alliance existed between Gay Power and the Trotskyite Social Work Party, this quickly dissolved. American gay activists eschewed revolutionary politics in order to develop a political agenda free from social class issues whose axis was the category of a sexual minority.

In the United States, a set of spaces that enabled sexual freedom and self-expression in a safe and pleasant way started to emerge and become more visible to the general public. Bars, discos, bookstores, specialized stores and especially bathhouses appeared in major metropolitan cities. The bathhouse became a privileged space because it allowed the concrete realization of one of the salient characteristics of the sexual revolution: casual sex with multiple partners. On the other hand, Latin American gay activists faced the repression of authoritarian governments, the challenges posed by a macho tradition and the censorship promoted by the Catholic Church. As a result, there were no possibilities of creating similar spaces to meet others who wished to celebrate their sexual identity. Consequently, clandestine encounters in public spaces (cinemas, railway station restrooms and parks) were the only alternative. Because of this repressive and authoritarian context, it is not surprising that many Latin American homosexuals thought that a true revolution was not complete if it did not include the destruction of oppressive social structures. Leftist militants and homosexuals pursued the same goal: the abolition of the *status quo* and the emergence of a new social order. The fight for sexual liberation could not take place in an isolated way but rather as part of the social liberation movement.⁷ Due to their exclusion from the national representational grammar, the new revolutionary society stimulated hopes of inclusion and equality for Latin American homosexuals.

However, gays and the Latin American political Left had many difficulties in developing a productive alliance, from Cuban homosexuals incarcerated in UMAP camps (Military Units to Aid Production) where they faced severe violence in an attempt to turn them into “real” men, to the suspicion over any declared homosexual militating in a leftist organization. The revolutionary ideology was articulated in two different, radically antagonistic and incompatible ways.

It is possible to construct a genealogy of Latin American novels that deal with this practically unexplored facet in historical research: the failed reunion between homosexuals and guerilla fighters. In broader terms, this issue is the meeting of two projects that many thought analogous: sexual liberation and political revolution. Manuel Puig’s canonical text, *El beso de la mujer araña* (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*) appears at the beginning of this genealogy which continues, in Brazil, with *Stella Manhattan*, by Silviano Santiago, and *Nivaldo e Jerônimo* by Darcy Penteado, in Mexico, with *El sol de la tarde* by Luis González de Alba, and *Entre la resignación y el paraíso* by Hugo Villalobos, and, in Argentina, with *La más maravillosa música (una historia de amor peronista)* by Osvaldo Bazán. These novels narrate stories of love among men that metaphorically

represent the fight among these two movements, encouraging readers to consider different perspectives about the bonds between sexuality and politics, liberation and revolution. Each of these novels elaborates a different explanatory hypothesis about the relationship between the revolutionary left and homosexuals, and in this context, different and distinctive homosexual representations emerged. Each representation reveals a particular position regarding the subversive and conflicting possibilities of marginal sexualities. Because of its complexity and literary particularities, I will explore these questions in Penteadó's *Nivaldo e Jerônimo*, a Brazilian novel published at the beginning of the eighties and practically ignored by literary critics.⁸

2. Forcing Interpretation

Nivaldo e Jerônimo (1981) begins with an author's foreword ("Nota Do Autor") which serves as a reading protocol, that is to say, it prescribes how to read what follows and, at the same time, functions as a metatext that reflects on its own writing and truth in literary fiction.⁹ The authorial voice appears at the beginning of the story to cast off a fear: the pluralization of meaning, the possibility of an interpretation that might differ from the author's intent.¹⁰ The author is fearful of the reader's likely condemnation of the text due to its gay content, and for that reason somewhat naively tries to establish a monological interpretation. It is necessary to remember that the dictatorship that began in 1964, with the removal of João Goulart from office, ended only in 1985.

