



Writing the Lives of "Travestis" and "Jotas": Ethnographies of Gender Transgression and Commercial Sexual Exchange in Latin America
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Review Essay**Writing the Lives of *Travestis* and *Jotas*:
Ethnographies of Gender Transgression and
Commercial Sexual Exchange in Latin America¹****Elizabeth Bernstein**

Annick Prieur

1998 Mema's House, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens and Machos. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Don Kulick

1998 Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture Among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.**I**

From India's *hijras* to Native American *berdaches*, from dyke daddies to drag kings, "the transgender issue" has come to constitute the vanguard of contemporary scholarship on sexuality and gender.² In recent years, feminists, queer theorists, and social researchers of diverse stripes have returned to a key insight articulated by Harold Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologically inclined sociologists some two decades earlier: "deviant" cases, in which gender is an achieved rather than an ascribed status, can provide a uniquely revelatory window into the mechanisms by which "normal" gender and sexuality are attained (Garfinkel 1967; Kessler and McKenna 1978).

Annick Prieur's *Mema's House* and Don Kulick's *Travesti* are two new ethnographies which make significant contributions to this expanding body of theory and research by illuminating these mechanisms, as well as the larger social structures that determine the range of ways in which sexuality and gender are embodied by specific individuals. Through richly complex presentations of field data and interviews, they elaborate upon what has become a central premise in the study of Latin American sexualities and genders: at least for men, sexual classification derives from the distinction between the active and passive, or penetrating and penetrated roles, rather than between "straight" and "gay." Men whose sexual persona revolves around the penetration of others are recognized simply as "men," regardless of the anatomical sex of the persons whom they penetrate, while men who let themselves be penetrated must bear the

homosexual label and the stigma of effeminacy (Almaguer, 1993; Carrier, 1995; Prieur, 1998; Kulick, 1998).

Though at first glance, *Mema's House* and *Travesti* appear to be similar works—both are ethnographic studies that deal with individuals anatomically classified as male at birth but who later in life embrace femininity, both focus upon the complex interplay between power and pleasure in practices of commercial sexual exchange, both were authored by Scandinavia-based social scientists and published as part of the University of Chicago Press's new Worlds of Desire series—the two books are in dialogue with radically distinct theoretical traditions. In turn, they reach very different conclusions about the nature and meaning of transgendered bodies and subjectivities, the motives for and experiences of commercial sexual exchange amongst their research participants, and—most significantly—the organization of sexuality, gender, and social power in Latin America.

II

Prieur's *Mema's House* draws primarily from materialist and structuralist feminisms (e.g. Ortner, 1974; Chodorow, 1978; Haug, 1987) and elements of the theoretical apparatus of Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1994) to interpret the fascinating field data she gathered while living and researching amongst *vestidas* (transvestites) and *jotas* (effeminate homosexual men) in Mexico City during the late 1980s and the early 1990s. The book centers around the interactions among the teenage *jotas*, *vestidas*, and their boyfriends who live or gather at Mema's house—the home of Prieur's key informant, an AIDS outreach coordinator and former sex-worker. The strengths and weaknesses of Prieur's analysis of this community correspond to those of her chosen theoretical approach.

Prieur, a sociologist, does an excellent job of theorizing the intersections between styles of gendered embodiment and social class amongst the largely poor and working class *vestida* population of her study. She employs Bourdieu's notions of "habitus" and "bodily capital" to understand the hypersexualized gender performances of her transgendered subjects, as well as their gravitation towards bodily trades such as prostitution and hairdressing.³ Following Bourdieu's analysis of masculine domination (Bourdieu, 1996-7), she notes the structural alignment between masculine/feminine, active/passive, and penetrating/penetrated roles, tracing the ways in which these sets of oppositions play themselves out amongst Mexican men. Prieur argues that because the alliance among these categories is so complete, the enjoyment of being penetrated and the passive sexual role is culturally inseparable

from a feminine gender presentation, resulting in the strict division between masculine men and effeminate *jotas*. The latter will often go to great lengths to enhance the feminine aspects of their appearance, not simply through make-up and dress, but also through prosthetic foam padding, hormone consumption, injections of oil and silicone directly into the flesh, and other forms of body modification. Yet she also notes that “the lower the class origin is, the more crucial the role division” (206). Those who are not sexually role-bound, who are normatively gendered and who engage in sexual relations with men whose gender presentations resemble their own, are called *internacionales*; such individuals almost always pertain to the middle classes.⁴

