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

Ferreira-Pinto, Cristina

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Chapter Six

The Works of Márcia Denser and Marina Colasanti

Female Agency and Heterosexuality

In the previous chapter I have focused on late-twentieth-century short stories in which lesbian desire is central to the narrative. It is important to highlight the existence of a lesbian tradition in literature by Brazilian women writers, in an effort to lift the silence usually surrounding the lesbian woman and lesbian sexuality in Brazil. As an expression of human sexuality and, in an ample sense, of human experience, lesbianism has been recurrently present in writings by twentieth-century Brazilian women. And as the end of the 1900s approached, these writers have depicted lesbianism more explicitly and with fewer veils, while the social stigmas that either mark or render invisible the lesbian woman have been slowly but firmly challenged.

As I noted in Chapter 5, the inscription of lesbian desire in literature creates a space not only for the validation of female homosexuality, but also for the liberating affirmation of female sexuality in general. Lesbianism becomes a liberating space for women because in it lies implicit a challenge to the dominant gender system, i.e., to compulsory patriarchal heterosexuality. While lesbian feminists may disagree with my assertions here, I side with Ruth Salvaggio (1999), who states: “. . . placing oneself as a lesbian in writing hardly means ascribing to some fixed message or even to a defined sexuality. Far from that, identity becomes process. . .” (85). In this way, Salvaggio underscores the existence of a common ground for lesbian and queer theories. I propose that, similarly, there is a commonality between lesbian desire and a queer stance toward one’s self-identity and toward the social group: both afford the female subject the rejection of fixed categories of gender.
Therefore, lesbian desire effects queer identities, if we understand queer as “anything that challenges or subverts the straight, the compulsory heterosexual, through either an ironizing of its limited view of human potential or through the overt defiance of its conventions” (Foster, Sexual Textualities 71; my emphasis).

Women who engage in heterosexual relationships may also assume a queer stance if they continually reject fixed categories of identity and the ideology of dominance that is part of patriarchal heterosexuality. As I discussed in Chapter 4, some of Coutinho’s protagonists do just this: as in the case of Cordélia, from “Cordélia, a caçadora,” they overtly defy the conventions of compulsory patriarchal heterosexuality while not repressing their heterosexual desire. In that particular story, the female grotesque allows the protagonist a strategy for living her identity as a process, as movement and change—and challenge—consequently undermining the dominant gender system. Coutinho thus has been successful in depicting women as they move on in their struggle for self-affirmation and for freely living their desire and sexuality, be it in heterosexual or in lesbian relationships. The author’s female protagonists herald Brazilian women in the new millennium, and the possibility of new forms of gender relations.

Denser, whose short story “Tigresa” I analyzed in Chapter 5, is another writer whose work in the last decades of the twentieth century was instrumental in the examination and undermining of the dominant gender system, and the emergence of a new female voice in Brazilian literature. Through her paradigmatic protagonist, Diana Marini, Denser radically challenges the conventions of patriarchal heterosexuality, not only in the few stories in which she depicts female homosexual desire, but also—and especially—in those in which Diana Marini, Diana the Huntress, hunts down her male partners and engages in heterosexual acts. Diana not only takes the initiative in the game of seduction and sex, but also is only interested in her sexual pleasure, a behavior that has bothered some readers, who have accused the character of “acting like a man.” In fact, Diana is the aggressor, the conqueror; she uses the men with whom she sleeps, much as some men act toward women.
Denser’s subversion of the dominant gender system is achieved precisely in this way: by placing Diana in a role traditionally exclusive to the male, the author claims for women the ability and the right to freely seek sexual satisfaction. In addition, Denser exposes the system of power and domination inherent in patriarchal heterosexuality, by inverting the usual positions men and women occupy in heterosexual relationships.

