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

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The Tradition of Lesbian Writing in Brazil

In his groundbreaking book *Sexual Textualities: Essays on Queer/ing Latin American Literature* (1997), Foster has pointed out that literary critics in Latin America have generally disregarded a tradition of lesbian writings by Latin American women (10). This is certainly true in the case of Brazil. The supposed nonexistence of such a tradition stems from the social and cultural taboos still associated with homosexuality in most segments of Brazilian society. Such taboos have given rise to the censorship and self-censorship that until recently have prevented the open expression of lesbian desire in women’s literature. On the one hand, female authors who portray lesbian characters and homosexual desire between women might be identified as lesbians. On the other hand, the explicit representation of lesbian eroticism in fiction or poetry might be quickly labeled pornographic and confined to the literary ghetto of “subliterature.”

The lack of recognition of lesbian characters and lesbian desire in works by Brazilian women writers is a result of the ideological “glasses” that make lesbian women invisible to the eyes of society. Sometimes it is the lesbian herself who may prefer to remain invisible rather than face the discrimination against homosexuals still pervasive in Brazil. For example, a lesbian medical doctor in the northern state of Rondônia offers her testimony: “Sometimes, I would ask myself what would happen if the people I was taking care of discovered their medical doctor was a radical and stubborn lesbian... I am sure I would have to live with nasty comments and jokes... there would have been no respect for my right to define my
own sexuality” (Mendonça 10). Mostly, however, it is society itself that denies the lesbian woman her existence, since lesbians do not fit the acceptable definition of “femininity.”

The lesbian subject radically breaks away from the established gendered patterns of behavior because she does not define herself vis-à-vis male desire or vis-à-vis the dominant system of biological reproduction and transmission of economic and ideological values. Therefore, because it is not possible to categorize her according to such cultural patterns, the lesbian woman is reduced to a nonexistence, a nonbeing, that is not named (and if she cannot be named, she does not exist), as Lillian Manzor-Coats states with unequivocal eloquence: “the lesbian exists in a vacuum of unreadability and unnameability both socially and sexually” (xxii). If this situation takes place in society, the recognition of a lesbian tradition in literature requires a certain type of reader, able to recover the lesbian subject and desire from their cultural invisibility. It becomes necessary to have a reader capable of a “queer” reading, as Gloria Anzaldúa suggests when she defends the need for a “lesbian sensibility.” She writes: “Queers (including cultural Others) can fill in the gaps in a lesbian text and reconstruct it, where a straight woman might not. I am arguing for a lesbian sensibility, not a lesbian aesthetic” (257). In other words, an ideological openness that allows for a reading between the lines becomes necessary in order to uncover the palimpsest and decode the ambiguity, and at the same time, rescue female homosexuality from the marginalized space of so-called pornographic literature.

However, despite the social and cultural invisibility of the lesbian woman in Brazil, one may find a tradition of female-authored writings about lesbian themes since colonial times and the Holy Inquisition’s first visits to Brazilian territory. In the mid-sixteenth century, around the time of the Council of Trent (1545–64) called by Pope Paul III, the Portuguese Inquisition was concerned not only with the persecution of Jews and people accused of witchcraft, but also with cases in which people’s sexual behavior was believed to have transgressed religious or civil laws or otherwise accepted social practices. Therefore, adultery, polygamy, any sexual activity by members of the clergy, as well as sodomy—a term used to de-
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scribe both homosexual acts and anal and oral sex between men and women—were perceived by the Inquisition as “erros de fé, desafios conscientes . . . à doutrina e à moral do catolicismo” (Vainfas, “Homoerotismo” 117) [“errors of faith, conscious acts of defiance . . . against the doctrine and moral of Catholicism”]. From then on, male homosexuality became an act of heresy, and homosexuals suffered the same kind of punishment as those accused of witchcraft, an accusation that led to death at the stake or, for those accused of being Jewish or observing Jewish beliefs and traditions, to death, loss of wealth and property, and disqualification of the accused’s descendents (Vainfas, “Homoerotismo” 118, 119).

Unlike male homosexuality, female homosexual relationships were labeled by the Holy Office as “nefarious acts” and were not as strictly regulated. The reason for this relative indulgence was that women, confined to the private space of the home, shared a great degree of proximity and intimacy that was, nonetheless, considered normal. Still, when the Holy Office visited Brazil for the first time, twenty-nine women were called by the inquisitors, accused of “nefarious sins.” From these twenty-nine, the Inquisition ultimately prosecuted seven women (Vainfas, Trópico dos pecados 24). Some inquisitors eventually proposed that, as long as women did not make use of phallic objects, female homosexual relationships did not constitute matters pertaining to the Holy Office. Such a proposition, that eventually led the Inquisition to concern itself only with male homosexuality, is symptomatic of a masculinist understanding of human sexuality that privileges genital penetration, and that will be pervasive in Brazil and in other Western cultures throughout much of the twentieth century. From the Inquisition’s viewpoint, if genital penetration did not take place, there was no sexual act and, therefore, no “nefarious act” with which the Inquisition ought to occupy itself.

The first records of female-authored writings with a lesbian content in Brazil date from the time of the Inquisition’s first visit, in the last decade of the sixteenth century. These first writings were the “cartas de requebro,” lustful letters Felipa de Souza wrote to Paula de Siqueira expressing her sexual desire for the other woman. In addition to these letters penned by a woman, the testimonies of women forced to confess their
“sins” to the inquisitors also recorded lesbian relationships and desire. Their testimonies, however, were transcribed by the confessors, whose male perspective overshadowed that of the confessed. According to Ronaldo Vainfas, the inquisitors could not conceive of the sexual act without the phallus and, therefore, “a sexualidade feminina registrada nos documentos da Inquisição afigura-se imperceptível, quase opaca” (Vainfas, “Homoerotismo” 135) [“female sexuality as recorded in documents of the Inquisition appears imperceptible, practically blurred”]. Ligia Bellini agrees that a heterosexual paradigm informed the interpretation and prosecution of cases of female homosexuality by the Holy Office, since theologians, jurists, and inquisitors adhered to the traditional morphology of the sexual act, central to which was the male body (cf. Bellini 69). And historian Emanuel Araújo adds in his essay “A arte da sedução: Sexualidade feminina na Colônia” [The art of seduction: Female sexuality in the Colony]: “Os homens, decididamente, não entendiam o que se passava sexualmente entre duas mulheres. Na cultura misogina, homem era homem e mulher era mulher: o ato sexual só podia ser compreendido com a presença todo-poderosa do pênis, e portanto as mulheres só encenavam um simulacro do verdadeiro coito” (67) [“Men definitely did not understand what could happen sexually between two women. In a misogynist culture, a man was a man and a woman was a woman: the sexual act could only be conceived in the all-powerful presence of the penis; thus women were just representing a simulacrum of the true coitus”]. For this reason, the Inquisition ultimately categorized female homosexual relationships as acts of “molície” (which can be understood as languor or lust), less serious than “nefarious acts.”

