

THE POLITICAL SCOPE OF TRAVESTITITIES: ON THE TRANSGRESSIVE POTENTIAL OF TRAVESTIS

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Summary

Those who reject the male/female bipolarity as a gender identity are grouped under the 'transgender' category. Furthermore, there is a tendency in queer studies to consider these kinds of identities as necessarily transgressive. However, not all the bodies that do not meet the heteronormativity of gender and sexuality can be considered along the axis of transgression. Frequently, we run the risk of falling into a conceptual ethnocentrism when considering identities that *must* be understood as transgressive and transgendered. My field experience with a group of Brazilian *travestis* in Rio de Janeiro and Barcelona makes me consider that although they challenge heteronormativity, they do not necessarily transgress it nor can they be easily homogenised within categories which escape their understanding. It is convenient to contextualize culturally and socio-historically the terms used to avoid the colonization of experiences representing a complex, diverse and polyphonic reality from the academic stance and that of political activism.

Keywords: *travestis*; bodies; queer; transgression; masculinity/femininity

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I. Introduction

I find it problematic to think about the *bantut* of the Philippines (Johnson, 1997), *travestis* of Brazil (Kulick, 1998) or *hijras* of India (Nanda, 1990) as ‘transgender’ because there is a tendency to universalise a category and find non-normative gender practices anywhere (Towle and Morgan, 2002). This text originates from my lack of comfort regarding the extensive use of certain categories, either academic or those coming from political activism, which are used to refer to any identity which is different from the gender binary male/female and from heteronormative sexuality.

Just like the term ‘third gender’ was at its peak in the eighties to identify the ethnographic evidence of non-western societies which could not be explained by dichotomic gender categories (Jacobs, 1983; Blackwood, 1984; Roscoe, 1996), the term ‘transgender’ started to be used in the nineties to find another theoretical and political referent for sexual and gender diversity. The relationship between both concepts is still in force in popular and activists’ writings (Bornstein, 1994; Feinberg, 1996) which intend to legitimize transgender movements. This is especially the case in the United States, where it is done by using intercultural examples of cases of ‘third gender’ which show that the western binary gender system is neither universal nor innate (Towle and Morgan, 2002). It is also from the nineties on, that some studies about transgender identities ally with heterogeneous queer theory to emphasize the political potential and the capacity of self-affirmation of transgender people (Boswell, 1991; Stryker, 1994).

In spite of the tight historical and theoretical link of the emergence of the ‘transgender’ and ‘queer’ categories, it is not so simple to think that queerness – as a theoretical and political strategy to denature the way of heteronormatively understanding sex, gender and sexuality-, can represent all ‘trans’¹ individuals because many of them identify with a more steady and heterosexual identity model (Valentine, 2007). Consequently, even acknowledging the huge diversity of identity experiences, in this article I will reflect on how some transgender studies use the most “liberating” and “transgressive” aspects of queer theory. At the same time, I will theoretically elaborate a critique of queer perspective to investigate what it means to “transgress” the male/female binary and I will ask myself if *travestis* can be considered as “transgressive”.

Finally, I must emphasize that my position is not radically opposed to the transgender movement or to queer theory as I recognise their theoretical and political importance in destabilising the male/female binary, normative sexuality and the hegemonic psychomed-

1 I used this expression as an umbrella term to include the wide variety of gender identities: transgender people, transsexuals or *travestis*, among others.

ical *perspective on* transsexualism. However, I question the identification of every person as “transgender” just because they display an identity which could be considered ‘transgressive’. I mainly discuss the attribution and imposition of this category from an academic point of view. I never question those who consider themselves “transgender”. Contrary to the universalisations which can simplify the complexity of reality, I stand for the socio-historical contextualization of case studies and for detecting when, from an academic perspective, labels are imposed which do not match discourses and practices of people involved. My field experience with a group of Brazilian *travestis* in Rio de Janeiro and Barcelona will contribute to rethink the risks that arise from such generalizations. Although the nature of this article is not eminently empirical, some relevant information gathered during my fieldwork will allow the organisation of theoretical considerations that bind the text’s content.

2. About the ‘transgender’ concept

Several authors (Docter, 1988; Mackenzie, 1994; Frye, 2000) consider that American activist Virginia Prince coined the term *transgenderist* in the late sixties in order to refer to those who, like her/him, live full time in a gender different from the one they were given at birth but without going through any surgical intervention to modify their bodies. This way, she/he and other people looked to differentiate themselves, on one side, from transsexual men and women (who did have surgery in order to change their bodies) and, on the other side, from fetishist and sporadic transvestites, as they are termed within psychiatric discourse.

From the early nineties on, the concept ‘transgender’ gained another connotation to confront what is considered “normal”. This concept is no longer only a category between ‘transsexual’ and ‘transvestite’ but it becomes an alternative to the gender binary (Valentine, 2007).

At the same time, the idea of understanding this concept as representative of a community began to spread, that is to say, the expression ‘umbrella term’ is used to include any type of gender variant. Using this logic, it is Leslie Feinberg (2006 [1992]) who gives a new radical meaning to the term: to refer to a ‘pan gender’ movement of oppressed minorities who are summoned to a revolutionary common cause in the name of social justice. Thus, a community which unites to fight against sexual oppression and discrimination is established at a theoretical and political level. Under this concept, we could put all individuals with a non-conforming gender identity (Mejía, 2006), those who reject the male/female bipolarity as gender identifier.

