

# THE PATRIARCHY PROBLEM

## Sexism, Homophobia, and the Many Faces of Transgression to Normative Representations of Difference

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*TENTATIVE TRANSGRESSIONS: HOMOSEXUALITY, AIDS, AND THE THEATER IN BRAZIL.* By Severino J. Albuquerque. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003. Pp. xiii+255. \$29.95 paper.)

*TEATRO DE CABARET: IMAGINARIOS DISIDENTES.* By Gastón A. Alzate. (Irving, CA: Ediciones de *Gestos*, 2002. Pp. 160. \$17.50 paper.)

*TEATRO CONTEMPORÁNEO JUDEOARGENTINO: UNA PERSPECTIVA FEMINISTA BÍBLICA.* By Matilde Raquel Holte. (Buenos Aires: Ensayos, 2004. Pp. 212.)

*LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN ON/IN STAGES.* By Margot Milleret. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004. Pp. x+263. \$45.00 cloth.)

*HOLY TERRORS: LATIN AMERICAN WOMEN PERFORM.* Edited by Diana Taylor and Roselyn Costantino. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. Pp. 464. \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.)

As several literary, social science, history, and cultural studies specialists have noted,<sup>1</sup> current interest in Latin American gender issues has resulted in a proliferation of research and scholarly publications, as can be evidenced in the catalogs of university presses, as well as programs of recent academic conferences and symposia practically all over the Western world.<sup>2</sup> The five books under review attest to this

1. See Elizabeth Quay Hutchison's "Add Gender and Stir?: Cooking up Gendered Histories of Modern Latin America" (2003).

2. In the theater field, a good number of venues have opened to women's artistic expressions, such as the well-known all-women international Magdalena Project, which had had major events held in Argentina, Cuba, and Colombia recently. On a national level, to mention but just one recent event, the eighth edition of the World Festival, *Mujeres en Escena*, organized by the La Candelaria group veteran actor and director Patricia Ariza, was held during the month of March 2005, in Bogotá, Colombia, featuring more than thirty productions from all over the country, and from other Latin American regions.

dynamic impulse as they display an array of diverse methodologies used to approach the state of gender relations as represented in the region's theater and performing arts in order not only to analyze it but also to undermine, if possible, the still very active patriarchy. One of the key factors scholars continue to question, deconstruct, and rewrite is women's role in society. Both Margo Milleret's *Latin American Women on/in Stages*, and Matilde Raquel Holte's *Teatro contemporáneo judeoargentino: Una perspectiva feminista bíblica* address this concern from different perspectives. Milleret covers women's entire journey through life as a process, presenting a variegated repertory of roles they have created in response to the wants of an also evolving society as seen "on/in" Latin American stages, while Holte explores the evolution of Jewish Argentine women characters as the social tension escalates between inherited tradition and the need to change.

Milleret approaches her material armed with a sound theoretical structure that includes concepts such as Michael Issacharoff's "mimetic" versus "diegetic" spaces (1981); Judith Butler's concept of gender as performance (1981); Jenijoy LaBelle's notion of the "self" not as "an entity but as an activity, a continual process" (1988); and Susan Suleiman's "patriarchal model (1981),"<sup>3</sup> among others. From the initial 120 plays Milleret collected for her research, mostly by urban playwrights from seven Latin American countries (with Argentina in the forefront, followed by Mexico, Brazil, and Venezuela), she chose twenty-four, organizing them thematically into three chapters. The first focuses on the couple and their habitat, traditionally represented by the "home," but sometimes metaphorically transformed into a comfortable "refuge" for men and a "prison" for women. Milleret explores women's behavior, ranging from subdued and trapped protagonists to feisty characters that openly battle patriarchal law and order. One of the plays, *Roda cor de roda* (*The Circle Game*, 1975), by Brazilian Leila Assumção, concentrates on the recycling of relationships among the typical love triangle (husband, wife, and mistress) wherein the roles of wife and mistress are inverted, proposing a nonsanctioned family arrangement. Provocative at the time of its writing, *Roda* has been acknowledged as one "of the reasons behind changes to Brazil's constitution to improve women's status" (221).

