

# The Transvestite Within: Visibility and the Configurations of Race and Sex in Silviano Santiago's *Stella Manhattan*

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*Performativity* and *withdrawal* seem to be the two constants in the life of the transvestites presented in Silviano Santiago's *Stella Manhattan*. A fragmented game of "tell and hide" converges in a narration where sexually marginalized subjects in exile are faced with the pressures of a society intent on politicizing them. Paco, alias La Cucaracha, and Eduardo, alias Stella Manhattan, assume roles that, while attune to their new reality in exile, still hold on to the signifying forces of their initial places of departure. By focusing on the relationship between Paco and Eduardo, I will present the ways these characters still function and react to such things as race and sex in much the same way as they did before exile. In other words, I suggest that the power dynamics between the initial space of departure and the place of exile have not changed much, except with regard to the social space. Everything else—race, class, and sexuality—still determines how visible these characters are in their space of *sexilio*. Furthermore, the way Eduardo and Paco's relationship is described—first as that of mother/son, then sister/sister, and ultimately as that of servant/master—alludes to the power dynamics that exist between these two characters as transcending their sexual status and delving into their national, racial and socio-economic differences.

## Constructing the Transvestite: Content, Context and Structure

The novel is written in what I refer to as a theatrical structure where action occurs offstage while the melodramatic remnants are left onstage to be played out by the numerous characters. Theatricality and transvestism provide the foundation for the alter egos of Stella Manhattan and La Cucaracha, along with the social and political implications these alter egos bring upon them. But before I get involved in the process of deconstructing Eduardo and Paco, it is imperative to present a brief

synopsis of the novel and its narrative structure which also hinges on the elaborate metaphor of transvestism.

Eduardo da Costa e Silva is a young attractive Brazilian, the son of an important family in Brazil that is very much involved with the military regime occupying the country in the 1960s. Due to the discovery of Eduardo's homosexuality, his family decides to send him off to the United States, and he is forced to depart from Brazil as an "exile." He arrives in New York City where a booming Latino community of immigrants and gays is developing. Amongst this growing community of Latinos, a space of dense political activism is also emerging and reflecting the political situations that exiled immigrants bring with them to these new spaces. Furthermore, Eduardo and Paco will be lost in this space of activism as they have to deal with their sexuality alongside the political persecutions of leftist (highly homo-sexualized in the novel) guerilla groups fighting the repressive military regimes that operate in Brazil and Cuba at this time. Eduardo's immersion into the political arena surges when he lands a job in the consulate, thanks in part to his family's connection with the Brazilian consulate in New York City. When he arrives in the city and befriends his gay Cuban neighbor, Paco, alias La Cucaracha, Eduardo assumes the alter ego Stella Manhattan, which is immediately connected to his new space of liberation. By his side, helping him with the intricacies of life in the city, and also providing a link to his nuclear family in Brazil, we have the distorted Colonel Vianna. The colonel, as every other character in the novel, has an alias which is *The Black Widow*, a name given by Stella, and is representative of the colonel's pseudo sado-masochistic homosexual side. In the peripheries of Eduardo's existence, a coalition of liberal intellectuals helping the leftist guerillas are soon interested in using him to aid them by turning against *The Black Widow*, and thus helping them to relinquish the military hold in Brazil. In order to seduce Eduardo into helping the guerilla, Professor Marcelo, an old friend of Eduardo's from Brazil, arrives in Manhattan with the purpose of teaching at Columbia University. Mixing in other characters such as Professor Anibal and his wife Leila, the novel creates a loosely packaged play where the sequence of events occurs rapidly through the voices of the uninhibited alter egos of Stella and La Cucaracha.