Confined to the enclosed space of the household, Brazilian women had their literary activities limited to the private and intimate production of letters and diaries for the next three centuries. With the exception of some isolated names, only in the nineteenth century does Brazil witness an increase and continuity in the literary production of female authors. From the late nineteenth century onward, the number of women who wrote for a public, even if under pseudonyms, kept expanding. This phenomenon has been studied by June Hahner in her work on nineteenth-century women’s periodicals in Brazil and, more
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recently, by scholars who have been engaged in the critical recovery of female-authored writings and the reevaluation of Brazilian women writers in the early twentieth century and before. An examination of this female-authored literature aimed for the public reveals the expression of lesbian desire since the first decades of the 1900s. However, the kind of "queer" reading suggested by Anzaldúa is necessary in order to determine the existence of an early lesbian tradition in writings by Brazilian women authors. In this manner, it is possible to identify the representation of lesbian desire, for example, in poems by Gilka Machado—as I have discussed in Chapter 2—as well as in works by other writers mentioned here before, such as Nogueira Cobra, Rachel de Queiroz, and Lispector.

Since her first novel, *Perto do coração selvagem*, Lispector has dealt with female desire and sexuality, albeit in a latent or very implicit manner. Generally, that is how the author has addressed female sexuality in her novels and short stories: through a highly lyrical and metaphorical language. In this way, issues concerning sexual relations and sexual satisfaction seem to be all but missing from her fiction, in spite of the central position the female body occupies in her narratives. This centrality is due in part to the predominance of women characters and of a woman’s perspective in Lispector’s texts; but most importantly, it originates in the corporeality the writer lends her characters’ mental and psychological processes. This brings into the text an erotic drive that pervades her discourse, intertwined as it is with the core aspect of Lispector’s literature: the search for knowledge and self-knowledge. In Lispector, eroticism is concomitant with a process of self-awareness and sexual awareness of the surrounding environment. Sexual desire—expressed as masturbation, heterosexuality, or homosexuality—is enveloped in a form of elusive language that also describes the character’s inner reality and perception of the outside reality. In this way, in Lispector’s texts, the “erotic impulse is muted, carefully coded in deeply poetic language” (Fitz 64).

Lispector’s “O corpo” (1974; “The Body,” 1989), one of her rare texts to focus openly on homosexuality, and which has received considerable critical attention, constituted a major departure from the author’s earlier works. In this story about the domestic and sexual relationship among a man, Xavier, and...
his two lovers, Carmem and Beatriz, Lispector is very explicit about the homosexual relationship in which the two women eventually engage. Explicit though it is, this is one of the least erotic of Lispector’s texts. The language here employed is stark and colloquial; the sentences are short and provide a minimum of information about the characters and their situation; and the narrative perspective is exterior rather than focusing on the characters’ inner, psychological reality. In short, the text lacks the erotic quality characteristic of Lispectorian discourse and, at the same time, the sexual situations involving the three characters do not intend to elicit any erotic pleasure in the readers.

What Lispector does achieve in “O corpo” is to lead her readers into estrangement, and thus into a critical stance regarding the unusual—but socially sanctioned—sexual contract among Xavier, Carmem and Beatriz, the women’s reaction to his phallocentric position, their lesbian relationship, and, finally, Xavier’s murder. Nelson H. Vieira asserts, “The implications concerning society’s reactions in this story . . . translate into Clarice Lispector’s strategies for conveying indirect sociological criticism about social repression and the potential rebelliousness in women” (78). Notable in this story is how society, as represented by the police, reacts to Carmem and Beatriz’s lesbian identity. As Vieira argues, the two women’s “. . . actions and lesbian relationship would corrupt or shatter social and sexual morality,” and thus they “are allowed to go free” (78), as long as they move to Montevideo. Lesbianism and the lesbian subject are deemed more dangerous and subversive to the social fabric than male polygamy, or murder, and for this reason the two lesbians are banished from the country or, in other words, made invisible in Brazilian society.

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In his pioneering book O lesbianismo no Brasil [Lebanism in Brazil] (1987), one of the rare studies of this topic, Luís Mott presents detailed research on lesbians in Brazilian literature. His extensive survey goes from fourteenth-century Portuguese literature to the literary production in Brazil in the early 1980s. His criterium for the selection of texts is the presence of lesbian characters or lesbianism as a theme. Mott includes mainly
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works by male authors, medical manuals or studies of psychology, and even foreign works that were translated and published in Brazil. Few, however, are the works authored by women, which suggests the critical difficulties involving the identification of a female tradition of lesbian literature. Nevertheless, Mott identifies the 1926 novel Vertigem [Vertigo] by Laura Villares, a writer all but unknown today, as the first literary work by a Brazilian woman to give expression to lesbian desire. According to the critic, the story line in Vertigem recalls the homosexual encounter between Léonie and Pombinha in Azevedo’s O cortiço. The depiction of lesbianism in Vertigem, however, was not as “violent and carnal” as in the naturalist novel, possibly because “being a woman writer, her self-censorship was stronger” than that Azevedo might have experienced (Mott 85).

Mott’s assessment of Villares’s novel brings up the important issue of how censorship and self-censorship can affect female literary expression. As I have previously discussed in Chapter 2, self-censorship can be responsible for silencing the various forms of expression of female eroticism. But in actuality, self-censorship stems from the social practices that seek to control female sexuality, as well as from the problems a woman writer encounters when searching for a language adequate to the representation of her voice, her body, her sexuality. Therefore, given the urgency to overcome centuries-old social and cultural obstacles, Cixous exhorts us: “Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies” (“Medusa” 279); and later: “Where is the ebullient, infinite woman who, ... kept in the dark about herself, ... hasn’t been ashamed of her strength? Who, surprised and horrified by the fantastic tumult of her drives (for she was made to believe that a well-adjusted woman has a ... divine composure), hasn’t accused herself of being a monster?” (Cixous, “Medusa” 280).

Immersed in a culture in which male pornography may be mistaken for eroticism, and eroticism, in turn, considered pornography, a woman’s expression of her sexuality and her erotic experience is still quite problematic. More so is the representation of lesbian sexuality, since female homoeroticism
radically disrupts the dominant gender relations, given that it excludes the male figure and gives women agency, allowing them to escape the traditionally passive role of objects of male desire. In this way, lesbian desire as represented in works by Brazilian women writers is not only an important dimension of female sexuality, but also serves to expose and question the social control of the female body. Lesbianism opens up a space that allows women’s personal and sexual realization; a space wherein the mutual identification between two equal beings makes possible the female subject’s sense of integration. Contemporary feminist theorists such as Cixous, Kristeva, and De Lauretis, among others, have located the origins of the physical and psychological identification between women in the Semiotic, a period when the child is in perfect symbiosis with the mother. This first stage of unity will have an influence upon the subject’s later relationships and is the origin of women’s flowing sexuality (rather than localized on one sexual organ) and openness to bisexuality.