This prologue points in multiple directions regarding the book's development. Although some real facts serve as "backdrop to a plot that is also fictional,"¹¹ the author asserts that the characters are fictitious and any likeness with real people is mere coincidence. He also adds that he invented some geographical data and that the novel, as all fiction, does not aim to be a historical document. Nevertheless, the relationship between history and fiction are not the central theme of the foreword; Penteadó instead focuses on the role that homosexuality plays within the novel:

This book narrates a sentimental relationship outside conventional parameters. *I hope that this relationship is not used to make judgments about sexual preferences and behaviors, which I consider a minor and outdated discussion.* This is a love story, or, more truthfully, a tragic chronicle of a love that turned out to be impossible, not due to the preconceptions and conventional norms of men, but rather due to circumstances created by fate. (n.p.; my emphasis)¹²

In this passage, a double strategy is observed: to deviate from one line of interpretation and to present the foundation for another one. It is affirmed that the object of the narration is a nonconventional sentimental relationship without even mentioning its homosexual nature. But this is an unnecessary caution because the title of the novel already clarifies the nature of this sentimental relationship. The author awakens the reader's curiosity regarding the homosexual problem but he quickly tries to deviate the reading toward other areas of meaning. He wants the reader to suspend his moral evaluation of the homosexual topic by stating that it is not a relevant issue but rather a smaller and outdated one. The author presents the meaning of the text in advance, confining the reader in a compacted and controlled network of ideas.¹³ He declares that the novel offers a history of tragic love whose antagonist is destiny and not social and historical norms. It is expected, then, that the text will be read following the conventions of melodrama. However, it is impossible not to wander away from this imposed interpretation because the text elaborates an ideological account of history and posits a particular politics around homosexuality and its possibilities of political agency that suggests different interpretations.

The novel narrates the tragic love story of Nivaldo, a young college student without strong political convictions, and Jerônimo, a university professor and guerilla fighter. It takes place between 1971 and 1979, during the time of the Brazilian dictatorship. The plot is developed around a series of encounters and separations between the two lovers. Jerônimo's position as a guerilla fighter forces him to abandon the city to hide from the police. He finally establishes himself in the interior of the country to promote a revolutionary conscience among the peasantry. During this time, the letters that he writes to his lover function to explain didactically the problem of Brazilian peasants, who are oppressed by large landowners and the army. These long descriptive segments are introduced in order to bolster the historic and geographical contextualization of the story.¹⁴

For Jerônimo, homoerotic desire is perceived as a form of weakness that causes him to deviate from the revolutionary fight. However, he is not able to cope with his lover's absence and he makes plans to bring Nivaldo to the jungle so he, too, can enroll in the guerrilla movement and they can be together. Sadly this reunion does not last long: Jerônimo is captured by the army and subsequently tortured and exhibited in the center of the town as a cautionary example for other insurgents. After a fruitless search, their comrades presume that he has died in prison. Nivaldo returns to São Paulo and becomes immersed in a severe depression and attempts suicide,

becomes a drug addict, a prostitute, and finally a transvestite called Viviane.

To this point we have a short synthesis of a baroque plot whose procedures of aesthetic representation are characteristic of the melodrama: excess, hyperbole, exaggerated emotions and an oversimplified conflict. The portrayal of the main characters also responds to the rules of the melodrama: they are sharply contrasted and simplified.

3. Guerrilla and Masculinity: The (Homosexual) Hero

Jerônimo's hyperbolic and idealized masculinity is not an anachronistic stereotype; it stems from a specific seventies historical source. The literary representation fuses two cultural myths: that of the guerrilla fighter and that of the New Man, respectively the present and future of the revolution. The guerrilla fighter is not a militant but a soldier, and as such, is subject to a rigid discipline that rewards obedience and punishes insubordination. A cultural myth acts economically: it simplifies and filters the complexity of history and its lack of depth is what allows for a world without contradictions.¹⁵ The guerrilla fighter myth accentuates heroism, adventure and the danger of the unknown. Only a man with almost superhuman characteristics can embark on this task. In a letter addressed to Carlos Quijano, which was published in the Uruguayan magazine *Marcha* in March 1965, Ernesto "Che" Guevara explains that becoming a guerrilla fighter is also a way of acquiring masculinity:

This type of fight gives us the opportunity to become revolutionaries, the highest step in the human species, *but it also allows us to graduate to manhood*; those that cannot reach any of these two stadiums should say so and leave the fight. (5; my emphasis)¹⁶

Man, guerrilla fighter and masculinity become entangled in an axis of continuity and within the revolutionary imaginary, they become interdependent categories where one guarantees the other.¹⁷ Being a guerrilla fighter is a blueprint to become a "New Man," which will emerge once the new socialist society has been imposed and, according to Guevara, is gradually constructed in the midst of the revolutionary struggle. For that reason its genesis is the untiring and abnegated combatant, willing to sacrifice anything in order to attain utopia.