This most important aspect of Denser’s fiction has been well analyzed by both Quinlan and Franconi. Quinlan, for example, examines the inversion of traditional gender roles in Denser’s short stories, and states that “Exposing the problems inherent in male-female relationships through inversion is one way to draw attention to the need for a collective solution” (Quinlan, “O animal dos motéis” 134). Denser herself does not offer solutions or alternatives for a binary gender system in which one subject dominates and uses the other as an object. Instead, she makes her readers face the problem through estrangement: in place of the culturally accepted subjugation of women by men, Denser depicts a situation that is not the norm, and therefore leads to discomfort. Diana is shown as calculating, cynical, and critically aware of her position vis-à-vis the men with whom she goes to bed: she seeks sexual satisfaction; they do too, as they do a prize, a trophy, and a conquest. According to Diana, her partners see her as a “mulher culta + bonita + avançada = satisfação garantida, a render juros, livre de impostos” (“Welcome to Diana” 17) [“learned woman + beautiful + liberated = guaranteed satisfaction, generating interest, and tax-free”]. There are no obligations, no commitments, for her relationships are devoid of emotion, love, or any other personal attachment between the partners.

Through Diana’s cynical perspective, the heterosexual act is represented in its animal dimension, in scenes that often approximate the grotesque. For example:

Ele diz: esse motel já foi bom, e eu olho o banheiro, . . . os lençóis castanhos com ramagens duvidosas entre encardido e vestígios de cor, os três espelhos redondos montados em curvim (um em frente do outro, no meio a cama, o terceiro no teto, sobre a cama), claro que para nos transformar numa espécie de confuso coquetel de siris assados: pernas, braços,
And once the sexual act is over: “Lá em cima, no espelho, duas, quatro, seis, oito larvas rotas, libertas do emaranhado” (52) [“Up above, in the mirror, two, four, six, eight broken larvae, free from the tangle”]. Denser’s discourse recalls Aluíso Azevedo’s Naturalism, with its emphasis on, and exaggeration of, men and women’s negative, pathological, or animal-like characteristics. In fact, her fiction has been labeled an expression of Neo-Naturalism, alongside that of Dalton Trevisan (1925) and Rubem Fonseca (1925).

Denser’s work has been closely associated with the emergence in Brazil of a female erotic discourse, not only because of the two important collections of female erotica she edited in the 1980s, but also because of the main themes she addresses in her own fiction: female desire and sexuality. Without a doubt, Denser’s short stories are examples of what Charney characterizes as “sexual fiction.” However, the label “erotic” is more problematic when applied to them. Denser’s fiction clearly displays her aesthetic preoccupations and her skill as a crafter of the word. Often employing stream of consciousness, and through skillful word choice, Denser weaves a narrative that is fast and apparently chaotic, and that is also poignant and poetic. Therefore, her narrative displays the intrinsic tie between eroticism and the poetic word, although hers is the poetry of the postmodern cosmopolis—fast, sarcastic, and crude.

Another element in Denser’s stories that would help characterize them as examples of erotic literature is the consensual nature of Diana Marini’s sexual encounters, as each partner seeks her or his own sexual pleasure. Nevertheless, her fiction in fact calls into question the concept of erotic, as it lacks a fundamental element of erotic discourse, i.e., the celebration of the human body. Instead, male and female bodies appear fragmented and faceless, and are described in their animal appearance or as machines for pleasure and self-pleasure:
So is Denser’s fiction erotic? Or is it pornographic? “Sexual fiction” is certainly an appropriate label and even a compromise, for her stories challenge conventional notions of eroticism and pornography. On one hand, Diana and her partners engage in consensual sex; on the other hand, however, there is a mutual exploitation between them, since both render the other an object, a faceless body, or simply a sexual organ. In this way, if we consider pornography as the sexual exploitation of one individual by another, or even the crude representation of men and women’s genitalia, Denser’s fiction fits the category. However, the sexual act is not depicted here with the intent of sexually arousing the reader, an intention that generally characterizes pornography. Rather, the stories serve other objectives. First, they give expression to female heterosexual desire during a historical period following the sexual and cultural revolutions of the 1960s, a period in which the liberation of customs coexisted with the marks left by the political repression of the Brazilian military dictatorship. And second, seen through the cold and analytical lens of Diana Marini’s mind, heterosexual relationships serve the author as tools to dissect gender relations in Brazilian society, and to denounce cultural-sexual conventions intrinsic to phallocentric or masculinist eroticism.