The novel is divided into three parts: the first one consisting of the first three chapters, the second consists of the fourth to the ninth, and the third consists of the last two chapters. An epigraph by Kafka serves as the prelude to the narrative: "God doesn't want me to write, but I know that I must," and then continues with a Bonrad quote: "It's not about painting life. It's about giving life to painting." These quotes make reference to the process of writing, and ultimately, to the impulse that reality gives to the act of painting and writing—a negotiation that is felt throughout the narrative, especially in the chapter that interestingly serves as a prelude to chapter three. Throughout this chapter, current postmodern concerns of authorship and "real narrative" spaces are exposed. This chapter, titled "Beginning: the Narrator," is a metafictional discussion of the written work, which is deemed important enough to be captured within narrative history. As the narrator proclaims:

Fiction is all bla-bla-bla fakery; and what about the poet? The poet is a quack. Quackery is his trade, quack, quack, the poet is faker, the fucker that's right, a jodedor. A motherfucker. A fode-jode-fucker, he fucks just for the pleasure of writing. That's why he is so fucked up. The novelist fucks only to be fucked. (Santiago 52)

Interestingly, the "fucking" act described in this passage is perhaps the most graphic sexual act depicted in the novel, and ironically, it alludes to a political act and not to a carnal act. The poet and the novelist differ in their political approaches to writing: while one has the political agenda of pleasure, the other one commits the act just for the act itself.

Poetry and narrative have played historical roles in the development of nations and their politics, often times becoming the preferred mode of propagating particular ideologies; processes, that if read closely, are also connected to the dense space of political activity that the novel is presenting. This is the case of the military and dictatorial regimes in Brazil and Cuba, which provide the political arena in which the novel develops. While poetry calls for a vociferous sense of nationalism within a "melodramatic" bourgeois class, the novel seeks to discuss and question this sentiment by closing in on the society as a whole. The act of "writing the nation" has been the intellectual profession of the poet and to a lesser extent of the novelist. But how can one write the story on behalf of

everyone? Any national narrative has to touch upon the many differences forming the subjects of each nation, an idea that is developed in this particular chapter. This convergence of “differences” within the elaboration of subjecthood and nationhood occurs in what Homi Bhabha has called an “in-between” space. As Bhabha indicates in his book, *The Location of Culture*:

The move away from the singularities of ‘class’ or ‘gender’ as primary conceptual and organizational categories, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions- or race, gender, generation, institutional location, geopolitical locale, sexual orientation- that inhabit any claim to identity in the modern world. What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity. (1)

In this case, the issue is addressed through the fusion of languages used to create this narrative where any notion of a purist language or for that matter political, racial and sexual ideology are cast aside to leave room for Bhabha’s notion of an “in-between” space.<sup>1</sup> Susan Quinlan and Silviano Santiago have borrowed this concept and presented it as a “third” space, as Quinlan explains in her article “Cross-dressing Silviano Santiago’s Fictional Performances”:

His narrative fiction depends on specific events regarding the status of contemporary Brazilian writing... Santiago defines his quest as his *entre-lugar* (space in between), a “third” space as he theorizes in the essay “O *entre-lugar* no discurso latino-americano”, a place that challenges static notions of sexuality, gender, and politics and that is at the center of much of his fictional work. (212)

But there is one interesting notion that is not directly challenged in the “third” space proposed by Santiago and Susan Quinlan—that of race and the prevalent power relations detached from the *amo-esclavo* binary. This mode of powering and racial configuration is particularly relevant when

studying the relationship of Stella and La Cucaracha, and the way this relationship mirrors the power binary of *amo-esclavo* in addition to the elements of exilehood from different nations.

There is also another discourse in this chapter that runs parallel to that of “writing the nation,” as narrative authority is contested through the questions of: who is in charge to “tell” and to “write”? Is it the common person, the intellectual, or a convergence of both? Through its narrative structure and content, *Stella Manhattan* proposes the idea of the unwritten, which is the creation of an ideal written work that can address the reality of every subject in a manner that can appease the demands of everyone without the demand for “proof”:

That’s why I held back my laughter and my voice: It’s doing you good to write like this, to write things you normally wouldn’t have the guts to write or say even to your most intimate friends. Ah, now you can tell me that I am contradicting myself by accepting subjective values and personal experience in the text without the requisite rhetorical coloratura that I like so much. (Santiago 55)

In the end, this text undoes itself with the disappearance of its main subjects who disappear at the mercy of the mainstream discourse: that of political macho-hetero dominance.

