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DANIEL BALDERSTON AND JOSÉ MARISTANY

The lesbian and gay novel
in Latin America

Literary tradition can be defined in terms of a select corpus of texts that have held meaning for readers and critics. In the case of a homoerotic tradition, it is worth reflecting on whether what is at stake is the mention of gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender practices in literature, whether the sexuality of the authors is central, whether the works are judged "authentic" (which for many signifies the presence of positive images), whether they express an esthetics that is in some sense "queer," whether they have some political content that ties them to programs of sexual liberation, and whether they are worth thinking about as works of literature. These questions are not even parallel to one another in terms of the semantic fields or epistemologies they invoke, so the difficulties of defining a tradition are obvious. Taking them one by one, then:

(1) Is it sufficient for there to be gay and lesbian "themes" in a novel to claim it for such a tradition? Works as diverse as Mario Vargas Llosa's *Los cachorros* (*The Cubs*, 1967), *Conversación en la Catedral* (*Conversation in the Cathedral*, 1969), and *Historia de Mayta* (*The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*, 1984), Julio Cortázar's *Los premios* (*The Winners*, 1960) and Leonardo Padura's *Máscaras* ("Masks," 1996) have gay male characters, and Aluísio Azevedo's *O cortiço* (*A Brazilian Tenement*, 1890), Juan Carlos Onetti's *Dejemos hablar al viento* (*Let the Wind Speak*, 1979), and Rosario Castellanos's *Album de familia* ("Family album," 1971) have lesbian characters, but it is our contention that this is not sufficient to define these works as part of a Latin American homoerotic tradition, at least in the terms that we will be setting out here. Although these works are certainly fertile ground for queer readings, there has not been a sustained tradition of critical readings of them in terms of their representation of lesbian and gay lives, and they have not been claimed for a homoerotic tradition in the same way that, say, José Donoso's *El lugar sin límites* (*Hell Has No Limits*, 1966), Manuel Puig's *La traición de Rita Hayworth* (*Betrayed by Rita Hayworth*, 1968), or Sylvia Molloy's *En breve cárcel* (*Certificate of Absence*, 1981) have. We

therefore respectfully disagree with David William Foster who, in a series of important collections on gay and lesbian writing in Latin America, sees the presence of such "themes" as crucial to the definition of a corpus. While it is true that there are numerous works by Vargas Llosa that treat these themes, something about that treatment has repelled a gay and lesbian readership. *Historia de Mayta*, for instance, posits Mayta's sexuality, at least until the last chapter of the novel, as a dirty secret, fascinating in a voyeuristic sense, and it is allied with Mayta's revolutionary practice in an ambivalent way; the narrator is perhaps slightly more sympathetic to Mayta's sexual quandary than to his political beliefs, but ultimately the novel functions as a damning critique of Mayta, at least in his politics. In contrast, a novel in which the gender (and perhaps sexual) identity of one of the main characters is a secret for most of the text, João Guimarães Rosa's *Grande sertão: veredas* (*The Devil to Pay in the Backlands*, 1956) narrates this sexual and gender ambiguity in a sympathetic way that brings the reader in.

Another way of saying this is that some of the works mentioned above have gay male and lesbian characters whose identities are fixed, and who therefore are usually relegated to secondary roles, whereas the works that have often been read as providing a seductive or mobile view of homoerotic desire (and this would include such characters as Donoso's Manuela in *El lugar sin límites*, Puig's Molina in *El beso de la mujer araña* (*Kiss of the Spider Woman*), and Guimarães Rosa's Diadorim (in *Grande sertão*) resist this fixity. This clarifies the problem in Cortázar, Onetti, and Vargas Llosa: the gay characters in their work are objects of fascination for the protagonists, but are not the protagonists themselves. E. M. Forster's distinction (in *Aspects of the Novel*) between "flat" and "round" characters is helpful here, since the protagonists or narrators of these novels define themselves (in their psychological complexity) by contrast to the stock background characters, even when these are as important for the works as the lesbian Frieda is for Onetti in *Dejemos hablar al viento* or the tortured homosexual revolutionary Mayta is for Vargas Llosa. That is to say, the "marginal" characters serve to shore up the "normative" quality of the main characters; homosexuality, as happened in the history of psychology in the nineteenth century, begets heterosexuality.

(2) Is the sexuality of the author key to the delineation of a lesbian and gay literary tradition? If not, why not? The problem here is multiple. There are authors about whose sexuality we know quite a lot (e.g. Virgilio Piñera), whose work rarely concerns gay and lesbian "themes," and authors about whose sexuality we know little (e.g. Carlos Montenegro or João Guimarães Rosa), whose works are rich in these themes. For reading *El lugar sin límites* it seems less important to know whether or not Donoso had homosexual

experiences (although he did), and certainly not whether he was the transvestite madam of a provincial Chilean brothel, than with analyzing the ways in which his portrayal of the sexuality of La Manuela is complex and absolutely central to the narrative. For whatever biographical reason, Donoso in his literary work focuses on marginal characters whose marginality is very revealing of the society in which they live (this would be true also in a very different sense of *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* [*The Obscene Bird of Night*, 1970]), and his work “queers” Chilean society and family relations even when its main theme is not sexuality.