The chief weaknesses of Prieur’s study stem from her inattentiveness to some of the lessons of third-wave, post-universalistic feminisms and queer theory. Early in the book, she informs us that she “will not run up the postmodernist flag” (37), but will instead rely upon a “social constructivist” approach (31), so as not to lose sight of the continued salience of corporeality and common identities to lived experience. While this is a laudable goal, Prieur’s is an ambiguous, uneven constructivism, and her analysis is frequently tainted by the overlapping residues of moralism and biological essentialism.

For example, Prieur postulates that the *jotas* “steal femininity” in order to pretend to be something that they are not.⁵ Because of the strong norm of gender complementarity in Mexico, for effeminate *homosexuales* this is a forced appropriation. In Prieur’s view, the sexual encounter between the *jotas* and their masculine lovers thus turns out to be little more than a sad sham, premised upon the fact that, “One partner pretends not to be a man; the other pretends not to be a homosexual” (252). Against the grain of recent scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences, Prieur here presumes that categories such as “man,” “woman,” “homosexual,” and “bisexual” have stable, unambiguous, even “correct” meanings (26). She argues that “Biological sex is also a social reality... And when two persons with the same male sexual organs are naked, the construction of one of the partners as a not-homosexual man and the other one as a not-male person is difficult to upkeep” (274).⁶ Furthermore, it seems not to occur to Prieur that between the *jotas* and their lovers, desire and eroticism might be generated by something other than heterosexual mimicry.⁷

Prieur does, however, make a sincere attempt to capture the paradoxes and political ambiguity that are encoded in practices of commercial sexual exchange. Early in the book, she writes:

With time, I came to understand that transforming one’s body in order to get female curves was to become beautiful, selling sex could be a way to gain

independence, taking drugs a way to get some entertainment, stealing a way to win self-respect, that violence is just the order of things, and that sexual experience is the meaning of life (21).

She points out that the distinction between “love” and “money” may be a middle class privilege (190), and presents data that stunningly reveal the sexual complexity of the *jotas*’ erotic and money-making endeavors—documenting, for example, the frequency with which their masculine-looking clients pay to be sexually penetrated, the fact that the *jotas* are often buyers as well as sellers of sexual services, and their propensity to economically maintain their boyfriends (189, 241). But in the end, Prieur mostly sees her subjects as victims of “symbolic violence,”⁸ actively participating in a set of material relations and an evaluatory schema that are not in their own best interests.⁹ Hers is a theoretical model which minimizes the possibility, relevance, and impact of any form of counter-systemic agency.

Prieur, in the book’s conclusion, sides against the view that Mexico’s *jotas* might conceivably be recognized as a third, autonomous gender category in the fashion of *hijras* or *berdaches*.¹⁰ Instead, Prieur proposes that sexuality and gender in Mexico (and perhaps throughout Latin America) are organized in accordance with a parallel set of dichotomous oppositions within the larger and more conventional binary of “women” and “men.” “Rather than being attributed to an autonomous third category, Mexico’s *jotas* are recognized as non-males inside the category of male, perceived and evaluated according to schemata of oppositions between women and men” (267). And just as *jotas* can be said to constitute the feminine pole within the male category, “The existence of the whore confirms the virtue of the virtuous woman” (261).