In the second chapter, Milleret concentrates on the less visited relationships between mothers and daughters. She attributes their absence, especially in the theater arts, to the "protected and enshrined status" mothers enjoy (88). As the daughters reach adulthood, many try to reconnect with their mothers after becoming painfully aware of the socially determinant double nature of the latter's child-rearing techniques. As

3. See the chapter, "Daughters Playing: Some Feminist Writings and the Mother" in Susan Suleiman's *Subversive Intent* (1990, 163–69).

to the mothers, “maternalism” is questioned and sometimes perceived as a social imposition thrust on women by men.

In the third chapter, the emphasis is put on “making aging women visible” in a context where they have been obliterated and disregarded as active human beings, sexually and otherwise. This sometimes results in their inventing alternative lives outside of the traditional role of grandmothers, as in Venezuelan Mariela Romero’s *Esperando al italiano* (*Waiting for the Italian* 1988), and Puerto Rican Teresa Marichal’s *Parque para dos* (*Park for Two* 1980). Given that feminist theories do not provide significant insights into aging since most have been geared to issues of interest of younger women, Milleret uses social science and health profession findings to frame her analysis. The book’s strengths are the author’s detailed analysis of the plays and her command of their social, historical, and political contexts. Even if one does not agree with some of her analysis, as is the case with *Uno/El bigote*, by Sabina Berman, which rather than a patriarchal paradigm of male dominance can be read as an illustration of gender fluidity, where transgenderism (insinuated by the interchangeable mustache) is used as a technique to revisit the rigidity of gender construction in the West, her readings are enriching, loaded with detailed observations and insight on the topic. Theater as a primordial space where women have customarily been subjugated gives way, through Milleret’s perceptive interpretation, to a locus where women playwrights “accommodate” their needs to tell their own stories. In this respect, of the three chapters, I feel the most compelling is the last one, if only because she ventured into unexplored turf in Latin American dramaturgy research with brilliant results.

Not unlike Milleret’s work, Holte approaches her topic drawing from a well-known cadre of scholars, most of them women, from fields as diverse as Jewish studies, anthropology, psychology, theology, and literary criticism. The main difference between the two books is that we are dealing here with Jewish / Latin American women as portrayed by four Argentine playwrights who happen to be Jewish too, and this adds an extra feature to an up until now scarcely studied subject in scholarship. With the exception of Germán Rozenmacher’s *Simón Brumelstein, Caballero de Indias* (1982), the rest of the plays were published in the 1990s: Ricardo Halac’s *Mil años, un día* (1993); Eduardo Rovner’s *Volvió una noche* (1993); and Nora Glickman’s *Una tal Raquel* (1994), and *Liturgias* (1995). Besides *Liturgias*, which takes place in contemporary New Mexico, and *Mil años, un día*, which depicts the last days of the Sephardic Jews in Spain, before the Edict of Expulsion of the Jews was signed by Queen Isabella in 1492, the other plays take place in Buenos Aires at different times throughout the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

4. The Jewish population in Argentina represents the fifth largest in the world, and probably the largest of this economically vibrant Latin American minority group, with an estimated half million people living throughout the region. Even if their presence

As Holte emphasizes, the line that divides reality and fiction in Jewish literature (and theater) is, with regard to Biblical references, a thin one, as manifested in the female characters she is examining. Agreeing with important feminist critics that have recognized the fact that “the Bible incurs in a fundamental moral mistake by not treating all human beings as equals (68),” Holte gives voice to updated speculations on the nature of God, as well as the origin of human kind, as written in the religious books (the Bible as well as the Torah) which have been brought to public attention recently.<sup>5</sup> The change in perception has implications for our time, as the perfect “models” of women inscribed in these androcentric documents came to be questioned by a growing number of scholars and critics reviewing the Bible, and a reassessment of their roles became necessary. Holte enters into a dialogue with these scholars in reclaiming a recovery of an alternative past that might shed light on the present condition of women. Not all of her criticism though is reserved to the scribes of the holy books; other important figures visited here who are blamed for keeping the misogynist tradition alive are Freud, who, tuned to his Jewish beliefs, did not envision women as companions and on equal footing with men but subservient to them, deriving “women’s sexuality from the male libido” (see Bach 1997, 124), and Lacan, who promoted the symbolic father as the universal purveyor of language and meaning.

