Gender, Discourse, and Desire in Twentieth-Century Brazilian Women's Literature

Ferreira-Pinto, Cristina

Published by Purdue University Press

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/4125

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=239249
Chapter Two

Brazilian Women Writers
The Search for an Erotic Discourse

The Transgressive Eroticism of Gilka Machado’s Poetry

As I discussed in the previous chapter, canonical Brazilian literature by male authors often represents the female body and sexuality as subservient to male desire, and has shaped myths of femininity that originate in, and help maintain, the dominant masculinist ideology. However, these stereotypical representations of the female body are not exclusive to the pages of Brazilian literature. Rather, they have left a deep mark within the larger frame of Brazil’s national culture and have impacted the social relations between men and women, between blacks and whites, and between elements from different social groups and social classes. Within this context, the dominant ideological voice has belonged to the white, heterosexual man of the upper classes who, as I mentioned before, acts “like a ventriloquist: the body belongs to the Other, but the voice is his” (Sant’Anna, Canibalismo 10).

Only after the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with some isolated exceptions in the periods before, do Brazilian women have a visible presence in society as producers of literature who seek public recognition. At the beginning of the twentieth century, two female authors had already achieved significant critical recognition in Brazil: the poet Francisca Júlia (1871–1920), and Júlia Lopes de Almeida (1862–1934), a journalist, fiction writer, and author of children’s books and of didactic literature aimed at a feminine audience. During their lifetimes both writers were already considered part of the literary canon and, later, they were seen as precursors of women’s literature in Brazil. Francisca Júlia was in fact among the most
significant poets of the Parnassian School in Brazil. Her poetry showed a concern with the poetic craft, with art for art’s sake, with an ideal of beauty to be created by the poet-artificer that seemed to preclude the poet’s subjectivity, not to mention her desire. Lopes de Almeida, in turn, wrote extensively about women’s issues and, in some of her fiction, criticized with light humor gender relations in Brazilian society then. Nevertheless, she generally fit within the dominant ideological patterns that affected her, as a woman, and as a female author.

Francisca Júlia and Lopes de Almeida were not by any means the only women who took up the pen in a rather conservative society, but for many decades, they were among a very small female group “given entrance” to the literary canon. I propose that the reason they were accepted in the canon is that their literature was deemed “safe” or even “masculine” enough by those who set the literary and ideological standards of the time. Something similar happened in the 1930s with Rachel de Queiroz, whose literature was characterized as “virile” by one critic (Silveira 89). That is not to say that Queiroz and other Brazilian women writers in the first part of the twentieth century did not raise issues relating to female sexuality and desire, or did not care to give representation to the female body. Indeed Queiroz herself was brave enough to write about issues such as sex outside the marriage and abortion in her 1939 novel As três Marias (The Three Marias, 1963).

However, if these women writers wrote about the female body and desire in their works, these issues were clad in layers of metaphorical language, actual clothes, and proper behavior. A female author who attempted to speak frankly of a woman’s desire and to depict her sexuality would run against social censorship, but was most likely stopped by self-censorship and the fear of being labeled inappropriate, pornographic, or obscene. Eroticism, and particularly female eroticism, can be rather disturbing when brought into the public space of literature or the arts, because of its intrinsically private quality. As Lynn Hunt states in Eroticism and the Body Politic (1991), eroticism is “the intrusion into the public sphere of something that was at base private” (5). Blurring this distinction, the woman writer who attempts to bring such a private affair into the public arena becomes herself identified with the public. In other words, she
becomes the public woman, the prostitute: “The prostitute was the public woman, and any woman pretending to act in public . . . risked being identified as a prostitute” (Hunt 10).

Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1900s, one Brazilian female poet was daring enough to take this risk, following her urge to speak of her self, of a woman’s body, and of her desire. Gilka Machado caused a very strong reaction among the literary public and critics with the publication in 1915 of her first book, Cristais partidos, followed by Estados de alma [States of the soul] two years later. Machado’s subversion lay in her claims of women’s subordination in society and, mainly, in her erotic poems. These were cause for scandal, fed in part by the sensationalist treatment the author received in the media at the time. This early negative encounter with the literary establishment had a great impact upon the way that Machado was perceived in Brazil vis-à-vis the poetic canon. For several decades since the publication of these two early volumes, Machado was often ignored in literary histories and manuals, or simply mentioned in passing without any in-depth assessment of her work. Many times her name appeared alongside her more famous contemporary Cecília Meireles (1901–64), the works of both seen as examples of “feminine poetry.” Machado’s poetry, however, seems to be more in opposition to that of Meireles. The poetic voice in Meireles’s poems frequently masquerades under the masculine gender or seeks a neutrality that denies gender as a mark in the literary discourse. In Machado’s poems, on the contrary, the female subject explicitly sings of her woman’s body and sexuality, either in a celebratory way or with regret for being a female in a patriarchal world.

In this regard, Machado was rather innovative in her discourse. In fact, many feminist critics credit her with inaugurating a female erotic discourse in Brazilian literature, and thus set her work in opposition to the repression of the female body and desire that was common in Brazilian women’s poetry of the period (cf. Paixão, “À sombra de eros” 115). Only in the 1930s do women writers in Brazil begin to let their female protagonists speak without denying their femaleness while, at the same time, questioning the dominant gender constructions. This change is noticed first in the works of Brazilian women fiction writers, as for example, in novels by Rachel de Queiroz, Lúcia Miguel Pereira (1901–59), Telles, and others. In her
expression of female sexuality and desire through the voice of a female subject, Machado remains alone and isolated within the national literary canon for many decades. Following the slowly growing influence of feminist literary studies in Brazil after the late 1970s, Machado’s poetry becomes the focus of a renewed critical interest. Like her, however, other women poets have only very recently been the subjects of critical study, as for example, Narcisa Amália (1852–1924), whose life and poetry Christina Ramalho discusses in *Um espelho para Narcisa: Reflexos de uma voz romântica* (1999), while others, like Colombina (1882–1963) and Adalgisa Néri (1905–80), still await critical recognition.

Before the late 1970s and the 1980s, when critics such as Fernando Py (1978), Nádia Gotlib (1982), and Joyce Carlson-Leavitt (1989) began to reexamine Gilka Machado’s work, the poet’s critical recognition was quite uneven. The often-brief mention of her name in literary histories, manuals, or anthologies represented an example of “the ‘roll call’ courtesy” (Berkin 44) that, for a long time and in many different cultures, placed “exceptional” women writers at the end of a long line of male names. These women had been found to somehow fit within some preestablished (masculine) parameters, and their inclusion would reiterate the idea that the only acceptable critical parameters were those already in place. Different critics read Machado under different labels: as a Symbolist poet, as a Neo-Parnassianist, as a Pre-Modernist, or as an example of the “Nova Poesia,” a new kind of poetry that critic João Ribeiro understood was being produced in Brazil then.1 Indeed, Machado’s poetry is characteristic of a period of transition in Brazilian letters and displays influences both of Symbolism and Parnassianism. At the same time, the poet also begins to make use of some poetic elements that will be proposed by the Modernist poetry of the 1922 Generation; specifically, varied metrics, free verse, the use of colloquial language, and the representation of aspects of everyday life.

However, the importance of Gilka Machado’s poetry for this study lies in the fact that she initiates a female erotic discourse in Brazil and, by doing so, transgresses all social expectations placed upon women then. Her first two volumes of poetry were perceived as scandalous, while the poet was regarded as extremely audacious, but at the same time naive, for thinking
that she could grant her poetic voice the same kind of agency that had always been a male prerogative. In these two early volumes, *Cristais partidos* and *Estados de alma*, we find the most powerful expression of female sensuality and eroticism:

**Sensual**

Quando, longe de ti, solitária, medito
neste afeto pagão que envergonhada oculto,
vem-me às narinas, logo, o perfume esquisito
que o teu corpo desprende e há no teu próprio vulto.

A febril confissão deste afeto infinito
há muito que, medrosa, em meus lábios sepulto,
pois teu lascivo olhar em mim pregado, fito,
à minha castidade é como que um insulto.

Se acaso te achas longe, a colossal barreira
dos protestos que, outrora, eu fizera a mim mesma
de orgulhosa virtude, erige-se altaneira.

Mas, se estás ao meu lado, a barreira desaba,
e sinto da volúpia a escosa e fria lesma
minha carne poluir com repugnante baba . . .

*(Cristais partidos [5])*

Machado constructs here, as in several other poems, an “eroticism of memory.” The object of desire is absent, but it is recalled through memories, and its evocation is sufficient for the sexual arousal of the female poetic voice. The poet also plays with the dialectics of chastity and sin, purity and guilt, as the female “I” depicts herself in the acceptable position of the passive woman, fearful, hesitant, or in other words, submissive to the other’s desire.