The physical and psychological identification between two women in a lesbian relationship is well characterized in Myriam Campello’s lesbian novel, Sortilegiu [Sortilege] (1981). In the novel, the protagonist, Ísola, meets and falls in love with Marina, a strange, mysterious Tarot card reader who becomes Ísola’s lover. When they first meet, “Ísola sentia a tepidez daquele corpo refletido sobre o seu no espelho, tocando-a, como se a fusão das duas imagens produzisse calor” (Sortilegiu 47) [“Ísola could feel the warmth emanating from that body reflected over hers in the mirror, touching her, as if the fusion of those two images produced heat”]. The image of the two bodies juxtaposed in the mirror foreshadows their first sexual encounter. When it takes place, one woman’s body functions as a reflection of the other’s, and both women experience physical integration and reciprocity in giving and receiving pleasure: “Marina . . . navegava Ísola também multiplicando-se, desdobrada e vária como um prisma sob a luz. Ísola/Marina se desencadeavam prazer como o vento no capim ondulante” (65) [“Marina navigated Ísola, she too multiplying herself, unfolded and various like a prism under light. Ísola/Marina offered each other pleasure like the wind on the wavering grass”].
Married to the king of Joralemon, an imaginary country, Ísola nevertheless finds in the other woman a new kind of nourishment, the full realization of her sexuality, her psychological and emotional satisfaction, as well as a sense of integration Ísola had not found with her husband: “Havia em Marina uma espécie de comida que não encontrava em Leandro” (65) [“There was in Marina a kind of food she did not find in Leandro”]. In this way, her relationship with Marina will nourish and sustain Ísola in her search for a more authentic self-identity. In fact, Ísola’s search is announced in the novel’s very title, which means in Portuguese escolha de sortes or “casting of lots” or, more literally, “choice of destinies.” That is what the novel’s protagonist is faced with: having to make a choice that will determine her fate and, more importantly, her sense of self.

Sortilegiu is a rather daring novel in its explicit representation of lesbianism. The story focuses on the sexual relationship between the two female characters but succeeds also in portraying them in all their human complexity, particularly the protagonist. Making the female erotic experience central to the narrative, the author is able to represent lesbian eroticism in an unveiled manner through the use of a very lyrical language that is, nonetheless, not abstract, ambiguous, or vague in any way. The explicit quality of Campello’s lesbian novel is noteworthy if we consider the strong censorship still prevalent through the end of the previous decade, when the novel was written. In this regard, however, the narrative temporal and spatial frame has an important function. The novel is set in an old, medieval-like time, and the setting is that of castles and knights; thus the author creates an atmosphere of legend, magic, and mystery, elements suggested in the title of the novel. In fact, it should be noted that the spelling sortilegiu, with a final u, is not Portuguese but rather Medieval Latin.

Most of the narrative events take place against this background, with the protagonist briefly going into the “modern section of Joralemon” (55). Here elements of the North-American culture are abundant: “Haagen-Dazs,” the subway, “structures of glass and steel,” as well as references to Penn Station, the Brooklyn Bridge, and the streets of New York. In her
construction of the narrative setting—both the anachronistic space of castles and knights and the foreign space of the United States—the author makes use of a strategy that provides for herself and for her readers a distance from the protagonist’s life experiences. It may be inferred that this strategy is a way of avoiding censorship, from publishers, literary critics, or the public. In any case, the importance of Campello’s lesbian novel lies in its open representation of the erotic relationship between two women, described in an often-poetic language, yet without subterfuges. In this way, Campello depicts lesbianism as a sexual, psychological, and emotional space wherein women’s self-realization becomes possible.

Annis Pratt, in Archetypal Patterns in Women’s Fiction (1981), affirms that “Through the experience of Eros with other women, . . . women experience themselves for the first time not as others but as essences, reaching that place in their consciousness where they can tap the sources of their own libidinal energy” (112). Thirteen years later, in The Practice of Love, Teresa De Lauretis comes to a similar conclusion, stating that lesbian desire “affirms and enhances the female-sexed subject and represents her possibility of access to a sexuality autonomous from the male” (xvii). The concept of an autonomous female sexuality stands in opposition to a sociocultural discourse that privileges male over female desire, while defining women’s bodies exclusively within the established gender hierarchy. Therefore, lesbian sexuality and desire can be understood as a rejection of the dominant system or, in other words, as the “act of resistance” proposed by Adrienne Rich in her well-known essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980).

De Lauretis sees “the figure of the lesbian in contemporary feminist discourse [as representing] the possibility of female subject and desire: she can seduce and be seduced, but without losing her status as subject . . .” (156; author’s emphasis). De Lauretis refers to the theoretical place lesbianism can occupy in feminist criticism and, I would add, in literary discourse: “a place from where female homosexuality figures, for women, the possibility of subject and desire” (De Lauretis 156; author’s emphasis). She continues:
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To the extent that all women have access to that place, female homosexuality . . . guarantees women the status of sexed and desiring subjects, wherever their desire may be directed. . . . the desire expressed in the figure, in the trope, of female homosexuality may be predicated unconditionally of the female subject; it becomes one of her properties or constitutive traits. . . . [and] it need not be confined in the patriarchal frame of a “heterosexual love story.” (156–57)

De Lauretis’s theoretical proposition offers a useful approach to understanding and situating lesbian desire and the lesbian subject in the short stories I discuss later in this chapter. In Van Steen’s “Intimidade,” Coutinho’s “Fátima e Jamila,” Campello’s “A mulher de ouro,” Telles’s “A escolha,” and Denser’s “Tigresa,” the representation of lesbian desire and sexuality privileges women’s agency and, at the same time, stages a critique of the dominant gender system. While “A escolha” tells of a lesbian relationship that took place in the recent past, outside the narrative frame, the other texts are erotic short stories that defy the kind of masculinist sexual fiction in which female homosexuality serves as a locus of pleasure for the male voyeur. Therefore, lesbian desire constitutes a rupture with the socio-sexual context defined by patriarchy and a disruption of gender relations framed by the “heterosexual love story.” The expression borrowed from De Lauretis points to the ideology that binds women to certain social and narrative roles (e.g., the virgin woman awaiting marriage, the “easy” woman, or the prostitute). This explains why the very word love is at times rejected in the lesbian narrative economy: it is ideologically charged with connotations of romantic love, hierarchical relationships, power, and submission.

Lesbian Desire in Late-Twentieth-Century Brazilian Short Stories

The stories I chose to discuss in this chapter are representative of a lesbian tradition within Brazilian women’s literature. However, one should not overlook the fact that characterizing them as lesbian fiction can be problematic, not only because of the issues concerning censorship and self-censorship discussed
before, but also because of the complex critical discussion on the definition of “lesbian literature.” Critics such as Bonnie Zimmerman, Barbara Smith, Lillian Faderman, and Marilyn R. Farwell defend different and sometimes contradictory explanations of what constitutes “lesbian literature.” Zimmerman categorically affirms that “the nature of lesbian fiction makes it impossible to separate the text from the imagination that engenders it” (15). Thus the categorization of the lesbian text depends upon the author’s intentionality or, perhaps, upon whether or not the author is a homosexual. For Smith, the defining element of lesbian literature is the textual critique of heterosexual institutions (188). On the other hand, both Faderman and Farwell point to the difficulties and complexity of the issue and see the reader as the “locus of the lesbian in the lesbian text” (Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots* 7). In other words, the reader (or critic) is the agent who can recognize the identifying elements of a lesbian narrative or poem.