Yet the myth of the guerrilla fighter transcends its theorization, as any cultural myth becomes independent of its written manifestation; this is the secret of its long-lasting permanency. It is nurtured from a visual repertoire of texts (e.g., the iconic pictures of "Che"), and deploys a

constellation of meanings that depicts a masculinity rising above Latin American machismo by means of its axiological codification. The aura of honor and heroism that surrounds the revolutionary man impedes the quick association with machismo. Furthermore, heroism is its fundamental component, and as such it is immediately visible, as Barthes would say. This allows the myth of the revolutionary man to hide one of its fundamental characteristics: the military discipline forced upon the masculine body. Paradoxically the guerilla organization duplicates the mechanisms used by the army to regulate and discipline subjectivities. At the same time, it is important to highlight that revolutionary subjectivity moves away from contemporary political activism and comes closer to the regulations characteristic of a religious practice, where participants accept and follow a rationalized cult based on its supposed historical inexorableness.¹⁸

Jerônimo's character carries out the characteristic tasks of the hero: he abandons his loved one, makes sacrifices for the cause, suffers torture and confinement, and finally returns triumphant. He also incorporates all the positive traits of the guerilla fighter. The narrator emphasizes his ideological conviction and his active participation in the revolutionary strategy:

He was a lonely guy by his own decision, in order to be faithful to an ideology that had priority over his life, his feelings, and his personal desires. . . . He lived surrounded by circumspect and confident individuals, so confident of their mission that they almost weren't willing to make concessions or to excuse their weaknesses, and more than anything else, they gave little or no importance to personal matters. They were made of stone, prepared to resist anything. And as such he also recognized himself as identical to the rest of the group. (30)¹⁹

The moral imperatives characteristic of a revolutionary subjectivity are underlined in this passage. The militant can be faithful to only one "lover": the cause. Jerônimo's conflict lays in the impossibility of reconciling political fight with love. It is clear that he has to choose one and give up the other: "One day, Jerônimo asked himself if his true commitment in life would be to the ideology of men, or if destiny's design would allow him to love the one that unexpectedly appeared in his way" (47).²⁰

The antagonistic element is not the guerilla organization opposing the homosexual relationship but the preeminence of the political ideology over the sentimental matter. The problem is located in the realm of ideological imperatives that bears the revolutionary cause. Contrary to what historical reality indicates, the text repeatedly affirms that the guerilla fighters are

tolerant in regard to their comrade's homosexuality and, in this respect, Jerônimo asserts, "the group's mentality and prejudices are beyond this matter" (56).²¹ Moreover, another guerrilla fighter travels to São Paulo to bring Nivaldo to the jungle and reunite him with Jerônimo, for whom this whole situation is "madness." However, his partner puts a hand on his shoulder, stares at him and replies, "Comrade, in this life of exception that we lead, our actions cannot be judged by ordinary norms" (79).²² Clearly, there is no interest in exploring the ambiguity of power, due to the impression that violence and cruelty are only exercised by the army. The novel discards a homophobic representation of both the guerrilla fighters and the authoritarian state. Jerônimo is not arrested for being homosexual but for his subversive affiliation. The problem between homosexuality and the revolutionary Left is portrayed in abstract terms, free of historical agents.

On the one hand, the antagonist of homosexual desire is the revolutionary imperative, and on the other hand, the achievement of a personal relationship endangers the guerrilla activist's commitment and fidelity. Individualism and revolution repel each other. Different resolutions are studied; the first seeks to correct the ideological breach between the lovers by having Nivaldo become part of the guerrilla organization. However, it quickly becomes clear that he cannot adopt a revolutionary ideology as he is only motivated by personal love with no authentic political motivation. Consequently, the simplest solution would be to choose between armed fighting and homoerotic desire. Although Jerônimo begins to doubt the revolutionary cause and the sacrifice that it entails, he does not give it up. He accepts the required sacrifices and in this way he fulfills the demands of the revolutionary "apostolate": the individual sacrifice after the collective ideal. Within the revolutionary Left's imaginary, the homosexual was seen as a problem of internal security for the armed left because his "intrinsic weakness"—a byproduct of being feminine—in an interrogation that could easily lead to a confession. Manuel Puig challenges this stereotype in *Kiss of the Spider Woman* by creating the figure of an effeminate homosexual that confronts the authoritarian state and dies heroically as he collaborates with the guerrilla.