In a rather ironic way, then, Denser’s female protagonist finds agency while living up her heterosexuality. Diana Marini’s agency, however, does not lead her to reject phallocentric heterosexuality, nor does it allow her self-realization. Instead, Diana plays and acts—hunts her male prey, satisfies
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her sexual appetite—within the frame of conventional gender relations, which demand that the woman submit, at least apparently, to male desire, to his authority as well as his vanity. Diana's great advantage over her partners is her deep understanding of the power struggle inherent therein, as well as the cynical awareness of the choices she has and makes.

With the stories in Diana Caçadora (1986) and others, Denser goes a step further than other Brazilian women writers of the late 1970s and 1980s. Like Cunha and Felinto, whose novels I examined in Chapter 2, Denser creates a female character aware of her own body, sexuality, and desire. And while the author still depicts female heterosexuality within the frame of phallocentrism, she does so concomitantly to a critique of the dominant gender relations, thus inviting the reader to engage in a rethinking of heterosexuality in order to disassociate heterosexual desire from a patriarchal ideology of power and domination. This disassociation is portrayed in Brazilian women's literature of the last decade of the twentieth century, when some writers create female poetic voices or fictional characters who are very comfortable with their bodies and sexuality, engaging in consensual heterosexual relationships devoid of sexual hierarchies and power struggles.

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One such writer is Colasanti, whose first book of poetry, Rota de colisão [Collision route], was published in 1993. By that time Colasanti had already been a familiar name within Brazilian literature for almost a quarter of a century, having published her first book, Eu sozinha [Me on my own], in 1968. Since then she has become widely known in Brazil thanks to her work as a journalist, and to the crônicas she wrote for the women's magazine NOVA, beginning in 1977, and to other magazines like Ele e ela [He and she], and Cláudia. In these periodicals, but also in books such as A nova mulher [The new woman] (1980), Colasanti has written extensively on gender relations and on women's issues, like divorce, careers, sexuality, and motherhood. In A nova mulher and in other nonfictional writings, the author inaugurates a new vein in the Brazilian essay,
one that combines autobiographical elements and an intimate narrative tone with the objective examination of social topics relating to women.

Peggy Sharpe comments that “Ao explorar a relação entre identidade cultural e de gênero, as crônicas e ensaios pessoais de Marina Colasanti se ajustam com exatidão à tradição de mulheres escritoras que empregam o autobiográfico e o subjetivo como significantes de uma nova linguagem” (47) [“Exploring the relationship between cultural and gender identities, Marina Colasanti’s crônicas and personal essays fit exactly within the tradition of women writers who employ autobiographical and subjective elements as signifiers of a new language”].

In her poetry, Colasanti continues to rely on her personal experiences as a woman, creating, however, a female poetic voice that is universal, for her personal experience is also a collective female experience that can transcend barriers of class and race.

Rota de colisão was very well received by critics and public alike, and was awarded the Jabuti Prize in 1994. The poems in this collection have in common the exquisite quality of their visual and aural imagery, and the striking plasticity of the language employed; “Verão em Campo Grande” [Summer in Campo Grande] is a good example:

É o tempo em que as mangueiras
se vestem de vermelho.
Folhas de fulva seda
cintilar de cetim.
Redondas como seios
ou ventres
as copas brotam
cor de carne nova.
E nos troncos,
espesso como sangue,
escorre
o cantar das cigarras. [35]

The visual dimension the words acquire in Colasanti’s poems may very well have originated in the poet’s training as an artist, for she studied in the National School of Fine Arts in
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Rio de Janeiro, and continues to paint and draw. Her interest in painting and other visual arts is conveyed in the many poems she has written on art museums, famous painters, and paintings, such as “Vincent,” about Vincent Van Gogh, or “Em Tôquio, no museu” [In Tokyo, at the museum], below:

Sobre o pano de seda
deitada e curvilínea
como uma mulher nua
a lâmina da espada. [36]

Colasanti’s attention to the form, shape, and color of objects translates into the refinement and craft with which she works the poetic image, and into the resultant sensuality found in so many of her poems; this sensuality then becomes a characteristic that permeates all her poetry, as the poems quoted above well illustrate.