In this way, both Faderman and Farwell reiterate the need for a kind of reading that will name—and consequently confer existence to—lesbian desire and the lesbian subject, even if the text itself does not explicitly do so. This is what Anzaldúa identifies as a “queer” reading, and which I accomplish in my analyses of these short stories. It is my intention, particularly in regards to Van Steen’s, Telles’s, and Coutinho’s stories, that my reading will make obvious evidence that lies in the subtexts, therefore foregrounding the lesbian subject and lesbian desire in these narratives.

A “queer” reading as described above is particularly valuable in the Brazilian context, considering the ambiguity and contradictions involving sexual relations, sexual behavior, and sexual identity in the country. Brazilians have tended to reject strict terms of (self-)definition, and this rejection concerns not only race and ethnicity, but also sexual preference. In spite of Brazil’s *machismo*—or perhaps in part because of it—there is today a considerable segment of society that experiences homosexuality and bisexuality without finding it necessary to categorically define its identity. The rejection of a rigid and exclusive identity can be understood as part of the process of sexual liberation that has taken place in Brazil since the late
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1960s. For Richard Parker (95–97), the refutation of rigid sexual categories is linked to the emergence of a new discourse he identifies with an intellectual elite in Brazil, but that in fact can be found, albeit inconsistently, throughout different social groups.

The above considerations are pertinent for the analysis that follows. For example, not all the characters in these short stories would identify themselves as lesbians. In Van Steen’s “Intimidade” and Coutinho’s “Fátima e Jamila,” the main characters are married women who experience a moment of sexual desire for each other. These two stories represent examples of what George E. Haggerty and Zimmerman, in the introduction to Professions of Desire (1995), identify as “the historical phenomenon of ‘romantic friendship’ among married women” (3). Pratt makes a similar observation, noting the existence of a long tradition in women’s literature of “a strong, if muted, bonding among women. . . . For all its ambivalence women’s fiction has not always muted the depth of women’s feelings for each other” (96). In Van Steen’s and in Coutinho’s stories, both authors make use of ambiguity and suggestion—and in Coutinho’s specific case, of strong imagery—in order to create texts with a clear erotic overtone; thus it is possible to read them as an expression of lesbian desire. In a discussion of Anglo-American literature from the 1800s, Vinetta Colby makes a pertinent comment, stating that passion between women in female-authored fiction often “is sublimated in relationships that modern readers would immediately designate as lesbian” (qtd. in Pratt 96).

“Intimidade” and “Fátima e Jamila” present similar narrative situations: each depicts two women characters talking to each other within the intimate space of the home. However, each story contains a fundamentally carnal erosicism that allows the reader to pinpoint the homosexual desire that flows throughout the text. The element of “carnality” distinguishes the situation lived by the characters from a simple friendship between women. For Catherine Stimpson, in fact, this element identifies the lesbian as “a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying.” She adds: “Of course, a lesbian is more than her body, . . . but lesbianism partakes of
the body. . . . That carnality distinguishes it from gestures of political sympathy with homosexuals and from affectionate friendships in which women enjoy each other, support each other” (301). While I maintain the inappropriateness of rigid sexual categories when applied to the Brazilian context, I agree with Stimpson in her assessment of the centrality of the body and of the erotic experience in the understanding of lesbianism and of the lesbian subject. In other words, what I consider valid in Stimpson’s position is that it excludes any simple demonstration of friendship or political support among women, and proposes, on the contrary, the homosexual erotic expression as a distinctive element.

Other issues concerning lesbian desire are raised in Telles’s “A escolha” and in Campello’s “A mulher de ouro.” Both stories, albeit with different approaches and styles, problematize gender relations in Brazilian society and, at the same time, raise the issue of the lesbian’s social invisibility and “unnameability.” While Telles employs with her usual mastery the ambiguity that characterizes her fiction, Campello weaves in her text a strong tone of defiance. In “A mulher de ouro,” she makes use of humor and sarcasm as forceful narrative strategies in order to open a space for the representation of lesbian desire. In spite of the differences between them, the reader finds in both stories a textual excess—the ambiguity not easily clarified, the narrative voice’s defiant sarcasm—originating precisely in the excess that culturally marks the lesbian body and desire. In many Western cultures, the female body is commonly associated with a notion of excess because of its capacity to ex-cede, expel, overflow (vaginal secretions, menstruation, giving birth, etc.). Female sexuality is thus excessive, and the dominant discourse tries to control this excess through various social and cultural mechanisms (Foucault, History of Sexuality. An Introduction 104 ff.). The lesbian body, in turn, can be considered twice as excessive because it “exceeds [the gender] system by being what the system constructs as the ultimate threat: a female body, a woman’s sexuality, independent of the male” (Farwell, “Lesbian Narrative” 161). Therefore, the lesbian body constitutes the “monster” par excellence, in opposition to the phallic discourse that aims at subjecting chaos and excess to the phallocentric order (see Harris 6).
This excess is "shamelessly" proclaimed by Campello's protagonist-narrator, while in Telles's story, it lies within the reticence, the ambiguity, within that which is not named but whose presence is very palpable. These two stories, as well as Denser's "Tigresa," necessitate a kind of reading that acknowledges the text's economy and how it disrupts traditional narrative as well as gender categories (Farwell, *Heterosexual Plots* 8–9). The lesbian text, says Farwell, presents "a disruptive female body that reorders the traditional narrative structure" ("Lesbian Narrative" 165). Diana Marini, the protagonist in "Tigresa," embodies this disruptive and excessive female presence, from whose central position the text is woven as a transgressive and somewhat chaotic discourse, critical of sociosexual relations within the Brazilian bourgeoisie.

**"Intimidade" and "Fátima e Jamila": Lesbian Desire and the "Heterosexual" Woman**

In 1977, Van Steen, along with Coutinho, won the *Revista Status* award for erotic literature. Van Steen's fiction often focuses on issues concerning the characters' sexual identity and tends to disrupt gender categories. Her female protagonists are frequently depicted in a search for personal and sexual realization, striving to achieve a sense of identity. Within the context of Brazilian patriarchal society, it is not uncommon for these women to fail in their search, which may lead them to create alternative spaces wherein the female subject's personal and sexual realization becomes possible. In "Intimidade," the homosexual desire shared by the two characters, Ema and Bárbara, represents such an alternative space.