On the contrary, in *Nivaldo e Jerônimo*, weakness has a different connotation. Weakness is not different from the homoerotic desire that corrodes the guerrilla fighter's discipline; sexuality becomes a privileged form of bending the order. Jerônimo explains this to his comrade in the following way:

I judged myself to be a strong person, able to conquer . . . those solicitations of my way of being, but it seems that loneliness here in the jungle has exacerbated them even more. It is a weakness; I recognized that it is a weakness, Antônio! (77)²³

Sacrifice implies not only renouncing love but also taming a sexuality linked to emotional instability and lack of self-control. If desire breaks into the revolutionary body and shatters the military discipline that governs it, then it is necessarily to expurgate it and regulate an uncontrolled sexuality since being masculine presumes self-control and restrain over emotions.

4. From Nivaldo to Viviane: The Negative Other

The hyperbolic masculinity of Jerônimo confirms the values traditionally associated with dominant masculinity (rationality, discipline, stability, power), but these appear in contrast and opposition to a negative Other: femininity, represented in the figure of Nivaldo. Femininity is linked to irrationality, lack of discipline, instability, weakness and passivity. In order to make the representation of the masculine homosexual possible, the writing needs to incorporate the Other; it is unable to escape to a binary logic. It develops a process of alterity that inscribes the Other (first, the effeminate homosexual, then the transvestite) as radically different and excluded. By opposing two differentiated homosexual subjectivities, homosexuality is pluralized, and there is no longer a unique individual that defines the “species.” Nevertheless, this diversification has a negative outcome because it reaffirms the dominant stereotype regarding the feminine homosexual and therefore symbolically legitimates its marginalization.

To reinforce Jerônimo’s gender stability, the novel opposes Nivaldo’s continuous gender fluctuations. Nivaldo has lived unworried and indifferent to the political situation of the country; his life is filled with sexual adventures and parties with friends. Jerônimo’s offers give Nivaldo a new perspective and a more “serious” approach to life. It is an ideological remedy that also brings access to an unknown masculinity:

“I am in love,” thought Nivaldo. And everything in life suddenly became clear with that statement. *Finally he felt as a man does, in the most proper sense of the word*, mature, strong and confident to enjoy and defend this new feeling which this other man was offering him. (36; my emphasis)²⁴

The access to masculinity also occurs through anal sex as Nivaldo declares: “When he penetrates me, my body absorbs his virility, which I

then return to him when I penetrate him, leaving my juice of life so he can distill and transform it in benefits that I will receive again” (119).²⁵ In the cultural imaginary, the person with the “active” role is invested with power, force and initiative, establishing a dominant relationship with a “passive” subject who instinctively submits.²⁶ Nonetheless, the symbolism of anal coitus has a new and very different meaning in this novel: the “passive” member does not subjugate his masculinity, but rather he ratifies and increases it, disregarding the symbolism of penetration as an act of male dominance. The masculine sexual organ acquires a new reproductive function: the power of disseminating masculinity. The numerous representations of sexual practices (either anal sex or fellatio) emphasize the alternation of sexual roles among the protagonists. This is already a progressive vision, if one thinks that until recently Latin American homosexuality was conceptualized and represented through unyielding sexual roles based on a sexual economy regulated by anal penetration, with one “active” and masculine partner while the other is “passive” and effeminate, and only the latter is considered to be homosexual. Although lacking empirical validity, and deeply engraved in Octavio Paz’s famous fourth chapter of *El laberinto de la soledad* (*The Labyrinth of Solitude*), this has become a standard definition of Latin American homosexuality.²⁷ Nevertheless, the deconstruction of the values conventionally associated with the active/passive sexual matrix functions here to reinforce masculinity; anal penetration is legitimated so long as it enables a fluid circulation of masculinity.

While the sexual acts show reciprocity and equality, in the political sphere there is a clear asymmetry between the two characters. Nivaldo’s motivation to become a guerilla fighter is so that he can be at his lover’s side, but this is unacceptable for Jerônimo. The recurrent insistence on Nivaldo’s psychological instability denotes that he has an inherent flaw (almost pathological), which could be the real reason why he cannot access that higher plane in which the guerilla fighter is located. The scale always leans in favor of Jerônimo; he has a stable commitment to his political and gender identities.

