Poetic opening stanched by violence

Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira

Professor Associado de Antropologia da Universidade Federal de São Paulo (Unifesp), São Paulo, SP, Brasil

Abstract

This article reflects on violence committed against *travestis*, examining a series of murders of *travestis*, together with narratives regarding violence, to see where these events and stories lead, and to formulate related questions. Through this movement, the research develops such questions as: what are the motives behind the violence committed against *travesties*, and what do these motives tell us? If violence is expressive – in other words, if it tells us something – what is it saying? Can we talk about crimes as being gender-based? If so, how should we consider the relations between gender, sexuality, and violence? What desires are at play? And what do these events tell us about the concept of gender itself ?

Keywords: Gender, violence, sexuality, power, desire.

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Abertura poética que a violência estanca

Resumo

Este artigo busca refletir sobre violência contra travestis. Seguindo uma série de assassinatos e narrativas sobre violência, o texto procura ver para onde esses eventos e histórias levam e, no percurso, formular perguntas. Tal movimento conduz a indagações, tais como: quais são os motivos da violência contra travestis? O que nos diz? Se a violência é expressiva, ou seja, se conta algo, o que estaria dizendo? Poderíamos falar em crimes com um caráter generificado? Se a resposta for afirmativa, como pensar as relações entre gênero, sexualidade e violência? Quais são os desejos em jogo? E o que esses acontecimentos nos dizem sobre o próprio conceito de gênero?
Palavras-chave: Gênero, violência, sexualidade, poder, desejo.

La apertura poética que la violencia estanca

Resumen

Este artículo reflexiona sobre la violencia contra las travestis. En base a una serie de asesinatos y narrativas sobre violencia, el texto se propone saber hacia dónde llevan esas historias y acontecimientos para poder formular preguntas en ese transcurso. Esto conduce a indagaciones tales como: ¿qué nos dice la violencia contra las travestis?, ¿cuáles son los motivos? Si la violencia es expresiva, es decir cuenta algo, ¿qué estaría diciendo? ¿Podemos hablar de crímenes con carácter de género? Si la respuesta es afirmativa, ¿cómo se pueden pensar las relaciones entre género, sexualidad y violencia? ¿Cuáles son los deseos que están en juego? ¿Qué nos dicen esos eventos sobre el propio concepto de género?
Palabras clave: género, violencia, sexualidad, poder, deseo.

Ouverture poétique endiguée par la violence

Résumé

Cet article cherche à réfléchir sur la violence exercée contre les travestis. Suite à une série de meurtres et de témoignages, le texte essaie de voir où conduisent ces évènements, ce que charrient les histoires et partant, formule des questionnements. Les évènements de cette sorte interrogent: quels sont les motifs de la violence envers les travestis et que nous dit cette violence ? Si la violence est expressive – en somme, si elle dit quelque chose, alors de quoi s'agit-il ? Pouvons-nous parler de crimes genrés ? Si oui, comment penser la relation entre genre, sexualité et violence ? Quels sont les désirs en jeu ? Que nous disent ces évènements sur le concept même de genre ?
Mots-clés : Genre, violence, sexualité, pouvoir, désir.

Poetic opening stanched by violence

Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira

We were in mourning, stunned by the escalation of violence against *travestis* in the city of Santa Maria, a municipality in the State of Rio Grande do Sul. On the morning of December 13th, 2019, I received a message informing me that Verônica had been murdered. She was a local leader and ran a boarding house for *travestis*. It was the third death during that period. Before her, Carol and Mana had already suffered the same fate and, soon after, news came of two more murders, those of Selena and Morgana. Five deaths in five months. In a short space and time, this series of murders seemed to condense the existing appalling data on violence against *travestis* and trans persons.

In 2019, 124 trans persons and *travestis* were murdered in Brazil, according to the *Associação Nacional de Travestis e Transexuais* (ANTRA) [National Association of *Travestis* and Transsexuals]. Among these deaths, 80% occurred after excessive violence, and in only 8% of cases were the suspects identified. According to *Rede Trans Brasil* [Trans Network Brazil], in 2018, there were 150 murder cases and, in 2019, 10,535. From the 1st to the 24th of January 2020 alone, there was a 180% increase in the number of homicides compared with the previous year (Souza *et al*., 2021). In a Brazilian study that sought to describe the profile of notifications of violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, *travesti* and transgender people (LGBT) between 2015 and 2017, based on secondary data from the *Sistema de Informação de Agravos de Notificação* (SINAN) [Notifiable Diseases Information System], Isabella Vitral Pinto *et al*. (2020) showed that of the 24,564 reports of violence against the LGBT population registered, 69.1% were between 20 and 59 years of age, half were black (50%), 46.6% were transsexuals or *travestis*, the most frequent type of violence was physical (75%), and in 66.2% of cases the likely perpetrator was male.

Faced with this scenario, particularly in reaction to the Santa Maria murders, the feeling was one of fear, but, as Butler (2004) has taught us, fear and mourning are also instigations for patient political reflection. Such feelings moved me during this period, because, in addition to this climate and sadness, the murdered *travestis* were interlocutors of mine in research that I coordinated. Since 2011, together with Martha Souza, I have investigated the itineraries of *travestis* from Santa Maria in the *Sistema Único de Saúde* (SUS) [Unified Health System – Brazil's National Health Service]. This experience led me to reflect on the ethnography I had conducted between 1998 and 2001, in which, for the first time, I came across the relationship between *travestis* and Afro-Brazilian religions (Pereira 2014). All this led me to believe that it is difficult to prescribe the limits of ethnographic work and to know precisely where it begins and ends, including its extension in time and space. As Peirano (2014) reminds us, the ethnographic experience is within us, and facts experienced in the field for years can be constantly remembered or reinterpreted. That is what happened to me; in Santa Maria, I learned from *travestis* (one of them, a "mother-of-a-saint", *mãe de santo*[1], who had been murdered) part of what I know concerning incorporations and concerning gender (Pereira 2014, 2017, 2019a, 2019b).

Moreover, shortly after the murders, COVID-19 struck. Unable to return to Santa Maria, I began to be called on in several ways. Some people asked me what to do; others wanted to tell stories, vent, talk about their lives. Thus, in addition to the research mentioned, the ethnographic experience, many of the stories narrated here were sent to me by the interlocutors in the middle of the pandemic, by phone, messages, video calls,

1 A "mother-of-a-saint" (or a "father-of-a-saint") is the central authority figure within a casa de santo ou terreiro, responsible for leading both religious events and other activities. They express the will of the orixá who commands the terreiro. They are also called caretakers, because their task is to care for the saints, the terreiro, and for initiates (the children-of-a-saint) (Pereira, 2019a: 7).

and through social media. Other times, researchers came to me to tell me what they were witnessing, in an attempt to understand the scenario of violence; health professionals, wanting to intervene, approached me, expressed their doubts and asked questions. Thus, I began to be requested by organisations and people with whom I was involved and had been in close contact for decades.