The delicate and exquisite qualities of Colasanti’s poetry should not be mistakenly understood as elements of a sappy poetics, and not even for any kind of Platonism, for the sensuality of her poems achieves an eroticism that is in fact very corporeal. Rather, these qualities reflect the poet’s attention to detail: she derives meaning from the word as if from a minute jewel, resulting in the aesthetic effects she carefully weaves in the message of her poems. This attention to details, a mark of the feminine according to Naomi Schor (1987), is even more striking when coupled with the explicit tone assumed by the poetic voice in her erotic poems, or with the gloomy reality the poet describes in others.

When Rota de colisão was published, erotic literature by Brazilian women was nothing new. Nevertheless, a more explicit eroticism tended to be more easily found in poets considered “alternative” or “minor” names in the Brazilian literary scene, and thus generally ignored by the critics. As I state in Chapter 2, the silence on the part of mainstream critics over the erotic production by Brazilian women poets still has been the norm in the last decades of the twentieth century. At the same time, a kind of “lyric” or “romantic” eroticism by women poets has been more easily accepted, while a more explicit eroticism or explicit references to the female body and sexual-
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ity have remained associated with “poesia marginal.” Says poet Claudia Roquette-Pinto:

Existe um acordo tácito entre os poetas, certas palavras que não devem ser usadas “porque não são táticas,” certos temas que são considerados de mau gosto. Menstruação, gravidez, parto, maternidade, a própria sexualidade feminina—tudo isso deve ser tratado de uma forma, digamos, elegante (esfriada ou cerebral), sob o risco de ser dispensado como “coisa de mulher.” Independente da qualidade do poema. Ou seja, está tudo bem, contanto que você escreva “de fora,” como homem. (Qtd. in “Vinte e duas poetas hoje” 210 [37])

As will become clear from the examples below, Colasanti’s poetry violates this tacit code Roquette-Pinto mentions. Colasanti’s is an eroticism “of the body”; it challenges the accepted defining principles of eroticism and of pornography, employing terms and expressions that still today are deemed by some to be vulgar and not “proper” for a woman.

Colasanti’s poetry gives voice to the heterosexual desire of a woman who celebrates her own body, represented not as the present-day aesthetic ideal of a young and thin (or in other words, childlike) female body, but rather as a womanly body, full, excessive, secreting fluids and blood. An example is the following fragment of “Eu sou uma mulher” [I am a woman]:

Eu sou uma mulher
que sempre achou bonito
menstruar.

Os homens vertem sangue
por doença
sangria
ou por punhal cravado,

Em nós
o sangue aflora
como fonte
no côncavo do corpo
olho-d’água escarlate
encharcado cetim
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que escorre
em fio. [38]

The same poetic voice is engaged in consensual heterosexual relationships, at ease with her body and sexuality, and thoroughly enjoys the sexual act with her male partner:

Teu sexo
Teu sexo em minha boca
me preenche
como se pela boca
penetrasse a vagina.
Teu sexo em minha boca
me engravida
me põe turgida
prenhe
mel coando dos peitos
sobre a cama. [39]

In this representation of oral sex, the poet does not allude directly to the active role the woman plays when giving pleasure to her partner, but rather describes the pleasure that she herself derives from the penis. The short verses and the use of enjambment lend the poem a very sensual rhythm suggestive of the female subject’s sexual enjoyment.

In other poems, the characteristic delicate imagery of Colasanti’s poetry is woven together with vulgar words, as for example, “pau” (“dick”) and “pentelho” (“pubic hair”). She thus appropriates a form of expression typically associated with mass-consumption pornography, in which the aesthetic construction of the text is usually not a concern, and which depicts the human body in a crude or even debasing manner. Conversely, Colasanti’s eroticism celebrates both the female and male bodies, and the heterosexual acts represented in her poems are often forms of encounter between the female poetic voice and her partner. Therefore, heterosexuality becomes in Colasanti’s poetry a form of wholeness that is very physical as well as metaphysical for, through the sexual act, female and male achieve the connection and unity Bataille has described as a basic human yearning. This sense of unity is present in the poem below:
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Corpo adentro

Teu corpo é canoa
em que desço
vida abaixo
morte acima
procurando o naufrágio
me entregando à deriva.