It is also worth remarking here on the importance of narrative works that tell of a sexuality that is different from the author's. Cristina Peri Rossi is not a heterosexual man, nor is Sylvia Molloy a gay Argentine-American man, nor is Manuel Puig a lesbian, yet their respective *Solitario de amor* (*Solitaire of Love*, 1999), *El común olvido* (“Common oblivion,” 2002), and *Pubis angelical* (*Pubis Angelical*, 1996) foreground these varieties of sexual experience.

(3) In feminist literary criticism it has been posited that there is such a thing as “écriture feminine,” with important theorists like Hélène Cixous insisting that there is an essence, a sensibility that informs women's writing. (Many feminist critics disagree, however.) Could such a thing as gay, lesbian, or queer writing exist? If so, what would characterize it?

Some critics of gay male writing have seen camp as an esthetics, even a tradition, that informs a significant body of texts. Certainly in Latin America one can find a camp esthetics in such writers as Manuel Puig, Severo Sarduy, and Luis Zapata. And certainly Sylvia Molloy's *En breve cárcel* works with familiar motifs of “écriture feminine” such as interiority, closed spaces, and a mixing of experience, desire, and memory. Such examples do not exhaust the range of gay and lesbian writing, however. A “queer” esthetics, which is much more difficult to define, seems to play with gender categories in a freer way.

(4) Is there a need for a gay and lesbian literary work to have some political dimension, to appeal to an “imagined community”? It could be argued that works after 1970 or so treat gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identities in a rather different way from works before that time, and that the social and political context is crucial in defining that difference. In that sense there is a difference between, say, Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) and D'Halmar's *Pasión y muerte del cura Deusto* (“The passion and death of Father Deusto,” 1924), or between Senel Paz's *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*, 1991) and Lezama's *Paradiso* (*Paradiso*, 1966), or between Sylvia Molloy's *En breve cárcel* (1981) and Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta's *La vida manda* (“Life commands,” 1929).

The possibility of appealing to a collective identity known to the readership is very different in 1990 from what it was in 1924 or even in 1966. The movements of women's liberation and of lesbian and gay liberation that begin in Latin America in the 1970s created new collective subjects, and related liberation struggles of different kinds to one another. The interesting thing about many of the literary works that can be claimed for a homoerotic tradition from the 1970s to the present is precisely that they do not work with categories of sexual identity alone or in isolation; questions of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and religious identity are often intertwined with the affirmation of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identities, and these many categories of identity are subjected to radical critique. A work like the Mexican-Peruvian novelist Mario Bellatín's *Salón de belleza* (“Beauty parlor,” 1999) says as much about poverty, access to public institutions of health care, and the market for transvestite prostitutes as it does about AIDS, and the power of the text turns on its radical critique of gender identity.

We should also emphasize the relation between this literary corpus and lesbian and gay movements in Latin America. These movements, beginning in the early 1970s, echoed liberationist ideas that came from the United States after the Stonewall rebellion of 1969 and also the rather different formulation of liberationist ideas that came from Europe (Hocquenghem and Melli), especially the French “homosexual liberation front,” whose name was echoed in the names of liberation groups in Argentina, Mexico, and Brazil. Manuel Puig's interest in liberationist practices is obvious in the footnotes to *El beso de la mujer araña*, and certainly one cannot read the works of Darcy Penteado, João Silvério Trevisan, Aguinaldo Silva, and Caio Fernando Abreu without taking into account the presence of gay liberationist ideas that were bravely asserted during the Brazilian military dictatorship. Similarly, the richness of gay and lesbian literature in Mexico (Zapata, Blanco, Monsiváis, Calva) is tied to the robust quality of the liberationist groups from 1975 on, and certainly a survey of lesbian culture in Mexico today cannot ignore the political dimension of the work of Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe.

In what follows we will reflect on a variety of literary works that form parts of a lesbian and gay tradition in the Latin American novel; we will refer to more gay male than lesbian examples because they are more numerous. We will group these novels loosely in three stages, not because there is any rigid periodization (in fact, there is considerable overlap among the stages) but to make sense of the configuration of “theme,” authorship, readership, and community, a configuration that changes with the emergence of gay and lesbian collective identities. We define these stages as:

- 1) the gay and lesbian as other, set in scenes dominated by discourses of the nation, science and law, often viewed through the lens of the "decadence" of a social class or as social or psychological pathology,
- 2) the estheticizing of homosexuality, with the homosexual posited as heir of the humanist tradition (Wilde and Gide), and the emergence of a homosexual subject without overt consciousness of community, and
- 3) the emergence of a lesbian and gay political subject concerned with the creation of a community and acting as an agent of social change, and the widening of definitions of queer subjects to include bisexuals, transgender people, transsexuals and even a queering of heterosexuality.