This article is, therefore, the result of these demands, conducting a kind of interpellated anthropology; for me, responding to them represents an attempt to opening up to Others (Segato, 2006). By making myself available to my interlocutors, I continue to seek to construct partial, situated conversations that may be of interest. Violence appeared for me in a fabric composed of bodies, vulnerabilities and the occupation of urban spaces. To face this complexity of relationships, I began to follow the narratives of *travestis* who focused on the relationship between violence and desire. I sought to follow the path traced by them and, thus, engaged in the task of accepting the ideas of my interlocutors as concepts, I sought to identify their questions (Viveiros de Castro, 2002).

In this sense, I seek to reflect on this tragic context. This movement can lead us to the following questions: what are the reasons for violence against *travestis*? What do they express to us? If violence is expressive, that is, if it tells us something, what is it saying? Can we speak of gender-based crimes? If the answer is yes, how do we consider the relationships between gender, sexuality, and violence? What desires are at stake? And what do these sad occurrences tell us about the very concept of gender?

Murders in Santa Maria

On September 7th, 2019, 23-year-old Carol and her colleagues '*faziam ponto*' [were soliciting 'tricks'] on an important avenue in Santa Maria, in a place known as a prostitution spot for *travestis*, where clients feel safer to make their approach[2]. The space, full of trees, out of sight of the city dwellers, suggests privacy. However, that which is discreet for clients, since the shadow protects them from the gaze of acquaintances, is unsafe for *travestis*, since it exposes them to danger.

That night, at one point, a young man approached, walking slowly. He wanted a *programa*[3]. Aline then addressed Carol: 'Go, it's your turn'. Carol and the young man left. Nearby, there was a garbage disposal container, and the two went behind the container. When she noticed what was happening, Aline commented that she did not believe they were going to have sex right there, since it was not like Carol. At that moment, they heard a shot. Carol came up, trying to run, but fell to the ground covered in blood. What followed was marked by screams, sobs, cries for help. But it was no use, Carol died there, on the avenue asphalt. The young man ran off. Later, they learned that he did not want to pay and had tried to rape her, but when Carol evaded him, he fired. The murder was recorded on security cameras, and the young man was arrested.

That same night, in another part of the city, far from the city centre and the avenue where Carol had been murdered, Mana, a *travesti* of presumed age between 35 and 40 years old – which, as a sex worker, meant she was considered old – was heading to the house of a well-known young man. She worked sporadically in her neighbourhood because, due to her age, she did not get many clients. A very different situation from when she was younger and she participated in the carnival balls and beauty contests in the city. Some time ago, Mana had lent a helmet to an acquaintance, and since she had not been given it back, she decided to go and get it. When asked to return it, the young man was outraged. He entered the house and came back yelling:

2 I decided to use the real names of the murdered *travestis* with the aim of following their decisions and imaginations throughout their lives. The names of the remaining interlocutors have been changed to protect their identities.

3 Here the term *programa* [a programme] is a slang used by sex workers that has a similar meaning to English equivalents 'date' (He wanted a 'date') or 'party' (He wanted to 'party'). It is also used in the sense of 'turning a trick': *fazer um programa*.

'Now you'll see how we're going to give you the helmet'. He and several other young men cornered Mana and killed her with 12 stab wounds.

The two deaths reverberated around town. The *Comissão Especial da Diversidade Sexual e Gênero* [Special Commission on Sexual and Gender Diversity] of the *Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil* (OAB) [Brazilian Bar Association], in Santa Maria, deplored the two crimes. Perhaps because of the repercussions, the cases were investigated, and the killers arrested. This response softened the mood and the latent revolt of the *travestis*.

When Carol and Mana died, the local press interviewed Verônica, who maintained a boarding house for trans women and *travestis* in the city and was one of the leaders of the LGBTI+ movement in Santa Maria. Carol was a resident in this boarding house. In her interview, Verônica denounced the multiple forms of violence against *travestis*, and added: 'When we leave the house, we don't know if we're coming back'.

Then came the alternative LGBTI+ Parade, with the theme '*Que bom te ver viva!*' [*lit*. Good to see you alive!], all due to the deaths and debates that arose from them. Verônica went to the Parade and, on stage, recalled the murders of Carol and Mana. With these acts, *travestis* and other LGBTI+ people believed they had sensitised the population and hoped that there would be no more murders like those on September 7th. However, mere months later, the city was surprised by another murder.

It was December 12th. Verônica and three other *travestis* were on the same avenue where Carol had been murdered. Although Verônica was no longer 'soliciting tricks', she was there to earn money with the aim of promoting the organisation of parties in the community and donate gifts to needy children in her neighbourhood at Christmas. That night, the *travestis* were called to the car of a young man who offered 50 reais for 'a trick'. No one accepted and they soon left to take shelter under the trees. The boy, indignant, began to shout: 'I don't kill *veados* [queers] only because I don't want to. I could kill that *veado*'. Upon hearing that, Verônica returned, since she always took the lead, as she said, in 'defending the girls'. 'When one of us was beaten, she was there, standing up to the cops, standing up to guys in the street, in cars', said Aline after the incident. When she returned, Verônica asked: 'What's that?' and tried to slap the young man. However, he dodged her and delivered a knife blow to her abdomen. It was enough to kill her. Once again, screams, cries for help. The ambulance took 40 minutes to arrive and Verônica had already lost a lot of blood. She died before the surgery.

Since Verônica was much admired in her neighbourhood, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) got together and managed to hold the wake in the Council Chamber – evidently, not without protest from a certain local elite – and with the absence of all the councillors. At her burial, people walked through the cemetery screaming, crying, and the voice of a *travesti* echoed: 'Verônica!', while the others responded: 'Present!', as recorded in a video by Avelar Neto (2019).

At Verônica's house, the situation was desperate, as they did not know whether the boarding house would continue to operate. 'In addition to losing Verônica, we could all be on the streets', said one resident. At the time, there were many requests for *travestis* not to solicit on Presidente Vargas. Faced with these pleas, Aline, a good-natured black *travesti*, who was present when Carol was killed, asked: 'Where should we go? How are we going to eat? I'm from Canoas, I don't have a family anymore, I can't go back there'. Another resident of the boarding house argued that it was the best spot in town, and they all needed to earn a living.

The night after Verônica's murder, on December 13th, even though they had changed location, a *travesti* was assaulted and someone tried to rape and kill another. During this time, under pressure from NGOs due to the murders, the councillors scheduled a hearing in the chamber, with the presence of the OAB and the *Conselho Nacional de Combate à Discriminação e Promoção dos Direitos de Lésbicas, Gays, Bissexuais, Travestis e Transexuais* [National Council to Combat Discrimination and the Promotion of the Rights of Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, *Travestis* and Transsexuals].