Teu corpo é casulo
de infinitas sedas
onde fio
me afio e enfio
invasor recebido
com licores.

Teu corpo é pele exata para o meu
pena de garça
brilho de romã
aurora boreal
do longo inverno. [40]

Giving voice to the female subject to speak of her own desire, Colasanti inverts the roles usually assigned the partners in a heterosexual relationship. Here the woman is the one who journeys, while her partner’s body is the vessel that takes her to ecstasy. His body is also the protective cocoon, as well as the skin that envelops her, two bodies thus becoming one.

In this way, Colasanti is able to construct in her poems a female subject who exercises her agency in heterosexual relationships. Her poetic voice takes pleasure in her own sexuality as well as in her male companion’s body. In addition, in her poetry, female heterosexuality does not privilege penetration, nor is the penis necessarily a site of phallocentric desire. Nevertheless, the agency of the heterosexual female voice, and the absence of relationships of power and domination in a woman’s sexual life, does not result in her exclusion from what Butler has called “the matrix of power” (30). Colasanti is aware of women’s position, as social entities, within the larger institution of heterosexuality, or “compulsory heterosexuality,” as Rich has termed it.

Heterosexuality as an institution rigidly conceives human beings in either side of the binary masculine versus feminine,
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and “entails women’s subordination to men” (S. Jackson 175). Colasanti has written extensively about this issue; in Rota de colisão she raises the problem in poems such as “Hematoma da infidelidade” [Hematoma of infidelity]:

Pertenço à eterna estirpe
das traídas
mulher que tece e fia
enquanto o macho
entre as coxas de outra
afia mentira e gozo. (Fragment [41])

Just as a hematoma is blood below the skin surface, the pain caused by the male’s deceit remains covered, yet hurting, in these women:

É sempre o mesmo macho
sempre o mesmo percurso.
Nenhum me foi fiel
a mim a minha mãe
minhas irmãs.
E nenhuma de nós
soube achar o caminho
que sem sair do amor
conduz à indiferença. [42]

Obviously the problem of infidelity is not exclusive to heterosexual relationships; however, the social double standard that characterizes the male as “naturally” permissive, while it deems feminine “nature” to be sexually (and emotionally) monogamous, is a cultural myth endorsed by compulsory heterosexuality, and supported by dubious notions of biological evolution. This double standard is a manifestation of the culturally sanctioned subordination of women by men, which has wide repercussions socially for all human beings.

The theme of male infidelity in “Hematoma da infidelidade” underscores the poetic voice’s belonging to a female lineage. Through the female body and through common female experiences—specifically female heterosexuality, autoeroticism, and women’s position within gender relations—Colasanti constructs a “sorority,” expressing a solidarity that brings together
women from different backgrounds, classes, and races. The pain the poetic voice expresses in “Hematoma da infidelidade,” as well as the pleasure expressed in other poems, are millenary; in a sense, the poetic subject is every woman. There exists, then, an intent of immediate communication and identification with other women, other Marinas, an intent the author had previously expressed in other writings:

Consequently, the desire for connection with the other does not manifest itself only in poems that give expression to a woman’s sexuality. It is also expressed in poems that speak of—and to—other women. Such poems may speak of the poetic voice’s understanding of her social Other, women of other social groups as, for example, in “Rumo à caixa” [Toward the cashier]:

Na fila do mercado
à minha frente
empunha a cesta
e espera pela vez.

Mulher magra
sem peitos
quase seca.
Pele escura
sem viço
quase negra.
Pés cascudos.