As Valentine (2007) argues, the repercussion of the transgender movement has been such that this concept has been institutionalized and become the “official” identity policy of non-normative gender identities, especially, in a specific social, historical and cultural context: the United States. This was due to the strong bond established between political activism and academic literature. Nevertheless, as a criticism, the use of this category does not acknowledge the complexities of the desire of the subjects and the different experi-

*The
political
scope of
travestilities*

J. Vartabedian

ences involved in each identification. As will be seen later, not all *travestis*, transsexuals or cross-dressers identify as transgender. As Valentine states, there is the risk of colonizing, through this category's representation, those who are not interested in identifying as transgender or who do not have the information to identify themselves as transgender. Ultimately, the risk lies in that the category "[T]ransgender itself (because of its institutional life, its implication in agencies of the state, its racial and class entailments) may unintentionally become another tool of 'exclusion', even as it promises to 'include', to liberate, and to seek redress" (Valentine, 2007, p. 245).

3. Brazilian *travestis*

The field research for my doctoral thesis on social anthropology lasted approximately one year and was carried out in Rio de Janeiro and Barcelona². I focused on the physical and geographic-spatial migrations of Brazilian *travestis*. I used two basic techniques to gather information: participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Throughout the ethnographic work, I wanted to look into how they became *travestis* through the modifications of their bodies and gender, and the gradual professionalization into the sex work industry and the following transnational migrations to Europe that many of them made.

I employ the term *travestility* used in recent years in Brazil (Peres, 2005; Vale, 2005; Patrício, 2008; Duque, 2009; Pelúcio, 2009; among others) to refer to the heterogeneity of the identities of *travestis*. '*Travesti*' is an emic concept that is widely used in Brazil and in Latin-America in general. Trying to explain who the *travestis* are can seem paradoxical if we talk about *travesti* identities as heterogeneous, multiple and plural. Nevertheless, based on the ethnographic works on Brazilian *travestis* (Silva, 1993, 1996; Kulick, 1998; Vale, 2005; Benedetti, 2005; Pelúcio, 2009), but also on the Argentine ones (Fernández, 2004; Berkins and Fernández, 2005), the Venezuelan ones (Vogel, 2009), the Ecuadorian ones (Camacho, 2009), among others, and from my own ethnographic experience, I can approach a definition that, however, does not intend to (and it would not be able to) cover the complexity surrounding *travestilities*. Marcos Benedetti states that *travestis*:

[...] are those who modify their physical form to make it as similar as possible to a woman's body; they dress and live daily as people belonging to the female gender without, on the contrary, the explicit desire of undergoing reconstructive surgery to remove the penis and construct a vagina³

(2005, p. 18).

2 In the first part of my fieldwork, I stayed for six consecutive months in Rio de Janeiro in 2008 and thanks to the invitation of the *Programa em Gênero, Sexualidade e Saúde*, Instituto de Medicina Social, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. The second part of my work took part in the city of Barcelona in non-continuously between 2009 and 2011. In both cities, I carried out interviews with Brazilian *travestis*, plastic surgeons and agents of NGO's related to *travestis* sexual workers.

3 "[...] são aquelas que promovem modificações nas formas do seu corpo visando a deixá-lo o mais parecido possível com o das mulheres; vestem-se e vivem cotidianamente como pessoas pertencentes ao gênero feminino sem, no entanto, desejar explicitamente recorrer à cirurgia de transgenitalização para retirar o pênis e construir uma vagina".

According to their practices, sexual desires and the way of constructing their gender, female and male features coexist in a same *travesti* body. The search for an aesthetically female image (frequently, idealized) and their repeated performances of a studied femininity, are part of the everyday *travesti* universe. They seek to be *like* women and *look like* women. With that purpose, they recur to a series of practices to modify their bodies permanently: they take hormones, they use industrial liquid silicone to enlarge their hips and buttocks, and then they undergo several plastic surgeries to have big breasts and retouch any male facial features. However, they are aware that they will never be women and they do not intend to be, following a different direction from other more orthodox trans identities. Under the make-up and the “litres of silicone”⁴ that their bodies flaunt, a certain masculinity prevails, which, in general, they do not want to get rid of. According to some of my respondents⁵ accounts in Rio de Janeiro:

I am not a woman. I have nothing against women, on the contrary, I barely... I like looking like... taking the place of a woman, a good image of a woman. Men see me like this in a woman’s body, but this way, a *travesti*. I like that men see me as a *travesti* in the body of a pretty woman⁶

(Samanta).

[...] we are not women, we look like women. I have never wanted to be a woman, I have always been very smart, I have always wanted to **look like** [emphasis from the interviewee] a woman. “To look like”, “to be” is a different thing. [...] I will never be a woman, I will not be able to give birth, you always have a prostate, my blood will say that I am a man...⁷

(Lina).