The year ended with sadness. The New Year arrived with uncertainties concerning Verônica's boarding house. The apprehension increased when, on January 1st, 2020, the *travestis* learned that in Sarandi, in the interior of Dilermando de Aguiar, a neighbouring municipality, 50 km [35 miles] from Santa Maria, Selena Peixoto, 39, had been murdered, shot in front of her home. The police arrested two suspects for the crime. According to rumours, the motivation was because of a debt that one of them had with Selena for the purchase of a horse. Selena maintained a *terreiro de batuque*[4] and was well known and respected in her neighbourhood.

A few days later, on January 23rd, in the Chácara das Flores neighbourhood, another murder: Morgana Cláudia Ribeiro, 46, was found dead inside her home. Born in Santa Maria, she lived with her '*familia de santo*'; only people 'of the religion' lived in the house. She had become a *mãe de santo* in 2014, but claimed to have been 'of the religion almost all her life'. She had been raised by her *pai de santo*, the only family she had ever known. The day after the murder, the report from the *Instituto Geral de Perícias* [Coroner Service and Forensics Dept.] indicated that the cause of death was 'traumatic brain injury due to a lesion in the temporal region'.

Five murders of *travestis*, among them a local leader and two *mães de santo* with strong influences in the community[5]. The atmosphere was one of concern and fear, especially among the *travestis* and their circle of acquaintances. Part of the population was indifferent to the deaths, considering they were cleaning up the city or claiming alleged links with drug trafficking. But what were the motives behind them and what does violence against *travestis* express?

Violence against *travestis*

Santa Maria is considered a medium-sized city, with over 280 thousand inhabitants, that has extensive influence in the central region of the state. It is home to the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), which in the first semester of 2018 had more than 30 thousand students. In addition to UFSM, the city has seven other higher education institutions. The city stands out for having the second largest concentration of Brazilian military, comprising the 3rd Division of the Brazilian Army and the Santa Maria Air Base. The concentration of students and soldiers, the proximity to the border, among other factors, undoubtedly contribute to the disposition of a certain virile masculinity and to the demand for sex, including the demand for prostitution[6]. However, evidently, these data are insufficient to understand the scenario described above, which requires more careful observation (Balieiro & Miskolci, 2020).

To begin with, it is interesting to remember that murders of *travestis* demonstrate how the gender expresses relationships of dominance, vulnerability, extermination, and impunity. Gender norms assign the possibility of living, as well as contributing to certain bodies being considered illegitimate, deprived of recognition and exposed to violence[7]. As unrealisable lives, *travestis* live processes that ruin their humanity (Butler, 2019a), exemplifying a dehumanisation that provides conditions for the irruption of the feeling of impunity (killed for asking for a helmet back, for collecting a debt) or of hatred ('I don't kill *queers* because I don't want to').

4 *Batuque* is a generic denomination of Afro-Brazilian religions that worship the orishas, through dance, songs, etc., mainly in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, and neighbouring countries Argentina and Chile. A *terreiro de batuque* is a space dedicated to these religious practices.

5 Stories like these are present in the works of Duque (2011; 2012). The author describes wakes and uses the term '*finada*' [deceased] as a way for the *travestis* to deal with violence, reconstructing their memory.

6 There is a glut of literature on masculinity, so I shall my limit indications to Almeida (2000), Connell (2005), Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) and Miskolci (2012). There are also works that analyse masculinity and borders, for example, the dossier *Corpos, fronteiras, gênero e sexualidade* [Bodies, borders, gender and sexuality], organised by Nieto Olivar and Passamani (2019), and masculinity and the military (Leirner 1997, 2001), to name a few.

7 For an approach to the construction of the relationship between violence and power that emerges as an instrument of articulation in relation to the various forms of violence presented in this article, see Mason (2002) and Cecchetto (2004).

In the cases in Santa Maria: two of murders were committed by firearms (one involving attempted rape, the other over a disagreement); two by knives, in one case the victim was ambushed followed by 12 stab wounds; and the fifth was killed with different objects. Three crimes were committed by persons known to the victim, and two by unknown persons. None of the accused claimed to be the victim's sexual partner. Since witnesses who were not close to the *travestis* refused to provide information about the victim or the crime, there were difficulties in punishing the culprits, which reproduces violence and the feeling of impunity. Moreover, these factors feed back into each other. The ease with which a knife is plunged into the abdomen, or with which a defenceless body is shot at, is directly proportional to hatred, underpinned by a sense of impunity (Efrem Filho 2016, 2017).

The fear on the street was constant. Of the five murders of *travestis* in Santa Maria, four were on public roads, even when they were in front of their home or the residence of an acquaintance. These murders signal something concerning the uses of space and how gender is deeply related to the way a person can appear in public space, establishing who can move around freely, who is criminalised on the basis of their appearance, who is afraid to go out at certain times of the day or night, who is limited to certain locations (Butler, 2009).

In all cases, there were insinuations of the *travestis'* involvement with trafficking, drug use and illicit acts. These insinuations and the aforementioned resistance of witnesses to provide information concerning the victim or the crime, act through a 'moral grammar' (Miskolci & Pereira, 2019; Carrara & Vianna, 2006), which acts by naturalising violence (considering it to be ordinary and automatic that crimes occur there and to such people) and also indicate the negative field where the victim is located. This moral grammar acts by transforming the victim into a (co)participant in the crime. In Santa Maria, manifestations on social networks sought to position the victims as troublemakers, which is why the accused sought to distance themselves from the image of lawlessness that could make them morally indistinguishable from their victims. This naturalisation and the above-mentioned moral grammar construct *travestis* as killable beings.

The murders, the mobilisation of the LGBTI+ community and the media visibility of the brutal violence did not signal the sharing of an understanding that these were hate crimes, given that 'being a *travesti*' constitutes a determining factor in executions, since it assumes the features of, to use Bento's term (2014; 2016), transfemicide. In addition, the official pronouncements of the local police on the murders denied their qualification as 'hate crimes' and attributed to them futile motivations. Such an understanding fuelled contempt for the deaths; two city delegates, however, took a stand on the matter. Weeks after Verônica's murder, the city's *Delegacia de Proteção ao Idoso* [Police Station for Older Adult Protection] changed its name to the *Delegacia de Proteção ao Idoso e Combate à Intolerância* [Police Station for Older Adult Protection and Combating Intolerance], as it also became responsible for incidents involving the LGBTI+ population. At the beginning of 2020, the female police chief who had worked for 18 years at the *Delegacia Especializada em Atendimento à Mulher* [Police Station for Specialised Assistance to Women] took over the command of this police station in early 2020. Since the time of Verônica's murder, this institution had already stated that the deaths of *travestis* should be counted as femicides (Souza *et al.*, 2015).