Important critical work has been done in the last few years to recuperate a series of literary texts that were somehow isolated in their moment and in their national tradition but that now, in retrospect, can be linked together. The earliest work of this kind that has drawn attention is Raúl Pompéia's *O Ateneu* ("The Athenaeum"), a *Bildungsroman* published in 1888 that describes a variety of perversions, including male homosexuality, to attack the false aristocratic culture of the late Brazilian empire; selections from this work were included by Winston Leyland in *My Deep Dark Pain Is Love* (1983), the second anthology of Latin American gay writing published by Gay Sunshine Press.¹ Another key early text is Adolfo Caminha's 1895 novel *Bom Crioulo* ("Bom Crioulo: the black man and the cabin boy") which describes the love between a black ex-slave and a much younger white cabin boy, a love that begins on shipboard and ends tragically on a street in Rio de Janeiro. Like *O Ateneu*, the Caminha novel is critical of the decadence of the old aristocracy in Brazil and uses homosexuality (as well as race) to describe social conflict that the new Brazil needs to overcome. What is different about *Bom Crioulo* is that the love between the two protagonists constitutes the center of the narrative intrigue and that a whole "sex gender system" (including anxieties about male passivity and female activity) is invoked. Caminha, like his contemporary Aluísio Azevedo, is inspired by Zola's naturalism, which proposes to cast a clinical eye on the ills of a society; the narrative voice, while sympathetic to the characters, is ultimately concerned with a national pathology. In addition, the relation between Aleixo and Amaro rehearses familiar tropes of heterosexuality (particularly in its insistence on Aleixo's "passivity"), though oddly the subsequent relations between Aleixo and Carolina (a "heterosexual" relationship) turns these stereotypes on end by making Carolina an aggressive, even a butch, character.

In Spanish America the works that have drawn most attention are from a slightly later period, from 1910 to 1940. Besides the long short story

"El hombre que parecía un caballo" ("The man who looked like a horse"), written by the Guatemalan Rafael Arévalo Martínez about the Colombian poet Porfirio Barba Jacob in 1915, a crucial work is Augusto D'Halmar's *Pasión y muerte del cura Deusto*, a novel that the Chilean sets in Seville. As Sylvia Molloy has argued in a recent article,² the exoticism of the Andalusian milieu serves not only to free the Basque priest's sensuality but also to provide a safe distance for the Latin American reader to imagine a different, even a "Mediterranean," sexuality, embodied in D'Halmar's novel in the gypsy altar boy, part of a world that the Basque priest finds exotic and enticing. Like Anna Karenina, he will die a suicide, killed by the train that is carrying his beloved to Madrid.

There are also several Cuban works from this period that are of interest: Alfonso Hernández Catá's *El ángel de Sodoma* ("The angel of Sodom," 1928), Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta's *La vida manda* (1929), and Carlos Montenegro's *Hombres sin mujer* ("Men without women," 1935). The Hernández Catá novel tells of the "difference" of José-María Vélez-Gomarra, the male protagonist (who ends a suicide, like Father Deusto), a melancholic victim of family expectations who falls into a chaste love for a male trapeze artist; the preface to the novel by the Spanish physician and essayist Gregorio Marañón emphasizes the pathological aspects of the world revealed by the novelist and asserts that social progress needs to take such pathologies seriously. Rodríguez Acosta's *La vida manda* purports to be about the subjugation of women in marriage and patriarchy but, interestingly, includes a Platonic lesbian subplot that seems to offer other possibilities before being closed off by the homosexual panic of one of the female protagonists. Montenegro's *Hombres sin mujer*, set in a Cuban prison like the one where Montenegro spent several years, concerns a black prisoner, Pascasio, and a white one, Andresito Pinel, whose love is tested by the warden's interest in Andresito. The warden punishes Pascasio to get him out of the way, and when Andresito, concerned about Pascasio, gives in to the warden, he sets in motion Pascasio's jealousy which will end with Andresito being murdered by Pascasio. Rodríguez Acosta and Montenegro include homosexual plots as part of a larger concern with oppression in Cuban society; important recent analyses of these works have been written by Nina Menéndez and Emilio Bejel.

In a second stage, we see the emergence of the gay and lesbian as esthetic objects, and of a complex coding of a minority gay and lesbian culture. The example par excellence of this stage is José Lezama Lima's *Paradiso* (1966), in which there is a defense of a homoerotic tradition in Western culture as part of a bohemian esthetic and of the invention of a spiritualized poetic tradition. José Cemí, the protagonist of Lezama's novel (based clearly on elements of Lezama's early life and the history of his family, as has been explored

in the criticism), joins a group of radical esthetes at the university, which includes his two closest friends, Foción and Fronesis. In the famous ninth chapter there is a neo-Platonic dialogue on the importance of gay love (which Lezama considers part of an "hipertelia de la inmortalidad," something like Wordsworth's "intimations of immortality"), which complements a series of sexual discoveries in the eighth chapter. Of the three friends only Foción is defined as a gay character, and he (like the heroes of many of the earlier novels we have discussed) ends up committing suicide, a nihilist act forced at least in part by his unconsummated love for Fronesis; nevertheless, the dialogue in the ninth chapter is echoed in many later works of Cuban (and more broadly of Latin American) literature. What is of interest here is not to claim *Paradiso* as totally, or even mostly, a gay novel; it is instead the way in which the "type" of the gay esthete is transformative of the whole world of the novel, and informs Cemí's development even if his maturing does not seem to have a homosexual identity as its teleology. Literary vocation, and the spiritualizing lessons of poetry, are bound up for Lezama with the homoerotic, however these may inform lived experience. Lezama's dense neo-baroque prose would also prove highly influential on many later writers, and for some would seem to condense a "gay" or "queer" style in Latin America: see, for instance, later works of Sarduy, Senel Paz, and Pedro de Jesús, among others.