Reading the sonnet as a “fervent confession,” we see the interference of an old form of social control over human sexuality, that of religion, in this case, Catholicism. Introduced by the Portuguese in Brazil, the Catholic Church left a deep mark upon Brazilian culture in matters related to human sexuality, marriage, and procreation, from the time of the first visits of the Holy Inquisition at the end of the sixteenth century. However, confession is also the transformation of desire into discourse and, as such, constitutes a mechanism for replaying and
increasing pleasure (Foucault, *History of Sexuality. An Introduction* 21, 22). Thus, in “Sensual,” the female subject also portrays herself as the sensual woman, who lets her guard down to live the satisfaction of her own desire. The ambiguity present in the play of chastity versus guilt carries over into other levels of ambiguity. First, desire (hers? the Other’s?) is both an abstract entity and a very concrete experience, represented in an image evocative of male sperm (“sinto da volúpia a escosa e fria lesma” [“I feel the thick and cold slug of voluptuousness itself”]; my emphasis). Second, the reaction of the poetic voice is one of fascination and repugnance, both feelings represented in the image of a slug.

Considering the strong imagery of Machado’s poems, it is not difficult to understand the reaction her poetry caused. Even today, some might find it embarrassing to discuss such vivid images of human sexuality in a classroom. Such audacity continues in Machado’s second volume of poetry, in poems such as “Volúpia” [Voluptuousness], wherein the strong imagery is enhanced by a sensually rhythmic metric:

Volúpia

Tenho-te, do meu sangue alongada nos veios;  
à tua sensação me alheio a todo o ambiente;  
os meus versos estão completamente cheios  
do teu veneno forte, invencível e fluente.

Por te trazer em mim, adquiri-os, tomei-os,  
o teu modo sutil, o teu gesto indolente.  
Por te trazer em mim moldei-me aos teus coleios,  
minha íntima, nervosa e rúvida serpente.

Teu veneno letal torna-me os olhos baços,  
e a alma pura que trago e que te repudia,  
inutilmente anseia esquivar-se aos teus laços.

Teu veneno letal torna-me o corpo langue,  
uma circulação longa, lenta, macia,  
a subir e a descer, no curso do meu sangue.

(Estados de alma [6])

Again we find an object of desire that is not clearly marked but that could, rather, be understood as “volúpia” itself. In this case,
Chapter Two

the poem could be read as another expression of autoeroticism. However, the poet makes use of biblical images, specifically the serpent and its poison ("veneno"), but inverting the scene of the original seduction: while the serpent is the seducer, the female I, carrying her "alma pura," tries to repudiate the Other and is finally seduced. The "serpent" becomes, in turn, a phallic symbol ("minha íntima, nervosa e rúvida serpente" ["my intimate, nervous and ruby serpent"]) whose movements ("coleíos") reproduce the sexual act. Most notable in this poem as in the one below, is the sensuality the poet is able to convey through the very rhythm of her verses:

Invocação ao sono

Sono! da tua taça brônzea e fria
dá que eu possa esgotar o éter, a anestesia...

Eis-me: corpo e alma—inteira,
para essa tua orgia.

Busco esquecer a minha hipocondria
na tua bebedeira.

Quero sentir o teu delíquio brando
apoderar-se do meu ser

e cochlindo,

bamboleando,

ir, lentamente, escorregando,
pelo infinito do prazer.

..............................

Vem! — já de mim se apossa um sensual arrepi,
todo meu ser se fica em total abandono...

Dá-me o teu beijo frio,

Sono!

Deixa-me espreguiçar o corpo esguio
sobre o teu corpo que é, como um frouxel, macio.

..............................

Eis-me, lãnguida e nua,
para a volúpia tua.

..............................

Faze a tua carícia,
como um óleo, passar pela minha epiderme;
essa tua carícia, humectante e emoliente,
que no corpo me põe coleíos de serpente

(Fragments; Cristais partidos [7])
Machado’s poetry allows the female subject to express her desire for an Other whose body is made present through the sensations the poetic voice recalls and describes. In the three poems quoted above, the object of desire is not gendered: it could be a male lover, it also could be another woman, or desire could be embodied in an abstract category. In “Invocação ao sono,” for example, the female subject addresses herself to “Sleep” in a poem that depicts a scene of autoeroticism. Thus in Machado’s poetry, female desire is experienced outside of the binary male versus female. In other words, female desire is autonomous, not submissive to male desire, and the erotic experience may take place between the female subject and her environment.

Indeed, eroticism in Machado not only expresses the satisfaction of sexual desire, but also is a way of being in the world. The poet gives expression to the female subject’s aspiration for unity—with the Other, with nature, and with the Cosmos. In fact, this desire for unity, particularly with the Cosmos, reflects a desire for spiritual elevation and for perfection, and is a common element in poetry of the period. As a poetic motif, it may be found in poems by the Nicaraguan Ruben Darío (1867–1916), the Portuguese Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935), and the Brazilian Augusto dos Anjos (1884–1914). In Machado, however, it constitutes another dimension of eroticism made very carnal and explicit. For some critics, Machado’s eroticism is an attempt to reconcile the flesh and the spirit (Paixão, “A fala-a-menos” 140). This attempt can be comprehended in the context of a socially imposed conflict between female sensuality and guilt, as Nelly Novaes Coelho has proposed (“Eros e Tanatos” 55–56). It is best understood, however, in light of Georges Bataille’s theoretical work. For Bataille, eroticism responds to human beings’ nostalgia of a primal continuity and their need to connect. Thus eroticism is necessarily transgressive and exuberant (Bataille 11); it transgresses, ex-ceds: “It is a state of communication revealing a quest for a possible continuance of being beyond the confines of the self” (17).

Machado’s erotic poetry creates the possibility of a space in opposition to the social space that renders women submissive to male desire. While Machado spoke up against the social
repression of women in poems such as the anthological “Ser mulher . . .” from *Cristais partidos*, her sense of disconnection, isolation, and marginality finds full resolution in the poetic satisfaction of female eroticism. In this regard, the five senses play an important role in her poems, as they give expression to the sensuality and desire of the poetic voice. As I stated above, her desire is channeled toward a nongendered object, or it may be expressed as autoeroticism. Therefore, Machado’s poetry achieves another level of transgression; for in her depiction of female sexuality, she fulfills the challenge proposed some sixty years later by feminist thinkers like Hélène Cixous (1975) and Luce Irigaray (1977). Says Cixous: “you can’t talk about a female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes—any more than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women’s imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing” (“The Laugh of the Medusa” 280). A woman’s sexuality is “cosmic” (Cixous, “Medusa” 293), fluid, not fixed or centered. She “has sex organs more or less everywhere” (Irigaray 28; emphasis in original), and her pleasure and her eroticism flourish everywhere. This female sexual fluidity is present in much of Machado’s poetry and is emphasized in her playing with the five senses, particularly the senses of touch and vision. Thus rugs, suede gloves, a peach, and her own hair take the female subject to erotic desire and to sexual ecstasy.

Likewise, the sense of vision is central in “Impressões do gesto” [Impressions from the motion], from *Mulher nua* [Naked woman] (1922), a poem Gilka Machado dedicated to a “bailadeira” (“female dancer”):

Danças . . . teus gestos são carícias mansas,
a tua dança é um tateio vago,
é o próprio tato dedilhando
as melodias do afago . . .

Danças, e fico, a quando e quando,
presa de gozo singular;
e sonho que me estás acariciando,
e sinto em todo o corpo o teu gesto passar.

(Fragment [8])
The Search for an Erotic Discourse

Here the poetic voice takes the place of the *voyeur*; and this visual experience awakens other senses, particularly the sense of touch, and leads to an erotic experience. Dedicated to another woman, the poem conveys a homosexual desire made explicit in the second stanza above (stanza 8 of the poem).

As Irigaray maintained in her book *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un* (1977; *This Sex Which Is Not One*, 1985), lesbian desire opens up yet another space for the affirmation and celebration of women and femaleness, while breaking away from sexual binaries. In Adrienne Rich’s words, “lesbian existence” allows for “the rejection of a compulsory way of life” (157), the rejection of compulsory heterosexuality that does not mean necessarily the condemnation of all forms of heterosexual relationships. As proposed by Rich and, more recently, by Teresa De Lauretis (1994), lesbian desire allows for a kind of relationship wherein an ideal reciprocity and identification between two individuals becomes possible, and “binary oppositions become nonpertinent” (Suleiman 125).