### **Binaries of Repression (Codes of Survival): Stella Inside/Eduardo Out, La Cucaracha Inside/Paco Out**

The vogue for the concept of transvestism has reached a new peek of interest in recent years, and particularly in the way it has been treated in literary cultural studies. No longer a visage that is permanently attached to a notion of cross-dressing, it adheres itself to innumerable other perspectives and modes of cultural production and awareness (Arroyo 5). In *Stella Manhattan*, the term itself alludes to a sort of “cross-dressing” that is aboard the subject itself, and most importantly, it is a feature that is within the subject and not solely an exterior performative element that is assumed to belong to the “other” entirely. Otherness and self are bound up in the concept of transvestism postulated in Silviano Santiago’s novel where the characters present different modes of national and political identities while at the same time presenting the hybridity of the term

"identity." Hybridity has been a self referential feature, a stark contrast to the literary production of other Latin American nations, specifically in Brazilian literature and exemplified in Oswald de Andrade's often cited "Manifesto antropológico." So from a stance of hybrid identity formation, how does an exiled sexual subject survive in a new space of further cultural convergences? Before continuing, however, it is perhaps important to define in what ways Eduardo and Paco are understood to be exiled subjects, and from this, speculate as to how this status cannot bridge them together in a common experience, but rather, separates them further.

In a general view, one could say that both Eduardo and Paco are exiled in New York City as they have been forced to leave Brazil and Cuba, respectively. But I suggest a difference in their condition as exiles; while one can envision a return to his homeland, the other one cannot foresee returning to the state that expelled him due to his sexuality. This imagining of a return to the homeland in connection to the concepts of diaspora and exile is discussed in James Clifford's article titled "Diasporas," where he discusses the imaginings of a return to the homeland by the exile as being tied to a sense of taboo: "Diasporas usually presuppose longer distances and a separation more like exile: a constitutive taboo on return, or its postponement to a remote future" (304). In the novel, the difference lays in the political circumstances that led to Eduardo and Paco's initial departure. Furthermore, the lack of a direct political circumstance delineates another situation. Paco leaves a Cuba that is highly persecutory against homosexuals, a situation that is not the same for Eduardo who leaves Brazil because his family, not the state directly, is reprimanding him for his homosexuality. While Paco is forced to leave as a poor homosexual Cuban dissident of the Cuban revolutionary nation after 1959, Eduardo leaves Brazil due to family circumstances linked to his sexuality. For one, the term exile is representative of the political misgivings attached to his sexuality. For the other, the term itself is applicable to his apolitical displacement from Brazil to New York City.

Both Paco and Eduardo assume female alter egos that represent the side of them that is uninhibited and liberated to a certain extent. As Stella and La Cucaracha, they are free to roam New York City as two free loving apoliticized subjects. There is a certain homogenizing effect in the appearance of Stella and La Cucaracha in the sense that the only thing that

differentiates them is their place of origin—Brazil and Cuba—nothing more. Due in part to the nonchalance of their alter egos, race, gender and sexuality are rarely discussed by Stella and La Cucaracha. When forced to mute their alter egos, however, Eduardo and Paco encounter many obstacles as they are forced to face their reality as gays living in exile. Suddenly, their position is politicized under the umbrella term *Latino* which seems to be created with the ulterior motive of neatly packaging the migratory experience of all Spanish-speaking people in the United States. But what happens to the Brazilians who are not part of this Spanish speaking community? How is race and class status articulated in this discourse of experience manufacturing?