While this is an intriguing formulation, it is also a bit too neat, leaving unanswered several perplexing questions: Is the madonna/whore binary also structured by the opposition between “women” and “men”? If so, does the whore constitute the male pole of the female category? Finally, what is the location of other varieties of female transgressors—lesbians, butch women, etc.—in the social organization of Mexican sexuality and gender?

III

In *Travesti*, the anthropologist Don Kulick presents us with a population of individuals very similar to the ones described by Prieur (*travesti* is the Brazilian equivalent of the Mexican *vestida*). Set in an impoverished section of Salvador (the nation’s third largest city), Kulick’s

study is a lively, almost literary account of *travesti* practices and constructions of meaning. In Kulick's precisely detailed ethnography, we get a strong visceral sense of what things look, feel, taste, and smell like in the world of the Salvadorean *travesti*. While many of Kulick's findings duplicate Prieur's, thick description enables a deeper understanding of the subtlety and nuance of daily existence.

The chief difference between the two books, however, is not primarily stylistic. Nor do I think that it is a function of different identity politics, despite both authors' claims that their status as a woman—in Prieur's case—and as a gay man—in Kulick's case—in various ways endowed them with privileged vision (Kulick, 1998: 15). The most striking contrast between *Mema's House* and *Travesti* is rather provided by their very distinct interpretive lenses. Where Prieur sees coherence and systemic unity, Kulick, steeped in the theoretical languages of linguistic anthropology and contemporary gender theory, sees contradiction and complexity.¹¹ Where Prieur highlights false consciousness and domination, Kulick redirects us towards sexual pleasure and agency.

Kulick's alternative analytic focus leads him to ask a different set of questions from the ones that inspired Prieur. He begins by noting that *travestis* are not the exact equivalents of either transvestites or transsexuals in the Euro-American sense of the two terms. Despite the literal translation of *travestir* (“to cross-dress”), and:

Despite the fact they live their lives in female clothing, call one another by female names, and endure tremendous pain in order to acquire female bodily forms, travestis do not wish to remove their penis, and they do not consider themselves to *be* women. They are not transsexuals. They are, instead, they say, homosexuals--males who ardently desire men, and who fashion and perfect themselves as an object of desire for those men...this specific combination of female physical attributes and male homosexual subjectivity makes travestis almost unique in the world (6).

“From this perspective, the main question to be answered about travestis becomes not why do travestis want to look like women, but rather: why does it make sense for homosexuals to become travestis?” (224).

Before resolving this dilemma, Kulick must first go further in documenting the multiple facets of power and pleasure in the life of a *travesti*. Just as Prieur found, Kulick notes that *travestis* overwhelmingly choose “heterosexual” macho men to be their boyfriends and live-in lovers, rather than other *viados* (homosexual men).¹² In sexual intercourse, they

expect these men to exclusively assume the penetrative role. The fact that the *travestis* support their men materially leads Prieur to analogize them to exploitative pimps,¹³ but Kulick sees them as more akin to kept women, arguing that the financial resources which the *travestis* bestow enable them to assert power. Even sexually, he claims, the power dynamic between *travestis* and their lovers is hardly straightforward, since it is the *travestis* themselves who actively police their boyfriends' sexual behavior. Any boyfriend who deviates from his assigned sexual role will be expeditiously replaced: "[I]nterest in her penis marks him as a *viado* and buys him a one-way ticket out of her room and out of her life" (228). Although *travestis* do not typically have orgasms with their live-in lovers, their boyfriends' chief utility is not sex but *gender*. They provide *travestis* with a sense of femininity; erotic satisfaction is derived elsewhere.

The main source of orgasmic sexual pleasure for *travestis* is their paying clients. Sexual fulfillment is equated with the public sphere of work, not the private, interior realm of the home. "The most striking difference between most existing accounts of prostitution and the prostitution practiced by *travestis* in Salvador," writes Kulick, "is the extent to which *travestis* continually regale one another with exuberant descriptions of the sexual encounters they enjoyed with the men they meet on the street while working" (136). About a third of their masculine-appearing clients request to be penetrated (this costs *more*) and to be referred to by feminine pronouns and names. For *travestis* who are generally discriminated against and stigmatized, the sexual marketplace is one of the few sources of sexual pleasure, self-esteem, and praise (183, 188).