“Impressões do gesto” emphasizes the identification between the two women, the poetic subject and the dancer, which is made clear in the last part of the poem, in stanzas 11–13:

Danças, os membros novamente agitas,
todo teu ser parece-me tomado
por convulsões de dores infinitas . . .
e desse trágico crescendo
de gestos que enchem o silêncio de aí,
vais
*smorzando*, descendo,
como que por encanto,
presa de um místico quebranto . . .
danças e cuido estar em ti me vendo.

Os teus meneios
são
cheios
dos meus anseios;
a tua dança é a exteriorização
de tudo quanto sinto:
minha imaginação
e meu instinto
movem-se nela alternadamente;
minha volúpia, vejo-a torça, no ar,
quando teu corpo lânguido, indolente,
sensibiliza a quietação do ambiente,
ora a crescer, ora a minguar
numa flexuosidade de serpente

... nos teus membros leves, quase etéreos,
eu contemplo os meus gestos interiores,
meus prazeres, meus tédios, minhas dores!

A tua dança para mim é infinda,
vejo-me nela, tenho-a dentro em mim,
constantemente assim! [9]

In the last stanza (stanza 14), the poetic subject reaffirms the identification between the dancer and the poet, announcing their union, their embodiment as one, in verses that recall a marriage ceremony:

No mais alto prazer, no mais fundo pezar,
ativa esteja, esteja embora langue,
tenho-te na loucura do meu sangue
para o Bem, para o Mal, a bailar, a bailar! . . . [10]

Dancing stands here as a metaphor for the act of writing, as the entire poem may be read as a metapoetic representation of Machado’s work, the recurrent images she employs, the rhythm of her verses, the effect she seeks to achieve, and the subject she commonly depicts: a woman’s body and desire. Again Machado portrays female desire as autonomous of the masculine figure. The male body is not the object of desire and is totally excluded from the poetic space. This exclusion posits Machado’s poetry as a transgressive discourse within a social context centered on male power, as was the case in Brazilian society during the first part of the twentieth century.

**Eroticism, Pornography, and the Woman Writer in Brazil**

Gilka Machado paid a high price for transgressing the social and literary norms of her time, as the audacity of her poems
tarnished her own reputation. She was often labeled "immoral," was made fun of, and, with her supporters, spent much time trying to show that there was a wide difference between the real-life Machado and the poetic voice who spoke so openly of female desire in her poems. Machado's transgression consisted of the invasion of a space from which women had been excluded and that, still today, does not quite belong to them: the erotic space, in which sexuality and desire are made explicit, not hidden and not disguised (Castello Branco 101). For many decades, the aggressive negative reception to Machado's erotic poetry obscured the value of her work and placed her in a marginal position within the literary canon. While it is true that Machado experienced some kind of recognition, the public attacks she suffered made her opt for a form of self-exile, choosing to lead a very private life away from the public eye. Thus her case serves to illustrate the censoring power of the dominant ideology upon female discourse. If before Machado no other Brazilian woman writer had challenged the established rules in society and literature, in such a daring manner, she is also the precursor of a female eroticism that cannot again be found in Brazilian letters until the 1970s and 1980s.

The reception of Machado's poetry, discussed by Gotlib and other critics, is an expression of the dominant ideological discourse attempting to silence the individual, while working at the same time as a potential warning for other women writers. The dominant ideology "speaks" through social institutions such as religion, marriage, institutionalized medical literature, and the literary and artistic canon. Its goal is to control human sexuality, and specifically the female body, and one of the mechanisms it employs is the use of labels such as "pornographic" and "perverse." Thus censorship is played out not only against one particular writer—in this case, Gilka Machado—but also against a whole group, leading often to self-censorship.

Self-censorship, the fear of being marked with the scarlet P of pornographic, can silence the expression of female eroticism. Behind this fear lies the dominant cultural perception of what is acceptable. First, the perception is that pornography and eroticism can be easily differentiated from each other and that the latter is acceptable while the former is not. In reality,
the line between eroticism and pornography can be rather thin, and the distinction between the two categories depends a great deal on the audience or on the reader’s personal history and perceptions. For this reason, critics such as Jesus Antônio Durigan (1985) in Brazil and Linda Williams (1989) in the United States stress the need to historicize the production and the reception of eroticism/pornography, since it is a representation contingent upon the period, values, social groups, particularities of the writer—in sum, upon the specific characteristics of the culture that produced it.

Maurice Charney in his Sexual Fictions (1981) surveys different definitions of “pornography” and “eroticism,” opening with a definition offered by French writer Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922) who claims that “Pornography is the eroticism of others” (qtd. in Charney 1). This idea is, incidentally, echoed by Brazilian cinema director and critic Jean Claude Bernardet, in an essay entitled “Pornografia, o sexo dos outros” [Pornography, the sex of others] (1979). In turn, Charney confronts numerous and often disparate definitions of the terms and concludes: “‘pornographic,’ ‘obscene,’ ‘erotic’ and ‘sexual’ can be seen as synonyms depending upon the value judgment and class orientation of individual users” (2). Therefore Charney chooses to employ the general term of “sexual fiction” to describe narratives that depict human sexuality and eroticism or that otherwise sexualize reality.

Nevertheless, a distinction can be useful in understanding the position of the female writer vis-à-vis her society and the literary canon (which includes expressions of male-authored “sexual” literature). In this regard, two main considerations should be made. One concerns the primacy of the aesthetic experience in the erotic discourse. Gabriela Mora (1991) has pointed out the relationship between eroticism and the poetic word (132), a connection also stressed by Cunha (1999) in an article that discusses Brazilian women’s erotic poetry. On the other hand, for Mora, pornography relies on crude and even demeaning representations of the body. She also recalls the frequent presence of violence in pornography and the relationship that exists between the pornographic work and the tendency within mass culture to commercialize the human body (cf. Mora 130).
For Brazilian sociologist Carlos Roberto- Winckler (1983), pornography is centered upon the phallus and its domination over the Other:

O Falo é símbolo do poder capitalista patriarcal, insaciável em seu desejo de expansão e domínio sobre seres humanos, aos quais atribui características na fantasia pornográfica, reflexo de relações efetivas da realidade social, vistas apenas sob o prisma da sexualidade e da excitação: continuidade do domínio do homem sobre a mulher . . . . reiteração do racismo . . . , permanência de relações sociais desiguais . . . . (81 [11])

In his discussion of pornography, which he categorizes as either “branda” (“soft”) or “forte” (“hard core”), Winckler allows for an understanding of the phallus as a symbol for the white, heterosexual, masculine domination of the Other—women, homosexuals, blacks, and members of the lower classes (73–76, 81). Thus, pornography works on a dialectics of domination versus submission and, as Rosalind Coward (1985) has asserted, “constantly [sustains] male power and privilege and female subordination” (29). Other cultural critics have emphasized that pornography represents a masculinist desire for mastery over the female Other, rendering through violence a cultural male fear of the female body. Susan Griffin (1981) has called this the “pornographic imagination,” which she places within a Western Christian tradition.

I generally concur with Mora in her association of violence and domination of the Other and pornography. However, violence can take different forms besides the explicit display of physical brutality. It may be present as a subtext within the sexual relationship between two individuals, and may take the form of implicit economic, political, or social coercion. For this reason, I find Winckler’s and Coward’s critical constructions of pornography more helpful because they stress the domination of the Other as the core element of pornography. Eroticism, in turn, celebrates the body and works on a notion of consensuality, in addition to showing the aesthetic concern as a distinctive element. This notion of eroticism, on the one hand, and, on the other, the notion of an existing link among pornography, violence, and domination of the Other are generally
recognized in Brazil and in other Western cultures. Nonetheless, the problem of defining eroticism and pornography as exclusive categories does not stop here.

Considering the male-authored canonical texts examined in Chapter 1, or Amado’s famous novel *Gabriela* and its cinematic version, not one reader would say that those texts are pornographic, and yet they all portray examples of sexual relationships that function as vehicles for the domination of the female Other. Therefore I prefer to use the term *phallocentric* or *masculinist* eroticism, for it better characterizes the erotic exchanges represented in these texts, exchanges that objectify women, limiting them within specific social roles, and reducing them to cultural myths that have become part of the Brazilian imaginary. In other words, these texts privilege masculinist desire, and the typical reader—male or female—accepts such privileging as the “norm.”