"Intimidade" constitutes a snapshot of the two women's everyday life. The story will reveal, however, another level of reality, deeper and more intimate, beyond the routine events. From this newly unveiled reality, the intimacy of the title acquires a new dimension. Ema and Bárbara are inseparable friends who look alike; their husbands work together, and the two women got pregnant and had children at about the same time. In this way, everything works to reinforce the idea of identity between the two women. The narrative depicts them talking to each other, alone, late at night, while the children
sleep and the husbands have gone out. Thus the two women are able to enjoy one of their “raros instantes de intimidade... tão bons” (68; “moments of intimacy... so rare and so pleasant”; 50). This break in their routine contrasts with their everyday lives centered on the system of a “compulsory heterosexuality.” In the story, the two husbands represent patriarchal culture, and the male presence implies the nullification and silencing of the woman: “Se o marido estivesse em casa a obrigaríamos assistir à televisão, porque ele mal chegava, ia ligando o aparelho, ainda que soubesse que ela destestava sentar que nem mumia diante do espelho” (66; “If her husband were around he’d make her watch television, because the second he got home he turned on the set, though he knew she hated sitting like a mummy in front of the TV”; 48). Contrary to this quotidian scene revolving around male desire, the female friend’s presence generates for each woman an atmosphere of intimacy, identity, and unity, allowing them to act spontaneously, without feeling repressed in any way: “Um sentimento de liberdade interior brotava naquele silêncio” (68; “A feeling of inner freedom bloomed in that silence”; 51).

Having a rather banal situation as a background, in which sexual desire seems to be buried by domesticity, the narrative begins to provide isolated signs of the women’s corporeality, of the physical dimension each one acquires in the other’s imagination. Watching Bárbara, Ema sees “uma linha de luz dourada [que] valorizava o perfil privilegiado” (65; “a golden shaft of light [that] accentuated her attractive profile”; 48); Bárbara, in turn, “looked admiringly” at Ema, her “cabelos soltos, caídos no rosto, [que] escondiam os olhos cinzas, azuis ou verdes, conforme o reflexo da roupa” (66; “loose strands of hair [that] hid her eyes, gray, blue or green, reflecting whatever color she wore”; 48). And later: “Cintura fina, pele sedosa, busto rosado e um dorso infantil. ... Louras e esguias, seriam modelos fotográficos, o que entendessem, em se tratando de usar o corpo” (67; “Narrow waist, satin skin, pink breasts, her back sleek as a child’s. ... Thin and blond, they could be photographers’ models, or anything else they wanted if they were to make use of their bodies”; 50). Fragmentary at first, these

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textual marks situate the female body at the center of the narrative economy. In addition, they hint at the homosexual desire the two women experience when they go into Ema’s room and take their clothes off in order to compare the size of their breasts, touching and caressing each other. Noteworthy too is the enunciation and displacement of objects normally eroticized in a male discourse, such as the bra, the bedroom, and the new sheets on Ema’s bed. Shown here as part of the everyday domestic life, such objects seem to lose their erotic quality. However, they in fact work together to construct a new kind of eroticism that originates exclusively in the female body and desire. At the end of the narrative, after they live a moment of desire and pleasure, the characters experience conflicting feelings. Thinking of their domestic lives brings a “tristeza delicada, de quem está de luto” (68; “delicate sadness, like someone in mourning”; 50), but at the same time, they feel a “sentimento místico, meio alvoroçado, de alguém que, de repente, descobriu que sabe voar” (68; “mystical feeling, almost elation, like someone who has suddenly discovered she can fly”; 51). Thus lesbian desire constitutes a rupture in the quotidian existence and is represented in the text as a space of self-liberation and personal and sexual satisfaction for the female subject.

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In Coutinho’s “Fátima e Jamila” too, lesbian desire constitutes an alternative space that isolates and joins the two women characters in the story, insulating them from the larger outside space of male power and desire. The latter is clearly described at the beginning of the narrative:

Sentado à cabeceira da mesa comprida armada na varanda dos fundos, benevolente e soberano como um chefe patriarcal, o Marido presidirá o encontro de Homens em Trajes Escuros e as mulheres de cabelos em penteados altos, roupas volumosas enfeitadas com rendas e jóias em demasia: dignos representantes da Nobreza Colonial Extinta, exibindo um antigo luxo trazido em caravelas de Portugal. (“Fátima e Jamila” 132 [27])
The capital letters are a strategy commonly employed by Coutinho in her fiction. Here they are used to present the dominant social order through critical lenses, characterizing it as an anachronistic colonial ideology. This larger reality serves as a backdrop to the intimate space that is established between the two female characters. In terms of narrative structure, it functions like a first “establishing shot” taken by a movie camera. Thus the “camera” first presents the social context of the narrative action, and then begins to close the shot until it focuses exclusively on the two women. However, the narrative action itself is practically nonexistent. In this respect, Coutinho’s story is less explicit than Van Steen’s is in its representation of lesbian desire. For example, the text contains no references to caresses or any physical contact as in “Intimidade.” Nevertheless, the narrative displays a strong erotic quality constructed by the choice of words and in the words themselves. More than anything, the erotic resides in the text itself, in the words impregnated with and emanating smells, tastes, an excess of life, that connote lust and sensuality. For example:

A brisa vinda do mar, lá longe, espalha pela sala o aroma pesado das frutas empilhadas nas cestas . . . : umbus cuja acidez termina em doçura final dissolvendo-se na boca, bananas pontudas e recurvas como adagas, mangas rosadas cabendo na mão feito um seio ovalado e cujo grosso caldo amarelo escorre pelo queixo, cajus quase púrpura, o travo das pitangas. (131–32 [28])

The narrative appeals to all the senses, including hearing. For example, Coutinho uses words evocative of exotic places, or that convey sensuality, as they unfold phonetically in alliterations and proparoxytones: “a requintada pourriture do Tokay”; “sabores aveludados e sápidos”; “As sombras já se alongam entre os troncos dos flamboyants e das acácia,” etc. (“Fátima e Jamila” 133) [“the Tokay’s sophisticated pourriture”; “velvety and sapid flavors”; “the shadows elongated among the acacia and the flamboyant trees”]. Sylvia Molloy’s commentary about eroticism in literature by Latin American women writers is pertinent here:

Women’s eroticism appears to express itself in forms more diverse . . . than the primarily sexual. . . . What one often
finds in women writers, in terms of erotic desire, is a slip-page from sex to text: the text itself is an erotic encounter in which the poet [or the writer] makes love to her words....

Not limited to the physical body, and certainly not repressing it, desire in these cases extends to the body of writing. (120)

Coutinho employs language in order to construct a highly sensual narrative. In addition to using the sound of words to achieve a sensual effect, she makes use also of images and metaphors such as an orchid Fátima picks up from the table. The orchid is a cross-cultural symbol of female sexuality, but here it is described in detail by Fátima, who states that flowers are hermaphrodite (133). This statement highlights the presence of various sexual symbols, both masculine and feminine, in the preceding paragraph and in other passages of the story.