As Holte unveils the human aspects of the “written” books, the structure of the family ceases to have a divine “origin” to become a social construction and a contentious political site. According to the rabbinic literary books, men and women’s occupations are neatly divided, constraining women to the home with the exclusive care of children and leaving men in charge of the public sphere. Thus, it is in the everyday social reality that one can start to scrutinize the lives of the Jewish matriarchs (Sarah,

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in Argentina dates back to the sixteenth century, the first important wave of Jewish immigration arrived in 1889. By 1914, nearly 160,000 immigrants, mostly Jewish from Russia, arrived in the country, responding to an official campaign to populate the pampas (Lindstrom 1989, 4). Yiddish was spoken and written throughout the city, and a literary and theatrical tradition was created that lasted approximately until the Second War World. Its decadence was partly due to the cultural transition into Spanish by the newer generations and the arrival of the nationalist-oriented Independent Theatre movement. See Glickman and Waldman (1996) and Rizk (2005).

5. The core of the controversy is based on the perception of God as embodying both male and female traits, who created the first human being (Adam) as an androgynous individual, in his/her image and likeness. The splitting of Adam’s sides created Eve, which due to the mistranslation (interpretation) of “side” for “rib” launched a gendered devaluating trip along the line of recorded history. One of the first publications to address this issue was *The Gnostic Gospels* by Elaine Pagels (1979), which, according to Cullen Murphy, set off a “sometimes bitter scholarly debate” (1993, 40). Undoubtedly, it got tenser with the subsequent publication, in 1988, of *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*, in which Pagels reviews the creation stories.

Rebecca, Leah, Rachel, and so on) who set the example for generations to come, and this is what Holte does, comparing them to the characters depicted in the above plays with engaging results. A doctoral dissertation transformed into a book, it reads more like a treaty, forcing the reader to read between lines and to discover a complex system of ideas that underlines the sometimes already intricate characters she is analyzing. One can argue that the book represents a biased look at ancient material based on presuppositions, but then again, we are dealing with a field of research where the "truth" is forever lost, and the scarce or nonexistent available evidence is a fact. And yet, the effects (patriarchy) are an intrinsic part of our own reality, which should be questioned and taken apart if possible. In an increasingly secularized world, it is important not only to reflect on the Bible as an unavoidable spiritual resource for understanding "Judaism," from a minority point of view, but also to include Latin American Jewish women as represented in the theater arts as the focus of biblical studies.<sup>6</sup>

Following up in the footsteps of groundbreaking publications in the field such as Arrizón and Manzor (2000), Svich and Marrero (2000), and especially Fusco (2000), the next book, *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*, edited by Diana Taylor and Roselyn Costantino, is a variegated collection of fragments of works, plays, sketches, testimonies, and critical essays on the work of prominent Latin American women performing artists and playwrights. While some of the essays are original, others are newly edited, versions / translations, or reproductions of previously published work. One common denominator in the production of all these women, and the most obvious, is that they all belong to that cultural "construction" named Latin America, and as such they grew up, as the editors point out in the introduction, in societies deeply entrenched in Catholicism (as implied in the title of the book) amidst dictatorships, revolutions, student upheavals, and civil violence, all of which shaped the way they perceive the world. Their craft, on the other hand, has been enriched by popular vernacular traditions such as the *sainete criollo* (comedy of manners), *revista de tandas* (variety shows), *carpa* (tent shows), vaudeville, cabaret, and so on, often characterized with the misnomer "género chico," referred to also as "frivolous theater." In the case of the Argentine playwrights the use of the *grotesque's* aesthetic characteristics is also an influence to be reckoned with (Kaiser-Lenoir 1977). Moreover, these women use their bodies, or women's bodies, as a cultural site of representative signs which sometimes becomes the performance itself; a text where you can write (some literally and others metaphorically) to "document" the conflation of feminist activism, politically or otherwise, and their aesthetic creativity.