However, the pronouncement of the two female police chiefs and the changes in the city between 2019 and 2020 were not enough to eradicate resistance to recognising gender-based crimes. Considering this resistance, or flat-out refusal, is this not exactly the gender-based violence that we should investigate? Such an attempt implies asking how *travestis* understood these murders and other aggressions, and how their narratives delineated the very texture of the violence[8].

8 Ethnographies by Judite Chipenembe (2018), Nelson André Mugabe (2019) and the Brazilian anthropologist Francisco Miguel (2019) address the experiences of 'trans persons' and are important for a comparative project. Obviously, while always carefully considering the specificity of travestilities.

The *travestis'* narratives

Faced with the murders, the *travestis* of Santa Maria perceived the possibility of being raped and of always being subject to death at the whim of others. Impacted by this, they began to remember similar events and share their experiences. The research conducted since 2011, was achieved through participant observation, interviews and monitoring of the daily lives of *travestis* in Santa Maria. However, after the murders, the *travestis* not only began to narrate their stories in conversations, but also in several unusual ways. As I mentioned, some of the narratives were also sent to me by phone, in messages, on social media, etc.

During the conversations, they insisted on indicating that the fear was mainly directed towards the relationships they established with their clients and with men who sought them out for sex. In light of this situation, panic spread among the *travestis*. The ease with which killing occurred ended up creating an atmosphere of constant foreshadowing of violence, related to the manner in which the murders were carried out. The repeated violence was as much a theme for activism, which counted its deaths, as for the police, who needed to respond to the 'crime wave', and in terms of the subjective displacement it produced among those close to and within people who share experiences of vulnerability. Thus, the 'accumulation' of cases produced a feeling of increasing violence that exceeded the possibilities of understanding. This situation began to produce an 'atmosphere' that led the *travestis* to comment on the violence and to formulate relationships and possibilities.

Motivated by this climate of fear, the narratives focused on violences suffered in the relationships with clients. Although in previous works I have analysed state violence against *travestis*, police violence, and even family violence, or that perpetrated by other subjects, guided by the logic of gender and not due to issues related to the sex market (including damage to property), etc. (Souza *et al*., 2015, 2021), at the moment when the murders were being discussed, the *travestis* indicated the relationships with clients as the most relevant to understand the context in which they lived; that is, everything happened as if these were the core of the concerns on which they sought to reflect. My task then was to follow these formulations, record them and affirm them. Everything indicated that, to respond to violence, the imagination appeared to invest in the fabric of the relationships they formed with the clients.

This is how, in later conversations with the *travestis*, a discussion began about who the clients were and how they defined them[9]. After all, who were these men? What made these men look for *travestis* and sometimes rape or kill them? Why were clients (and men who came to them for sex) and prostitution chosen as an object of discussion?

These questions lead to several likely answers[10]. First, because of the characteristics of the murders and crimes narrated. In Santa Maria, two of the murders were carried out by clients, in search of sex, as a result of conflicts during negotiations; the others, by people close to them who had relationships with the *travestis*, including sexual relationships. Furthermore, other crimes narrated in conversations with Aline and Carla included attempted rapes, which I recount below. Second, there is the possibility that *travestis* are engaged in daily routines that involve the night, in a sexualised universe, in which a *travesti* is recognised as being '*na pista*' [*lit*. on the track] (a place of pleasure and danger). Third, the violence committed by men who seek them out for sex indicates an increased level of exposure and vulnerability to which they are subjected.

9 In preparing this article, among other data, I felt the need to know the age, level of education, place of residence, marital status, and religion of these men. I will dedicate myself to this task at another time.

10 There is a body of literature on the clients of *travestis*. Pelúcio, for example, has conducted research on *T Lovers*, and she has produced ample work on the sex market and the relationships between *travestis* and clients in Brazil and in European countries (Pelúcio 2004; 2005; 2007a; 2007b; 2009a; 2011a; 2011b; 2011c; 2011d, 2013). Although it deals with virile prostitution, Perlonguer's book (1987) was important in its thinking on relationships of desire. The link between the construction of gender and sex work intervenes in issues of gender, inequalities, the labour market, among others. See Benedetti (2004), Piscitelli (2006; 2007), Piscitelli, Assis & Olivar Nieto (2011), Nascimento (2014), Patriarca (2017), and Teixeira (2008).

Thus, it is important to discuss relationships of desire and hate in these unpredictable relationships, because while there are men who kill *travestis*, there are those (in smaller numbers) who love and marry them.

Be that as it may, these partial responses must be contextualised in the climate of fear that affected the *travestis* of Santa Maria at the time. It is interesting to highlight that there is no way to directly and invariably link the figure of the client to violence, as shown by important approaches on the subject (Pelúcio 2006; Piscitelli and Teixeira, 2010; Teixeira, 2011).

In Santa Maria, when we were talking about the subject, a representation emerged: the client who seeks a *travesti* defines himself as heterosexual, he approaches 'all manly, very *gaucho*'[11]. According to Carla, at that moment, you get the impression that 'it'll be a cool *programa* [trick]'. After one or two encounters, however, the *travestis* conclude that the client 'is a *maricona*'. Carla continues: 'you have to lend him a wig, you have to lend him lingerie, he wants to be passive, then he gets angry'. According to the *travestis'* narratives, this scene is very frequent.

The *travestis* maintained that they preferred to 'be passive'. I heard one of them declare that she did not like to ejaculate: 'why make such an effort to transform our bodies if we do it like men?'. However, to continue to get clients entails 'being active'. Penetration forms part of the relationships, part of the economy of desire. Carla sums up the dilemma:

> I'd like to have surgery, because I am very feminine. I wanted to have the surgery and remove the penis, but if I do that, I can't do *programas* anymore. That's what they look for in me: they want penetration. If I take too much hormone and can't get an erection, I can't get clients anymore. The men who seek me want to play a passive role. Most of them.[12]

On the avenue, when they are '*na pista*' and a known client approaches, it is common for *travestis* to announce: 'There comes another *maricona*'. A *maricona* is a client who seeks to be penetrated and is the counterpoint of a 'real man' (Pelúcio, 2013). But who is this real man? Evidently, someone with very masculine and penetrating characteristics. Given the ways of conceiving sexual positions, pleasures and even the stereotypes at play, there is, therefore, complicity in the eroticisation of the heterosexual. When asked if 'real men' were clients, Aline hesitated. First she said they could be, then she thought it difficult. As Pelúcio (2013) pointed out, clients will always be *mariconas* for *travestis*, since by publicly denying their desires, they move out of the moral zone of masculinity, as they lack courage or honour.