To become a *travesti* it is necessary to start a long and complex journey through the borders of a spatial and bodily territory. This process starts when they still are *gayzinhos* (young gays). Their sexual orientation is assumed, with a lot of difficulty, in a social and family context generally marked with violence and incomprehension. These young *gayzinhos* –frequently with a low level of education and coming from the poorest social strata of Brazil- are usually thrown out of their homes or they run away to big cities looking for the tolerance and freedom lacking from their place of origin.

Cities like Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo are big schools for these young generations of future new *travestis*. However, to enter into the universe of *travestilities*, the existence of a complex and hierarchic system of relationships is required. The *mães* (mothers) or *madrinhas* (godmothers)⁸ are *travestis* with more experience and economic means who are at the top

4 Silicone is measured, among *travestis*, in litres.

5 All the names of my interviewees are fictitious in order to preserve their anonymity.

6 “Eu não sou uma mulher. Não tenho nada contra mulher, pelo contrário, eu apenas... eu gosto de fazer uma imagem de... substituir uma mulher, uma imagem boa da mulher. Os homens me vêem assim no corpo duma mulher, mas assim, uma travesti. Gosto que os homens me vejam como travesti naquele corpo daquela mulher bonita”.

7 “[...] nós não somos mulheres, parecemos mulheres. Eu nunca quis ser mulher, eu sempre fui muito inteligente, eu sempre quis ‘parecer’ [emphasis from the interviewee] mulher. ‘Parecer’, ‘ser’ é outra coisa. [...] Eu não vou ser uma mulher, eu não vou poder parir, você sempre tem uma próstata, meu sangue vai acusar sexo masculino...”.

8 For these and other expressions I keep the original use in Portuguese to emphasize, precisely, the

of the system. They protect, guide and advise those *travestis* who have just arrived into the big city. In exchange for this “protection”, the *filhas* (daughters) or *afilhadas* (god-daughters) show respect but also pay them money periodically. This way, there is an exchange of symbolic and economic goods to enter into and become a part of the world of *travestilities*. Respect, fear, violence, admiration, commitment, money and debts converge to create a bond. After some time, it becomes clear this bond has little to do with “maternal love” and more with the need some have to access support networks, and the desire others have to exploit this need and economically benefit from it.

In words of a renowned *madrinha* of Rio de Janeiro, those who arrive in the city “arrive very primitive, very... crude, like an uncut diamond”⁹. In these big cities, they will learn how to dress, do their make up, and gesticulate a specific type of idealised woman. They will also meet other *travestis* and those who will start to modify their bodies with silicone injections. They will learn the codes and rules of sexual work, their main form of employment, of the street and of the night¹⁰. It is also here that they will get money lent by *mães* or *madrinhas* to travel and work in Europe, one of the greatest goals of the *travestis* which empowers them.

In short, *travestis* identities go beyond the act of cross-dressing, even though that sense is in the origin of the concept. *Travestis* cannot be considered as cross-dressers or drag queens, as they change their bodies permanently and live all day *as* women. I depart from the acknowledgement that *travestis* (a term which is not used to refer to the bodily crossings from ‘woman to man’) constitute a kind of gender identity in which “feminine” beauty and male genitalia are combined in order to define the *travesti* particularity. Furthermore, keeping their penises makes *travestis* different from some more orthodox transsexual women for whom sexual reassignment surgeries are a *necessary* requirement to fully live their gender identities as they believe they were born in the “wrong” body and genital surgery is the only solution to their “problems”.

The use of certain identity categories as ‘*travesti*’ or ‘transsexual’ is problematic because they cannot be thought as representatives of homogeneous and closed identities. For instance, there are transsexuals who identify themselves as women and want to keep their penises and, on the other hand, some people who identify themselves as *travestis* but have undergone surgery to construct a vagina. Consequently, instead of considering them as closed categories that delimit an identity, I propose understanding them in a more ‘fluid’ way, by giving more value to self-identifications rather than the interpretations which can be made of those categories. Considering this, this article will discuss ‘*travesti*’ identities due to the fact that this is the term that they have used in Rio de Janeiro as well as in Barcelona to identify themselves although, as will be seen later, in their transnational migrations many of them tend to refer to themselves as ‘trans’ or ‘transsexual’.

As already noted, the term ‘*travesti*’ is an emic category with wide acknowledgement in Latin America. It is important to make it visible and to get to a place far away from the

contextual and emic meaning of said terms.

9 “*Aí chegam bem primitivas, bem... brutas, como um diamante bruto*”.

10 The profile of most of my *travesti* interviewees (both in Rio de Janeiro and in Barcelona) is characterized by young individuals, with a low level of education, from the popular social classes and devoted to the sexual work as main source of income.

negative connotations that this concept has, for example, in Spain, where the term *'travesti'* is usually subsumed under the more consensual medical category of 'transsexual' or the more politicized one of 'trans' or, less common, 'transgender' due to the fact that it produces a greater social legitimization. In the European context, *travesti* is a concept tightly linked to the world of prostitution and marginality. For instance, Rosanne, interviewed in Barcelona, says that:

R: - I introduce myself as transsexual, it sounds... a little bit more delicate. I think *travesti* sounds a little strong.

J: - But did you learn this concept here or before in Brazil?

R: - No, I learnt it here. After you accept things and say that you are a transsexual, because the *travesti* is very marginalized in society, do you know what I mean?