6. Besides discrepancies in the order of footnotes, the bibliography also presents anomalies that should have been corrected in the final printed form.

The book opens with a series of humorous sketches by Diana Raznovich, which accentuates the “frivolous” yet transgressive outline of the book, as interpreted by Raznovich herself.<sup>7</sup> Her play included in this collection, *From the Waist Down* (1999), centers around a couple that only makes love once a year, on the husband’s mother’s birthday. While he is pleased with the arrangement, the wife is in despair. His mother is called in to help, practically taking over the situation. What follows is a whimsical projection of sexual fantasies in which male violence is underscored for the pleasure of a potential audience’s visual field of desire. As Taylor remarked in her study of Raznovich’s career, the playwright’s continued exploration of the systems that produce desire by using violence against women leads to a profound questioning of the nature of the “construction of national identity as predicated on female destruction” (79). In this respect, Taylor is expanding on her previous book, *Disappearing Acts* (1997), in which she projects the notion of a feminine nation as a mediator of “the autoeroticism of the military’s performance” (68), while she calls our attention to the role of the mother as deconstructed by Raznovich who provides “visibility to Argentine women as different as Evita (the ‘mother’ of the Argentine homeland) and the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo” (85). Following this line of thinking, and after reading Holte’s book, one cannot but identify the mother character in the above play with the quintessentially controlling “Yiddish mama,” also present in other Raznovich plays, such as the popular *Casa matriz* (*Matrix, Inc.*).<sup>8</sup> In this respect, and although not explored in Taylor’s analysis, I agree with Nora Glickman’s contention that “Jewishness” is central to the playwright’s craft (1994: 316).

Another corporeal approach to violence is supplied by Chilean novelist and playwright Diamela Eltit’s excerpts from *Lumpérica* (*E. Luminata*). A painful experience to read and visualize, we are dealing with a novel that became a reading / performance (in a public square and in a brothel), which was actually videotaped at the same time, of self-mutilation as artistic activism. A political statement, even though, as Robert Neustadt warns us in his insightful approach to her “writing,” “the interpretative ‘difficulty’ of these texts [may] undermine their subversive power,” (118), Eltit projects an unambiguous gendered point of view in two specific spaces mostly associated with male domination: the square, as the metaphorical site of their public, and political, domain, and the bordello, a location where the masculine sexual “initiation rite” traditionally takes

7. When she participated with her piece *El desconcierto* in Teatro Abierto, a cycle of short plays put together collectively at the beginning of the 1980s to defy military power in Argentina, she was asked by her theater colleagues to withdraw her play on the grounds that it was “frivolous.” As Taylor points out, she took her disqualification as a “compliment” finding it “wonderfully transgressive” (74).

8. See Diana Raznovich’s collection of four plays, *Defiant Acts / Actos desafiantes*, which includes *Matrix, Inc.* (2002).

