BEYOND PASSING: TRANSMUTIVITY AND ITS ILLUSION OF COMPLIANCE

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It seems that in the United States, we are constantly preoccupied with cultural geography and sites of difference. Earlier in our history, this preoccupation centered on race. The belief that some sort of racial essence existed was evidenced by the fact that race was legislated; terms such as "quadroon" and "octoroon" were part of the living vocabulary, and an associated concept was that of "passing," commonly thought of as "passing for white." One might look at current vocabulary and find other words that assign bodies to culturally geographic locales – words such as "straight," "gay," "male," "female," and "disabled." These words also relate to categories that are legislated, and there are countless examples, real and fictionalized, of subjects "passing" in order to appear as if they aligned with a different, though no less socially constructed, category or cultural territory.

In my exploration of gender-related passing, I cannot help but think about theories of racial passing and what such theories might offer a study of gender. Before moving forward, I feel compelled to state outright that I am careful not to equate race and gender as sites of difference. In her 1999 Preface to *Gender Trouble*, Butler offers guidance to theorists working with gender-related issues and theories of racial construction. She writes:

> The question of whether or not the theory of performativity can be transposed onto matters of race has been explored by several scholars. I would note here…that race and gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies. I would therefore suggest that the question to ask is not whether the theory of performativity is transposable onto race, but what happens to the theory when it tries to come to grips with race. (xvi-xvii)

I seek, then, to explore – more than *passing*, with its limitations and specific historical meaning here in the US – expressions of performativity and related consequences, particularly with figures who challenge normative gender. My findings have led me to develop my theory of transmutivity which is an effort to address what passing does not.

In thinking about the word 'passing' with its literary, social, and political implications in the culture in which I have been educated, I discovered four problems or theoretical failures in the historical concept of passing. First of all, passing implies deception and dishonesty on the part of the passing figure. Werner Sollors, in *Neither Black nor White Yet Both*, acknowledges this in his chapter on the subject, explaining that "…social rules have

sometimes sanctioned a moral condemnation of passing on the grounds that it is a form of deception, hence dishonest" (249). This is corroborated by Elaine Ginsburg, who writes in her introduction to *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, "As the term metaphorically implies, [a passing] individual crossed or passed through a racial line or boundary – indeed *trespassed* – to assume a new identity, escaping the subordination and oppression accompanying one identity and accessing the privileges and status of the other" (3). Both Sollors and Ginsburg illustrate the tendency of theorists to say that passing is performing as something that one is *not*. I seek to problematize this definition by displacing the responsibility from the passing figure to other sites and by acknowledging the slippery definition of passing itself.

Second, as already mentioned, the traditional concept of passing displaces the locus of responsibility on the passing/disenfranchised figure and places no responsibility on the society and/or government that constructed such a space to encourage such passing in the first place. That identity is socially constructed (though we are inculcated with the idea that it is essential or inherent) is alluded to by Ginsburg (among many others), who explains, "…metaphysical passing necessarily involved geographical movement as well; the individual had to leave an environment where his or her 'true identity' – that is, parentage, legal status, and the like – was known to find a place where it was unknown" (3). Though one's biological parents cannot be socially constructed, ethnicity, legal guardianship, citizenship, etc. (as Ginsburg suggests) *can*. And though these forms of identity are commonly thought to be 'true,' they are just as much constructed as are ideas of race (e.g. "Hispanic", "Latino," etc. – all terms invented by hegemonic white culture). In other words, a "passing" figure is not deceptive; rather, he/she makes a choice on how to best get by in an oppressive environment. To summarize, society, not the individual, is to blame for creating an unequal, violent environment where an individual feels s/he can and should pass in the first place.