Aline added: 'We don't like to be touched on our penis. They all come down here saying the same thing: and they always say they won't touch it, because they're too manly. But, over and over again, they all want the same thing: the day comes when they turn their backs on us'. 'Turning' has a corporal and moral meaning: offering your buttocks to a *travesti* (Pelúcio, 2013). Notwithstanding the positions and conformations of established sexual relationships, clients identify themselves as 'hetero', as 'macho'. According to Vanessa, 'after the *programa*, the young man who just gave me his arse, leaves all horny, macho, and goes back to his wife'. However, it is necessary to consider the differences of class, generation, race, and even experiences of migration.

In the narratives I collected, relationships with clients are delicate and involve secrets and careful gestures, because, at any moment, 'the situation can get dangerous'. Many revealed that the greatest fear is when they are alone with clients: 'We are afraid of dying and being raped, being hurt', added Aline, who began to narrate Dani's story, in a paused voice, accentuating the words:

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11 In Rio Grande do Sul, the term *gaucho* is commonly used by natives to refer to themselves. Here though, the *travesties* use *gaucho* to define heterosexual male clients who display a virile masculinity.

12 As was well observed by Flávia Teixeira, in a personal communication, this assertion can also indicate a moral accusation in relation to the client; perhaps as a way of displacing it, using the 'same argument' with which the *travesti* is branded.

> It was very late at night. A client approached, but he 'smelt terrible, he stank of cachaça and sweat'. But apparently, he wasn't drunk. They agreed on the *programa* and left. Half way there, in a dark place, the client punched Dani and knocked her down. Then he approached and held her violently. He withdrew his erect penis and tried to rape her, but soon lost his erection. He couldn't manage penetration. In a few minutes, he gave up and left, pushing Dani's body away from him, who couldn't even scream. She just asked him not to hurt her in the end, given the client's features. The man walked away. Dani came back to the spot as she had 'to get something to pay the bills'. At the spot, other *travestis* said that that man was a *maricona*. They knew well what he liked.

The above account by Aline emphasises Dani's expressions, recalling certain phrases from memory (which I placed in quotation marks). Next, accompanying Aline, Carla narrates the story of Alda and an attempted murder. The story, which I try to transcribe—from memory—in the following paragraph, appears syncopated, without the drama of its narration spoken with a muffled voice and marked by silences.

> Alda was on an avenue in Santa Maria, known for being a prostitution spot for *travestis*. It was Thursday and a special customer was due to arrive. He was punctual and at midnight he would be there. As expected, João arrived and began looking for Alda, who was ready. She had put on her best lingerie and was carrying a very sensual, short, black dress. They got into João's car and went to a well-known motel in town, but a little farther away. The couple gets out, João pays in advance for the *programa*. Alda slowly undresses and offers the black dress and lingerie to the client. Somewhat awkwardly at the moment, João enters the bathroom, puts on the clothes and, with a racing heart, goes back to the bedroom. He begins to touch Alda voluptuously. João sits on the bed, holds Alda's penis and starts performing oral sex, somewhat recklessly. In a few more minutes, Alda will penetrate João. The client kept on her panties, which had simply been moved aside, and her black dress. Soon, João reaches orgasm. After sex, he goes back into the bathroom, takes a shower, rubbing himself insistently. The couple gets in the car. Not a word. To interrupt the discomfort of the situation, Alda tried to say something. Still silence. For some reason, Alda touched João between his legs, and he lost control. He stopped the car and pushed her violently. As she fell, Alda lacerated her leg and screamed unrestrained, 'shitty *maricona*', '*veado*' [queer]. Immediately, João throws the car on top of Alda, who cannot dodge it: the tires go over her right foot. The car disappears down the asphalt. Alda can't walk, her body hurts. She picks up her thrown bag and tries to call. No signal. She manages to walk to a point where she gets a signal to call for help. As she waits, she cries in anger and apprehension. She could be dead, as some of her friends were. It was an 'easy *programa*', even so, for a *travesti*, 'you never know if you're coming back'.

When describing the violences experienced, Aline and Carla claimed to have chosen 'more peaceful' stories, because 'no one had died' in them. The speed with which they accessed narratives like these in and of itself indicates that violence is common. These scenes are extreme forms of domination (including discrimination, attempted rape, physical violence), which must be conceived within a continuum that includes the murder of *travestis*.

As the literature on the subject has already indicated (Butler, 2009; Segato, 2003, 2013), the killers are not associated with pathologies or 'male aggression' but are found within a context of domination. Segato (2003; 2013), for example, argues that sexual crimes are not the work of deviants, those with mental illness, or anomalies, but rather expressions of a profound symbolic structure that organises acts, fantasies, investing them with intelligibility. Thus, the aggressor and the collective share the gender imaginary, speak the same language, and understand each other.

Gender and violence

As we saw in Aline's story, there was an attempted rape. Thinking about similar violence against non-trans women or *travestis*, Segato (2013) concluded that rape is directed at annihilating the victim's will, in which they suffer a loss of control over the behaviour of their bodies. Consequently, rape seeks to eradicate the power of a person as an index of otherness or alternative subjectivity. In this case, the aggressor addresses his peers and does so in numerous ways: he requests acceptance into their society and, from this perspective, the raped woman functions as the immolated sacrificial victim of an initiation ritual in which he competes with his peers by demonstrating his aggressiveness and his power of death, so as to occupy a place in the virile brotherhood.

For a subject to acquire his male status, it is necessary that another subject does not have it, but grants it to him through a persuasive or imposing process that Segato (2013) denominates 'a tribute'. Under the 'normal' social and political conditions of the status order, women are the tribute givers; men, the recipients and beneficiaries. The structure that relates them establishes a symbolic order, marked by the inequality that organises all spheres of social life, governed by the asymmetry of status law. According to Segato's model, the crime of rape is the result of a mandate that emanates from gender structures that ensure, in certain cases, the tribute that guarantees new members access to the virile brotherhood. An intersection of two axes occurs: one vertical, the victim's consumption; and one horizontal, conditioned on obtaining tributes. The aggressor who takes possession of the female body in an open, public space does so to show that he can and to communicate with his peers.

Despite the sophistication of Segato's proposal, the stories of *travestis* seem to force us to rethink the imagination of the masculine and feminine. There is something in this formulation that seems to differ from the *travestis'* narratives, from the stories told and the murders described above, since in them, the gender imagination wanders along paths that the concepts of masculine and feminine seem to elude.