J: But did you not have any problems back then in Brazil when you introduced yourself as a *travesti*?

R: I never introduced myself, I did not speak to anyone, people just observe, we do not speak. But if they ask me, I always say I am *travesti* or transsexual. I say one or the other¹¹.

Thus the importance of the context in which *travestis* are located to refer to themselves can be seen. In Brazil, none of my interviewees identified themselves as transgender. In fact, most of them were not aware of the term's meaning. Moreover, not even a politicized group of *travestis* and transsexuals (ASTRA RIO, Associação das Travestis e Transexuais do Estado do Rio de Janeiro) used this concept in some of their public interventions. Here follow some examples of my interviewees in Rio de Janeiro:

J: - Do you know the word 'transgender'?

P: - No, I have never heard it¹² (Priscila).

J: - What does the concept 'transgender' mean to you?

R: - [Thinking]. I don't know. I heard that term the transgendered [sic], and I was considered one but I do not know. I know that I am a human being and I am Reyna, and it depends on the point of view of the client or who is looking at me, I can be a man or a woman or I can be both¹³ (Reyna).

11 "R: - *Eu me apresento como transexual, transexual fica assim.... um pouco mais delicado. Travesti acho que soa um pouco forte.*

J: - *Mas esta ideia você aprendeu aqui ou já no Brasil?*

R: - *Não, aprendi aqui. Depois que você assimila as coisas e fala que você é transexual, porque o [sic] travesti na sociedade está muito marginalizada, entendeu?*

J: - *Mas lá no Brasil não tinha problemas de se apresentar como travesti na época?*

R: - *Eu nunca me apresentava, não falava com nada, as pessoas só observam, a gente não fala. Mas se me perguntaram eu sempre falo ou sou travesti ou sou transexual. Eu falo uma coisa ou outra".*

12 "J: - *Conhece a palavra 'transgênero'?*

P: - *Não, nunca ouvi".*

13 "J: - *Que significa para você o conceito 'transgênero'?*

R: - [Thinking] *Eu não sei. Já ouvi o termo a transgênera [sic], já fui qualificada como tal mais eu não sei não. Eu sei que sou ser humano e sou a Reyna, e depende do ponto de vista do cliente ou de quem me enxerga, eu posso ser homem ou mulher, ou posso ser as duas coisas".*

Although the concept ‘transgender’ has appeared with more strength and visibility in the last years in Spain, in practice this term is hardly used by movements not linked to academia (Balzer, 2010, Coll-Planas, 2010). I understand that the use of politically correct and legitimized categories as ‘transsexual’ or ‘transgender’ must not be imposed to name *travesti* gender identities. As Berenice Bento warns: “It seems that being transsexual still sounds as something with more legitimacy and power while *travesti* is constructed as the radical other. It is as if the medical category ‘transsexual’ cleans and disinfects a category from the street”¹⁴ (2008, p. 12).

Nevertheless, the term ‘*travesti*’ continues to be widely used in Brazil and there is a very powerful political and identitary consciousness, so new generations of *travestis* define themselves as such. The origin of this term dates back the beginning of the 20th century. In Brazil, in the forties, the well-known ‘dances of *travestis*’ emerged as a privileged place for the public practices of those who inverted gender identities. Even though those in street carnivals also wore clothes as women do, the *travestis*’ dances were the main places where the rule was the non-rule, where people could transgress the norms of masculinity and femininity without worrying about the social hostility and punishment of those times. From the fifties on, a clear distinction was drawn between heterosexual cross-dressers for the carnival and “effeminate men who dressed like women to express their ‘real’ identity”¹⁵ (Green, 2000, p. 347). This way, an identity which had little to do with the mocking imitation by temporarily cross-dressed heterosexual men started to be strengthened in public.

Even though in those times, people talked about *travestis*, this concept did not have the same meaning that we give to it today. Until the mid-sixties, the term ‘*travesti*’ was used as a synonym of “transvestite” or cross-dresser. That does not mean that there were not people who wanted to live their femininity permanently. But their public exhibition in the streets was forbidden during the long military dictatorship Brazil endured (1964-1985). Transvestite acts were only accepted during carnival, specific dances, or on stage, where some *travesti* artists got fame and recognition. Balzer (2010) describes how in democratic Brazil, after the Second World War, these individuals were able to go from the carnival space into the theatre stages of the big cities where they obtained a greater social acceptance. According to the author, the coup of 1964 forced the new *travesti* celebrities to leave the stage due to the censorship and persecution they suffered because they were considered enemies of the «good morals of the traditional Brazilian family». As Balzer says: “After 20 years of military dictatorship, in the view of most part[s] of Brazilian society, *travestis* were no longer admired and respected celebrities, but they were considered criminals associated with «prostitution», drugs, and later, HIV/AIDS” (2010, p. 89). Nevertheless, in this space of illegality, there was a development of discourses and practices to value their identities. Very slowly, the first generations of *travestis* who dared to exhibit themselves in the streets opened the path to strengthen an identity. Thus, they left behind the initial character of occasional cross-dressing in order to permanently transform their bodies and live as women. However, many of them have paid a great price for the public exhibition of their identities:

14 “Parece que ser transexual ainda soa como algo que confere mais legitimidade e poder, enquanto travesti é construída como a outra radical. É como se a categoria médica ‘transexual’ fizesse o trabalho de limpeza, assepsia de uma categoria da rua”.