A complementary example of a gay esthetics is Lúcio Cardoso's final literary work *Crônica da casa assassinada* ("Chronicle of an assassinated home," 1959). A novel of existential anguish and bourgeois decadence, centered on a series of diaries including that of a gay character, *Crônica* is a complex novel in which the homoerotic elements are part of the estheticizing of loss and nostalgia. Celebrated by recent critics such as Mário Carelli and Severino Albuquerque (the latter also noting tantalizing connections between the works of Cardoso and that of his close friend Clarice Lispector, the most important woman writer in modern Brazil), Cardoso views sexual difference as a component of the struggle for artistic creativity; in this sense he queers the Brazilian literary tradition of the mid-twentieth century.

Other works that could be connected with this estheticizing of gay experience are Virgilio Piñera's *La carne de René* (*René's Flesh*, 1952) and many of the works of Manuel Mujica Láinez. Piñera's work includes a homoerotic sensuality (heroically resisted by René, the protagonist) as part of a "religion of the flesh," a sharp (and sometimes campy) parody of Catholicism with its plethora of martyrs; José Quiroga has argued that the scene of the "softening of René's flesh" is the most erotic in Cuban literature. Mujica Láinez, who in his public life cultivated a dandy image, even dressing in imitation of Marcel Proust (captured in a photograph in Herbert Craig's book *Marcel Proust and Spanish American Literature*), was Argentina's ultimate esthete,

writing in flowery language about the mysteries of artistic creation. His fiction often includes implicit homoerotic impulses and situations, though these are somewhat obscured by a focus on tormented characters who exemplify the decadence of a local aristocracy. Gay characters in Mujica Láinez are sensitive flowers of these aristocracies, strongly attached to European (especially French) culture; their desires are sublimated through cultural allusion. Another writer who deserves mention in this regard is José Bianco, whose two novellas, *Sombras suele vestir* (*Shadow Play*, 1941) and *Las ratas* (*The Rats*, 1943), and much later novel *La pérdida del reino* ("The loss of the Kingdom," 1972) are powerful examples of the esthetics of homoeroticism, though this is never made explicit. (Some of these elements are also present in the short stories of Bianco's friend Silvina Ocampo.) In Bianco's *Las ratas* the powerful scene that precedes the murder of the half-brother by the narrator includes an intensely erotic description of the half-brother's nude body; the murder bestows a mysterious power on the narrator, as if he had taken in some of the dead man's erotic aura. A younger writer with ties to Mujica Láinez, who wrote a biography of Mujica, a collective biography of the *Sur* group, and a memoir of childhood in northern Argentina, Oscar Hermes Villordo was famous in the period of the Argentine transition to democracy for his rather crude gay novel *La brasa en la mano* ("The ember in the hand," 1983), a celebration of furtive encounters in a repressed Buenos Aires. Another writer who uses homosexuality to evoke a world of conflict and decadence is Mauricio Wacquez, particularly in *Frente a un hombre armado: cacerías de 1848* ("In front of an armed man: hunts of 1848," 1981).

Severo Sarduy wrote his fiction after his exile from Cuba in 1960, especially after he became part of Roland Barthes's circle in Paris. Already in his second novel, *De donde son los cantantes* (*From Cuba with a Song*, 1967), there is a camp self-consciousness about the portrayal of gender, with biologically female characters acting the part of drag queens. His best-known novel *Cobra* (*Cobra*, 1972) is largely set in an Amsterdam peopled by transvestites, motorcycle gang members, and a variety of fetishists. In this novel Sarduy writes: "La escritura es el arte de la elipsis" (Writing is the art of ellipsis); his novel includes divagations on fashion, Buddhism, Forster's *The Passage to India*, and invented rituals, while evoking a mysterious sex change experienced by the protagonist. Sarduy's much later novel *Pájaros de la playa* ("Beach birds," 1993) is an allegory about AIDS presented once again through a spiritualizing language and a densely strange atmosphere; its influence can be felt later in Mario Bellatín's *Salón de belleza*.

