Chapter 3

Gender without Limits: The Erotics of Masculinity in El lugar sin límites

Uno de los hombres trató de mear a la Manuela, que pudo esquivar el arco de la orina. Don Alejo le dio un empujón, y el hombre, maldiciendo, cayó al agua, donde se unió durante un instante a los bailes de la Manuela. Cuando por fin les dieron la mano para que ambos subieran a la orilla todos se asombraron ante la anatomía de la Manuela.

—José Donoso

[One of the men tried to piss on la Manuela, who was able to avoid the arch of urine. Don Alejo pushed him, and the man cursing fell in the water, where he joined la Manuela’s dances for an instant. Finally, when the men gave them a hand so that both get on the river’s bank, everyone was amazed by la Manuela’s anatomy.]

Skirting the Penis; or Que grand tu as!

Clothes possess an interesting power of class signification; why else do certain private clubs still insist on “coat and tie for gentlemen.” By the same token, race, ethnicity, and nationality can be easily marked by certain clothes or accessories. Moreover, clothing as a marker of gender, class, and race, gains its meaning through repetition: By this I mean that within a specific, discrete, semantic field, clothes repeat the structure of a cliché. However, what is at stake in the signifying element of dress are not the social or cultural assumptions that are repeated by any particular item—say a yarmulke, a dashiki, or a Paloma Picasso choker. Clothes not only gain meaning through a continuous socio-historical displacement, but strangely, what matters most is that any meaning that clothes might have
becomes manifest most strongly at the moment a particular object is deployed and recontextualized outside its “intended” use and space. I have been discussing cross-dressing as an explanation of this phenomenon. Transvestism evokes and fixes the intentionality of dress beyond exclusively maintaining what might be “traditional” values of clothes (which incidentally permit some slippage). (Sartorial) meaning appears more lucid through the complex of difference.

Inherent in the act of transvestism is this paradox of difference, which reveals the structuring of meaning and echoes the paradigm of displacement and decolonization—to which I alluded in the last chapter. We witness this paradigmatic scene awry in José Donoso’s El lugar sin límites (Hell Has No Limits). El lugar sin límites is a bold representation of this chaotic, albeit pleasurable, moment of reading.

Although written at the height of the Latin American “Boom,” Donoso’s text, El lugar sin límites (1966), has been displaced as a minor text; this displacement happens from the very beginning, even as the work’s very author claims that it would not be his great oeuvre. He would designate his gothic El obsceno pájaro de la noche his contribution to the “Boom.” But like all that is repressed, El lugar returns to haunt the author and us.

El lugar sin límites is a simple story. On a cold Sunday, in the middle of nowhere, the famed madame, la Manuela, learns that Pancho Vega has returned to town. A year earlier he had tried to beat her physically but failed; the rumor was that this time he was “going to get her.” The entire Sunday is full of anxiety, but Manuela tries to run her errands as if things were not any different. In the course of the day, she decides to fix her red flamenco dress, in the event that she might need it to entertain Pancho. This shows the reader that, although she fears him, she very much desires—or even loves—him. She thinks of the passion that she unleashes in other men. Their passion is hard to articulate because it is unconventional: la Manuela is, after all, a transvestite. That evening Manuela makes every effort to appear calm. She imagines that, if there is any trouble, the town’s patriarch, don Alejo, will come to her rescue. She is unsuccessful at pretending that her safety is assured, and once Pancho inevitably arrives at the whorehouse, she runs and hides in a chicken coop. It is there that she remembers another day—eighteen years earlier—when she was raped, and how she and her partner, la Japonesa, “won” the (whore)house where she has lived since.

An analysis of that rape scene (which serves as the opening epigraph of this chapter) shows the representation and construction of the body and the structure of sexual and gender domination that operate throughout El