For example, on the part of clients, there is a search for detachment from the sex scene with *travestis*. In the case of Carol's murder, when arrested, the young man who killed her stated that he did not have sex with *travestis*; even so, he managed to post on his Facebook page that he 'the last thing he was there for was to pick up a *travesti*'. The actions of the accused were directed to show that he did not have relationships with *travestis* and not to maintain his innocence. The affirmation of his masculinity occurred through the suppression of his involvement with *travestis*, in the erasure of the scene (Balieiro & Miskolci, 2020). Occasionally, as I heard from Carla, some *travestis* posted on social media: 'so now you don't want it, right? So, then I'm going to post your photo here. Next time I'll take a picture of what you did.' There is, therefore, the threat of exposing that relationship, which for the client is distressing. In Cachoeira do Sul, a town near Santa Maria, a *travesti* began a firmer relationship with a young man and fell in love. At some point, he said he did not want it any longer. The *travesti's* reaction was to say that she would 'tell everyone', revealing what had been kept secret up to that point. He killed her.

When a man rapes a non-trans or non-*travesti* woman, he is likely sending a message to other men (Segato, 2013): I have power over this woman; I want to and can possess that body; I can do what I want with her body. However, with a *travesti*, the man is engaging in something ambiguous. If, at times, the client identifies the *travesti* as female; at other times, this is no longer understood as a legitimate expression of the feminine. There is a fine line between pleasure and revulsion (Pelúcio, 2009a, 2009b), as I will argue later. How do we talk about a mandate if the tribute is not declared? And of brotherhood, if communication between peers is obscure?

Initially, while still in some form of dialogue with Segato (2013), you could argue that those who are on the feminine pole contribute to the affirmation of masculinity. Furthermore, violent action can be understood as part of a 'conversational community' (Corrêa, 2012) – acting as society expects their gender to act; a conversational community where articulating is less important than acting. In reality, masculinity distances itself from verbalisation (including impersonal sex between men in bathrooms), as if a code of silence were something

masculine – the secret that is linked to masculinity (Simmel, 1999). However, the attempt to withdraw from the scene that involves sex with *travestis* also indicates that something unexpected has occurred, while the denial of proximity and erasure of the scene indicate the existence of noise in communication and dissonance in acts. Everything takes place like the erasure of a scene because intimacy with *travestis* should not exist, much like sexual violence.

Directly addressing the staggering number of murders, Bento (2014, 2016) argues that trans women and *travestis* are a hyperbolic expression of the place of the feminine in our society, which is why violence is directed against bodies and subjectivities that express performative stylistics closer to the feminine. Violence may function to remind us that *travestis* perturb the norms of sexual and gendered life, blurring the boundaries and categories through which we see and interpret the world (Mason, 2002: 57). The main social function of this type of violence is exemplary spectacularisation: disfigured bodies contribute to the cohesion and reproduction of the law of gender that defines that we are what our genitals determine (Bento, 2014, 2016; Gonçalves Jr., 2018). In Bento's definition, *travestis* are in the female field. Anchored in such dispositions and feelings, violence works to guarantee the reproduction of gender norms, diffusing the idea that bodies that deviate are not lives worthy of mourning. Thus, murders like the ones I have narrated, for example, are trans-femicides.

There is a difference between the norm and violence. In Butler's texts, the norm is linked not only to forming subjects, but also to undoing them. That is, there is something about violence that excludes certain bodies and subjectivities from intelligibility (Butler, 1990, 1993). There is, however, a lapse between the formation of subjects and subjection (Butler, 1997), which guarantees that if violence is related to norms, it is not fully identified with them. Norms are related to power, but are characterised less by the use of force or violence than by the logic that allows for the power of reflection on their strategies. Power should be perceived as a relation between forces or a relation of forces that is a *rapport de force* (Deleuze, 1998). Violence is thus a 'concomitance or consequence of force, but not its constituent element' (Deleuze, 1998: 56), which is why relations of force surpass violence and cannot be defined by it.

As Butler (2004) themself pointed out, the norm transforms restrictions into a mechanism and proceeds with a movement through which legal power becomes productive. Did Foucault himself not signal the passage from a society of blood (one marked by blood symbolism) to a society of knowledge as a norm and as a discipline (Blanchot, 2002; Foucault, 1976)? Thus, even though we can speak of a normative violence, which occurs in the very process of the formation of subjectivity, these relationships have to be nuanced.

Furthermore, although Bento's (2014, 2016) argument is closer to the scenario I found in Santa Maria, I wanted to highlight some characteristics I observed in Alda's story, which was narrated by Carla. Clients could be allocated to the male pole: the client pays for the *programa* and is placed on the side of those who have the power to establish relationships; men can – and should – satisfy their desires, since the imperative of jouissance relocates subjects in the terrain of masculinity (Pelúcio, 2009b). The relationship between client and *travesti* is never symmetrical, even when there is an initial agreement on values, and there is always the fear that this agreement will be broken. Despite this, a *travesti*, with a female body, assumes the active role. The client, when establishing passive anal relations, believes he is left without possession, letting masculinity slip away. Since penetration is always a masculine act, those who allow themselves to be penetrated are feminised (Pelúcio, 2009b).

The fluidity of classifications threatens the client's masculinity, as it is closely linked to the *travesti's* penis. Furthermore, while it seems acceptable for men to seek out prostitutes for sexual relations, this legitimacy does not apply to *travestis*. Since they are not fully considered women, when men seek them out, their masculinity is called into question, their heterosexuality becomes suspect and moral criticism is extended to family members and intimate others. *Travestis*, in turn, 'claim to be "more macho" than their clients, as they have the courage to "come out" and "face society"' (Pelúcio, 2013).

Finally, following the narratives, whether socio-anthropological or those of the *travestis*, allows for an approximation of disparate visions and actions: *travestis* who die because they are female, hyper-women; clients with an aggressive masculinity and, at the same time, *mariconas*; *travestis* 'more macho' than the clients. This scenario makes it difficult to locate gender in a binary logic of oppositions, since relationships emerge in movements of force, in flows and, even if they somehow revolve around the masculine-feminine opposition, the more they become entangled in it, the more they outline and produce differences (Rolnik, 1996).

Less than a misunderstanding of the analyses or inaccuracy in the narratives, these disparities may be indicating that the terms masculine and feminine cannot fully define what is happening: language fails when it approaches forbidden desires.

Forbidden desires

Desire is understood here as the construction of assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, 1980) as an attraction directed towards certain universes, as a repulsion from others, as forms of expression that are created 'to embody the sensitive states that such connections and disconnections are producing in subjectivity' (Rolnik, 2016: 24).

In the context I am turning to, there is desire; however, apparently, this desire is not possible. As I have already mentioned, there is a fine line and, at some point, the client distances himself from his own desire and demonstrates horror at the body that had previously attracted him. The desire is in him: he puts himself in positions and relationships, but sometimes he cannot stand it. Masculinity is constructed as if men had the right to access other bodies, but the domain of masculinity is fragile, since any element that breaks through and challenges it ends up revealing ambiguities, which become disturbing. It may be that violence (in which, as we have seen, murder is only one form – the cruellest) emerges in this imprecision between the desire that is experienced and the impossibility of conceiving it contextually[13].