A related matter of cultural perception has to do with what is and is not acceptable for a woman in a society such as that of Brazil. At the end of the twentieth century, critics and public alike still react negatively toward erotic expression in works by women writers, not with the same kind of aggression suffered by Gilka Machado, but rather through silence. Colasanti, for example, has commented on the general silence on the part of critics toward her and other Brazilian women’s erotic poetry, while the “virile” eroticism of male poets is ostensibly and widely well received.³

Poet and fiction writer Hilda Hilst (1930) has experienced similar reactions to her work. In fact, her situation within the literary canon at the end of the twentieth century was somewhat like that of Gilka Machado’s in the early 1900s. Hilst has been labeled a “difficult” author, is still read very little in Brazil, and has also been generally perceived as a “peculiar” writer and a somewhat “odd” person. Her latest fictional production—*O caderno rosa de Lori Lamby* [Lori Lamby’s Pink Notebook] (1989), *Contos d’escârnio: Textos grotescos* [Stories of derision: grotesque texts] (1990), and *Cartas de um sedutor* [Letters from a seducer] (1991)—has been considered pornographic. Indeed the author makes use of pornography and, by doing so, takes on the position of transgressor in national letters and culture. While some Brazilian critics have recognized

52
the high level of aesthetic and formal realization in her work, they have yet to assess Hilst’s pornography as a strategy to problematize gender roles in the country. Interestingly, this assessment has been made in the United States (Foster, *Sexual Textualities*) and in France, where critics have been positive in their evaluation of Hilst’s poetry and narrative, specifically of her “pornographic” fiction. For example, after the prestigious French press Gallimard published a translation of her *Contos d’escárnio*, critics there stated that Hilst “had raised pornography to the level of art” (qtd. in Mayrink 139).

Hilst represents the case of a woman writer who has appropriated a type of writing traditionally seen as the prerogative of a male author. In addition, male-authored pornography has only been widely accepted outside of the literary ghetto of “popular fiction” in the late part of the twentieth century. As examples, one could think of the short stories by Dalton Trevisan (1925) and the 1999 novel by João Ubaldo Ribeiro (1941), *A casa dos Budas ditosos* [The house of the fortunate Buddhas]. While in the present day Hilst may still be considered transgressive because of her daring use of eroticism/pornography, the expression of female eroticism by contemporary Brazilian women writers is not altogether uncommon.

As I mentioned here previously, as early as the 1930s other Brazilian female authors, such as Rachel de Queiroz and Pagu, addressed issues relating to the female body in their literature. Likewise, beginning in the 1940s, Lispector and Telles have treated themes relating to female sexuality, such as adultery, masturbation, a young woman’s first menstruation, and lesbian desire. These themes are portrayed as part of the authors’ representation of female characters and their search for an identity and self-realization. Eroticism thus plays a part in a larger process of self-development and self-affirmation. In addition, in early works such as *Perto do coração selvagem* (1944; *Near to the Wild Heart*, 1991) by Lispector and *Ciranda de pedra* (1954; *The Marble Dance*, 1982) by Telles, these issues are either veiled by a highly abstract and symbolic language (Lispector) or framed in such a way that they do not appear to challenge the dominant ideology (Telles).

Only after the late 1960s does eroticism appear more frequently in literature by Brazilian female authors. By then,
women had gained a wider access to and more participation in the socio-political sphere, and a larger number of women writers had begun to achieve public recognition. Brazilian women poets and fiction writers began to explore female sexuality as an intrinsic part of their characters’ lives, identity, and self-realization, and eroticism as “a source of power, change and creativity,” to quote Audre Lorde, the Afro-American poet (285). In her 1978 essay “Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde emphasizes the link among eroticism, self-knowledge, and power, characterizing the erotic experience as a space for female self-empowerment. Recognizing the importance of this link, late-twentieth-century Brazilian women writers recurrently address issues relating to the female body, desire, and sexuality: many works of fiction portray female eroticism as a significant part of their characters’ life experience, while it is often the main focus of poetry.

In the 1970s, Brazil saw the publication of novels like Piñon’s *A casa da paixão* [The house of passion] (1972), and anthologies of women’s poetry such as *Mulheres da vida* [Public women] (1978), edited by Leila Míccolis (1947). Míccolis is one among four Brazilian women to appear in an English-language anthology of erotic writings by Latin American women, *Pleasure in the Word* (1994). She was a member of the “Gerac;ão Mimeógrafo” (Mimeograph Generation), a “Pós-Vanguarda” [Post-Avant-Garde] poetic movement that during that time produced and sold their poetry through alternative channels. In his book *Música popular e moderna poesia brasileira* [Popular music and modern Brazilian poetry] (1978), Sant’Anna recognizes a new tonality in Brazilian women’s poetry as a distinctive feature of the “Pós-Vanguarda” movements of the 1970s. He states: “A mulher assume uma linguagem realista, descobre seu corpo, descreve as relações eróticas num tom totalmente avesso ao de Cecília Meireles e outras autoras típicas da ‘lírica feminina’” (165) [“Women assume a realist language, discover their body, describe erotic relationships in a tone completely opposite to that found in the poetry of Cecília Meireles or of other typical authors of ‘feminine poetry’”].

*Mulheres da vida* includes poems by Norma Bengell, Gloria Perez, Míccolis herself, and others. Beginning with the title,
the collection displays an overall attitude of rebelliousness by the participating female poets as representatives of a new woman—braver, more daring, and more in touch with reality. Says Míccolis in her introduction to the volume: “Ontem talvez temêssemos as conotações eróticas e ofensivas da expressão; ontem talvez pensássemos duas vezes antes de ousar viver e escrever. Hoje nós e nossas poesias nos jogamos nos bares, calçadas, ônibus, boates, prisões, trabalhos, manicômios, casas, bordéis” (5) [“Yesterday we might fear the erotic and offensive connotations of our expression. Today we and our poetry are out in bars, on sidewalks, in buses, clubs, prisons, workplaces, mental clinics, homes, brothels”].

Bengell, in a brief introduction to her own poetry, addresses other characteristics of many of the works in the anthology—a solidarity among women and a concern for the liberation of women in art as well as in real life: “Os meus trabalhos foram feitos em favor das mulheres violentadas, presas dentro de prisões ou dentro de casa. . . . Esta minha participação fica como continuação na luta pela emancipação da mulher na arte” (in Míccolis, Mulheres da vida 61) [“My poems were written for raped women, prisoners in prisons or in homes. . . . My participation in this anthology is a continuation in the struggle for the emancipation of women in art”]. This new woman has left the protected space of the home to be immersed in the public space, where she is as active and participative as she is in touch with herself, her body, her desire. Therefore, the reality sung by these women poets is complex and multidimensional: female hetero- and homoeroticism, the family, mother-daughter relationships, unsatisfying marriages, and the political moment.

In these poems, the female poetic voice accepts marginality as a way of challenging or even rejecting the dominant masculinist ideology, similarly to what is seen in some of Coutinho’s short stories that I discuss in Chapter 4. For example, in this fragment from the poem “Na vida” [In life], Míccolis defends her right to define herself as she pleases:

Não sou comportada.
Puta e lésbica
e o que mais me der na telha,
pareço um pássaro maluco
procurando espantalhos e alçapões,
Chapter Two

querendo me expandir como sono
em pálpebras cansadas,
explodir como violência
no silêncio dos acomodados.
Puta e lésbica
e o que mais me der na telha
sou a sequência
do que o primeiro gesto desencadeia.

(Mulheres da vida 44 [12])

The Portuguese title of the poem has a double meaning. In addition to the literal meaning translated above, “na vida” evokes the expression “cair na vida,” which means to prostitute oneself. This latter meaning is present in the verse “Puta e lésbica” [“A whore and a lesbian”] wherein the poet defiantly embraces her marginality. Moreover, in linking these two locations, Míccolis is appropriating a homophobic representation of the lesbian woman that stereotypically portrays her as a whore. The poet illustrates here the problem of the social and literary representation of the lesbian in Brazilian society, a problem she has addressed in her 1983 essay “Prazer, gênero de primeira necessidade” [Pleasure, an item of prime necessity] and which I discuss in Chapter 5.

Other anthologies followed, of both poetry and fiction, some with wider circulation. Many of the works anthologized spoke of gender relations and of women’s dissatisfaction with hierarchical relationships and the lack of communication between men and women (cf. Coelho, “À guisa de posfácio” 242). Others sought to give expression to women’s eroticism. Denser, a journalist and fiction writer, edited two important anthologies of female erotic short stories: Muito prazer [Pleased to meet you / Much pleasure] (1980) and O prazer é todo meu [The pleasure is all mine] (1984). The two anthologies were well received and considered groundbreaking, or perhaps as novelties by some readers and critics. And it was from this perspective that the publisher marketed the volume: “Escritores que falam de sexo é a regra, escritoras falando de sexo já vira exceção. . . . o resultado af está: . . . as mulheres sabem (e muito bem) falar de sexo” [“Male writers who speak of sex constitute the rule, female writers speaking of sex, however, becomes an exception. . . . here is the result: . . . women can speak (and
The Search for an Erotic Discourse

speak well) of sex”] says the back cover of Muito prazer. In her preface, Denser reiterates this idea, stating that, previously, the theme of sex had seemed to be a masculine prerogative, and that her objective in editing the anthology was to show otherwise.

