



# The Colonisation of Non-feminine Lesbian Experiences as a Mechanism for Controlling Bodies and Compulsory Reproduction of Masculinity<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article is a discussion of the results of field research about the collective experiences of different LGBT movements. That is, currently there is an investment of some groups in proposing, whenever possible, the inclusion of non-feminine lesbians into various definitions of transmasculinities.<sup>2</sup> This produces deterministic regulations on the bodies and practices of non-feminine lesbians, like when the gaze on that body identifies it as “a ‘*transmacho*,’ but an inadequate one, because it has boobs.”<sup>3</sup> Considering the empirical data, it is reasonable to ask what are the historical conditions of possibilities that have contributed to this move to frame the body with this level of determinism. Beyond this, it also raises a political-epistemological issue. It is a political matter because it shows a hierarchy of transgressive gender experiences, in which transmasculinity is more valued than the non-feminine lesbian experience. Epistemological, on the other side, because it demonstrates a “will to truth” and the production of narratives about bodies and practices, in order to move the non-feminine lesbians body from the scene, by transforming it into more of the same. That is, a masculine body that is closer to the heteronormative ideal. In this sense, it is possible to question if this move is related to historical sexism and lesbophobia which have, for a long time, produced a non-place for non-feminine lesbian bodies and practices.

**Keywords:** non-feminine lesbian bodies and practices; the regime of truth; sexism; lesbophobia; gender and sexualities transgression.

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“Are you sure that you’re just a lesbian? Don’t you feel like getting rid of the intruders? You still don’t realise it yet, but you are a trans man. That’s okay, you’re going to realise it. It’s so empowering when we realise it! You really should give it a try. We really need men like you in the trans movement. Besides that, it’s kinda weird this manly attitude in someone with boobs, right?! Straight girls probably don’t like it...” (João Paulo 2018).<sup>4</sup>

This quote from João’s was said during an event that brought together the leadership of trans social movements in Curitiba, Paraná in 2018. It consists of a set of common narratives that reveal, empirically, the attempt to colonise “non-feminine” lesbian bodies and experiences (Milena Cristina Carneiro Peres, Suane Felipe Soares and Maria Clara Dias 2008, 28).<sup>5</sup> These narratives may also be found in the article “Lésbica feminista masculinizada ou homem trans: o governo dos outros sobre o corpo e o agenciamento política identitário” (Masculine feminist lesbian or trans man: the governing of the body by others and the political identity agency), in which Léo Ribas (2016, 167-168) presents four scenes produced in different times and spaces of the LGBT social movements in Brazil.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, according to Rosalinda, an activist from the lesbian feminist movement, “The *sapatões* are in danger of extinction. Soon there won’t be a story to tell. They’re all transitioning!” (Rosalinda, Lesbian Feminist Movement Event, Curitiba, 2019).<sup>7</sup>

In the face of these scenes, this article aims to construct a post-structuralist analysis of a current issue. The methodology used in this study is the dialogical quantitative interview (Arfuch 1995). A discussion group with four participants, including the interviewee João Paulo and the interviewers, took place in a trans people’s social movement event in Curitiba, on 25 June 2018. Another interview,

in which Rosalinda was interviewed, had a total of six participants and took place during the national lesbian feminist meeting, on 5 October 2019, also in Curitiba. According to Leonor Arfuch (1995, 152) the interviews are understood as a dialogical relation, in which power relations and performativities uncover/ emerge from memories. The duly authorised narratives were compiled and then included in a compilation that makes up the corpus of this research.

This study is part of a broader research that has been developed since 2016 and that highlights the existence of incursions of power in the field of the transmasculinities social movement in Brazil to produce *truths* about non-feminine lesbian bodies and experiences that might result in the colonization of those bodies and experiences. Such power incursions seem to intend to co-opt these bodies and experiences to produce a regulation aiming the construction of transmasculinities.

These power dynamics relations have become possible contemporarily due to specific possibilities created by historical conditions. The sexuality *dispositif* [device or apparatus], as Michel Foucault has shown, produced a discursivity and a variety of strategies of knowledge-power that have made sex its target. These strategies in turn, produced discourses about body-gender-desire that fixes and associates the presence of a vulva with the existence of a certain femininity (Gayle Rubin 2017) and compulsory heterosexuality, designated by the identification of the genitalia at birth (Adrienne Rich 2012), promoting, therefore, a system that imposes an alleged coherence and normative complementarity among sex-gender-desire.

Thus, the discourse materialises what it names through an operation called citationality (Derrida 1988), which consists of the exhaustive repetition of discursive networks by different institutions for the reiteration of regulatory norms and the production of heterosexual bodies and experiences. In this perspective, the concept of hetero-cisnormativity refers to the gender and sexuality norms in force in the West by which the instituted norm is the non-trans body and the

heterosexual sexual practices. That is, the body is manufactured in a coherent relationship between sex and gender that meets the heterosexual imperative as the only way to experience sexuality (Judith Butler 2008).