### **Deconstructing the Exiled Transvestites: Race, Power and Class at Play in Power Relations**

In the creation of the alter egos, I have mentioned a homogenizing process that comes by way of the stereotypically loud transvestite. This loudness and flamboyancy is only carried by way of voice and attitude, and only within the confines of a private space. Neither Stella nor La Cucaracha perform in public. They are always in Eduardo's apartment, and never cross-dress. As Stella, Eduardo's performance begins right at the beginning of the novel when she leads us into the voyeuristic-theatrical space in which she develops. The curtains seem to open as she sings and cleans her New York apartment while her mind is wandering off to a different space of imagined sexual encounters that end according to her expectations as Stella, but hardly ever as Eduardo. By concealing details of Stella's physical embodiment, Santiago subtly leads us to assume the stereotypical creation of the transvestite as being synonymous to "cross-dressing." This is clearly not the case as Stella's peeping neighbors watch her closely and immediately subject her to a reality entirely alien to her, a process Stella is fully aware of but concedes to: "Stella can see -how could she not see?- the old neighbors across the way observing her through the windows" (Santiago 3). The neighbors' gaze immediately becomes a dual symbol pinning Stella with an erroneous political label, and also fostering a community stereotype that is rooted in an initial incongruent classification: [a neighbor tells her husband] -"He's nuts." -"who's nuts?" -"The Puerto Rican who lives in the building across street" (Santiago 4). Furthermore,

the neighbors' accusatory gaze is emblematic of the misreading Susan Quinlan makes reference to

[t]he hegemonic misreadings of third-world texts by North American and European critics have had, and continue to have, multilevel repercussions in terms of popular misconceptions by the centers of peripheral cultures and the geographical consequences inherent in the relationship between centers and peripheries. (213)

Neither Stella nor Eduardo are Puerto Rican, and at that point of performance there is not a "he" on the stage, but a complete "she" encapsulated in a male body. The hegemonic reading of the character is then one that follows a heterosexist norm (if it looks like a man, it has to be a man) and is also a producer and follower of stereotypes (if he "looks" like a Puerto Rican, he cannot be anything else).

In a sense, Stella does hegemonic readings of herself, while Eduardo acts out these readings when relating to others outside of his racial, social and apolitical margins. Stella's hegemonic stance stems from her performance of the house duties under the imagined guise of her black nana Bastiana, introducing in this way the *amo-esclavo* binary:

[...] when she has to clean the bathroom she holds her nose, mutters under her breath and calls her friend Bastiana for help, she can do anything. *Me? I'm not cut out for that*, Stella says to herself. *I rather like cooking but I'd never soil my angelic fairy hands on that mess. God help me!* She blesses herself all over as if that could keep the mess far away...Bastiana goes about her house cleaning chores, docilely obeying Stella's instructions. (Santiago 13)

As an atypical exile, Eduardo is carrying with him a piece of his "imagined" nation of Brazil that is interjected into his place of exile by way of his alter egos and relationships with friends. The Brazilian space is an imagined territory in Eduardo's mind, especially when he insists on remembering the family he left behind. He often forgets that he had to leave Brazil due to his family's imposition, and by extension the nation-state's ideological imposition. In many ways, this process of denial could be seen as a mode of survival, but in more ways than one it is an extension of the race relations instated in Brazil and Latin America, where the black



subject is made to assume roles of servant hood and/or secondary motherhood without any national acknowledgment of this treatment. Bastiana is emblematic of the black slave woman forced to develop her maternal instincts towards the offspring of her oppressors. Furthermore, she embodies all the ailments the society has infected her with, but at the same time she constitutes a sort of national motherhood. As Jossianna Arroyo describes in her article on Gilberto Freyre "El cuerpo del esclavo y la narrativa de la nación en *Casa-Grande & Senzala* de Gilberto Freyre":

[...] la figura de la nana, aunque se pueda ver como transmisora de enfermedades, posee en el discurso de Freyre valores positivos. Es la madre de la nación, la madre de todos, la que con su leche iguala a los hijos de la nación brasileña. (39)

Her status as such is made possible in part by Eduardo's insistence on seeking power relationships that will ultimately place him as the hegemonic element, while placing the "other" in the "nana" position. As Arroyo posits, the black body has silently structured the concept of "family" within the Brazilian family nucleus: "El cuerpo del negro, visto desde su situación dentro del régimen de la esclavitud, es el móvil principal en la formación de la "familia brasileña" (32). Race, class, and power come into play much the same way with Paco, alias La Cucaracha, whom Eduardo seeks as his "adopted nana." Not coincidentally, Paco is a mulatto man who is poor and has been forced initially to enter and then to leave an oppressive political system founded under the basis of marginal passive elements and "strong *hombres nuevos*." With Paco, the black body is once again used for servitude even if under the guise of "motherhood" or "sisterhood."