Perhaps the richest of the texts of our second stage is José Donoso's 1966 novel *El lugar sin límites*, the account of the life and death of La Manuela, the transvestite co-owner of a bordello in a small town in Chile (perhaps

the first novel that centers on questions of transgender). Narrated partly in interior monologues by La Manuela (who alternates masculine and feminine pronouns when speaking of him/herself), it recalls his arrival in Estación El Olivo as the young dancer who has been contracted to entertain the male population of the town in the company of several prostitutes including one known as La Japonesa Grande. The novel includes an extraordinary chapter in which La Manuela evokes the scene by which he became co-owner of the house of prostitution (sharing it with La Japonesa Grande) by winning a bet in which the owner of the town and the surrounding hacienda challenges him to make love to La Japonesa; she becomes pregnant and years later (after her death) the co-owner of the house is now La Manuela's frigid daughter La Japonesita (who is ashamed of her cross-dressing father). The plot turns on the sexual obsession with La Japonesita and La Manuela on the part of Pancho, a local truckdriver who is probably the illegitimate son of the local landowner; the novel ends in an orgy of homophobic violence. Many of Donoso's other works include scenes of sexual dissonance, from the hilarious bestiality of the *La misteriosa desaparición de la marquesita de Loria* ("The mysterious disappearance of the Marquise of Loria," 1980) to the bizarre scenes of blood transfusion in *El obsceno pájaro de la noche* to the sexual obsession with the androgynous figure in *El jardín de al lado* (*The Garden Next Door*, 1981). The center of many of Donoso's novels is a sexually attractive and ambiguous figure about whom there is woven a web of intrigue; this figure is isolated from the community but its life revolves around him or her.

In Manuel Puig's first novel, *La traición de Rita Hayworth*, this estheticizing of the homosexual continues to some extent, with the *Bildungsroman* format that narrates Toto's coming to artistic consciousness through daily excursions to the small town cinema with his mother, troubled relations with the macho bullies at school, and a conflictive relationship with his homophobic and anti-artistic father. Some of these elements are also present in his next two novels, *Boquitas pintadas* (*Heartbreak Tango*, 1969) and *The Buenos Aires Affair* (*The Buenos Aires Affair*, 1973). We consider, however, *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) as the founding text of a post-Stonewall gay literature in Latin America. Explicitly focused on the political maturing of a gay man, Molina, and of the changing perspective of an imprisoned revolutionary, Valentín Arregui, who comes to see the place of sexual oppression in the society he is struggling to change, Puig's novel depends for its force on identity categories that it ultimately questions. As in Puig's earlier work, there is not a unifying narrative voice in *El beso*, which consists mostly of the dialogues between Molina and Valentín; in turn, these conversations are largely concerned with the narration, usually by Molina, of a series of films. Gender and sexuality are staged and analyzed in the two characters' conversations

as they come to understand the other's worldview and to modify their own. The analytical undercurrent of the conversations is underscored in a series of footnotes in which Puig grapples with theories of sexuality and their relations to theories of social change; the synthesis of psychoanalytic and liberationist ideas on sexual oppression serves in counterpoint to elucidate the changes in the two characters in the prison cell. Elements of camp and melodrama are used to heighten the urgent search for a new and inclusive community. As Puig argues (in drag, in the final footnote), sexual liberation is part of a larger social transformation.³ The novel exemplifies the connections made among struggles for liberation in the New Left and uniquely dramatizes those struggles in the prisonhouse dialogue. Puig's novel is arguably the first in which a gay character is given the status of a political subject, and in which the struggle for a new society explicitly includes a vision of the place of gay people in that society.

Sylvia Molloy's *En breve cárcel* (1981) is another landmark in the Latin American novel. An unnamed woman waits in an apartment and writes; she reflects on her past love for Vera and weaves in her present love for Renata; the writing and the incidents of the advancing story inform each other. An interior story, sometimes rather claustrophobic in its extreme interiority, Molloy's novel nevertheless tells of momentous incidents in the life of her protagonist. The lesbian context of the novel is central to the story, even as the protagonist explores the meaning of her relationships with her dead father and aunt, with her mother, with her sister. Minimalist, dense, intensely moving, *En breve cárcel* is the most important lesbian novel in Latin American literature to date.

Luis Zapata's *Las aventuras, desventuras y sueños de Adonis García, el vampiro de la colonia Roma* (*Adonis García: A Picaresque Novel*, 1979), while not the first Mexican novel that focused on a gay male character,⁴ was the first one that was a popular success precisely because of its use of this theme in a new picaresque novel of marginal life in Mexico City, one of the great mega-cities of contemporary Latin America. Using the device of an interview with a male hustler, the Adonis of the title (a device linked to the testimonial genres of the time and to the new urban novel of Gustavo Sainz and others) tells the story of his sexual life. The silent interlocutor (who stands in for the reader and perhaps for the author) takes a voyeuristic interest in García's life but is also a potential victim of García's mischievous view of society, where the prostitute's clients only seemingly dictate the terms of the encounter, and where the hustler/narrator takes pleasure in the sexual commerce of which he forms part. It is this focus on the narrator's sexual pleasure that contrasts with earlier narratives of prostitution which so often cast the prostitute as victim, and are usually narrated from a dominant male

perspective. García in contrast "feminizes" his clients, sometimes portraying them with gentle ridicule, and reveals that despite their economically dominant positions in society they often prefer to take a passive role in their relations with the hustler. At the same time, the hustler here clearly defines himself as a gay subject who is led into this "trade" not only by economic necessity but also by desire.