Nivaldo’s gender oscillation seems to cease with the later adoption of an “exaggerated” femininity. After a failed suicide attempt and upon returning to the city, Nivaldo becomes a drug addict and prostitute. At one point he takes a transvestite called Gilda as a client:

Nivaldo’s impression was that he was preparing to sleep with a very sophisticated woman, despite the fact that he never got excited by women. He preferred men, that is, men who also liked men, like him, despite having a well-preserved sentimental story that would never repeat again.

Convinced of this and to avoid ruining that ideal image, he didn't allow himself the luxury of choosing his clients. He prostituted himself for his livelihood: whoever paid could take him. (192)²⁸

The scene of the naked transvestite, focalized through Nivaldo, becomes a performance where it is possible to detect and isolate the feminine markers that are used in the construction of the transvestite body: make-up, colored lips, long lashes, dyed blonde hair, and breast implants. The performance recalls a kaleidoscope that captures forms and colors “to create an elaborated image, borrowed and false, but nonetheless pleasant to the view—like a stained-glass window in a Gothic cathedral being illuminated by artificial lights” (193).²⁹ After undressing completely, the falsehood of the copy is confirmed:

Gilda was almost nude, with just a black panty. She stood a little back from Nivaldo, enough to remove it with an agile movement of her hands, and he saw a small triangle of dark hair, carefully drawn by a razor blade, sprouting among her closed thighs. Gilda opened them and a piece of tape that was between them appeared. At that moment the penis jumped forward, already slightly intumesced, while Gilda, pressing with her fingers on the sides of the triangle of hair, made the testicles drop. (193)³⁰

When Gilda's numb penis jumps from its hiding place, Nivaldo is dismayed and horrified: the biological mark is the proof of the “crime.” Sexuality functions as a regimen of control, imposing a binary logic that imposes two principles: man/woman, and makes them incompatible (you cannot belong to both) and unavoidable (you cannot belong to neither) (Llamas 13). Through their corporal representation, the transvestites that appear in the novel (first Gilda and later Nivaldo/Viviane) contravene this sexual order by inscribing onto their bodies a gender that supposedly cannot belong to them.

Becoming a transvestite for Nivaldo is not an act of freedom or resistance, rather the best possible strategy for self-destruction: “Finally he could get rid of his original identity and in exchange receive another, external and fabricated one, freeing the real one so he could realize his planned and desired self-destruction” (199).³¹ Viviane is a negative performance, made purely of surface, a false exteriority that allows Nivaldo to preserve an interiority that is thought to be pure and true:

This new form of being seen also provided an unusual way of seeing others. Hidden, he would look from within, only at what he wanted and what interested him, using others to his will, without them knowing it. Nobody would notice his disappearance. The necessary but uncomfortable

exchange with the external side would then be something from an external standpoint to another, because he would be lending himself to somebody, using the structure of his face and body, but he didn't need to be the one inside. (199-200)³²

The novel describes the transformation process in detail: Nivaldo's gaze is no longer horrified and amazed by the transvestite body. Seeing now becomes identified with learning; he observes carefully in order to understand the different strategies needed to gain access to a gender that is not contiguous to his biological body. As Josefina Fernández explains, the transvestite body is created on the foundation of a male body's narrative that the transvestite inhabits at the beginning of her journey. In order to achieve a feminine body, it is necessary to articulate a double dialogue with the actual body that is being abandoned, and with the desired feminine body that is trying to be attained.³³ Nivaldo scrutinizes his transvestite friend's body, comparing it with his own. He learns how to "disguise," as the narrator says, the masculine parts of his body (the back, the hips, the arms and the feet), bending the waist and tightly joining the legs (195). Nivaldo does not dress as a woman, because he is not a cross-dresser; he fully transforms his body, and with the exception of the penis that he keeps but hides, he erases all the characteristic markers of his male sex and the masculine gender he wants to leave aside. He gradually begins to incorporate some exterior markers of femininity: long hair, plucked eyebrows, careful make-up to hide his beard.

The transformation of Nivaldo into Viviane continues with the use of feminine hormones and culminates in the acquisition of a thorax with feminine forms through silicone. Silicone implants have a tremendous importance in the constitution of the transvestite body. Acquiring female breasts marks a definitive point in the transvestite's life because it puts an end to gender ambiguities; it also allows the transvestite to detach herself from cross-dressing performers and to separate herself from the space she shared with homosexuals to whom she was associated when she did not have them (Fernández 170-1). More importantly, breast implants entails stable social visibility as a dissident subject becomes permanent; there is no more separation between theatrical performance and everyday life.