place in Latin America. As a contrasting example with those women who went on the streets pounding pots (“*el cacero-lazo*”) in support of a pro-Pinochet military take over, Eltit opts for the self-reflexive parodying act of writing on a text (which happened to be her own body with a blade), to articulate a “double-edge critique” of contemporary Chile.<sup>9</sup> Brazilian Denise Stoklos’s play *Casa* (1990) aims to affirm agency amidst political and social chaos through her visible struggle to get the right corporeal posture and linguistic inflection, which Leslie Damasceno rightly calls “the game of staging potency / impotency” in her article. From Frederic Jameson’s concept of “cultural pathology” in her previous study on Stoklos “essentialist theater,” (1994) Damasceno turns now to “hysteria,” a Freudian psychoanalytical term which has become popular among critics of performance artists,<sup>10</sup> passing through Lacan and Zizek, to enlighten the performer’s pursuit of an utopist historical subject. R. Costantino reviews the stage work of Mexican Astrid Hadad, whose spectacles, mostly based on her mocking rendition of Mexican cultural icons (the Virgen of Guadalupe, la “*china poblana*”), folk songs (the *ranchera*), and the official Mexican power rhetoric, are directed to deconstruct “the categories of female and, by extension, national identity” (205). Other Mexican artists featured in this collection are performers/activists Katia Tirado and Ema Villanueva, via Antonio Prieto Stambaugh’s essay. A keen observer of the Mexican as well as the Chicana/o performance site (Prieto Stambaugh 2001a; 2001b), he centers on the construction of the body as a social marker to resist institutional loss of memory as “a mechanism of silencing and control” (248). In the case of Tirado, it is done through the “recontextualization” of popular forms such as the *lucha libre* (wrestling), as in *Exhivivilización* (1995–97), and in Villanueva by conflating conceptual art with political activism. During an eight-kilometer march to mark the one-year anniversary of UNAM’s strike in 2000, she used her bikini-clad body as a paint-in-process canvas where people would write in their opinions.

9. For a provocative and contextualized reading of the original novel *Lúmpérica* (1983), from which the performance derives, see Pratt (1999).

10. Used by Freud mainly to purport women’s deviation of the “norm” (heterosexual compulsive behavior) as social maladies, the term has been updated by social and theater critics such as Carlos Monsiváis who uses it to describe Mexico City’s 1920s and 1930s “frivolous theater” divas, “always at the brink of hysterical trance” (1988, 32), and Gastón Alzate, in his book reviewed here, who alludes to Astrid Hadad’s performances as evoking a constant “pathetic state in hysterical trance” (2002, 47). For an in-depth study of the use of psychoanalysis as a method to approach women’s characters, see Consuelo Morel Montes’s study of Chilean dramaturgy from 1920 to 1990, in *Identidad femenina en el teatro chileno* (1996). In the theater world, Sabina Berman’s 2000 play *Feliz Nuevo Siglo Doktor Freud*, on his famous “Dora case,” breathes new life into the Austrian doctor’s official pronouncements regarding non-normative sexuality.

Chiapas indigenous activist Petrona de la Cruz Cruz's *A Desperate Woman* is also featured here, which harks back to the 1960s and 1970s *Nuevo Teatro* times, when theater was used directly as a didactic instrument to raise consciousness, with the emphasis put on the resistance rather than the transgression (See Boudet 1983 and Rizk 1987). Teresa Marrero gives us a persuasive rendering in her essay of the struggle of indigenous women activists in a milieu where virility is still associated with violence and femaleness with domesticity and submission despite their joint engagement in a larger conflict for freedom on a national scale.<sup>11</sup> The article on the all-women Colombian ensemble La Máscara, another beleaguered group in a war-ravaged country, by Marlène Ramírez-Cancio, concentrates on the "voice" as a gendered other (in the sense of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1988), struggling to be heard, as it becomes apparent in the transcripts of the translated interviews with Lucy Bolaños, director and founder of the group, and Pilar Restrepo, one of the actors, which comprise the mainstay of the entry.

Teresa Ralli, one of the pillars of the legendary Peruvian group Yuyachkani, gives us an interesting behind-the-scenes account of her obsession with *Antigone*, by Sophocles, and how she and director Miguel Rubio created the piece until the final version was written down by poet José Watanabe (a fragment of the play is also included). Based in large part on contemporary discourses as well as eyewitness evidence of abusive state power, and to a lesser extent on the Greek tragedy, this *Antigona* represents the reconstruction of a cultural identity situated in a specific geographical space, the strife-ridden Peru of the last two decades, that, nevertheless, transcends any specificity to become a universal paradigm of resistance and transgression. Rosa Luisa Márquez, the Puerto Rican director, actor, and educator, is next, with an essay of her own, in which she highlights important aspects of her career. Unfortunately, she cuts the framework of her experience to 1985, five years before her autobiographical book (*Brincos*