Zapata's later fiction explores other dimensions of gay life in Mexico, including the relation of gay men to their families (*Melodrama*, 1983), transsexual identities (*La hermana secreta de Angélica María*, "The secret sister of Angélica María," 1989), and extreme sexual obsession that verges on madness (*En jirones*, "In shreds," 1985). Zapata's contemporary José Rafael Calva also explores a wide variety of sexual experience including sadomasochism (*El jinete azul*, "The blue horseman," 1985) and gay male pregnancy (*Utopía gay*, 1983). Two important Mexican novels of lesbian life are Sara Levi Calderón's *Dos mujeres* (*The Two Mujeres*, 1990) and Rosamaría Roffiel's *Amora* (1989). *Dos mujeres* is concerned with the relationship between Genovesa, a painter, and Valeria, a writer, who defy the social expectations of their gender and class; it also explores the outsider status of Jewish lesbians in a mostly Catholic country, and the protagonists finally choose to migrate to the United States in search of a more accepting community. *Amora* is concerned with lesbian participants in several feminist groups who end up forming an alternative family; less concerned with the lesbian couple than Levi Calderón's novel, it is also more deeply concerned with the place of lesbian communities in the Mexican feminist movement. Deborah Shaw has questioned the literary value of both books, which she argues are rather simplistic in their portrayal of their main characters.⁵

Perhaps most famous at the moment because of his self-promoting myth as a gay Cuban martyr in the posthumous memoirs *Antes que anochezca* (English translation and subsequent film version by Julian Schnabel both entitled *Before Night Falls*, 1992), Reinaldo Arenas wrote a series of novels (which supposedly form a "Pentagon") that narrate aspects of the homosexual condition in a patriarchal Cuba before and after the revolution of 1959. The first novel, *Celestino antes del alba* (*Singing from the Well*, 1967), tells of the boy poet's coming of age in rural Cuba where he writes poems on trees and is brutalized by his male relatives; *Otra vez el mar* (*Farewell from the Sea: A Novel of Cuba*, 1982) is an anguished account of sexual obsession in the repressive atmosphere of the revolution; *El color del verano* (*The Color of Summer*, or *The New Garden of Earthly Delights*, 1991) narrates in fictional form some of the episodes of persecution and imprisonment that are also narrated in *Antes que anochezca*. The humorous novel *El mundo alucinante* (*Hallucinations: Being an Account of the Life and Adventures of*

Friar Servando Teresa de Mier) includes extravagant sexual scenes amidst religious and political persecution in the period of the Mexican struggle for independence.

Other gay novelists of note in recent years include the Puerto Rican Angel Lozada for *La patografía* ("Patography," 1998), the late Colombian writer Fernando Molano Vargas for *Un beso de Dick* ("A kiss from Dick," 1992), Colombian novelist Alonso Sánchez Baute for *Al diablo la maldita primavera* ("To hell with damned spring," 2003), and the Argentine journalist and novelist Osvaldo Bazán (*La más maravillosa música, una historia de amor peronista*, "The most beautiful music, a Peronist love-story," 2002). Brazilian writers of note who have written novels on gay themes are João Silvério Trevisan (*Vagas notícias de Melinha Marchiotti* ["Vague news of Melinha Marchiotti"], 1984 and *O livro do avesso* ["The book of the inversion"], 1992), Caio Fernando Abreu (numerous short stories, as well as the novella "O marinheiro" ["The sailor," 1983] and the novel *Morangos mofados* ["Spoiled strawberries," 1982]), João Gilberto Noll (*Bandoleiros*, 1988 and several subsequent novels), and Jean-Claude Bernardet (*Aquele rapaz*, "That boy," 1990). A novel that powerfully evokes the persecution of gay men in the Inquisition and the Cuban Revolution is Antonio José Ponte's *Contrabando de sombras* ("Smuggled shadows," 2002). Several other younger Cuban writers who have focused on gay and lesbian experience are Pedro de Jesús López Acosta (in his short stories *Cuentos fríos* [Literally, "Frigid tales," but translated in English under the original Spanish title], but also in his novel *Sibilas en Mercaderes* ("Sibyl of Mercaderes," 1999), Jorge Angel Pérez in *El paseante Cándido* ("Strolling Candide," 2000), Ena Lucía Portela in *El pájaro: pincel y tinta china* ("The bird: paintbrush and Indian ink," 1999) and *La sombra del caminante* ("The shadow of the walker," 2001), and Abilio Estévez in *Tuyo es el reino* (*Thine Is the Kingdom*, 1997) and *Los palacios distantes* ("The distant palaces," 2002).