Kulick summarizes the interpretive dilemma as follows:

Travestis inject great quantities of industrial silicone into their bodies to give themselves feminine physical features, but they think that any male who claims to be a woman is suffering from a psychosis. They live with tough, muscular macho males whom they treat like housewives. They stand out on the street at night wearing miniskirts and displaying their breasts, attracting males who want to be penetrated and to be called female names...(191)

Their lives seem to "invert, twist, double back on and fold any configuration of gender that one might care to imagine" (191). By the end of the book, Kulick promises to end the suspense and to unravel this knotted mass of contradictions. If *travestis* are not simply men who want to be women, nor are they the anti-identarian icons of postmodernity.

In Brazil, he declares, there is "a subtle and fluid gender system...a gender system in which being a male does not limit one to being a man"

(226). Although he believes that there are three distinct types of gendered individuals in Brazil (men, women, and *viados*), Kulick, too, ultimately rejects the hypothesis of the third sex:

Instead of talking about themselves as a third gender, travestis spend a lot of time situating themselves and others in relation to a very specific gendered binary. That binary, however, is a *different* binary, anchored in and arising from *different* principles than those that currently structure and give meaning to gender in places like Europe and North America...The fundamental difference is that whereas the Northern Euro-American gender system is based on anatomical sex, the gender system that structures the travestis' perceptions is based on *sexuality* (226-7).

In Brazil, “the locus of gender difference is the act of penetration--if one only penetrates, one is a “man”; if one gets penetrated, one is something other than a man” (227). On one side of the binary are men, on the other side are feminized “not-men.” Women and males who enjoy being penetrated thus “belong to the same classificatory category...They share, in other words, a gender” (229).

This is a stunningly bold formulation, one which Kulick pauses to qualify, acknowledging the possibility that not all Brazilians necessarily understand sexuality and gender in the way that he has posited. Due to a dearth of relevant research, what is particularly unclear is “the extent to which women (both heterosexual and lesbian) perceive their bodies, desires, and identities to be implicated in a gendered framework that is grounded in penetrative sexuality” (236). This is perhaps the most significant deficit in Kulick’s otherwise exceptional study. Shouldn’t the omission of any data regarding women amount to more than just a minor, post-hoc qualification? Although Kulick devotes a great deal of care and attention to unpacking the complex constructions of gender amongst *viados* and men, he acts as if women were uniformly gendered, unproblematically subsumable under the category of “the penetrated.”¹⁴ As in Prieur’s text, female gender-transgressors (like the *sapatão*, or butch lesbian) are conspicuously absent from Kulick’s gender cosmology.

IV

Mema’s House and *Travesti* are, in different ways, rewarding, informative, and thought-provoking works. Reading them, we learn a great deal about the particularly intriguing constructions of sexuality and gender embodied by one set of transgendered individuals. Overall, the books also accomplish their mutually declared, more ambitious goal: to shed light upon the general foundation of “understandings, representations, and

definitions of sexuality and gender” in Latin America (Kulick, 1998: 224). But they do not reveal the entire picture.

Perhaps the blind spots that we are left with are themselves illuminating.¹⁵ With a few exceptions, the overwhelming majority of scholarship on transgenderism has focussed upon male-to-female transgendered individuals. Whether this is due to the greater historical prevalence of this type, or to the biases and predilections of individual researchers (Garber, 1992: 100-102), one thing seems clear: no matter how “perfectly” encoded cultural systems of sexuality and gender are in any one category of individuals (Kulick, 1998: 9), we will need to focus our lens more broadly if we seek to determine their organizational logic in its entirety.

¹ Special thanks to Laurie Schaffner, Lawrence Cohen, Casey Green, Maria Cecilia dos Santos, and Julie Chu for fruitful discussions of these issues.