11. I am not as optimistic as Marrero, who sees the active involvement of Mayan women in the Zapatista movement, with unisex military garb and all, as a sign of empowerment bolstering a claim to female authority that would have lasting effects in the aftermath of the conflict, mainly because they have a clear antecedent in the *soldaderas*, who fought arm in arm with their men during the Mexican Revolution (in fact some of them even reached "official" ranking). They have indeed become an intrinsic inherited part of the country's popular culture, aggrandized to mythical proportions through folk songs (*ranchera* and *corrida*), movies (played by larger than life divas such as María Félix and Dolores del Río), and literature, but the social status of women did not advance for decades. In fact, Mexican women earned the right to vote as late as 1953. In this respect, as Maxine Molyneux suggests, "gains in women's status [over the course of the twentieth-century in Latin America] have always been contingent on political and economic contexts, variable in degree, and subject to reversal" (quoted by Hutchison 2003, 276–77). Furthermore, the biggest stumbling blocks in the road to social change within their own communities are probably the same traditional cultural rights they are defending.

*y saltos* 1992), where most of this material comes from. Teresa Hernández, the other Puerto Rican featured in the book is given an even shorter space, a couple of pages review by Vivian Martínez Tabares of her production, *How Complex Being Is, or, The Complex of Being*, whose fragments can be read in the book. Reminiscent of the popular play *Quintuples*, by Luis Rafael Sánchez, the characters' (Senator Pardome, Perpetua, and Isabella) monologues point to the same direction: the denunciation of the colonized state of Puerto Rico and the nonchalant attitude of its inhabitants vis-à-vis the process of de-culturalization in which they are submerged. Martínez Tabares's review emphasizes the colonial dichotomy of being when one dwells between two cultures and two languages. The book closes with José Esteban Muñoz's essay on Cuban conceptual artist Tania Bruguera's performance, *The Burden of Guilt*, in which he resorts to psychoanalytical devices such as transference, displacement, and introjection to interpret her cutting-edge performances (she actually eats dirt out of guilt and in solidarity with the exterminated Caribbean indigenous population). But she is only a part of the larger picture. Taking the community beyond the "stultifying rhetorics" of Gustavo Pérez Firmat's characterization (Muñoz 1994, 403), and the rigidity of the antagonistic dyad comprised by the right-wing hard-liners based in Miami and the supposedly socialist-oriented still living in the island, he is actually course-plotting an "imagined community" of a "Greater Cuba" that would include all of the above.<sup>12</sup>

*Holy Terrors* is a wide-ranging effort to compile the work of women artists from an even wider spectrum. As with many collections of this kind, the articles are uneven. There is no doubt that the book signals new departures in the field of theatrical and performance criticism as Prieto Stambaugh's work suggests, for example, by moving beyond performing gendered issues to a broader perspective of performing "citizenship" in this globalized era, shifting the focus of his essay which also reflects the last entries of the book. On the other hand, while it is always rewarding to read or hear directly the voice of the creators (included are Griselda Gambaro's play *Strip* (1974) on institutional-state violence; Jesusa Rodríguez's short pieces on Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *La Malinche*, and "Genesis;" and Sabina Berman's *One / The moustache* playlet), published sources should not be substitutes for critical evaluations on this collection's obvious *pièces de résistance*.<sup>13</sup> Gambaro has been widely recognized as a pioneer of Latin American women's theater, and as such her critical bibliography is

12. Muñoz has already given us a sample of his innovative scholarly research in his much-quoted *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), on the several strategies the "emerging identities-in-difference" (7) have adopted to effectively challenge dominant ideologies.