Although his work is extremely slight in volume, Senel Paz is known as the author of *El lobo, el bosque y el hombre nuevo* (*Strawberry and Chocolate*, 1991), later used by the Cuban director Tomás Gutiérrez Alea as the inspiration for the film *Fresa y chocolate* (and some later editions of the novella use *Fresa y chocolate* as their title instead of the rather clumsy original title). In Paz's novel, Diego, the gay character, has as his model the Lezarian dandy and explicitly reenacts scenes from *Paradiso* in his attempted seduction of the young communist David. Like Bazán's *La más maravillosa música* ("The most marvellous music," 2002) and Pedro Lemebel's *Tengo miedo torero* (*My Tender Matador*, 2001), the plot is derived from Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* in that it focuses on a dialogue between a revolutionary and a homosexual. Filled with references to Cuban and international gay culture,

the novella narrates the gay character's love of and alienation from Cuba, the revolutionary utopia that he ends up leaving. The novella is narrated by the young revolutionary David who evokes the memory of his now exiled friend as a fictional plea for reconciliation and tolerance. Paz's novella marks an attempt by a member of the post-revolutionary generation of writers to pay homage to crucial figures in Cuban culture (including Lezama) and to forge a reconciliation with Cuban gays (inside and outside of the island) who had been rejected by a homophobic revolutionary culture.

Silviano Santiago, best known outside Brazil as a literary and cultural critic, has published two novels, *Em liberdade* ("In liberty," 1982, a continuation of Graciliano Ramos's prison memoirs of 1953) and *Stella Manhattan* (1985, translated into English in 1994). The latter novel is focused on the life in New York City of a young gay Brazilian, Eduardo da Costa e Silva, who is working at the Brazilian consulate after his family decides that his life at home is scandalous. In New York he is a protégé of Coronel Valdevinos Vianna, an old friend of his father's who despite an ostensibly proper married life has a nocturnal double life as the leatherclad Black Widow (a *Viúva Negra*). Eduardo's explorations of life in Manhattan are fraught with danger, as he encounters a maniacal professor of Brazilian literature and a series of Brazilian graduate students who are linked to urban guerrilla groups in Brazil. Eduardo's death in jail covers for one of Vianna's nocturnal escapades; the novel ends with a sickening letter of condolence from Vianna and his wife to Eduardo's parents. Eduardo's explorations of gay life, and his imaginative doubling as the *Stella Manhattan* of the title, end tragically (as in earlier melodramas), though Santiago undoubtedly intends the tragedies to be viewed with a measure of camp humor.

Cristina Peri Rossi's most explicitly lesbian work is her early book of poetry *Evoché* (1971), and sexual obsession of every type is discussed in the essays of *Fantasías eróticas* (1991), but it is important to mention here the final chapter of *La nave de los locos* (*The Ship of Fools*, 1984) and the subsequent *Solitario de amor* (1988). *La nave de los locos*'s final chapter is a fantasized lesbian encounter between Marlene Dietrich and Mexican film star Dolores del Río (though Dietrich cultivated a lesbian persona, del Río did not, so the fantasized encounter is surprising). *Solitario de amor*, a tale of heterosexual obsession with a male narrator, has been read as a covert meditation on lesbian butch-femme relations, though Peri Rossi herself has refused to authorize this reading (for queer readings of her work see Martínez and Kaminsky). Another writer who has made an elliptical reference to lesbianism is María Moreno in her novel *El affair Skeffington* ("The Skeffington affair," 1992), the purported translation of materials by an English woman writer on the edge of the Bloomsbury group; Francine Masiello has discussed

the significance of this novel in terms of the staging of a woman-centered literary tradition. Another writer who makes elliptical use of same-sex relations in a woman-centered world is the Colombian Albalucía Angel, particularly in *Estaba la pájara pinta sentada en el verde limón* ("The colored bird was sitting on a green lemon tree,"⁶ 1975) and *Misiá señora* (1982).

Jaime Bayly, a Peruvian television personality and writer, became famous with the publication of *No se lo digas a nadie* (*Don't Tell Anyone*, 1994), a narrative focused on Joaquín, a gay *limeño* (details of whose life story are very close to Bayly's) who struggles to come to terms with his homosexuality in light of his tense relations with a womanizing, racist, and homophobic father and a devoutly Catholic mother who is part of the Opus Dei. Though the plotting is clumsy and the novel much too long, *No se lo digas a nadie* has won an audience with its attempts to capture a Lima vernacular, the experience of a yuppie youth culture, and its seeming frankness about the sexuality of the protagonist. At the same time, the novel is dedicated to Sandra, Bayly's wife, and the biographical note on the cover clarifies that Bayly is married and has a daughter: at least one could speak of a sales strategy that wants to have it both ways, with a photogenic and ostensibly straight author and a flamboyantly gay (and passive) protagonist. Bayly's subsequent career – he has published four more novels and a book of verse (one hesitates to call it poetry) – has continued to play on the angles that made *No se lo digas a nadie* famous (and eventually resulted in its transformation into a film), notably the tensions in the family (with parents, spouse, and daughters) brought about by the hero's unresolved sexual identity (or at least the unresolved relation between his public persona and his private identity or identities). Bayly himself is novelized as the narrator's love interest in Luis Corbacho's recent *Mi amado Mister B.* ("My beloved Mr. B.," 2004).