15 “[...] e os homens afeminados, que se vestiam como mulheres para expressar sua identidade ‘real’”.

arrests, beatings and murders¹⁶.

In short, I defend the use of the term ‘*travesti*’ as, more than any other concept, *travesti* reflects the particularity of a type of gender identity which must be thought of by taking into account the social, cultural and historic context in which this identity was created. When academia appoints the Brazilian *travestis* as ‘transgendered’ or ‘transsexuals’, the richness and complexity of the construction of the *travestis*’ identities become invisible and homogenous. Becoming a *travesti*, in the Brazilian context but also in international migrations, is part of a process in which cultural, historical, social, economic and political variables are involved. Such variables must be taken into account in order to assess how Brazilian *travestilities* have been and are created.

4. Queerness versus (hetero)normativity

Queer studies emerged in the United States as a theoretical and political strategy to denature the way of heteronormatively understanding sex, gender, sexuality and the way they relate (Sullivan, 2003). Before becoming a theory and political movement, the use of the concept “queer” was, in an English-speaking context, a way of insulting and tarnishing homosexuals and all those whose behaviour, appearance and ‘life style’ escaped from the dominant rules of human ‘nature’ (Epps, 2008). The appropriation of “queer”, which means “odd”, or “fag”, reflects an ensemble of practices and speeches which transgress (or intend to transgress) essentialisms related to the institutionalization of heterosexuality. Queer activism – which emerged from a reaction to the ethnocentrism and androcentricity of gay activism (Coll-Planas, 2012) - and its heterogeneous theoretical corpus, are based, as Sáez summarises (2004), on a critique of the male/female and the hetero/homo binary; the consideration of sex as the result of gender production; the resistance to normalisation; the recognition of the subversive potential of marginal sexualities; the necessity to articulate “race”, sex, culture and class; and the criticism of any essence and naturalization of gender and sexuality. In conclusion, queerness represents a heterogeneous group of individuals with non-normative sex, gender and sexuality that, many times in a radical way, defend the subversion of *gay lesbian, woman or transsexual* identities and the labels, that they consider as essentialist and which reproduce oppressive relationships of power.

The marginal origin of queerness (above all, in an English-speaking context) gave way to a certain institutionalization of queerness, becoming an identity sign and even a “brand” (Epps, 2008). Not without tension and accusations, queerness spread in the theoretical-academic world as well as in activism and the artistic environment. Even considering the critiques that will be presented hereinafter, the recognition of the construction of queerness as a critical referent of the sex-gender dichotomy is undeniable.

Trans experiences are part of an axis of important reflection to think about the decon-

16 According to the annual reports of the Brazilian NGO *Grupo Gay da Bahia*, Brazil leads the list of countries with a large number of murders of homosexuals and *travestis*/transsexuals.

struction or subversion of sex and gender categories which are normativised in society. Departing from the theoretical context and from queer activism, there are numerous claims which allude to the political potential of the trans identities. Of great influence on feminist and queer studies, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* mentions the capacity of subversion of *drags* (included within the wide trans umbrella) when referring specifically to the documentary *Paris is Burning* where the gay and trans community of Latin and Afro-American origin organize fashion shows and dance competitions in New York in the mid-eighties. She considers *drags* as subversive characters who make evident the parodic nature of the gender identities. Gender is *made* constantly though a “stylised repetition of acts”, as Butler states (2001 [1990], p. 172). Nevertheless, in *Bodies that Matter*, she recognises that not all drag performances are necessarily subversive. Butler puts the “transvestism”, as she says, in an ambiguous position: although it is subversive as it reflects gender as a performance based on an imitation, on the other hand, she considers that the sole exposure of this naturalized gender condition is not enough to undermine the roots of heterosexuality. *Drags* can repeat, imitate and parody the gender norms, but they do not challenge them. There is no existence of “a necessary relationship between the travesti¹⁷ and subversion” (2002, p. 184). Butler concludes: “heterosexuality can argue its hegemony *through* its denaturalization, like when we see those parodies of denaturalisation which re-idealize heterosexual norms without questioning them” (2002, p. 325).

The possible transgression of the transgender is refuted, above all, by a sector of feminism which considers transsexual individuals (trans women) as “victims” of a system of patriarchal domination that “forces” them to follow the normative patterns of gender. Janice Raymond (1994 [1979]) in particular understands transsexuality as a program which competes disloyally with the movement of women who intend to end the oppression of stereotyped sexual roles imposed by society. She accuses transsexuals (male to female) of being part of this patriarchal system and being forced to “change sex” by it. These “men transformed into fabricated women”, as she calls them, pretend to neutralize the biological women by taking over the *spirit* of the woman. In a word, its essential positioning conceives the transsexuality as a way of deifying the existing roles of the gender that oppress women. Others scholars as Kando (1973), Mackenzie (1994) and Jeffreys (1998), warn that transsexuals imitate the most extreme examples of femininity, maintaining and reinforcing gender stereotypes. Furthermore, they think that sexual reassignment surgeries support the distinctions based on “sex”, instead of challenging them in some way (Hird, 2000).