In this scenario, perhaps the most striking affect is shame: of having this desire, of the acts, of the bodies (Balieiro and Miskolci, 2020). 'After sex, they don't even want to touch us', said Aline. On this subject, Carla recalled: 'I had a *programa* once that, after sex, the man couldn't even look at me'. In some stories, like the one about Alba and João described above, the client is also unable to talk to the *travesti* who accompanies him. Thus, the language is both non-verbal and corporal – sex, desire and, at its limit, physical violence. This leads us to verify that virile masculinity (or a certain virile masculinity) is fragile because it fears its own desire.

In the preface to the Brazilian edition of *Negócios do Michê* by Perlongher, Peter Fry (1987) analyses the relationship between desiring the desirable and desiring the undesirable, revealing the conformity of certain desires to the norm in contrast to desires that are exercised despite the norm. Fry warns at the outset that the most exciting subject of the book is the desire—transitory and mediated by money—that occurs between people of the same sex and that momentarily unites people who are socially distant. The desire that occurs 'in absolute opposition to socially acceptable desire' (Fry, 1987: 15). Here, the scene is also one of desirous flight that entangles bodies, as described by Perlonguer (1987), diversities of devices that are established to channel this desirous outbreak to avoid or neutralise the dangers of such flight. However, in the cases I am addressing, the opposite is true, the dangers of death or violence are imminent for the *travestis* and the danger is the client's surfacing effeminacy.

For most clients, the *travesti* is never 'fully' or 'completely a woman'; she is ambiguous (Benedetti, 2005; Duque, 2017). Even when seduced by a femininity or even an ambivalence, at some point, the client perceives the ambiguity (of the penis, of being penetrated), or he perceives that it evanesces and a side emerges from

13 In this article I seek to describe and analyse the narratives of *travestis* from Santa Maria concerning men who seek *travestis* for sex, trying to cover a set of experiences that cannot be generalised, because there are, as I have pointed out, numerous possibilities for the desire to arise.

which he yearns to escape. This imprecise game produces (and is the product of) pleasure and disgust; they are two affects that are in intimate relationships at that moment (Pelúcio, 2009a). Cynthia once told me: 'If he [the client] just wanted to be penetrated, he could go to a gay man. But they come to us because we can be mistaken for women'. And she immediately corrected herself: 'we are women'. Perhaps the clients desire the imprecision, the vacillation.

By some means, in certain situations, the desire turns against the subject; anger mixed with disgust fosters a desperate hatred that fuels violence. To use Gaile Mason's (2002) terms, 'repertoires of disorder' are created, involving dirt, sexuality, *travestis*, and clients. If ambiguity on certain occasions is part of desire; in certain circumstances, when revealed, it is linked to violence. Far from a well-defined, binary framework of masculine and feminine, instability erupts under the diligence of ambiguity, caused by a refusal, a gesture, an argument, a disagreement, as in the cases of some of the murders in Santa Maria. A hand that unknowingly touches the other causes violence to erupt. Perhaps due to the simple fact that touch signals who has the initiative (attributed to the straight, manly man). In other words, being touched is a gesture that removes masculinity at a moment when it is already being called into question. So touching someone becomes (or feels like) aggression. Therefore, the ability to touch or its impossibility are ways of drawing boundaries between protection and rejection, hence the (im)possibility of being touched emerges at the centre of conceptual and political challenges related to difference (Parrini, 2018).

Perhaps, when violating a woman, a man understands this violence as within the possible: 'I desire this body and I desire this desire' – this action communicates to their peers a possible virile masculinity. With a *travesti*, like in the scene described by Carla, at some point, he probably perceives something impossible and distances himself from his desire and his own desirous body. Once again, the relationship between desiring the desirable and desiring the undesirable, to use Fry's (1987) terms. Thus, it is necessary to frame what is possible: 'my body does not want (and cannot desire) the undesirable'. Is violence then a way of dealing with the body after actions that could not have occurred, but which cause obsession? Thus, what the person wants to communicate is: 'the desire does not exist, I long to erase it, to obliterate it'. The problem lies in the part that remains of this impossible body, of this burning desire.

Considering that these relationships are always contextual, to desire a *travesti* is to desire the undesirable; for the person, it is constructing the possibility of impossible desire. A desire that happened, that happens, but the instability of what moves it determines the need to eliminate an opening, as if to say: 'I have to kill this impossible possibility in myself'. Desire accompanies the inventions of bodies and is seduced by poetics. Poetics, understood as 'the effect of estrangement' (Jakobson, 1960; Langdon, 1999), signals that something changes when we are faced with the poetic dimensions of language and life. Of course, here it is not just about language or performances, but about the entire poetics of the processes of invention of *travestis*' bodies and subjectivities.

For a fleeting moment, something impossible appeared on the horizon of the possible: a female body with a penis, which yearns to be penetrated, but which, when penetrating, assumes a position that it believes is masculine; this poetically constructed body penetrates a man who defines himself as straight and is dressed in seductive, feminine clothes. After the jouissance, the silence, the insistent cleaning of the body that aspires to return to some place in listless daily life. In this case, what is inadmissible is the opening that appears for a moment: the escape, the reinventions that insist on obsessing, the flight. Violence appears in the interstices of the moment. Perhaps such an instant can lead to thinking on the very concept of gender and its openings.

With this in mind, in the next section, I seek – without proposing any grand synthesis of the proposed themes and, it should be said, in provisional explorations – to think about the concept of gender from another angle: gender as opening.

Gender as opening

As is evident, it is not easy to separate the life of gender and the life of desire. For Butler (2004), the social norms that constitute our existence imply desires that do not originate in individuality and the viability of our existence depends on them. Butler also recalls that in Hegel (1992), desire is related to recognition; desire is always a desire for recognition. If part of seeking desire is achieving recognition, then gender, insofar as it is animated by desire, will seek recognition. If the projects of recognition available to us are those that undo the person, then recognition is converted into a centre of power where humans are differentially produced (Butler, 2004).

Desire and social norms are thus linked to the question of power. Gender forms part of the regulatory order, and therefore gender performativity cannot be theorised separately from the enforced, reiterative practice of regulatory sexual regimes (Butler, 1993, 2004); it is a form of continuous social disciplining that is never complete; gender involves power relations in which a person's position changes according to circumstances; it is not something that you have or you are, rather it is 'a social imposition to which we all always respond and to which we never fully comply' (Miskolci, 2021: 87).

However, it is Butler (2004: 15) who warns us that norms can become disconnected, show their instability and are open to resignification: 'Norms do not exercise a final or fatalistic control'. Not invariably, because desire is not entirely determined, nor can sexuality be fully captured in a rule. Sexuality can never be reduced to the effect of a rule; in some senses, sexuality translates us outside of ourselves, it can never be reduced to 'a container' (Butler, 2004: 15), as we are driven by something that lies elsewhere and whose purpose we cannot fully capture. There is then room for flights and openings.