13. Further material may also be found in the website created by the editors (<<<http://hemi.nyu.edu/eng/cuaderno.shtml>>>), which, for obvious reasons, is beyond the scope of this review.

plentiful, including Taylor's own earlier work (1989). A perceptive recent analysis of her play can be found in Puga (2004); for an updated evaluation of her career, see Cypress (2005). Sabina Berman and Jesusa Rodríguez, who have come to prominence during the last two decades, have also been the subjects of recent remarkable scholarly research. For Berman, a good source of information, with valuable interpretations on major theatrical productions, can be found in the book *Sediciosas seducciones: Sexo, poder y palabras en el teatro de Sabina Berman* (2004), edited by Jacqueline Bixler.<sup>14</sup> As for Jesusa Rodríguez, a recent perceptive outlook on her resourceful career is found in the next book under review here, Gastón Alzate's insightful glance into Mexico City's mostly underground, but very visible, cabaret cultural life: *Teatro de cabaret: Imaginarios disidentes*. If performance is a compelling object of study, cabaret is no less gripping, as demonstrated by Alzate. Using the concept of "queerness" in its widest possible sense as a theoretical underpinning to gender differentiation, he opens his discussion to include cultural representations of heterosexuals, homosexuals, bisexuals, transvestites, and transsexuals. Six sites of dissidence from the traditional gendered system of representation promoted by the "great Mexican nation's" patriarchal project are analyzed here, through the works of performer artists Astrid Hadad, Paquita la del Barrio, Francis, Tito Vasconcelos, Liliana Felipe, and Jesusa Rodríguez. Alzate endorses the notion of the Mexican culture as a process where elements of sexuality other than the normative heterosexual are constantly being affirmed, repressed, or legitimized (83). In fact, for Jesusa Rodríguez, as quoted by Alzate, "Mexican tradition is a culture in which [it] is possible to find an excessive concentration of oppressive forces overfilled with euphoria or sentimentalism which carries within manifestations of political and sexual dissidence" (88).

While inroads by women have been substantial, studied, and documented, homosexuality per se presents a different case study. With few exceptions, sound scholarly books on the subject are scarce. Similar to Alzate's emphatic illustration of Mexican culture's transgressive edges, Severino J. Albuquerque's book *Tentative Transgressions: Homosexuality, AIDS and the Theatre in Brazil* takes on Brazilian culture's prevalent "ambigosexuality and the notion of inversion"<sup>15</sup> to elaborate a "particularly constructed" discourse to depict, synchronically as well as diachronically, the sexual other, as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transvestites, transgendered and transsexuals find their way in this well researched book, with the

14. Adam Versényi has also translated into English and published a collection of four plays by Berman, in *The Theatre of Sabina Berman: The Agony and Ecstasy and Other Plays* (2003).

15. Rommel Mendes-Leite's notion of "ambigosexuality," from which Albuquerque borrowed the term, "is rooted in an understanding of sexuality as a cultural and historical defined manifestation," (1993; quoted in Albuquerque, 84).

emphasis put on the subaltern aspect of this “subculture.” Following a genealogical approach, the book is divided into four parts, which one can actually read as separate essays. As with the rest of Latin America, Brazil’s prevailing phallogocentric ideology is based more on the “social role” the subject performs than the gender role. In spite of greater visibility and political advances, the advent of AIDS has exacerbated homophobia, representing “a major setback to the process of relative liberalism with regard to homosexuality” (9), now dressed in moral codes and religious values, despite the presence of the “sexual other” in every aspect of the country’s popular culture. Homosexuality has been manifested, as Albuquerque thoroughly demonstrates, in many cultural forms including the *teatro de revista*, a popular entertainment format of the 1930s and 1940s, still active today; in the plays of some of the most prestigious playwrights of the twentieth century; and in the stereotyped gay characters disseminated in popular TV soaps (nowadays a major export product of Brazil, mainly by the hegemonic communications giant Rede Globo), who enjoy a wide acceptance among audiences of all social classes. Coterminous to TV, commercial theater thrives on gay-themed theater, and the drag queen shows, as in the rest of the continent, have become cult phenomena; still, marginality and discrimination have not diminished noticeably.<sup>16</sup> In order to deconstruct the values associated with this position and expose its double moral standards, he recalls cultural metaphors such as “antropofagia” (cannibalism), Oswaldo de Andrade’s clever term for the appropriation and “digestion” of “other” cultural forms and trends; “carnivalization,” one of Brazilian primordial cultural spaces where transvestism and the inversion of gender roles propose an alternative paradigm to the sameness of hegemonic culture; and “natural characteristics” such as Sergio Bourque de Hollanda’s term “cordialidade” (cordiality), “an inclination to evade or reject conflict altogether” that has transformed “sites of contestation” into temperate showcases (19). Albuquerque certainly feels that the theater in Brazil has from its onset demonstrated both “an attraction to and rejection of the experience of the different and the disenfranchised”