In recent years, trans-queer activists have faced these accusations when they reassert that they are not conformist and they do not intend to “fit” in any identity mould. Studies about transgender people use transsexuality as a queer cause to point out its “transgressive” potential. For instance, Leslie Feinberg (1996) rejects any kind of association between gender identity and a specific bodily expression. On the contrary, he/she proposes to transit through male and female identities constantly. The requirement of *passing* is the result of oppression. Kate Bornstein (1994) argues that transsexuals cannot become men or women, not due to the fact that they are not “authentic” as Raymond suggests, but because those who refuse to identify themselves as ‘men’ or ‘women’ radically deconstruct sex and gender.

Myra Hird’s critical contribution (2000) is that queer theory considers that while perform-

17

Butler uses the expression ‘travesti’ as a synonym of *drag* or cross-dresser.

ing or *making* gender, existing gender practices are being combined. Queerness assumes that when transgressing the borders based on sex and gender, there is already subversion. Nevertheless, the supposed subversion does not imply transgression because “*all* modern expressions of sexual and gender identity depend on the current system of the two-sex system for their expression” (p. 359). The author emphasizes that queer theory should be able to produce interesting “cakes” but instead, it always uses the same “ingredients”. For Hird, finally, there is transgression precisely when sex and sexual difference can be transcended.

According to Van Lenning (2004), being willing to leave the gendered body does not necessarily imply having to escape from binarism as the main referential framework: alluding to masculinity and femininity is inevitable. Moreover, she considers that bodies themselves can never be subversive by definition, but they depend on the meanings assimilated into them. For the author, transsexuality cannot be used as an example that breaks the duality between masculinity and femininity. She disagrees with Hird (2000) because instead of subverting sex, she recommends broadening the categories of femininity and masculinity. The techniques used on the body nowadays do not only transcend sex, but they purify it. She warns that insisting only on the deconstruction of the gender is risky, as it is possible to fall into a postmodern labyrinth where nothing is what it seems. In short, she considers that queer theory as well as the technological possibilities of recent years allows playing with sex, without transcending it (yet). Finally, Van Lenning observes that the lives of those individuals who subvert the limits of sex should not be romanticized because not all of them intend to transgress and, rather, they are surrounded by suffering and pain.

Both Namaste (1996) and Aizura (2012) are highly critical of those theoretical postulates that use the trans experience to exalt it as a symbol of transgression. These postulates deny the *real* desire of many people with a non-normative variation on sex and gender who only want to be considered as “normal”¹⁸ men or women, in many cases. Namaste (1996) understands the centrality of trans people in queer theory to dismantle the strict binarism of gender. However, she questions why queerness becomes detached and completely ignores the suffering and precarious situation of, for example, black transsexual women who are sex workers and who are not looking to transgress any pattern. Aizura (2012) proposes that the *idea* of the gender variant is the one which should be theorised as a threat to the dominating order, instead of transsexual and transgendered people themselves. Similarly, Valentine and Wilchins (1997) warn that instead of asking how trans people and their bodies are explained, we should consider why we are interested in trans bodies. In other words, the “suspicious” bodies are not the ones which need to be explained, but we should investigate the requirements used to explain them. In effect, as Butler (2001 [1990]) also argues, it is these requirements themselves which naturalize and normalize non-trans and non-intersexual bodies.

18 “Normality” implies to adjust to certain constructed patterns in the society. For example, the sex-gender dichotomy recognises men and women as the unique and possible sex and gender variants within a heteronormative society as the Western one.

These theoretical reflections lead us to a relevant question: do trans people transgress the sex and gender borders or do they not? Queer theory usually considers that people with bodies which are unintelligible according to the sex-gender dichotomy system of society or with “ambiguous” bodies are “transgressors”, as they question the heteronormative social identities. However, it is convenient to consider, as Morris (1995) does, that the concept of “ambiguity” is used as an explanatory tool in itself as it works in certain analyses as defining gender and sex differences in a sort of pre-discursive and pre-ontological way. As I will describe next when referring to Brazilian *travestis*, I understand that these bodies, without a political will of transgression, are not transgressors themselves. The willingness of the subject to transgress reveals itself as a crucial element to think of a specific person as a transgressor, even though this does not deny the interpretation of certain acts as transgressive.

5. Are *travestis* transgressors?

Just as I find it problematic that the “transgender” category is used to refer to *travestis*, I question the scope of queer theory as a study framework that can *exclusively* guide the analysis around *travestilities*. In spite of the usefulness of many of its theories, there are three aspects of queer theory which deserve to be considered critically. Firstly, academia as well as American queer activism and later the European and Latin-Americans ones, rise as the *most legitimate* referential framework to analyse issues related to sex, gender and sexuality¹⁹. It sets itself up as a universalist proposal which becomes the most “correct” way to get closer to the trans world. At the same time, and secondly, I understand that this focus becomes ethnocentric by being constituted as the environment (above all, English-speaking, white, and middle class) entitled to examine *other* sex or gender non-normative variants. In effect, when reading all these variants from the exclusively queer point of view, we run the risk of homogenising experiences and conceptions which should be explained according to their historic, social and cultural context, as I have previously stated. Lastly, I find it inappropriate to understand *all* expressions linked to queerness as necessarily transgressive. The fights against any kind of heteronormativity end up becoming finalist: it is compulsory to subvert, transgress, dismantle, denaturalise, deconstruct and defy any power relationship any way possible. Clearly, not all experiences are transgressive nor should they be seen solely under this perspective and with this end.