The text continues to emphasize the excessive quality of the elements that form the narrative setting: the heat, the stifling air, the different smells, and the exuberant vegetation. These elements reflect the culturally perceived excess of female sexuality, conveyed also in the way Fátima is described: “o ardor maduro do corpo de Fátima era o do excesso de sumo que precede a decomposição” (135) [“the mature ardor of Fátima’s body was that of the fruit’s excessive juice that precedes its decomposition”]. In order to achieve the overall effect of sensuality, they are woven together with the few physical descriptions of Fátima (Jamila remains “hidden” from the reader, who sees only her back), her few, yet mysterious gestures, and with the stories of love and seduction she tells her friend. The conversation, apparently purposeless, eventually takes the reader to an important scene of seduction: “Quem você vai enfeitiçar, desta vez?” (134) [“Whom are you going to bewitch now?”], asks Jamila. The answer lies not in the events, actions, or plot, but rather at a textual level, in the words themselves. In this way, lesbian desire is condensed in a series of images metonymically linked:

Como se repentino o cantor de flamenco rompesse, no grito pungente da saeta, o silêncio branco/negro de casas caíadas sob o sol vertical do meio-dia—com estranha inquietação, ... um arrepio de presságio descendo-lhe pelos rins, quem sabe a Compreensão, Fátima se voltou e viu o rosto de Jamila. (135 [29])
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Fátima and Jamila thus face each other in the ambiguous game of seduction, in which each one plays the role of seducer and seduced. Lesbian desire places both women in a position of agency, a position frequently forbidden women within the dominant gender system, as Coutinho reminds us here and in other stories.

Márcia Denser's Transgressive Discourse

Diana Marini, a writer, the paradigmatic protagonist and cynical narrator in Denser's short stories, constantly transgresses the established patterns of feminine behavior by playing the role normally attributed to men within gender relations. Diana is the huntress who actively looks for pleasure for the sake of pleasure. Diana is not a passive woman who awaits the masculine initiative in matters of sex, nor is she the prostitute willing to satisfy male desire. Diana looks for the satisfaction of her own sexuality and for that she makes use of “a própria arma do dominador” [“the [male] conqueror’s very weapon”], in other words, the erotic seduction. For this reason, “o homem, acostumado a ‘controlar’ vê-se ineiciente diante dela” (Franconi, “Eroticism” 57) [“the man, used to ‘controlling,’ finds himself inefficient before her”]. Playing the active role in the game of seduction, Diana subverts gender relations without, however, actually rupturing them: “... in the regime of compulsory heterosexuality, women’s power of seduction... is the flip side of their powerlessness as objects of seduction” (De Lauretis 155).

Diana hunts her sexual (male) prey, but the traps she uses are the so-called feminine artifices, apparently submitting to the men with whom she has sex. Nevertheless, she is very aware and very critical of her position as a woman vis-à-vis male desire. Diana’s sexual behavior is subversive of gender roles because she rejects the social mechanisms of control of the female body and declines to take part in the system of procreation and transmission of economic and ideological values. Still, it is Diana’s cynicism as narrator, as much as Denser’s own narrative style, that destabilizes the dominant gender system. Diana’s cynical meditations on the sexual act and on the nature of relations between men and women critically expose
the hypocrisies permeating Brazilian society, particularly its large middle class. Denser’s style underscores the character’s meditations, through the use of stream of consciousness and a rapid, almost chaotic rhythm that conveys to the reader a sense of urgency, frustration, and even despair. In this way, the author makes clear how men and women’s mechanical behavior toward sex, excessive self-indulgence, and desire for power make it impossible to achieve the authentic expression of Eros.

Denser utilizes eroticism in order to examine power relations not only between men and women, but also between individuals from different social classes and racial groups. In fact, Diana Marini, in spite of inverting the gender hierarchy and displaying types of behavior generally unacceptable for women, shares much of the ideological prejudices of the Brazilian bourgeoisie, especially regarding social classes but also in relation to homosexuality. The short story “Tigresa” exemplifies well these two types of ideological prejudice, of race and of sexual orientation. In the story, the protagonist does not hide her disdain for members of the lower classes: “Olhei-o dum jeito de estremecer até os bagos do seu tataravô, se é que essa gente tern raça. Brotam da lixeiras” (123–24) [“I looked at him in such a way as to make even his great-great-grandfather’s balls tremble, if these people have any ancestry at all. They sprout from the trash”]. Nor does she try to disguise her discomfort when faced with another woman’s desire for her: “Aquele olhar untuoso e apaixonado de odalisca me incomodava” (132) [“That impassioned and syrupy stare, like an odalisque’s bothered me”].

“Tigresa” is an excellent example of Denser’s transgressive narrative: it is fragmented, fast, and chaotic, with interrupted dialogues and the protagonist’s stream of consciousness, as she is engaged in her hurried evaluation and judgment of the other characters. In the story, which at times resembles a kind of comedy of errors, Diana is unexpectedly invited to a party by an unknown but enthusiastic female admirer. The young woman, Lila, calls Diana tigresa, and the protagonist immediately responds by playing up the role of the writer as a superior or special entity and, at the same time, as an irresistible and seductive woman. The invitation made over the phone begins the game of seduction that will continue at the party, in an
upper-middle-class apartment that belongs to Lila’s parents. Encouraged by her own vanity and then by the alcohol she copiously consumes, Diana goes to the party convinced of her power to seduce. However, all too soon she finds out that someone else has already planned a game of seduction, laid out the rules, and determined the roles each guest is to play. Hence the tigresa is Lila: she seduces Diana (or tries to), exchanges heated kisses with another woman causing a scandal among some of the guests, and in a sense seduces or fascinates everyone present. Nevertheless, Lila’s homosexual behavior does not express her desire for Diana or for the other woman. In reality, it is an expression of Lila’s hope to “épater les bourgeois” (cf. Faderman 50). Therefore, by inviting Diana to the party, Lila wants more than anything to establish her difference from both her conservative family and her bourgeois friends.

In the last part of the story, an exchange of roles takes place again, and Diana is once more the seducer rather than the seduced she had been during the party:

... Lila segurou-me pelos ombros e debaixo do meu sono e cansaço percebi outra vez o olhar gorduroso do desejo. Está bem, pensei, eu me rendo, doce Lila, mas custo terminar o que começo. Vamos ver até onde você vai.

... Lila encostou-se melosamente na parede, com infinitos dengos de sedução. Então, calmamente mandei:

—Tira a roupa. ...
—Tira tudo. Se você quer é pra valer, meu bem. Lila engoliu o riso. (135–36 [30])

Diana uses Lila’s own weapon, achieving the same effect the young woman had intended. Lila wanted to live a homosexual experience in order to “épater les bourgeois” and thus create her own space set off by her difference. However, as a true bourgeois herself, she is the one stunned and even humiliated by the experience. The protagonist, in turn, feels not like the seductive tigress, but rather like the tiger who, feeling threatened, is capable of wounding: “não sei porque, lembrei aquela frase do Ernest Hemingway em As neves do Kilimanjaro a respeito de um tigre que foi encontrado morto, enregelado entre
os cumes cobertos pela neve e que ninguém, ninguém jamais soube explicar como e por que ele chegou até lá" (136) ["I don’t know why, I remembered that sentence in Ernest Hemingway’s ‘The Snows of Kilimanjaro’ about a tiger found dead, frozen amidst the snow-covered peaks, and that nobody could ever explain how and why it got up there”]. In this way, it is Diana and not Lila who sets her difference, her marginal space, and her loneliness within the larger space of Brazilian bourgeois society.