Escrita na blusa
em letras bordadas
uma só palavra

LUXÚRIA [44]
In this poem, Colasanti depicts a woman from the lower classes, maybe someone else’s maid, a woman who struggles in life without *luxo* (“luxury”), but with *luxúria*. The poet does not attempt to speak for this other woman, though. Rather, the woman expresses herself out loud through her choice of attire, even if an elitist class society tries to render her voiceless: she too is a sexual being.

The possibility of identification among women from different social groups lies in the feminine as a mark of difference, which Colasanti has never rejected. Indeed, it is a difference that the writer has always embraced, and recognizes at the very source of her writing: “... tudo que escrevo vem do meu olhar de mulher, vem dos meus hormônios, vem do meu ciclo e da minha relação com a lua” (Colasanti, “Caçadora” 9) [“everything I write comes from my female way of seeing things, comes from my hormones, from my cycle and from my relation to the moon”]. Colasanti thus posits herself against the notion of gender “neutrality,” particularly as it refers to women’s literary and artistic production. In this manner, she represents a minority view among Brazilian women writers who, still today, prefer to defend the idea that literature is “genderless.”

Her position does not mean, however, that she believes in some form of essentialism, even though she sings in her poetry the natural phenomena of a woman’s body. Colasanti understands a woman’s experience as culturally marked by her social environment, by her class, her race, her economic status. Yet, all these categories lie framed by the institution of compulsory heterosexuality or, in other words, are primarily impacted by it. In this regard, says Heleieth Saffioti:

... relações de poder exprimem-se *primordialmente* através das relações de gênero. Tal fato é ... primevo, porquanto antecedeu, e de muito, a emergência das sociedades centradas na propriedade privada dos meios de produção. ... É primordial, ainda, pelo fato de permar absolutamente todas as relações sociais, sejam elas de classe social ou étnicas.

(197 [45])

Colasanti concurs with Saffioti’s analysis. At the same time that heterosexuality is in her poems a valid expression of a
woman’s desire, she does not lose sight of the phallocentric society that lies beyond, and that regulates the lives of women—and men. The poem “Sexta-feira à noite” [Friday night], below, illustrates this point:

Sexta-feira à noite
os homens acariciam os clítoses das esposas
com dedos molhados de saliva.
O mesmo gesto com que todos os dias
contam dinheiro papéis documentos
e folheiam nas revistas
a vida dos seus ídolos

Sexta-feira à noite
os homens penetram suas esposas
com tédio e pênis.
O mesmo tédio com que todos os dias
enfiam o carro na garagem
o dedo no nariz
e metem a mão no bolso
para coçar o saco.

Sexta-feira à noite
os homens ressonam de borco
enquanto as mulheres no escuro
encaram seu destino
e sonham com o príncipe encantado. [46]

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In examining in this chapter Denser’s short stories and Colasanti’s erotic poetry, I have addressed a question raised earlier in this volume: Can female desire be rendered in a way other than submissive to male desire, and to what extent can the dialectics of domination versus subordination be left out of the erotic exchange? The two writers here discussed offer different responses. Both Denser and Colasanti give expression to a woman’s heterosexual desire and eroticism. Both also recognize the existence of a dominant masculinist ideology that privileges male desire, and necessarily impacts gender relations in Brazilian society. This fact is very clearly represented in Denser’s stories through the critical perspective of Diana Marini. Usually characterized as female eroticism, however,
Denser's writings may be more correctly identified as a kind of anti-erotic sexual literature, for the heterosexual act here does not bring to the partners any sense of wholeness or unity, nor does the female protagonist seem to find sexual satisfaction. Nonetheless, through the portrayal of female heterosexuality, Denser realizes an excellent critique of the dominant phallocentric ideology.

In turn, in her poetry Colasanti succeeds in creating an erotic discourse in which female heterosexual desire finds fulfillment and satisfaction, while the woman is given agency in the sexual act and in her relationship with her partner. The fact that Colasanti's poems were published some ten years after Denser's stories should not be overlooked, as it may indicate some changes Brazilian women have achieved regarding their bodies, their sexuality, and their identities, vis-à-vis a still patriarchal, phallocentric society.