The bodily, social and sexual paths of *travestis* do not make it so easy when considering the political potential of their identities. For a start, most of my Brazilian interviewees in Brazil but also in Spain do not consider themselves as “transgressors”, many of them do not know the meaning of the term (as was the case with the concept ‘transgender’). Reyna, a *travesti*, says the following from Rio:

In order to be transgressive, it is necessary to go against a rule. I am not against any rule, I am not normal but I am not against anything!²⁰

19 I point out the capacity of queer theory to position itself as a legitimate and critical framework against heteronormativity. It is important to emphasize, nonetheless, that this supposed hegemony emerges in a critical and opposed context to the *de facto* hegemony of psycho-medical knowledge around the regulation of bodies, gender relationships and sexualities.

20 “Para ser transgressora tem que ir contra um padrão. Eu não sou contra um padrão, não sou comum, mas eu não

They describe, rather, their feminine bodies with male genitalia as: “fascinating”, “mysterious”, “pretty”, “odd” and “different”. They tend to be proud of their bodies, especially the “beautiful” and “successful” *travestis*, and even of their penises, an element that makes them feel “different”. For instance, Samanta, also interviewed in Rio, states that:

I love my penis, I love looking at myself naked in front of a mirror and looking at my feminine body with a penis in between my legs. Ah, that’s very gratifying to me²¹.

According to the *travestis* that I talked to, their bodies, instead of being transgressive, are seen according to an aesthetical pattern and the effect they create in intimacy with others. The “mystery” and “fascination” that their bodies provoke are aspects that they link with the beauty and with the *particularity* for which they are sought out, admired and desired by men. Furthermore, I consider that looking for a type of ‘transgression’ in their bodies is an act that only has sense and legitimacy for academics or queer activism, but that it does not always come from the people who are being discussed. It is problematic to introduce collective claims when they do not recognise the meaning of what they *should* be defending²².

On the other hand, affirming that they are not or do not feel like transgressors does not mean thinking that they are passive individuals who only think about aesthetics and being more beautiful. On the contrary, they are agents who strategically combine acting and embodying a kind of femininity with the desire to claim the sexual pleasure of being penetrated, and at the same time penetrating with their penises, creating in this way a game where the symbols of masculinity and femininity are appropriated, sometimes rejected or accepted just in certain contexts of social and sexual interaction. Furthermore, their penises destabilize the assumption- a foundation of heteronormativity – that female bodies have a vagina (“cultural vagina”, according to Garfinkel [1967]). *Travestis* repeatedly declare that they are sought out and desired due to their penises, that thing that makes them “fascinating”, as that *something else* determines –in the field of sexuality- how they will behave and negotiate the gender roles they will perform. However, these penises mean that for Brazilian society in general their bodies are not understood as ambiguous but as abject²³, because these bodies belong to *viados* (“fags”) (Kulick, 1998). Transphobia in Brazil is founded precisely through the consideration that the *infractions* that these “men” incur when making their bodies feminine and desiring other men, must be *punished*. In short, whatever the level of “reaction” to their bodies (from the rejection to acceptance, going through bewilder-

sou contra nada!”.

21 “Eu amo meu pênis, amo, adoro me ver no espelho nua e olhar para meu corpo, ver meu corpo feminino com pênis no meio das pernas. Ah, isso aí é muito gratificante para mim”.

22 During my fieldwork in Brazil, I met a small number of *travesti* activists who fought in favor of broadening and achieving minimum rights as citizens instead of defending the possible capacity of *travestis* of destabilizing the sex-gender order. On the contrary, the participation of Brazilian *travestis* as activists in Spain was totally non-existent. Consequently, in this text, I refer mainly to the experiences of non-politicized sexual worker *travestis*.

23 Butler (2002) claims that within the heterosexual framework in a simultaneous way, the formation of subjects requires the creation of that which cannot be articulated, abject bodies, those who are not “subjects”. She says that “abjection implies literally the action of throwing off, rejecting and excluding and therefore, this abjection produces a zone where difference is established” (19-20, note 2).

The
political
scope of
travestilities

J. Vartabedian

ment), and even though there is no a political will of transgression on the part of *travestis*, it can be affirmed that their bodies interpellate and are not indifferent as they mobilize the male/female dichotomy.

Thinking about *travestis* as an “alternative” or that they “transgress” would imply recognising that the male/female binary is “overcome” or “transgressed”. In effect, any attempt to overcome or transgress the binary, in reality, does not modify it but leaves it intact, because, as suggested by Hird (2000), the supposed transgression of gender and sex identities depends on the current dichotomic system for its expression. For example, one person can defy gender rules by dressing and acting one day as a “man” and another as a “woman”. This way, that person breaks up the association of a body with a specific gender identity. However, although it is acknowledged that such an action destabilizes the sex-gender system, the meanings of ‘man’ and ‘woman’ remain unchanged because it is “played” and “transgresses” within known parameters of gender. Transgression implies a radical reformulation of gender, transcending any sexual difference.