Other important ideas are conveyed in the short preface: one, that each woman has her own way of “feeling” [sic] sex, and it is not necessarily the way male writers have portrayed female desire; two, that women had been kept from talking of their own eroticism, and of their partners’; and three, that each woman has her own individual way of representing sex and eroticism. Denser points to the aspect of individuality and difference among women writers in their treatment of eroticism, an aspect revealed through the heterogeneity of narrative styles and perspectives that characterize the stories in both Muito prazer and O prazer é todo meu. In fact, the heterogeneity is such that the subtitle Contos eróticos femininos [Female erotic short stories] may not seem to fit all the narratives.

For example, the opening story in Muito prazer, Cristina de Queiroz’s “A chave na fechadura” [The key in the keyhole], is less about eroticism than it is a fictional analysis of gender relations and marriage in Brazilian society. And Denser’s own “O vampiro da alameda Casabranca” (“The Vampire of White-house Lane,” 1992) represents an excellent example of the author’s cynical, antiromantic, and even antierotic eroticism. Both Cristina de Queiroz’s and Denser’s stories exemplify the different narrative strategies Brazilian female fiction writers employ in order to problematize gender relations and examine social hierarchies and power struggles within a society centered upon masculinist desire.

In 1984, poet Olga Savary published Carne viva [Bare/living skin], subtitled the first Brazilian anthology of erotic poems, including both male and female poets. The expression of female eroticism by some thirty women poets represented then a new phenomenon in Brazilian literature, possible only after the linguistic and thematic rupture evidenced in the 1970s “Pós-Vanguarda” poetic movements, particularly in the female-authored poetry that emerged during that decade. In addition, Savary’s anthology appeared after the dark years of censorship of the Brazilian military dictatorship. In fact, some seven years
before, the Department of Censorship in Brasília was still very active, especially censoring works that portrayed human sexuality and the human body in a manner deemed “offensive” or “obscene.” The strict censorship that had begun around 1970, however, declined by the early 1980s due not only to political developments, but also to the social action of several liberal segments of the middle class who sought to establish a new socio-sexual hegemony (Winckler 72). While in the mass media these efforts seemed to have (again) favored male desire, in literature, women writers attempted to construct a space for the authentic expression of female sexuality and eroticism, and poetry proved to be an almost boundary-less space.

Nevertheless, Brazilian women fiction writers were also striving to find a new language to give expression to female sexuality, eroticism, and desire within the more confining limits of the narrative genre. In this regard, a noteworthy book published during that time is Joyce Cavaalcante’s *O discurso da mulher absurda* [The discourse of an absurd woman] (1985). Cavaalcante presents here a collection of erotic short stories in which the female protagonists occupy the position of subject of desire, “aggressively” (according to the dominant patterns of female behavior) seeking sexual pleasure. In the story “Luta livre” [Wrestling match], for example, the protagonist is a single woman from the middle class who goes out at night looking for sexual partners. To each lover she finds, she introduces herself with a different name: Míriam, Cleide, Leila, Cláudia. Her various names represent the evasive nature of her identity before the men with whom she has sex and, at the same time, the elusive nature of female sexuality, not localized, but rather fluid and multiplied. In addition, her position as a woman not easily defined is made even more threatening to her male lovers (and perhaps even to some male readers then) by the fact that she is sexually experienced. Thus Cavaalcante, in this and other stories, makes use of the disturbing nature of female sexuality. It is disturbing because both the author and her characters disrupt the dominant patterns of gender behavior: the characters, because they take the position of subject of their own desire; and the author, for speaking so explicitly about female eroticism.
Eroticism and the Search for Self-Identity: 
*Mulher no espelho* and *As mulheres de Tijucopapo*

Eroticism has also played an important role in novels by Brazilian women that focus on female characters and their search for an identity and self-realization. Marilene Felinto's *As mulheres de Tijucopapo* (1982; *The Women of Tijucopapo*, 1994) and Helena Parente Cunha's *Mulher no espelho* (1983; *Woman between Mirrors*, 1989) each focuses on a female protagonist engaged in a process of self-examination and redefinition of her identity. Such a process entails revisiting and confronting the past, going back to their origins so as to understand who they are, and therefore rebuilding a sense of identity free from the constraints imposed by their society. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, this is the same Brazilian patriarchal and Eurocentric society that gave rise to such myths of femininity as those discussed in Chapter 1. For, as Roberto Reis has explained, "despite Brazilian modernization, certain myths and patriarchal legacies still impregnate the social imagination in regard to sexuality" (109). In other words, some one hundred years after the publication of *Memórias de um sargento de milícias*, *Iracema*, *Dom Casmurro*, and *O cortiço*, Felinto and Cunha were writing within and about a social context still structured upon a masculinist and "whitened" form of desire. In fact, gender and race are the main cultural categories scrutinized in *As mulheres de Tijucopapo* and *Mulher no espelho*, as these are the categories that, along with class, intersect in the societal construction of each protagonist's identity.

The position that each woman holds in this society, however, is not identical. Rízia, Felinto's protagonist, is a young woman of color, in her twenties, from a poor northeastern family, living in São Paulo; the unnamed protagonist in *Mulher no espelho*, on the other hand, is a forty-five-year-old, upper-middle-class woman from Salvador, the capital city of the State of Bahia who, at middle age, awakens to the reality of the subordinate position she has held within a male-dominated social environment. Nonetheless, *Mulher no espelho* and *As mulheres de Tijucopapo* hold in common several important elements, most relevant among them the fact that both novels represent one's "search for the origins," as Marilena Chauí has
characterized Felinto’s book (Chauí 9, 10). Both first-person narratives tell of the protagonist’s search for her origins, in order to understand where she comes from and who she is, and therefore reconstruct a sense of identity. In this way, both novels can be read as female-authored examples of autobiographical fiction, or even as postmodern examples of Bildungsromane. In fact, in “Marginality in the Contemporary Female Brazilian Bildungsroman,” Kimberle S. López and Alice A. Brittin discuss Felinto’s novel as such. It should be noted that both the autobiographical genre and the Bildungsroman represent literary models that traditionally have not taken gender into account. Rather, the traditional critical concept of these two genres, or subgenres, of the novel assumed the presence of a male protagonist from the dominant culture, portrayed as an organic entity, whose “view of the life history is grounded in authority” (Benstock 9).

Such a model is problematic for the Brazilian female author, given women’s subaltern status in Brazilian society. Therefore, in As mulheres de Tijucopapo and Mulher no espelho, the authors are engaged in a twofold deconstructive project. One, they write against a literary model that had excluded women protagonists and female life experiences; and, two, through their women characters, they seek to deconstruct cultural myths of female identity created by masculinist desire. Consequently, the characterization of these two novels as “narratives of search” is most appropriate: the phrase describes not only each protagonist’s search for her origins and the process of reconstructing her self-identity, but also each author’s search for her own language, a language suitable for the expression of a woman’s life experiences, particularly her sexuality and eroticism. Hence, another important aspect that Felinto’s and Cunha’s novels have in common is the experimental nature of the language employed.

***

Formal experimentation has been a distinctive element in Helena Parente Cunha’s literature since the publication of her first volumes of poetry and short stories, but is most notable in later works such as Cem mentiras de verdade [One hundred
true lies] (short stories; 1985) and As doze cores do vermelho [The twelve colors of red] (novel; 1988). Mulher no espelho, her first novel, also presents the formal concern the author displays elsewhere, as it is marked by a strong metafictional component, and by a very innovative narrative strategy that underscores both the question of authorial power and the status of the self as a split entity. The novel, which achieved a renewed success after its English translation came to light in 1989, tells the story of a woman who, standing between the facing mirrors on the doors of an armoire, sees her image multiplied ad infinitum.

Confronted with these multiple images of herself, the woman embarks on a journey of self-discovery and rediscovery, of defining and redefining her own identity. From the successive images staring at each other in the mirrors, two stand out and are represented by the alternating narrative voices that speak to each other, in a dialogue, a battle of sorts or, as the narrator-protagonist states, a “jogo eu-ela” (28; “game of I-she”; 18). One voice belongs to the protagonist herself, a repressed woman who has always been submissive to her traditional, patriarchal culture. The other voice belongs to “a mulher que me escreve” (“the woman who writes me”), an alter ego of the first woman, a liberal and rebellious female image who embodies everything the protagonist always wanted to do and be like, but never dared. These two narrative entities, who speak to each other through alternating fragments, represent at a structural level the psychological conflict of the female self, split between her own desire on the one hand and, on the other hand, her society’s masculinist desire and the demands and expectations it places on women. Throughout the novel, the two narrative voices recount the protagonist’s life story, the “I” trying to see her past and her present life positively, and the “woman who writes me” pointing out the repressed life the woman has led so far. As the narrative evolves, the two switch positions: the protagonist becomes more aware of her own desires and aspirations, and of how she has been repressed by a patriarchal system; she becomes more liberal, and begins to free her self, her body, and her sexuality from the previous constraints. The “woman who writes me,” on the other hand, begins to take more conservative stances, afraid of the threat
that the truly liberated and thus subversive female body poses. Therefore, as the protagonist begins to display the behavior of a liberated woman, the discourse of “the woman who writes me” seeks to tone down the other’s bold attitudes and claims.