The concept works as a union of heteronormativity (Letícia Lanz 2016, 89) and cisnormativity (Beatriz Bagagli 2016, 89; Lanz 2014, 296). Hetero-cisnormativity consists of a conceptual tool that promotes an understanding of the narratives elicited here, considering that they aim to establish a coherence between the body and the experience towards masculinity – in this case displaced from the genitalia and focused on the adequacy of the gender identity (Lanz 2014), the production of transmasculinity and an apparently cisgender *performance*. That means that when these narratives are deployed, they produce a materiality that, reflecting what Judith Butler addressed in the *performativity* theory (1988; 2000; 2008), produces the effect of power and control over bodies to make them intelligible to an assemblage of patterns fixed in binary bodies and heterosexual practices.

However, the analyses can shift, for when a trans man finds similarities with himself in a non-feminine lesbian body, other potential targets are at stake. It is on the gender identity and experiences of non-feminine lesbians that power focuses its incursions and strikes. That is, the trap of the normative gender system works even in non-hegemonic spaces of masculinity production.

In this sense, the discourses that support and operate the regulatory norms of body, gender and sexuality establish yet another ideal of masculinity through the citationality and the reiteration of the regimes of *truth*. However, non-feminine lesbian bodies and experiences affront, disturb and “cause” perplexity, defying such norms. What is at stake are the effects of *truth* that this manifestation of discourses produces. That is, through the repetition of such discourses, the goal is to institute them as the *truth*. For Michel Foucault:

The important thing, I believe, is that the truth does not exist outside of power or without power (...). Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault 2010, 12-13).

Considering this, it is possible to understand that narratives like the ones brought in this essay demonstrate the production of another form of regulation of bodies and practices. This regulation takes place amidst a web of power and establishes a *truth* about body-gender-desire that moves non-feminine lesbian bodies and experiences closer to bodies and practices that also escape the regulatory ideal produced by the binary and complementary body-gender-desire system, as long as they fit. For Judith Butler, gender and sexuality norms produce cis-heterosexual bodies and practices as well as trans and non-heterosexual bodies and practices, since if the norm were efficient, it would not need to be reiterated all the time (Butler 2001; 2008).

In the perspective of Foucauldian studies, the discourse analysis that presents narratives, such as João Paulo's, distances itself from a specific interest in the origin of those discourses, since they possess historicity – that is to say, since they are contingent, located, dated and produced through specific conditions in the functioning of power relations. According to the author:

We must be ready to receive every moment of discourse in its sudden irruption; in that punctuality in which it appears, and in that temporal dispersion that enables it to be repeated, known, forgotten, transformed, utterly erased, and hidden, far from all view, in the dust of

books. Discourse must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but treated as and when it occurs. These pre-existing forms of continuity, all these syntheses that are accepted without question, must remain in suspense. (Foucault 2017, 31).

Thus, we suspect that the non-feminine lesbian subjectification processes constitute themselves as a target of a collusion between sexism – that, throughout history, has been placing women and their femininities in the position of inferior subjects – and lesbophobia – that consists in a violent device of several attacks against lesbian bodies and experiences. In the case of non-feminine lesbian bodies and experiences, lesbophobia intersects with different effects of power. These effects produce bodies and experiences marked by abjection for performatively materialising bodies that do not fit in what is expected of femininities (Butler 2001; 2008). Besides that, these bodies also affront the statute built around a hegemonic masculinity, which is projected for bodies and experiences that performatively materialise the coherence between sex-gender-desire – that is, bodies with penises, which produce themselves as male with hetero-cissexual practices.

Perhaps it would be possible to consider the existence of a moral panic – established by the non-feminine lesbian experience – affecting not only the intelligibility of norms, but also those who escape from them. Stanley Cohen has created the concept of *moral panics* to reflect how societies react to the breaking of established normative ideals through the media, public opinion and through agents of social control. As the author points out, moral panic refers to:

A condition, episode or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or developed to. Then, the

condition disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. Sometimes, the object of the panic is new, and at other times it is something that has existed long enough, but suddenly appears in the limelight. Sometimes, the panic passes and it is forgotten, except in folklore and collective memory; at other times, it has more serious and long-lasting repercussions and might produce such changes as those in legal and social policy or even the way the society conceives itself (Cohen 1972, 9).

Besides bothering hetero-cisnormative bodies, non-feminine lesbian practices and experiences also affect bodies that distance themselves from current gender norms. Do non-feminine lesbian bodies and experiences represent a “threat” to hetero-cisnormativity and to transmasculinity ideals? In conceiving a critical ontology of ourselves (Foucault 1988), what is at stake when it comes to analysing both the limits and social imperatives created historically, and the possibilities of escaping from these connections? This means a change of attitude and posture in the world, in the presence of yourself and others. As Margareth Rago (2002, 15) suggests, and as we consider it productive to: “problematize a relationship established with the world, the other and oneself seems, thus, a fundamental condition to open new, more positive and healthier paths that would promote the exercise of freedom and the invention of life.”