16. According to Rebecca Schneider, quoted by Albuquerque, “Late capitalism appropriates, incorporates, and consumes transgression into fashionable chic at such a rapid pace that the subversive impact of transgression becomes impossible” (1997, 111). On the other hand, to find gay cultural expressions that are having a significant impact in Brazilian society, one may have to look into other venues such as the popular “Pride Gay Parades” that have become annual happenings in many cities throughout Brazil since the late 1990s. Derived, in part, from the Carnival’s celebrations on gender transgression, and well attended by both heterosexuals and homosexuals, they have become increasingly associated with “showcases of citizenship,” linked to demonstrations of human rights where non-normative sexuality is but one among other struggles, such as gender or racial discrimination. See Benjamin Junge, “Heterossexuais em eventos públicos gays: a ‘Parada Livre’ em Porto Alegre, 2002,” (2004). On the increasing growth of gay communities in Brazilian urban centers, see Richard G. Parker (1999).

(20), reinforced by the fact that the sexual “other” has customarily been represented by literary and theatrical heterosexual mainstream figures such as modernists Oswald de Andrade and Nelson Rodrigues, as well as neorealist Plinio Marcos.

From tentative transgressions belonging to a “closet of representation”<sup>17</sup> in early works, Albuquerque walks us through gay-themed plays during the gay liberation movement of the 1970s, to openly transgressive gay theater mainly from groups and artists dealing with HIV and the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and 1990s who had to “make sense of the disease,” confront marginality and prejudice, and resolve the “crisis of representation” that has plagued gay-oriented theater during the last decades. The difference then and now, as Albuquerque succinctly puts it, is that “transgression was no longer a matter of shock value but rather a measure of an individual’s struggle to live his life as he pleases” (113). One of the most gripping allegorical plays reviewed here, pertaining to the later stage, is *O livro de Jó* (1988), an adaptation of the story of the biblical figure, by Luis Alberto de Abreu, staged by Antônio Araújo in a dilapidated São Paulo hospital, with the main character sitting in a pool of blood throughout the performance.

A meticulously researched book, Albuquerque does make a convincing case that “a gay-themed play can definitely have the universality of drama by and about heterosexuals” (177). From a feminist perspective, though, even the best-meant works when built on an androcentric perspective, as is the case here, produce blind spots that are difficult to overcome. One such instance occurs when the author explains in a footnote the terms “*bicho* and *veado* (and its alternative spelling, *viado*),” which he considers to be “in Brazil perhaps the most offensive epithets one can direct at a man, because, both terms, in addition to holding nonhuman association, reduce a man to the status of woman” (207). The fact that gay discourses can also be monolithic is what makes you realize the complexity, not absent of paradoxical overtones, of grouping together under the rubric of “queer” discourses the productions of gay and lesbian artists.<sup>18</sup> This is a book not to be missed by those interested in gender studies, cultural studies, or Brazilian studies. All the books reviewed here are important contributions to scholarly debates on the nature of gender and sexuality in Latin America; some of them challenge traditional notions, others define, enlighten, and embolden the field.

17. According to Ed Cohen, “‘closet of representation’ means the symbolic displacement of homosexual desire onto the aesthetic or the linguistic codification of the erotic,” (Cohen 1991; quoted in Albuquerque, 193).

18. See Beatriz J. Rizk, “La estética gay: SIDA, travestismo y el derecho a la alteridad,” *Posmodernismo, y teatro en América Latina: Teorías y prácticas en el umbral del siglo XXI* (2001: 248–78).

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