The protagonist’s confrontation with her plural “images” (Cunha, Woman 1), a crisis elicited by the departure of her husband, leads her to revisit her past and her childhood, when she felt abandoned by her father after the birth of her baby brother. In fact, the protagonist-narrator acknowledges: “É verdade que o meu pai havia querido um menino quando eu nasci, em vez de menina” (59; “It’s true that my father had wanted a boy when I was born, instead of a girl”; 42). Thus the narrative juxtaposes two spaces dominated by phallic desire. One is the space of the father’s house, wherein the patriarchal power passes from father to son while silencing the females. For example, the daughter (the protagonist) is constantly neglected and unfairly punished as a child and, as an adolescent and a young woman, seriously repressed, particularly in her sexuality. Her mother is the image of the “perfect” woman, the “angel of the house,” who seldom, if ever, speaks—she certainly never speaks up against the father—and whose voice is heard only as she whispers or sings “em voz baixa” (21; “under her breath”; 12). And the black nanny is repressed as a woman, as a black—thus a member of “anOther” culture—and as a servant or, in other words, as a member of an economically dependent class. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” “if you are poor, black, and female you get it in three ways” (294), and this statement is most applicable to the Brazilian case, no matter how intertwined race and social class may be in the country.

The second space of masculinist desire is the protagonist’s home, wherein her husband and three sons represent similar patriarchal values; there, as in her father’s house, “um homem é um homem e a mulher deve saber o seu espaço” (15; “a man is a man and a woman must know her place”; 8). In a sense, the triangle formed by the protagonist and the images she encounters in the facing mirrors constitutes a space in opposition to the spaces centered upon masculinist desire, where a woman’s social function is defined by her roles in the family, primarily as a wife and mother. Through the protagonist’s mother and the protagonist herself in her domestic roles, Mulher no espelho
exposes the types of myths of female behavior Brazilian women have assimilated. For example, the protagonist states: “... meu marido gosta de me ver bem arrumada. Boniteza no vestir, cabelos bem obtidos, leve pintura concedida” (29; “... my husband likes to see me all dressed up. Nice clothes, my hair all fixed, just a touch of make-up”; 19). In this apparently encouraging behavior on the part of the husband, one may read a not-so-subtle form of repression: he desires her as a doll on display, with “just a touch of make-up” lest the wife—the private woman—look like a prostitute. At the same time, the passage above reminds the reader, as it surely reminds the protagonist, of her mother and the “perfect” relationship between the mother and the father. For example:

Minha mãe repetia certas frases. Normas de vida. Em primeiro lugar, o marido, em segundo, o marido, em terceiro, o marido. Depois os filhos. Sim, ela era muito feliz. Toda cheirosa, à espera de que meu pai voltasse do trabalho. Ela o esperava. Perfumes, silêncios, sussurros. (21 [13])

The space marked by the facing mirrors constitutes the space “of one’s own,” wherein the protagonist will engage in an ever shifting process of self-questioning, self-definition, and, eventually, self-knowledge. The mirrors are the starting point of the narrative and, at the same time, complement the narrative act: seeing and narrating (speaking), the sight and the voice, are mutually complementary instruments of self-liberation that lead the female subject through her past and toward the future, toward the possibility of a new woman. In a section of the novel where the complementarity of sight and voice is most clear, female sexuality appears as the key component of the character’s life that must be rescued, liberated, and satisfied. Alone in her room, away from the rigid stares of male desire, it is in front of the mirrors that she allows her body to come to life and her voice to rise from the low tones of the maternal whispers. Her body, her voice, her sexuality emerge in pleasure amidst the music from her record player and the rhythm of the author’s language:

Nos momentos em que estou realmente sozinha em casa, tranco-me no quarto, ligo o toca-discos e me ponho a dançar. Onda e som. Pulo para a outra margem, liberada dos
Music, sensuality, self-pleasure, the mirrors become the doors, the “cracks through which [she escapes]” (26) to the space where female sexuality is not bound by the phallus, but is rather satisfied through self-love. The satisfaction of her sexuality represents at the same time the realization of the multiplicity of the self: “Estou muitas” (38; “So many of me”; 26). Later on, the female character will step in her newly invented independence, and taking on the demeanor of a sensual, provocative, and seducing woman, will seek her own pleasure in intercourse with different men.

In Cunha’s novel, autoeroticism has been the transgressive act that, once realized, allows for other transgressions to take place, foremost among them narrating/writing. Laura Beard, in an article on Latin American metafiction authored by women, points out the relationship that exists between writing and sexuality. She states about Mulher no espelho: “Para la protagonista, escribir es un acto sexual, secreto y transgresor” (Beard 301) [“For the protagonist, to write is a transgressive, secret, sexual act”]. The phallocentric discourse has rendered both writing and sexual pleasure forbidden to women, and this is made vivid in the protagonist’s dialogue with the “woman who writes me,” as they remember the sad episode from her adolescence when the father reads and misinterprets her secret diary, reacting with physical aggression toward the daughter (55–57).

Years later, as a middle-aged woman, she will react against her father’s violent repression, her husband’s debasing behavior, and her sons’ mockery by adopting a new form of behavior that stands as the antithesis to the phallocentric model of female behavior. She starts to venture out of the domestic space, and to bring men she meets on the streets to her home. In this way she rejects the clearly marked myths of the housewife and mother on one hand, and, on the other hand, of the “public” woman, blurring also the distinction between the public and the private. However, her sexual body, subversive of patriarchy, does not go unpunished, and the violent death of one of her sons will mark the end of the narrative and the failure of her search for independence and satisfaction.
The Search for an Erotic Discourse

*Mulher no espelho* is a novel still written under what we may call *the sign of sexual-cultural ambiguity*. This ambiguity stems from the conflicts faced by Brazilian women, particularly those who lived through the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s or grew up in its aftermath, torn between the traditions of patriarchal ideology and new lifestyles and forms of behavior disseminated by the mass media in an ever-shrinking world. Cunha has not been able to resolve such ambiguity for her protagonist. Rather, she represents it through the “fragmentação do sujeito, oscilando entre o aprisionante ‘destino de mulher’ e o repentino desejo de libertação do jugo” (Cunha, “Desafio” 155) [“the fragmentation of the subject, who oscillates between the entrapping ‘woman’s destiny’ and the desire for liberation”].

As a consequence, guilt (cf. Cunha, “Desafio”) dominates the female subject, while the woman writer is unable to finally represent her character’s sexuality outside of the boundaries of male desire. In Cunha’s novel, this is seen in the protagonist’s search for sexual satisfaction in heterosexual relationships that turn out to be unsatisfactory. Interestingly, the most beautifully constructed passages of erotic discourse describe moments of self-love, when the protagonist experiences full satisfaction. For example:

As minhas mãos percorrem o meu corpo, de alto a baixo. Detêm-se na nuca e se misturam aos cabelos para soltá-los, livre, sobre os ombros. As minhas mãos descem, contornando os seios, levemente sobre as pontas endurecidas, que somente conheceram as mãos balofas e suadas de um homem. Sinto que haverá um prazer à espera dos meus seios solitários. As minhas mãos descem pela cintura, pelas nádegas, se afundam no sexo, polpa madura e úmida aconchegada ao abrigo de vôos e mergulhos.

Saio dos espelhos à procura do tapete de pele. Deito-me no chão e os meus poros conhecem a aspereza macia deste pêlo. O vento que vem do mar me traz o cheiro de manga madura. Encolho-me, estendo-me, rolo. (109–10 [15])

The sensuality experienced by the character is echoed in the writer’s language. The passages above exemplify the use of some linguistic elements that distinguish the experimental style of *Mulher no espelho*, and that are even more striking in the Brazilian original text. For example, one may find the use of...
very short sentences, repetition of one or more syntactical elements, alliteration, and the careful construction of the sentence’s rhythm. Throughout the novel, Cunha also employs truncated sentences, oxymora and parallelisms, and syntactical constructions that defy the rules of standard Portuguese language.