Queer theory and gender studies have shown that transvestite sexuality destabilizes the gender binary that regulates the heteronormative system and questions the intrinsic notion of "fixed" categories.³⁴ Within the Latin American literary tradition, the transvestite functions as a radical alterity, as an otherness that denounces the heteronormative power and its homophobic component.³⁵ On the contrary, the novel constantly ratifies its disdain for transvestism by representing it as a faulty version of an

original; as Gilda explains, “There isn’t a transvestite in the whole world who doesn’t have a trait of her former masculinity” (202).³⁶ Once again, gender is defined in proprietary terms; transvestism entails an appropriation of something that “naturally” belongs to women. To make this even more explicit, Nivaldo’s transformation into Viviane comes in the chapter titled “Inferno” (the novel is divided into chapters entitled “Paradise,” “Purgatory” and “Hell” following Dante’s *Divine Comedy*).

The question, then, is how to understand this unusual construction of transvestite subjectivity in a novel that is part of so-called “homosexual literature.” It would, therefore, be fair to expect a progressive stance for marginal and dissident sexualities. To answer this question, I believe it is important to recast the text’s underlying gender and sexual ideology whose main feature is its affiliation to a dominant masculinity. The writing penalizes the intrusion of femininity into the realm of masculinity and prescribes the masculine gender as the only one appropriate for a male homosexual. Clearly, it reaffirms the Manichean distribution of genders and reifies heterosexual homogeneity.

The plot structure, and especially the ending, reinforces these meanings. The story begins with a musical performance by Viviane in a disco in São Paulo. Jerônimo is in the audience, accompanied by a journalist who is writing an article about Jerônimo’s years in jail. The reader ignores Viviane’s true identity and the bond that unites her with Jerônimo. A predictable enigma is constructed and develops retrospectively. Once Viviane and Jerônimo’s shared past is recounted, the novel returns to the narrative present, that is to say, to the initial scene with pending resolution. The reader now knows that Nivaldo is hiding under the disguise of Viviane. At this point one of the text’s surprising characteristics emerges: the presentation of two alternative ends.

The first ending delivers a happy outcome for the couple: the two lovers look directly into each others’ eyes and recognize each other. The eyes become the only proof that can reveal Nivaldo’s true identity not subsumed by the transvestite body. This is also a traumatic recognition as Nivaldo becomes aware of his shameful persona:

- How horrible! What a disgusting person I have become.
- Please, Nivaldo. We have our whole lives ahead of us. Don’t worry: we will return to what we were, recovering what life owes us.
- I can’t bring myself to look at my hands, with these long polished nails, the feeling of this long dyed hair touching my face, this... this horrendous implanted bosom, this dress... I feel disgust for myself, ashamed of knowing that you are looking at me, and touching me in this miserable state.

– It is true; it saddens me, seeing you in this way, but we . . . we will solve everything... (223)³⁷

The transvestite must die because happiness is only possible if he recovers the lost masculinity:

I begin today; this morning I will return to what I used to be: I will cut my hair and nails; in a month my eyebrows will grow in; tomorrow I will go to the clinic to remove the silicone implants; I will stop taking hormones and in three months the hair will grow back and my body will recover its masculine characteristics again, which I will help with the gym; and I will definitively stop taking the drugs. (223)³⁸

Masculinity is understood in terms of verification: the masculine man is discernible and classifiable based on a certain group of physical characteristics that are never shared by the other gender. The writing stresses the possibility (and moral obligation) of recovering the “original” gender, which is the individual’s true essence. This posits a problematic ontology because it requires undoing the feminine physical markers in order to reinstate the masculine ones. In a contradictory way, the novel ends up underlining not a core identity but rather the representational character of all identities—in other words, the way in which gender positions move and intertwine and where the body becomes a privileged zone for the inscription and exchange of signs. At the same time, according to the novel, it seems that people can choose the gender they want and represent it in the way that seems most fitting. This possibility of jumping from one gender to the other presents the process of identity construction as entirely flexible and voluntary.

Because the second ending follows the logic of the plot and the novel’s sexual ideology more closely than the first ending, it seems more credible. Nivaldo decides not to reveal his true identity because he anticipates his former lover’s rejection, and Jerônimo does not recognize him beneath Viviane. It is not possible to recover the “original” gender because the disguise is almost perfect; repetition finally becomes identification. The story finishes with Nivaldo/Viviane accepting that he/she is not worthy of his/her old lover, and ultimately it heralds his/her death, presumably caused by an overdose at a post show party.