The great bulk of Fernando Vallejo's work is autobiographical, especially the massive series of *El río del tiempo* ("The river of time," 1983–95), as well as in his recent *El desbarrancadero* ("The derailment," 2000), and *La Rambla paralela* (2002). *La virgen de los sicarios* (*Our Lady of the Assassins*, 1997) is the most novelistic of his works; it narrates the return of the middle-aged narrator, Fernando, to his native Medellín, where he falls in love with a young hired gun, Alexis, and then (after Alexis's death) with another, Wilmar (who turns out to be Alexis's killer). The novel, adapted for the screen by the Franco-Colombian director Barbet Schroeder, is lyrical in its evocation of a lost love, even though that love turns out to be a killer who is shockingly indifferent to the narrator's esthetic and ethical concerns. A brilliant text that has been viewed as a celebration of man-boy love, as the supreme fiction of Colombia's violence, and as a diatribe against Nation and Church, *La virgen*

(which unfortunately has been translated badly) is one of the most widely commented upon of recent Latin American novels.

Mario Bellatín, born in Mexico but raised in Peru, has recently emerged as one of Mexico's most powerful writers; his work has considered topics as varied as a blind poet, a young man afflicted by the loss of limbs from the drug thalidomide, a Japanese writer with an abnormally large nose, and various other marginalized figures. His finest work to date is *Salón de belleza* (1999), an allegorical novel about AIDS that bears some relation to Sarduy's final *Pájaros de la playa* (1993). *Salón de belleza* is narrated by a hair stylist who decorated his beauty shop with aquariums full of brilliantly colored fish, and who has another source of income when he goes out at night (with some of his fellow stylists) to work as a cross-dressing prostitute. The novel takes place after the narrator's co-workers have fallen sick from a mysterious and stigmatized illness that has forced their isolation from the world; it tells of the death of the fish in the aquariums and of the co-workers as the beauty shop is converted into a hospice, a place of death and dying. The intensity of the narrator's account is heightened as the reader comes to realize that the narrator also is afflicted with the mysterious disease and that the world of the beauty shop is coming to an end. A brief, intense, and apocalyptic novel, *Salón de belleza* is a beautiful evocation of a lost community, at the same time that the magical space of the beauty salon also is part of a network of solidarity and caring (a topic also discussed by the Chilean Pedro Lemebel in *Loco afán: crónicas de sidario* ["Mad pursuit: AIDS chronicles," 1996]).

In 2002 Sylvia Molloy published a second novel, *El común olvido*, twenty-one years after the publication of *En breve cárcel* (and as important we think to any history of the gay and lesbian novel as the earlier text was). It tells the story of Daniel, the gay male narrator, and his return to Buenos Aires to explore the reporting of the Oscar Wilde trials in Argentine newspapers of the 1890s. Spurred on by a more urgent personal need to explore the story of his late parents, *El común olvido* is notable for the ways in which the protagonist's contemporary story of life as an Argentine-American in New York is woven into the stories of his Anglo-American father (and the father's relatives that Daniel encounters on his return to Buenos Aires), of his mother's (lesbian?) friends, and of stories of gay life in Buenos Aires both past and present. A rich tapestry of lives, an interweaving of voices, *El común olvido* is an intense, mature work of exile and return, of the search for identity, of the construction of an "imagined community."

A notable feature of *El común olvido* is how it relates gay and lesbian lives in the past to the present, and how it shows the impact on contemporary communities of AIDS, exile, and globalization. In this regard it is typical of a variety of novels of the present moment, including Ponte's *Contrabando*

de sombras, Bellatín's *Salón de belleza*, and the works of Pedro Lemebel: reflecting on how a community is forged in adversity, it shows how essential memory is to the invention of a tradition. There can be no doubt that at the time of this writing the homoerotic tradition in all its fullness (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer) is a powerful one in the Latin American novel.

NOTES

1. On these anthologies, see Balderston and Quiroga, "A Sinister, Beautiful Fairyland: Gay Sunshine Press Does Latin America," *Social Text* (Fall, 2003): 85-108.
2. Sylvia Molloy, "Of Queens and Castanets: *Hispanidad*, Orientalism, and Sexual Difference," in C. Patton and B. Sánchez-Eppler (eds.), *Queer Diasporas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 105-21.
3. See Balderston, "Sexuality and Revolution: On the footnotes to *El beso de la Mujer araña*," in Matthew C. Gutmann (ed.), *Changing Men and Masculinities in Latin America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 216-32.
4. See Claudia Schaefer, *Danger Zones: Homosexuality, National Identity, and Mexican Culture* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996) for discussion of earlier novels, notably Manuel Barbachano Ponce's *El diario de José Toledo*, 1964.
5. Deborah Shaw, "Erotic or Political: Literary Representations of Mexican Lesbians," *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 5, 1 (1996): 51-63.
6. The title of this novel corresponds to the first line of a children's song - well known in Colombia - about a colorful female bird. The song's innocent connotations are belied by Angel's depiction of patriarchal violence against women.

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