One of the novel’s most important themes is the protagonist’s attempt to recover her African heritage, which is vital in her process of reconstructing her identity. Therefore, the narrative abounds with images that relate to Africa and to Salvador’s Afro-Brazilian culture, particularly the Candomblé religion. Afro-Brazilian gods such as Xangô, Iansan, and Oxum are evoked often, and in many passages the text reproduces the rhythm of the Candomblé drums in its syntax and through word choice. Images such as mangoes, the mango tree, the sea, seashells, and the wind are recurrent, and often come together by way of synesthesia. Africa and related images appear associated with the character’s sexual awakening and satisfaction, as “o cheiro de manga madura” in the passage quoted above. In fact, the protagonist’s sexual encounter with “the good-looking black man” is depicted as the most satisfying of her heterosexual encounters, and leads her to experience a sense of wholeness: “Preenchimento e totalidade. Estou aqui. Inteira e múltipla. Completa” (162; “Fulfilled and total. I’m here. Whole and multiple. Complete”; 125).

Standing on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean or, in other words, on the opposite side of the father’s house, Africa, and by extension Afro-Brazilian culture, represent a space of freedom, pleasure, and self-realization. Nevertheless, just as the sense of totality is transitory, and even though she takes pride in her “pele queimada” (“tanned skin”), and in her “cabelo crespo” (158; “curly hair”; 121), the character can only temporarily experience this space of freedom. She has been removed from it by centuries of cultural whitening and by her standing in the class structure of Brazilian society. Consequently, she remains divided, her self forever split, fragmented as the images of her face reflected on the multiple fragments of the broken mirrors (132).

In this way, as Maria José Somerlate Barbosa argues, “os espelhos estilhaçados fragmentam a noção de uma identidade coesa” (147) [“the broken mirrors fragment the notion of a
The Search for an Erotic Discourse

cohesive identity”), also undermining the essentialism that the text and the character’s search might have implied (cf. Barbosa 147). The concept of the subject as inherently split is an accepted premise in Lacanian and post-Lacanian psychoanalysis and cultural and literary theories. However, this concept entails a sense of failure or defeat, for the subject does require some conviction of his or her own stability and unity that, once reached, will be immediately questioned by the subject. It is the implication of failure and defeat that lies at the conclusion of Mulher no espelho, as the protagonist and “the woman who writes me,” “feet gnawed at by rats,” come together, driven by guilt (132).

***

Cunha’s protagonist’s search for an identity is a process that necessitates the creation of a new, more authentic language, and that unfolds through language, through the act of narrating and writing. These acts allow the subject—male or female—to revisit the past, and by way of revisiting, to relive, replay past experiences. In this way, narrating and writing are strategies of repetition, which leads the subject to mastery over past events and situations. In Mulher no espelho, narrating takes shape through the dialogue established between the “I” and the “woman who writes me,” but writing is also an important component of the protagonist’s development, from adolescence to maturity, and from there to self-awareness. She writes a diary when young, later writes in her room, hiding from her husband and sons, and eventually comes to write and publish a book of narrative fiction.

In Felinto’s As mulheres de Tijucopapo, writing and narrating have a similar function. In fact, they take place concurrently, as Rízia, the protagonist-narrator, writes a letter addressed to her mother while going on a nine-month journey back to her place of origin. In fact, Rízia goes beyond her original birthplace to reach Tijucopapo, where she hopes to find a strong female lineage to which she lets herself be reborn. Her journey represents a “process of reverse gestation” (Matthews 125), a process through which she searches for a sense of a new identity. In Felinto’s novel, as in Cunha’s, the protagonist must devise her own language in order to narrate/write her
childhood, her past experiences, what she encounters along her journey, her thoughts and emotions. In order to achieve a language that authentically represents her character’s life experiences, Felinto weaves together different linguistic registers to form a fragmented narrative with often unusual syntax. These registers include an English-language song by the Beatles, verses from a Brazilian children’s rhyme, references to a psalm from the Bible, poetic prose, and regionalisms. Throughout the novel, the author also uses repetition of sounds, words, phrases and sentences, and repeatedly breaks the traditional structure of Portuguese grammar. Moreover, Felinto transgresses the social and literary expectations regarding how a woman should speak or write by using crude language, making explicit sexual allusions, and employing a distinct tone of violence to mark her protagonist’s discourse. In this regard, Felinto’s novel is truly innovative within Brazilian women’s fiction, for she openly gives expression to female violence and anger.

Rízia’s journey is then a reconstruction of her past as well as of an identity: addressing the mother, she recounts her childhood, her family relations, her feelings, lacks and desires; she searches for her origins and searches for a new origin, a new identity. This is carried out through language, and becomes at the same time a most pressing search for a new and authentic language. Nevertheless, this authentic language sometimes proves to be elusive or not sufficient to convey the protagonist’s feelings. In these moments, the character wishes to express herself through other means: “Ah, se pelo menos eu pudesse falar em língua estrangeira. Ah, se eu pudesse somente grunhir. Ah, se eu pudesse ser um bicho” (36; “Oh, if I were at least able to talk in a foreign language. Oh, if I could only grunt. Oh, if I could be an animal”; 23). 5

Grunting, growling (97), stammering, silence (41), and the desire to be an animal, to be a mare (97), not only reflect the character’s problematic relationship with language, but also her determination to break away from the dominant sociolinguistic system and be heard. Her position vis-à-vis the dominant system could be thus summed up: “Everything in me joined forces to forbid me to write [or speak up]: History, my story, my origin, my sex. Everything that constituted my social and cultural self. To begin with the necessary, which I lacked, the material
that writing is formed of and extracted from: language” (Cixous, “Coming to Writing” 12).

Rísia is socially and culturally displaced because of who she is: a woman, of color, poor. In addition, her family follows a Protestant faith in a country where Catholicism is the official religion; and she is a Northeasterner, standing out, because of her accent and her ethnic physical attributes, in São Paulo, a large, wealthy, cosmopolitan and Europeanized city in the Southeast region of Brazil. Rísia’s voice, therefore, echoes those of marginalized groups in Brazilian society, voices often silenced, seldom heard. In fact, Rísia’s narrative replays to a certain extent the story of generations of Brazilian Northeasterners who migrate, alone or with their families, to cities in Southeast Brazil, like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. They go looking for a better life, but typically find themselves, instead, culturally, socially, and economically marginalized.

Felinto recounts this story, made famous in Brazilian literature by novels such as Graciliano Ramos’s Vidas secas (1938; Barren Lives, 1965) and Lispector’s A hora da estrela (1977; The Hour of the Star, 1986). Like Lispector, Felinto focuses specifically on the plight of a woman, underscoring, throughout her narrative, the signs of Rísia’s difference that make of her a social and cultural Other. Moreover, Felinto’s novel reverses the usual path of the retirante (the Northeastern migrant) by depicting Rísia on her way back to the Northeast. In this way, Felinto portrays her character’s rejection of the society’s dominant values; at the same time, the author is able to disrupt the false notion of Brazil as a racial democracy, and free of gender, class, and religion-based discriminations (cf. Penna 218, 223–24). Such forms of discrimination are not always open and physically violent; rather, they often take the guise of tolerance and interaction among different groups, an interaction that maintains “a dominação de um sobre o outro, no caso sempre predominando a cultura e etnia branca européia sobre as outras” (Penna 223) [“the domination of one over another, in this case always prevailing the white European culture and ethnicity over the others”].

Furthermore, Rísia’s displacement is also of a psychological nature, as a consequence of her conflicting relationships with her mother, who failed to nurture and protect her; with
Chapter Two

her father, who was frequently unfaithful to her mother, and verbally and physically aggressive to his children; and with her siblings, who were over dependent and abusive. At the heart of these conflicts is the subject’s relationship with the mother—the primary Other—which can determine to a large extent the individual’s later relationships, with herself and with others. Ríssia’s social, cultural, and psychological displacement begins thus in the mother, in her emotional absence, her inability to nurture her daughter. The mother becomes for Ríssia a synonym of passivity, weakness, and the worst of the reality wherein they live—poverty, dirt, adultery, broken marriages, lack: “Mamãe, sua cara de cu” (21; “Mama, your shitty face”; 9).

Many psychoanalysts have asserted that the process of female identity formation necessitates a separation from the maternal figure. In Ríssia’s case, however, the process of individuation is framed by strong and conflicting feelings of rebelliousness and guilt toward the mother. Both sentiments are conveyed in her narrative, wherein she expresses the need to rebel against the mother and what the mother stands for, the necessity to reject identities imposed from the outside. “Jamais vou admitir que me definam” (24; “I’ll never let anyone define me”; 11), Ríssia states. Instead, she will construct a new sense of identity on her own terms, in her own language. At the same time, her narrative is born out of desire; it seeks to compensate for a lack, the lack left by her mother’s emotional absence.