Lygia Fagundes Telles and Myriam Campello: To Name or Not To Name, That Is the Question

By 1985, when “A escolha” was first published, lesbianism was not a new literary theme for Telles. The author had already addressed it openly in her first novel, *Ciranda de pedra*, which I have mentioned in Chapter 3, although reflecting the social prejudices dominant then. In the novel, Leticia, a woman in her early twenties, after living through a frustrated heterosexual love, begins to seduce younger women and eventually falls in love with the protagonist, Virginia. In one passage, the two women kiss, and Leticia proposes that Virginia move in with her. Despite being quite progressive for the time it was published (1954), the novel represents Leticia’s homosexuality as an “evil” she is doing to herself and to the young women she seduces. Her homosexual identity is said to have resulted from a disillusion she had with a man. In addition, Leticia herself plays a masculinist role in relation to her female lovers, who submit to her socio-economic power and authority. Almost twenty years later, in *As meninas* (1973), Telles presents a less prejudiced view of lesbianism, depicting it in a straightforward manner. Nevertheless, the homosexual experience is practically an accident in the character’s life. Lião, one of the three protagonists, has her first sexual experience with another young woman, and this initiation is characterized as a stage in her process of growing up. In other words, it is a “passing phenomenon” in a process of development that eventually will take her to heterosexual “normalcy,” in a representation of lesbianism not at all uncommon. In fact, both Pratt (97) and Foster (*Sexual Textualities* 2) comment on literary works in which lesbianism
is represented as a passing experience in the female characters’ sexual development. For these women, “normalcy” or “maturity” would eventually be reached once they engaged in a heterosexual relation and through procreation.

While in the works mentioned above, Telles openly depicts lesbianism, in short stories such as “Tigrela” [Tigress] (1977) and “A escolha,” lesbianism truthfully represents the narrative’s central theme, even determining how the text is structured. In “A escolha” the author problematizes the textual and social representation of the lesbian subject and lesbian desire. Thus Telles accomplishes here what Foster has characterized as a strategy of “[textualizing] . . . the problems of writing about a subject that cannot be satisfactorily accommodated within the dominant discourse” (Gay and Lesbian 141). Telles’s solution for this problem of representation highlights the lesbian woman’s “invisible” position in Brazilian society. In the Brazilian social context, a lesbian’s existence for the most part is either acknowledged with irony and not named, and thus she is kept socially “invisible,” or is rejected with violence, and she is reduced to prostitution and promiscuity (Miccolis, “Prazer” 89–90).

In order to expose these two social models of representation, Telles reproduces them in her narrative through the use of certain textual strategies. For example, the image of red roses stands for the love between two women, Gina and Oriana, who remain silent and their desire invisible. In actuality, the two are absent from the text: Gina has died and Oriana has been robbed of her voice, and their presence is affirmed through the red roses Oriana—silently but persistently—lays on Gina’s tomb. The story is narrated by another woman, Gina’s mother, whose white roses contrast and compete with the red ones, just as she continues to fight with Gina’s lover for her daughter’s affection, even after her death. The unreliable narrator and the non-enunciation of Gina and Oriana’s homosexuality serve to structure in the text the ambiguity that characterizes much of Telles’s fiction.

Gina and Oriana’s relationship is presented through the jealous and hostile voice of the mother and is forced into hiding, situated as it is in the obscured space of closed doors and muffled voices. The narrator’s perspective depicts the daughter
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in an ambiguous manner, at the same time “dissimulada” [“dissimulating”] and “inocente” [“innocent”] (Telles, “A escolha” 131), while Oriana is vile, “suja” [“dirty”] (129). The same excess that socially marks lesbian sexuality characterizes the women’s love, symbolized in the image of red roses. The roses Oriana leaves on her lover’s tomb are “vermelhonas, completamente desabrochadas... deslavadas ao sol, quase obscenas de tão abertas” (129) [“deep red, completely full-blown... naked under the sun, so completely open that they looked almost obscene”]. In contrast with the excess of the roses’ “vermelho-negro,” or deep, almost black, red tone (129), the white color of the roses the mother leaves on Gina’s tomb represents what is discreet, controlled, and socially acceptable.

Split between her mother and her lover, Gina is violently forced to make a choice and, in a sense, to define herself. The confrontation she has with her mother reproduces the violence with which society often treats the lesbian woman: “... de repente comecei a gritar, batendo com os punhos nos joelhos” (131) [“suddenly I began to scream, hitting my fists on my knees”], says the narrator; and then: “Faça o que quiser, vá-se embora com Oriana ou fique comigo, a decisão é sua, tem todo o direito de escolher” (133) [“Do whatever you want, go away with Oriana or stay with me, it’s your decision, you have the right to decide”]. The mother voices the dominant ideology in her attempt to control her daughter’s sexuality. Gina, however, does not choose either one of the options society, represented by the mother, imposes on her. She neither opts for the social marginality of the lesbian, nor does she renounce her love for another woman. Her final decision comes as a surprise to the reader as well as to the narrator: “Me lembrei de tanta coisa, tanta mas em nenhum instante me ocorreu que além das opções que lhe ofereci havia uma terceira. Que ela escolheu em surdina, fechada lá no seu mundo secreto” (133) [“I thought of so many possibilities, so many, but never did it occur to me that there was a third possibility besides the options I gave her. That she chose quietly, locked in her secret world”]. In this way, suicide seems to be the only possible resolution to the conflict in which she is placed by a homophobic society. Nevertheless, this resolution is also ambiguous. On the one hand, it gives expression to the lesbian woman’s agency and authority
over her own body; on the other hand, it reflects her silence, as a mute act that takes her back to the invisibility to which society reduces the lesbian subject.