² Stryker, 1998. For a sampling of other recent publications, see Halberstam, 1998; Califia, 1997; Harper, McClintock, Muñoz, and Rosen, 1997; Lancaster, 1997; Herdt, 1996; Cohen, 1995; Garber, 1992; Epstein and Straub, 1991.

³ “Habitus” is Bourdieu’s term for the set of unconscious and embodied dispositions which correspond to different social positions and trajectories. “Bodily capital” designates a form of symbolic capital often acquired by members of the dominated fractions of society who, deprived of more privileged forms of capital, cultivate their bodies as value-producing investments. For a fuller explication of these ideas, see Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1994; and Wacquant, 1995.

⁴ *Internacionales* are akin to the category of “gay” or “homosexual” as it exists currently in Northern Europe and the United States. Bourdieu (1994: 382-3) and Newton (1972: 30) have similarly noted more flamboyant and divergent gender incarnations in the lower and working classes, in contrast to the relatively androgynous middle tier. In related fashion, D’Emilio (1993) and Almaguer (1993) have elaborated upon the ways in which modern homosexual identity is historically dependent upon the freedom from an extended kin network that is provided by industrial capitalism.

⁵ “Stealing femininity” serves as the title for Chapter Four of Prieur’s book. Kulick also calls attention to the problematic nature of this phrase in his discussion of Prieur’s work (Kulick, 1998: 254-255).

⁶ Most recent scholarship on sexuality and gender departs from the premise that “the concept of biological sex is itself a gendered notion, dependent on culturally generated notions of difference for its meaning and its ability to seem ‘natural’” (Kulick, 1998: 11). Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) is often credited with being the first coherent argument against the “biological sex/cultural gender” distinction, but precursors can be found in an earlier generation of radical feminist theory (“Since I believe...that biology is its social meaning in the system of sex inequality... the sex/gender distinction looks like a

nature/culture distinction. I use sex and gender relatively interchangeably.” (MacKinnon, 1987: 150)). For empirical challenges to the validity of the biological basis of dimorphic sexual difference, see Herdt, 1996; Laqueur, 1990; and Fausto-Sterling, 1993.

⁷ Against the mimetic reading of same-sex role playing, Judith Butler has argued that it may be precisely the “dissonant juxtaposition” between the social meaning of one’s anatomy and a transgressive gender identity that fuels erotic tension (Butler, 1990: 123).

⁸ “Symbolic violence, to put it as tersely and simply as possible, is the *violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity*” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 167).

⁹ What *are* the *jotas*’ best interests, according to Prieur? Prieur seems to assert her own normative agenda when she argues that a wild sex-and-drugs lifestyle, in combination with the aforementioned erotic game of “let’s pretend,” dooms them to superficial, fleeting intimate relationships and ultimately, unhappiness. “The point of the relationship is to have fun--not to create a home, establish a family, and grow old together” (235).

¹⁰ On third sexes and genders, see Herdt, 1994.

¹¹ Following Judith Butler, Kulick presumes no necessary coherence among “sexed bodies, gender identities, and sexualities” (Butler, 1990: 123).

¹² According to Kulick, “The word *viado* is homophonous with *veado*, which means “deer”...*viado* originally derived with reference to that animal, which is popularly perceived to be frail and delicate” (239). Many Brazilian dictionaries, including the most reputable *Aurélio*, list *veado* as the correct term for both “homosexual” and “deer.”

¹³ For an argument that pimps may themselves be feminized and “prostituted,” even in the classic version of the pimp-prostitute relationship, see Wacquant (1994: 15).

¹⁴ At an earlier moment in the text, Kulick quotes his own attempts to convince several *travestis* that women, too, are capable of penetration (193). However, this point does not reemerge in the book’s theoretical conclusion.

¹⁵ See Cohen (1995: 301) for a similar critique. Academic works which focus on female-to-male transgenderism include Halberstam (1998); Hale (1997); and Devor (1997).

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