Ríssia’s journey, therefore, is threefold: it is the actual geographic displacement from São Paulo to the Northeast; it is psychological, as she reinvents herself in her own discourse addressed to an absent mother; and it is mythical, revisionist, mythmaking. In order to satisfy her desire for the maternal body, Ríssia becomes her own mother, and creates not one mother figure, but rather a group of women with whom she can identify, the women warriors of Tijucopapo who will mother and nurture her. Thus she establishes a new genealogy for herself, a heritage of strong women to replace the passivity and weakness associated with her mother and other women of her childhood.

In seventeenth-century Brazil, the women of Tijucopapo used their own weapons—i.e., their cooking and washing utensils—to fight against the Dutch who had invaded Pernambuco;
these women had been, however, only a footnote in the male-centered Brazilian historiography. By foregrounding them, Felinto is interpolating two different chronological planes: the colonial and the contemporary periods, which confers upon the novel a mythic quality. Felinto is a mythmaker, as her character claims for herself a strong lineage of female fighters. In this way, the author is rejecting cultural myths and assumptions such as those that populated Rísia’s childhood: passive women, like her mother; unfaithful and violent men, like her father; adultery, alcoholism, and promiscuity as the norm, as Rísia had seen in her neighborhood. In addition, Felinto questions Brazilian society itself, and social divisions along class and racial lines.

The character of Lampião, whom Rísia meets upon approaching Tijucopapo, advances the mythic dimension of Felinto’s novel. Another chronological period thus intersects with the previous two, for Lampião was a real-life cangaceiro (“bandit”) who terrified the population in the backlands of Brazil’s Northeast region from the mid-1910s until his death in 1938.6 Throughout the twentieth century, however, he became a cultural icon, famous for his bravery as well as his cruelty in dealing with his enemies, and admired as a symbol of rebellion against the status quo. As such, he underscores Rísia’s desire for rebelliousness and Felinto’s deconstruction of the Brazilian society’s dominant values.

Interestingly, many women joined Lampião’s group, including Maria Bonita, after the two fell in love. For these women, life with the cangaceiros represented an opportunity to escape the social restrictions typically imposed on women in the first decades of the twentieth century, and to live freely a life of adventures (Schumaher and Vital Brazil 171, 373-74). These cangaceiro women, some of whom carried small guns with them, certainly defied the accepted standards of behavior, by breaking away from the typical and stable family life. However, the idea that they participated equally with the men in armed struggles against the police is erroneous. In fact, during fights, they were generally kept in a defended hideout, protected by the men. Moreover, while many of them followed the cangaceiros of their own free will, others were kidnapped and forced to go along, serving the men as good wives and lovers,
Chapter Two

bearing children and doing typically “feminine” work, such as sewing.

Consequently, Rízia’s encounter with Lampião in Tijucopapo, in the last chapters of the novel, signals a conflicting and ambiguous denouement. Her identification with the women of Tijucopapo emphasizes the characteristics of bravery, strength, and self-sufficiency “as desirable and indispensable for women seeking to create a new place for themselves in society” (López and Brittin 22). Nevertheless, while Lampião embodies the social revolution erupting in poor Northeastern Brazil against the dominant social and cultural values represented by the wealthy and Europeanized São Paulo, women’s roles in such a revolution still seem to be those of followers. As Rízia states at the novel’s very conclusion, in the letter to her mother: “eu posso no máximo seguir Lampião. Por uma causa justa” (133; “at the most I can follow Lampião. For a just cause”; 120). It is here that Felinto’s novel seems to fail in its attempt to devise a new path and a new identity for the female protagonist.

Likewise, the expression of female desire and eroticism conveys a similar ambiguity. Felinto represents her character’s desire and sexuality through an explicit and unashamed language, in a manner that reflects her self-awareness. Rízia feels sexual: “Mas hoje meu corpo precisou de um homem. Meu corpo estava insolarado e labirintático [sic], meu corpo estava bebado. Eu queria ser seduzida. . . . eu falei a um jovem montando um jegue. Não sei se falei coisa com coisa. Só sei que ele me seduziu” (110; my emphasis; “today my body needs a man. My body was sunstruck and labyrinthine [sic], my body was intoxicated. I wanted to be seduced. . . . I talked with one virile young man mounted on a donkey. I don’t know if I talked about anything in particular. I only know he seduced me”; 95; my emphasis). The use of passive voice by the female protagonist is telling of her stance toward her own sexuality: she is aware of her sexual desire, but will remain passive and allow the male to take the active role in the game of seduction and love. In the sexual act that follows and that is described as “quase a perfeição” (110; “almost perfect”; 96), the narrative portrays Rízia and Lampião as models of transcending female-ness and maleness joined in the millenarian act of love. This is achieved through the omission of their names and the repeti-
The Search for an Erotic Discourse

tion of words, particularly “man” and “woman,” and through their implied identification as animals, horses and mares:

... os sons que se juntavam numa ária que era nossa, dele homem e de eu mulher cruzando uma noite de raríssima lua melada. O homem e eu apeamos no estábulo das éguas e entramos. O homem e eu deitamos no capim onde as éguas deitam. Foi no capim que eu amei um homem como era raríssimo aquela lua estar melada como estava. Eu senti que, com aquele homem, eu deitava com todos os atos que deitara antes com outros homens. Eu via com todos os atos e aquele meu ato eu sentia que seria quase a perfeição.

In the passage above, Rísia claims her agency: she loves, she is, she stands equal with the man. Nevertheless, female agency is lost as the description of the sexual act continues in terms that progressively privilege the male’s actions:

O homem me tocava como se nenhuma parte do meu corpo sobrasse, eu era inteirinha do homem, ... eu estava sendo varrida e invadida como só a água salgada do mar pode me varrer e invadir até a exaustão. Eu estava sendo mergulhada e molhada. O homem me imprensou contra as paredes do estábulo das éguas e me penetrou num membro ... , me invadindo, me varrendo de gosma, me mergulhando e me molhando até que gritei exausta e ele gritou exausto no nosso caíamos no beira dum mar de capim. (110-11)

Again the author uses repetition, creating with it an effect that suggests the couple’s movements during the love act. The use of the same or of corresponding verbs—to void, to invade, to exhaust, to saturate, to submerge—in the passive and, then, in the active voices, renders the woman subject to the active male. Despite the author’s efforts to depict Rísia as equally participative in this erotic scene, and the sexual act as an act of unity and harmony—“O homem e eu nos movemos em todos os atos” (111; “The man and I moved together in every act”; 96)—in actuality she reproduces a traditional heterosexual relationship. While Lampião plays the active role, Rísia’s agency in the love act alludes to the traditionally female functions of mothering and nurturing: “quando eu quis coroar o membro do homem com minhas mãos e ele se excitou, e quando eu o quis
acalmar na minha boca e ele se molhou como uma criança se molha, eu chorei" (111; "when I tried to enwrap the man’s member with my hands and he got aroused, and when I wanted to appease it in my mouth and he wet himself like a child wets itself, I cried . . ."); 96).

In conclusion, with *As mulheres de Tijucopapo* Felinto has been successful in the construction of an innovative discourse that authentically expresses a woman’s emotions and life experiences, and is particularly effective in its expression of her anger and inner violence. The author has also succeeded in creating a female character aware of her own body, sexuality, and desire. Nevertheless, as noted above in relation to *A mulher no espelho*, like Cunha, Felinto fails to rethink female sexuality outside the frame of male desire and the dominance of the phallus. This is not to say that heterosexuality is not a valid expression of female desire, but rather that Felinto’s novel points to the need to problematize how we think heterosexuality. Her erotic discourse is revealing of how twentieth-century Brazilian women writers, for the most part, have been unable to rethink it, and to disassociate the heterosexual act from a heterosexually hierarchical ideology privileging of male desire and penetration. Thus, it is not “the act of intercourse itself which [constitutes] the problem, but rather the way in which heterosexuality is institutionalized and practised under patriarchy” (S. Jackson 176), as a reflection of gender relations in a given society. In this way, even if Felinto’s protagonist engages in a search that leads her to redefine her sense of an identity, by finding her own voice and means of self-expression, and by reidentifying her origins, she does not fully claim her agency. Rather, she adheres to a form of erotic expression that “has been culturally constructed around an eroticization of power” (S. Jackson 176). Eroticism in *As mulheres de Tijucopapo* has in fact been deemed disturbing and even pornographic by some readers, as it perpetuates male aggression over female passivity. The issue Felinto and other Brazilian women writers face, therefore, is that of crafting an erotic discourse through which the female body and sexuality are not rendered submissive to others’ desire, but find, rather, authentic self-expression and satisfaction.