These endings may seem different but the novel does not truly promote alternative interpretations; both endings apply precisely the same moral: the transvestite needs to die either symbolically or literally. Gender transgression, the escape from the realm of masculinity, is what is being punished in this novel, and not homosexuality per se. The transvestite is

part of a “context of death” that has been the symbolic context where her life developed; this is why death is seen as unavoidable. On the other hand, the death of Nivaldo/Viviane helps to define an instance of both survival and victory as it reveals a life that is worth living. Jerônimo is the homosexual that deserves to live because he conjugates political ideology and militancy with the “appropriate” gender identity for his biological sex. Nivaldo is the other side of homosexuality, and he is doubly punished: for violating the laws that regulate the gender binary, and for his lack of political commitment. The moral of the text seeks to put an order in the otherness by offering the normative model of a masculine homosexual.

5. Bodies in Combat and Beyond

Through these idealized and stereotypical characters, the novel displays the struggle between two bodies: one political and revolutionary and the other sexually liberated. Within a wide spectrum of political bodies, the revolutionary body is a complex machine because of the singularity of its parts; the machine of war, the permanent guerrilla warfare, regulates its functions. The political technology of the body rationalizes the work force provided by the subject, and it coordinates institutional systems (schools, prisons, barracks, etc.) by juxtaposing bodies according to a calculation that will lead to the obedience of the subjects and the intended effectiveness of the action undertaken.³⁹ In this sense, the revolutionary logic regulates and disciplines Jerônimo’s political body; it takes away its singularity and inscribes revolutionary imperatives. Homoerotic desire is thematized as the intrusion of irrationality, a weakness that leads the subject away from its freeing mission, but its major role consists of revealing the constructed nature and fragility of masculinity.

In this regard, although represented negatively, the ever-changing body of Nivaldo becomes a liberated and undisciplined body, where different gender markers and sexual practices can be inscribed. His early body is young, almost adolescent and androgynous, where the masculine is “not well digested” and the feminine is latent. This gender instability presumably enables his eventual transformation into a transvestite body. If the revolutionary body points to its own self-effacement by disconnecting itself from desire and emotion, Nivaldo’s bodies express hyperbolically a radical freedom and the limitless possibilities of gender transformation.

The author’s foreword attempts to regulate the novel’s meaning by pointing the reader in a specific and monologic direction; but the gender-sexual ideology sustained by the novel turns problematic and complicates any simplified interpretation. Although homosexuality ceases to be a

singular identity, and the novel does provide space for different gender and sexual identities (the hypermasculine homosexual, the effeminate homosexual and the transvestite), this pluralized representation of homosexuality does not seek to call attention to diversity. On the contrary, it tries to regulate heterogeneity by morally stratifying these representations, placing one as superior while the other is policed and constructed as unnatural and perverted. The text legitimates masculine homosexuality, transforming a possibility into the norm, while the effeminate homosexual and the transvestite become paradigmatic abjections. Far from interrupting the heteronormative representational system, the novel produces a homosexual subject within the codes of a dominant masculinity. In this sense, it is a contradictory fiction, an aporia that apparently affirms revolutionary virtues but in truth strongly legislates the “appropriate” gender for the homosexual. As demonstrated by Butler’s deconstructive analysis of gender, there is no “proper” gender to one sex rather than another, and where the notion of the “proper” operates, “it is always and only *improperly* installed as the effect of a compulsory system.”⁴⁰ But the novel reifies this ideologem under the assumption that a homosexual subjectivity that adheres to the conventions of an exacerbated masculinity would guarantee homosexuals a place within the revolutionary ranks. Despite this, the elimination of femininity (represented by the transvestite and the effeminate homosexual) does not facilitate a true alliance between the political Left and homosexuality because the later is silenced.