Paco becomes Bastiana as soon as Eduardo meets him. His body turned into a vehicle of servitude performing as mother and later on as servant to Eduardo. The relationship that develops is one of codependency that goes along the lines of the "master-servant" relationship, where one exists because the other does. Paco's function in Eduardo's life is solely perceived through the unreciprocated deeds he does for Eduardo: "Paco would like Eduardo to succeed in visualizing his desires. His bulging, unhappy eyes lead Paco to conclude that the vision is denied" (Santiago 75). Eduardo's weak and distressed character rings oddly similar to the

characters the slave nanas took care of in the past. For instance, Eduardo always needs a supplemental maternal figure beside him to nurture him, and that figure is always ironically associated with his black nana in Brazil: "Now Eduardo realizes it was Bastiana who prevented the worst from happening. That very afternoon he found himself all alone..." (Santiago 15). And then later on he places La Cucaracha in that same role: "If it hadn't been for La Cucaracha who knows what would have become of Eduardo..." (Santiago 17). Interestingly, Paco accepts his role as "mother" with no apparent concern for the dynamics of power that such a relationship would entail. He does not realize that his positioning as "mother" follows the usual trajectory people of color have been consigned to when being placed in relationship to others in positions of authority, especially when presenting such relationships within the realm of household labor. Furthermore, Paco's reaction is surprising because he does not perceive the differences between him and Eduardo as having anything to do with their racial, economic, or political dissimilarities. Ironically enough, he is proud to be of "service":

Fearful yet happy, like the magus who beholds the star that will lead him to the savior, Paco carefully drew near, placing his hands on Eduardo's shoulders and gently pulling the seated body toward him, which effortlessly let its head fall on his *breast*. La Cucaracha passed his fingers through Eduardo's hair like his mother used to do...He understood that he had just taken on a very heavy burden (months of rejection, suffering, and loneliness) and that his breast, like a soft pillow, cushioned the impact of greater sorrows that might yet befall Eduardo through his traffic with the world. (Santiago 23, my emphasis)

The maternal sacrifice that is hinted in these words is also surprising because it denotes Paco's status as a subaltern within this relationship; he is the allusive passive other required for a master-slave relationship. His own process in passing through the "traffic of the world" is not important, he is there to protect and nurture his higher "other," Eduardo.

Through Stella and La Cucaracha, Eduardo and Paco do not have to directly negotiate their new realities, and can continue to develop their old patterns of racial, sexual, and political behavior that had shaped them

before going into exile. The community of exiles they encounter provides the right conditions for old patterns to continue, especially when they are both viewed within an all-encompassing ethnic identity. When gazed upon within the boundaries of the Latino community, Eduardo and Paco are misread by the hegemonic signifying discourse that accounts for visibility in spaces of exile. As such, they are victims of readings that will always go wrong as particular issues of race, politics, and sexuality go unattended through their bodies. In addition, their alter egos provide the *modus operandi* by which not only sexuality is maneuvered, but also political activity. In this fashion, underground sexual displacements are linked to the political guerrilla activity occurring around Eduardo and Paco. In her article Quinlan concludes: "The text, the images, and the characters are all masked in order to question identity. They epitomize Santiago's own struggle for gay space, the "third" space or his *entre lugar*" (Quinlan 229). In my opinion, Quinlan's analysis of the "third space" falls short, especially when she delves into configurations of sexuality, politics, and the exiled subject without recognizing or taking into account other significant elements of identity construction in Brazil and Latin America, such as race. In conclusion, Silviano Santiago's *Stella Manhattan* presents an interesting condition as it strives to "question identity," but falls short especially when drawing (dis)similarities amongst gay exiled subjects. Eduardo and Paco are treated as similar subjects struggling for a gay space in the exile community when in reality such a space has different meaning for each of them.

## Notes

1. It is difficult to perceive the hybridity of language in the version I am utilizing because it has already been translated to English. In the original text Spanish, English and French are fused to create a text that mirrors the dynamic space of exile and also of the exiled subject that penetrates it.

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