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Like the story discussed above, Campello’s “A mulher de ouro” addresses the lesbian subject’s (in)visibility, the silencing of lesbian desire in Brazilian society, and the problem of how to name them within an inadequate socio-linguistic system. However, the narrative strategies employed by Campello are different from those Telles utilizes. Telles makes use of the very social code that discriminates against lesbians and chooses not to name lesbian desire as a means of highlighting how society makes it invisible. Campello, to the contrary, defiantly enunciates female homosexual desire and thus opens a space for the lesbian subject. In doing so, the author announces the possibility of a new social order wherein homosexuality will have its legitimate place:

Aqui uma nota: Proust esperou até que a mãe morresse para poder dizer as coisas. Mas a minha está viva e terá que agüentar. Paciência, mamãe. Sei que tem vizinhos, parentes e amigos, mas a verdade queima, louca para sair. Além disso, é bom ir se acostumando, gente fresca o lobo vai comer e lamber os beijos nesta década, para mim está claro como água. (“A mulher de ouro” 59 [31])

Here the maternal figure represents again the dominant ideology against which the homosexual woman has to rebel in order to affirm the right to define her sexuality, to define herself and thus reject the proposed pact of silence. By brazenly stating her sexual desire for another woman, Campello’s protagonist-narrator anticipates with sarcasm society’s disapproval: “Oh, Senhor, o que fazer desse desejo? E, oh, Senhor, uma mulher!” (61) [“Oh, Lord, what to do with my desire? And, oh, Lord, for a woman!”]. Her sarcastic comment not only makes clear that lesbianism does not have a place within this social context, but also that female desire is something to be controlled or hidden. The unequivocal enunciation of lesbian sexuality and the use
of humor and sarcasm are the narrative strategies Campello utilizes in order to create a lesbian space.

In “A mulher de ouro,” the protagonist recounts how, after her latest marriage fell apart (60), she met the “golden” woman in a dance hall. Nonetheless, lesbian desire is not characterized here as consolation for a frustrated heterosexual love. In fact, Campello creates a protagonist who is aware of her own sexuality, a woman who had previously lived homosexual as well as heterosexual experiences, and thus illustrates the idea of a “sexual continuum” found in Freud (De Lauretis xiii, 41), Foucault, and Rich. The “sexual continuum” explains both homosexuality and heterosexuality as possible forms of expression of human sexuality. However, “A mulher de ouro” clearly privileges lesbian desire, while at the same time it critiques the dominant gender relations and marriage as defined according to “séculos de herança medieval, amor eterno, babaquices lançadas sobre [a mulher] ...” (“A mulher de ouro” 60) [“centuries of a medieval heritage, eternal love, bullshit imposed on a woman”] since she is born.

The protagonist is a woman who looks for a kind of relationship that would not represent a form of imprisonment. She has discarded the false promises implied in romantic (heterosexual) love and searches now for a nonhierarchical relationship wherein both subjects are equal, finding the possibility of its realization in lesbian desire. With the “golden woman,” she lives an idyllic relationship, in which the two women fully express their sexuality and are free of societal ties. The protagonist states: “Não lhe perguntava nada. Mal sabia seu nome, evitando por minha vez lhe dar informações que penderiam inómodas” (63) [“I didn’t ask her anything. I barely knew her name, and avoided giving her any information that could cause uneasiness”]. The idyll, however, is over when the woman utters the forbidden word: “num momento de selvagem doçura a mulher de ouro ... me olhando nos olhos disse que me amava .... Foi nossa ultima noite. Não quis mais vê-la” (63) [“in a moment of wild tenderness, looking in my eyes, the golden woman said she loved me. ... It was our last night. I didn’t want to see her again”]. For the protagonist, the love declaration connotes a power struggle, possession and submission,
and hierarchies common in heterosexual love, and she opts for breaking up, although the text suggests that she has chosen that option in spite of her love for the other woman.

In the end, “A mulher de ouro” is a lesbian love story, as romantic as any heterosexual love story can be. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that it represents female homosexual love as possible and natural, and the lesbian subject as any woman from any social group: “Ela era diferente de mim. Simples, tímida, trabalhava em qualquer repartição do governo” (59) [“She was different from me. Simple, shy, she worked in any government office”]. In addition to the sarcasm Campello boldly employs in order to rescue the lesbian woman from her invisibility and silence, the author also displays a concern with creating a language adequate to reproduce, in the most authentic way possible, the experience of a homosexual woman. In this regard, the author is particularly concerned with adequately representing her sexual and erotic experiences:

... uma febre oceanica me devorou, uma tempestade me comeu, toda a mitologia hindu visitava meus desvãos solitários enquanto Brahma, Vishnu e Siva corriam pelos nervos de raiz à mostra, o que era, Senhor, esse olho de tufão me empurrando pra fronteiras tão longínquas que eu nem sabia existirem. ... e não eram só os orgasmos tremulando por meu corpo como carrilhões de catedral que me conduziam a essa perplexidade de prazer, era o espaço perfeito deixado por seu rastro na minha alma, uma anulação tão grande na plenitude que me vi à beira do êxtase religioso. (61–62 [32])

Campello’s story alternates erotic passages such as the one quoted above with humorous segments that anticipate any negative reaction to lesbian eroticism: “imagino que deva haver alguém na distinta platéia que se questione aflito, mas o que podem fazer duas mulheres juntas? Respostas para o Ministério da Educação” (62) [“I suppose there must be someone in the audience wondering upset, what can two women do together? Answers to the Ministry of Education”]. The blending of these two linguistic levels, the erotic and the humorous, serves to underscore the author’s accomplishments in this text as well as in Sortilegiu and in other works in which she addresses homo-
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sexuality. Campello is able to create a narrative space wherein the affirmation of lesbian identity and desire is possible. In addition, she creates a female erotic discourse independent of male desire, and simultaneously lends a didactic function to her narrative, offering a new perspective on the issue of lesbian desire and preparing her readers for the new social order she has announced.

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In the short stories I have examined here, lesbian desire is central to the narrative and even determines the story’s formal construction. Although the narrative strategies, style, and tone differ, in all of them, lesbian desire is a locus that allows a woman the exercise of her subjectivity, a space wherein she abandons the passive role to which she has been confined by the dominant gender system. In this way, lesbianism not only opens a channel for the more authentic expression of female eroticism, but also effects a critique of hierarchical heterosexual relationships.

Van Steen, Coutinho, Denser, Telles, and Campello make use of a wide range of strategies, from suggestion and ambiguity to humor and the clear enunciation of the lesbian body and desire. The narratives are not always explicit and often require a “queer” reading to affirm what is present but not named: female homosexual desire. Telles’s story best textualizes this problem, working with a cultural code that makes the lesbian woman socially invisible. Similarly, Van Steen’s and Coutinho’s texts are structured over such a paradox, representing lesbian eroticism without naming it. As a matter of fact, Coutinho writes passages of deep eroticism and sensuality in “Fátima e Jamila,” wherein the erotic expression goes beyond what is sexual in the plot to eroticize the words themselves. Campello also creates a language adequate to the representation of the lesbian woman’s life experiences—sexual and nonsexual. Denser’s story, in turn, is characterized by a transgressive discourse that subverts and disrupts the dominant gender system. Through the protagonist’s viewpoint, Denser exposes the discursive practices that marginalize female homosexuality; at the
same time, she points to the appropriation of lesbianism by Brazilian bourgeois classes, which makes of lesbian desire, more than a mark of difference, a symbol of status.

In spite of the differences I have discussed here, these stories exemplify the construction of a literary space that offers a place for lesbian subjectivity, a space where the lesbian character as well as other female characters can fully live their sexuality and desire (Farwell, “Lesbian Narrative” 157). Therefore, it is the creation of such space and the centrality of lesbian desire in these works that make them part of a lesbian tradition in female-authored Brazilian literature.