By ascribing homosexuality to dominant masculinity, the novel naturalizes male domination, ultimately reaffirming its underlying ideology: men’s supremacy over women. The text fails to acknowledge that masculine ideology always establishes gender as non-negotiable and enforces a compulsive heterosexuality with a homophobic component as a mechanism of perpetuation and reproduction.⁴¹ While it might seem absurd to associate homosexuality with dominant masculinity, as Leo Bersani eloquently observes, the gay man is always at risk of identifying himself with the dominant images of the misogynist heterosexual man and, in this respect, Bersani writes, “A more or less secret sympathy with heterosexual male misogyny carries with it the narcissistically gratifying reward of confirming our membership in (and not simply our erotic appetite for) the privileged male society. Same-sex desire includes the potential for loving identification with the gay man’s enemies.”⁴²

Penteado’s novel not only indirectly evokes Leo Bersani’s reflections but also those of Néstor Perlongher, an Argentinean writer and essayist who was exiled in Brazil and whose theoretical contributions anticipate

many of the current contributions of American queer theory. In a 1984 seminal essay, “El sexo de las locas” [The sex of queens], Perlongher outlines the notion of heteronormativity by reflecting on the ways in which normalcy and heterosexuality converge. He perceives a great risk in incipient gay identity politics because it creates “a homosexual territory (a kind of micro-Zionism) that constitutes not subversion but an amplification of normality, the establishment of a parallel normality, a normality divided between *gays* and *straights*.”⁴³ Furthermore, the idea of *homosexuality* is starting to subsume an astonishingly vast number of sexual and gender identities. Perlongher calls this process “the normalization of homosexuality,” noting that it also establishes a particular subjectivity: “the gay model” which in the past was just a possibility now becomes the normative identity for homosexuals. This process is not only a question of gender and sexuality but also of class division and race. For this reason, a new set of excluded social players appears in the social landscape: transvestites, effeminate homosexuals, masculine lesbians and male prostitutes. By rejecting the social norm and the sex-gender system, these subjectivities become, for Perlongher, the most subversive and dissident forms of homosexuality.

In “La desaparición de la homosexualidad” [The disappearance of homosexuality], written at the beginning of the nineties and a few years before his death, Perlongher deepens his deconstruction of the “gay model.”⁴⁴ The institutionalization of gay culture has finally reconfigured homosexual practices, taking away its aura of mystery and secrecy. For him, this marks the end of “the homosexual orgy” (“la fiesta de la orgía homosexual”) and of the sexual revolution. It is a turning point between liberation and coercion, promiscuity and monogamy, subversion and submission. Nevertheless, he asserts that homosexuality was not defeated by repression. On the contrary, the homosexual movement succeeded, but it is the triumph of the American gay model, not of Genet’s “queen” (“la loca genetiana”). Indeed, there is a clear shift from the establishment of a culture that belongs to a specific minority to the aspiration of integration to the general society, and, as Sedgwick would later elucidate, universalizing aspirations have subjugated minoritizing aspirations. It is the historical turn from separatism to assimilation, from subversion to integration, and from difference to sameness.

These issues have concrete relevance as they interpolate contemporary gay culture to seek a delicate balance between the social imperatives of integration, and the defense of a heterogeneous minor identity. It seems that gay culture has embarked on an incessant celebration of the “good gay” (much like the good doctor, the good journalist, the good professor,

the good father, etc.), and condemns and discriminates against the “gay outlaws” who, unlike Bersani’s account, are not just a literary mythology. Today being a “good gay” entails compliance to heterosexual norms, and by which gays and lesbians are supposed to behave according to their “appropriate” gender. The mainstream gay image is fully invested in putting an end to the “feminine” image associated with gay men, which recalls Eribon’s claim that “the obsession with masculinity” is one of the most visible features of an affiliation to contemporary gay culture.⁴⁵ As Eribon points out, there is a part of gay culture that takes its very form from an attraction to femininity, and certainly there is another part of that same culture that has a strong adherence to masculine values. One is not better than the other. The problem is the moral condemnation of the effeminate homosexual and the rendering of the masculine gay as the appropriate and politically correct image. In the end, the danger that assimilation might bring is becoming a form of self-effacement (119).

Heteronormativity will always demand marginal sexualities to refrain from displaying their characteristic traits and carry themselves in accordance to its set of norms. There will always be tension between choice and imposition, self-creation and social construction, subjectivity and objectification. What matters most is our project of self-definition as a *heterogeneous collective*. In this regard, it is crucial to resist stabilizing gay identity into a unitary and global discourse, and to refrain from trying to make singular what has always been plural. As another Brazilian writer, João Silvério Trevisan, wrote, a gay person is a subject that posits a doubt, somebody that affirms an uncertainty, opening a space for differences that become signs of contradiction (43). The task, then, is to preserve gay culture as a productive locus of conflicting and opposing subjectivities, of disagreement and heterogeneity, and where the local cohabits with the global.