I consider that *travestis* cannot be positioned using the gender binary, not because they transcend or subvert it, but because they are not ruled by it: they are not men or women, they are *travestis*. From the moment when the *travesti* identities are recognised as singular gender variants, with their own logic and organisation of gender and sexuality, we are going down a path which is parallel and different from the male/female binary. This parallel journey, in a non-convergent identity space, is confirmed when thinking of the indissolubility of the gender and sexuality of the *travestis*. Their sexual practices establish when and with whom *travestis are being* “feminine” (when they are penetrated) or “masculine” (they penetrate others), in a simultaneous way. The peculiarity of *travesti* identities lies in that they are capable of imitating and performing the gender assigned to men and women, without being men or women, through their sexuality and their physical attributes (“virile” penises, “feminine” breasts, prominent buttocks). This chameleon-like acting ability which can be paradoxical and disturbing in society, is precisely what defines *travesti* identities.

As anticipated, it is necessary to recognise that it is difficult to think that established gender categories and practices can be omitted. Remembering Van Lenning (2004), masculinity and femininity are inevitable. *Travestis* embody these categories, negotiate and play with them, developing their own identity processes. Nevertheless, my proposal consists of understanding that, in spite of simultaneously embodying these elements, expressing them through their physical aesthetics and sexual practices, *travestis* are not men, they are not women, they are *travestis*, as they themselves affirm. The *travesti* gender identity does not form in the margins, it is not a hybrid, transitional, liminal or incomplete, nor can it be measured according to the male/female binary. Consequently, their identities, experiences, bodies and sexual practices put them in a different place from the hegemonic binary. Although neither I or the *travestis* name it transgression, such difference mobilises, interpellates and alters the structure on which the learnt notions around sex, gender and sexuality lie.

6. Conclusions

I used the emic term '*travesti*' to talk about the identities discussed in this article. As a term situated in context, the category '*travesti*' gave meaning to the identity experiences of my interviewees. 'Transgendered', 'transsexual' or 'transvestite' are not the pertinent categories to reflect this universe. There is a risk of falling in a determined *conceptual colonialism* when terms, not related to the reality that intends to be described, are imported.

"Are *travestis* transgressors?" has been the main question that guided this article. This complex question cannot have a final answer because the scope of the reflections presented makes sense in relation with the social context that I have referred to. I distance myself from any attempt to reach universalist conclusions that can overshadow the specificity laid out here.

Several theoretical stances about the transgressive potential of trans identities were discussed. More classical studies within feminism warn that transsexual women reproduce and strengthen gender norms. On the contrary, trans-queer activists understand that their bodies transgress any relationship between sex and gender, radically breaking up the hegemonic heteronormativity of society. Other more critical analyses from the queer perspective question what transgression means and how queerness is presented as a deconstructor of identities: How do the "most revolutionary" position themselves towards those trans individuals who only want to lead a "normal" life? Does everyone with an "ambiguous" body transgress? Not only does queerness run the risk of becoming an inherently "transgressive" perspective but there is also a danger of colonising trans identities that do not intend or wish to subvert: they are just looking for "normality". Although they presumably put the gender and sex regime in disarray, we cannot forget the suffering and pain of their experiences. In effect, not all unintelligible bodies intend to transgress, even though they do question the male/female dichotomic model.

Moreover, it has been considered that the transgression attempts of the sex-gender binary end up leaving it intact. In spite of being questioned, it is very difficult to reconfigure it. Transcending and questioning the binary by "playing" with gender identities arbitrarily is different from modifying and reformulating it radically. According to my field experience, the bodily, social and sexual trajectories of the *travestis* I interacted with are organized by an itinerary different from the male/female binary. They cannot be thought of within this model because they are neither men nor women, they are *travestis*. The indissoluble link between the sexuality and gender of *travestis* makes their identities go along a parallel path, different from that one belonging to male/female dichotomy. Their sexual practices determine how they are *being travesti*. The capacity of transiting permanently along the masculine and feminine continuum does not mean that these individuals are considered as "hybrid", "incomplete" or in a *liminal* stage. Precisely, these transitions constitute their main identity characteristic and put them in a place different from the male/female binary.

Nevertheless, the criteria of masculinity and femininity organise the identity range that *travestis* go along. As described previously, it is very difficult to transcend the sex-gender binary even though *travestis* do not consider themselves as women or men. Although they

*The
political
scope of
travestilities*

J. Vartabedian

do not claim to be “normal”, they do not feel they are as “transgressors”, despite the ability they have to act simultaneously *as* women or *as* men destabilizes any notion of intelligibility. That *particularity* of *travestis* stigmatizes them and positions them as abject beings and paradoxically, also as objects of desire. Their bodies do not go unnoticed, they question and allow reflection (especially for those who belong to the male/female binary) on how we construct ourselves into that we want to – or *must* – be.

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The
political
scope of
travestilities

J. Vartabedian

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*The
political
scope of
travestilities*

J. Vartabedian