Before this issue, the main point was to bring the non-feminine lesbian body’s experiences and practices into the debate as political elements through which it becomes possible to analyse a regime of *truth* being produced in the present. In that sense, as Foucault has demonstrated, the exercise of power and control of conduct also produces resistances, subversions, escapes, and counter-conducts (Foucault 2008). Then, the bodies, experiences and practices of non-feminine lesbians that dare to resist and to potentialise the discussions about the body, gender and sexualities are means of experimentation and self-invention themselves. This perspective of self-experimentation can move thought towards



an analysis of the potentials of the ethical and aesthetic experience of narrated existence.

Also, elaborating critical analyses on the epistemological and historical construction of the invention of the body-sex-gender system seems to be imperative in understanding the ways that the fields constructing non-feminine lesbian experiences are delimited in contemporary times. With the intention of building an intense critique of this system perhaps we can think, through feminist and queer theorizations, what it would mean to break drastically with the thinking that produces and makes functional the body-sex-gender system, founded on binarism and centred on the conjugation of the normal/abnormal binomial (César 2004, 54; Foucault 1988; Foucault 2001; 121-122; Rubin 2003).

Thus, the reason for these analyses lies in promoting self-reflection and self-invention before the possibility of glimpsing other visibilities and utterabilities (Albuquerque Júnior and Filho 2008, 10). Perhaps it can even change the way of perceiving the world and life, making it as close as possible to the expression of a personal and political project of a work of art (Foucault 1984, 2). Besides, these studies and analyses also intend to be strategies to confront and counterpoint the recent attacks against democracy, vulnerable demographic groups, public universities and the production of academic analyses and research in the area of Human Sciences in Brazil (Penna 2018).<sup>8</sup>

The reflections proposed here do not intend to close the discussion. Rather, our experiences and perceptions from the field of social movements and the academy will keep feeding our analyses. We will keep on doing meaningful exercises by connecting activism and the academy, never forgetting our double subjectivity.

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<sup>1</sup> T.N.: a non-feminine lesbian [lésbica não-feminilizada] is a lesbian that rejects/does not comply with femininity ideals and performativities. Despite rejecting femininity, it is important to point out that, even though some of them might, these lesbians do not necessarily identify with masculinity.

<sup>2</sup> T.N.: Transmasculinity is not one – or single – type of masculinity. It is more aptly described as a context: masculinity as enacted by people with transgender identities. Transmasculine is an umbrella term referring to individuals who were assigned to a female gender role at birth and at some point come to self-identify as men, or with some other masculine identity, rather than seeing themselves as women. Trans man (sometimes trans-man or transman) is a man who was assigned female at birth. "Transmacho" can refer to a transmasculine person who embodies patriarchal and sexist attitudes or to a transmasculine person.

<sup>3</sup> T.N.: deterministic regulations refer to biological interference on how the lesbian body is read, where the life/body of a "butch" does not fit in the female/male binary. By being a "butch" (lésbica não feminilizada, as they use) a "butch" cannot be a "woman." Therefore, she would be seen as a (trans) man.; the quote can also be read as: "[this person is not a lesbian, it is] a transmacho, but an inadequate one, because it has boobs [and a transmacho, a trans man, should not have boobs]; "transmacho" here might simply mean "trans man," since Brazilian feminist women and lesbians/sapatonas colloquially refer to men as "machos" (whether they are explicitly sexist and have macho attitudes or not)."

<sup>4</sup> The names João Paulo and Rosalinda are fictitious and were used to preserve the identities of the subjects who provided the narratives for this study. The narratives were collected, and authorised in dialogical and punctual interviews, in a dialogue between all individuals of the process, including a lesbian feminist activist and other researchers, in two moments of different events: an event from the trans movement and one from the lesbian and bisexual feminist movement, at Curitiba. Those narratives are part of a larger collection and constitute the corpus of this research, which has been produced since 2016.

<sup>5</sup> We chose to quote the authors' first name in the first citation or reference to make visible the female authorship that has historically been erased from the spaces of knowledge production and that remain invisible by the rules of current bibliographic citations. This is a political and epistemological decision for feminist writing.

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<sup>6</sup> Although we do not ignore the recent political organization of intersex people in Brazil, here we refer to organised social movements using the LGBT acronym produced democratically at the 1st National LGBT Conference, that took place in 2008, in Brasília – Distrito Federal. For more information, read: Santos, Dayana Brunetto Carlin dos. 2010. "Cartographies of Transsexuality: a School Experience and Other Plots." Master's thesis. Federal University of Paraná – UFPR.

<sup>7</sup> T.N.: See "sapatão" in Barros, Bruna and Jess Oliveira. 2020. "Black *Sapatão* Translation Practices: Healing Ourselves a Word Choice at a Time." Also in this issue.

<sup>8</sup> For further information, please check: [https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2019/05/11/politica/1557603454\\_146732.html](https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2019/05/11/politica/1557603454_146732.html) and <https://congressoemfoco.uol.com.br/especial/noticias/associacoes-de-ciencias-humanas-rebatem-argumentos-de-bolsonaro-para-cortar-investimentos/>.