Following not only this last movement by Butler, but also the economy of desire that I have already discussed, it would be interesting to invert the proposition: not norms and power as priorities, but rather desire; consequently, not metaphors of 'container' or metaphors of architecture (like those of Butler and Foucault), but tropes of flight, of gas, of flows.

It was precisely following this logic that, in a letter sent to Foucault in 1977, Deleuze (2006) highlighted the primacy of desire over power and the secondary character of devices of power. According to the French philosopher, a social field flees everywhere in advance, the lines of flight come first. 'Flight lines are not necessarily revolutionary, on the contrary, but they are what power arrangements are going to seal off and tie up [...] desire is precisely in the lines of flight, the conjunction and dissociation of fluxes' (Deleuze, 2006: 127). Lines of flight are the first determinations, because desire acts as an agent in the social field; thus 'power arrangements are both products of these assemblages and that which stamp them out or seal them up' (Deleuze, 2006: 129).

As early as 1986, in a conversation with Paul Rabinow and Keith Gandal, Deleuze defined the difference between him and Foucault: they did not have the same conception of society. For Deleuze (2006), society is 'something that is constantly escaping in every direction' (Deleuze, 2006: 280), constituted by lines of flight. The problem for any society was to prevent such flight; the powers came later. Deleuze then talks about the difference between what surprised him and Foucault: 'What surprised Foucault was that faced with all of these powers, all of their deviousness and hypocrisy, we can still resist. My surprise is the opposite. It is flowing everywhere, and governments are able to block it' (Deleuze, 2006: 280).

In the case of Santa Maria, we saw that simply allocating the scene within the masculine-feminine binary grammar leads to obscurity of their fluid character, in which the terms seem to be unable to define what is happening. Desire acts, actuates; words are slippery, terms swing, terms differ. And this difference signals other possible worlds. A gap opens, a crack, an opening, as if screaming that the rules cannot control and discipline everything. This can be contradicted as merely a fleeting moment; true, but what is instigating is the opening. There is always a beyond; an Other thing; one in an Other form.

Perhaps, taking due care with what a transversal crossing between thoughts from different origins requires, paying attention to differences in comparative processes (Strathern, 1999), this idea of gender as an opening that I have been developing somehow converges with the fluidity and mutability described by Marilyn Strathern (1988), in which people contain within themselves multiple possibilities with immanent capacities that can be activated (Piscitelli,1994). Thus, gender is an operator of differences that shapes social relations. According to her, 'The idea of domains corresponding to men's and women's worlds is not a dualism that needs to be sustained in the Melanesian context' (Strathern, 1988: 96).

Considering this fluidity and cases involving dissident genders and sexualities, violence erupts in order to restore social norms, the intelligibility of the moment and, as a mandate, to ensure a masculinity momentarily blurred. Therefore, gender and violence are correlated and implicated. However, coming at this in another way, insofar as gender signals an opening, other possibilities not yet imagined, other pleasures (those forbidden, or pleasures in the forbidden), there is always the presupposition of failure (of repetitive acts), always a lapse where the norms cannot fully reach, there is always something that takes flight. Therefore, could this opening cause obsession to such an extent that we cannot define gender without saying, at the very least, that this opening defines gender in the same proportion as structures, norms and acts? What do the norms do? Are they not also stagnating, tying up, sealing off (to use Deleuze's expressions) possibilities – albeit through violence – that the openings insist on enunciating? The point is not to imagine that those who question the binary logic, or the reinvented bodies, are on the other side of the crack, since the opening is never what is constituted, somehow already wrapped in norms, but rather an instance that signals what is yet to be invented, yet to be constituted. What the opening signals is becoming: there is always a beyond.

With their bodily transformations and feminine performances, *travestis* challenge the social norms that operate the logic of sex/gender intelligibility, presupposing behaviours and actions. From then until their death, and even after it, devices act to restore the norms. Murders are the most extreme form of these devices. How do these devices work? Through the lack of recognition of liveable lives, which leads to insensitivity with regard to murders like those described here, naturalization (again: it is natural that crimes happen to these bodies and in these places), and a moral grammar as phenomena that feed back into each other. These devices create an overall scenario that is itself violent, but do not indicate that all men have committed and/or commit physical violence. What is it then that leads to murder or rape? *Travestis* tell us that, in relationships of desire, the boundary between aversion and pleasure is more tenuous. Here the devices, characterised by a hyper-corporality manifest in murders, rapes, physical aggressions (Parrini, 2018), violently turn against the openings that bodies invent and actions that insinuate themselves in fragile moments.

Final notes

The murders in Santa Maria are hate crimes, trans-femicides anchored in this process of impunity and in a moral grammar that blames the victims. Faced with these violences, the *travestis*, reflecting on an economy of desire, indicated that their fear was mainly directed towards the relationships they establish with their clients, with the men who seek them out for sex. They depict a context in which the terms 'masculine' and 'feminine', understood in a rigid, binary manner, could not fully define what was happening. I again insist: here, binary grammar ceases; something takes flight and language fails when it approaches forbidden desires.

The narratives raised questions: who were these men who sought out *travestis* and looked at themselves, at their desire, wanting to stanch the open possibilities? Violence appeared as a concomitant, or as a consequent movement of burying openings of a desire that should not exist, of a pleasure that turned to unrealisable lives.

However, simply linking murders to the action of norms obliterates how norms also act in the formation of the person, constituting them. Led by my interlocutors, I learned about desire and its investments, the affects and affections of moments. Something ruptures with the affections that make violent actions possible *in a scenario that is always contextual*.

I ended up asking myself if the very concept of gender as a norm could not be displaced in favour of another that understands gender as openness. In this case, violence would then be untimely, desperate actions that accompany *travestis* throughout their trajectory, from when they begin to transform their bodies, in schools, in families, in health services, even after they are dead (Souza *et al*., 2021). These actions aim to contain, to staunch poetic openings, the reinventions of bodies and subjectivities and their pleasures. From this perspective, the title of this article is imprecise. A more accurate option is: poetic openings that violences *seek* to staunch, search incessantly and through different means, without ever fully achieving them, because there is always an other-possibility that the openings signal, there is always 'something that is constantly escaping in every direction' (Deleuze, 2006). In conclusion, it is worth asking: beginning with the idea that gender can be defined as poetic opening, what are the means to oppose violence? Could it not be precisely the recognition of poetics, instead of considering them to be 'ideologies' and forbidding them?

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Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira
Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Federal University of São Paulo (Unifesp)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0298-2138
Email: pedro.paulo@unifesp.br