Third, *passing* does not express the suffering caused by passing. What I call circuitous biopower relates to this idea; in fact, in this scenario the passing figure can be read to punish him/herself. It is, in fact, a self-imposed panopticon, and s/he is forever burdened by the punishing hand that s/he has now internalized. The figure, out of fear of being 'found out,' monitors and modifies his/her own behavior, attire, speech, movement, etc. He or she is in fact, always being monitored, whether or not an oppressive figure is physically present. In other words, the anxiety and internalized oppression we read in passing literature can be seen as an expression of the oppression under which many live in real life.

Finally, *passing* implies binary oppositions: black versus white, male versus female, married versus single, heterosexual versus homosexual. Sollors defines passing as "the crossing of any line that divides social groups," yet acknowledges that, at least in the US, "'[p]assing' is used most frequently … as if it were short for 'passing for white,' in the sense of 'crossing over' the color line in the United States from the black to the white side" (247). Still, he alludes to the problem of binaries in *Neither Black nor White Yet Both*. In fact, the

title of the introduction alone complicates the issue: "Black – White – Both – Neither – In-Between."

I use the term transmutivity to describe performative acts that are not adequately described by the word "passing." The word is inspired by Butler's idea of performativity; in fact, I think of transmutivity as a 'spin-off,' or even an extension of performativity. Transmutivity differs from performativity in its connotation. Though it, like Butler's idea of performativity, describes acts that are performative (in the sense that we daily 'act out' gender and other constructed identities), transmutivity addresses many of the limitations I find in the word 'passing.' First of all, the '-tivity' connotes Butler's theory, and thus problematizes the act itself; it also implicates hegemonic structures in the act. Next, 'mutative' connotes change, but an *unnatural* change (like cells mutating to form cancer), thus alluding to my idea that the word passing does not adequately address the suffering of the passing figure. 'Trans' implies movement – but not simply a crossing over, as is suggested by passing. Rather, 'trans' suggests ideas of 'transport,' and the transmutive figure often moves (or does not move) amid, across, and between many boundaries, thus illustrating the precarious nature of the boundaries in the first place. Absent from the word is any idea of deception or betrayal. In other words, the transmutive figure engages in performative acts that do not necessarily align with his/her own desired actions and moves (or does not move) about in the world amid boundaries and structures already set up for him/her.

Though transmutivity can help to offer a productive reading of many texts, for the purposes of this discussion I will consider it in the context of three that all contain subjects that pass and that challenge normative gender: Flora Tristán's 19th century travel narrative, *Pérégrinations d'une paria*; Manual Puig's novel *El beso de la mujer araña*; and the film *XXY* based on Sergio Bizzio's short story, "Cinismo."

Tristán's biography tells us she was a disenfranchised figure in several ways. First of all, her parents' wedding in a Spanish church was not recognized in France; the French recognized only civil ceremonies. As such, Tristán was considered a bastard child and this had tremendous repercussions on her future. As a woman, she certainly was subjected to the prejudices against all women in France at this time; her frustration about gender injustice is evident in *Pérégrinations d'une paria* and also appears in several of her other works. Another way to visualize her position is that her status as a separated woman further distanced herself from normative behavior. It is this status that will be the focus of my discussion.

Tristán's transmutive actions illustrate some of the less obvious expectations of normativity for women in her time; though these actions are in many ways similar to those of racially passing figures, looking at them through the lens of transmutivity offers a richer reading than what might be afforded by using more traditional theories of passing. Still, Tristán admits to different types of passing in her narrative, and she does so just to physically move; though, like other types of passing, this physical movement was enacted in hopes it

would lead to economic movement. Her narrative, through its transnational nature, economic concerns, and accounts of gender-related performativity, offers fertile ground for discussing gender-related passing and its colonial (geographical) implications.

The first example of Tristán's transmutive action occurs very early in the narrative; after separating from her husband, she changes her name. It is important not to overlook the significance of what might initially appear to be a small, innocent act; the name change was part of her camouflage. Tristán passed as a widow when with her children and as a single woman when without; then, by changing her name, Tristán essentially 'disappears' herself – or exiles herself – from society. Her previous name – and thus, her external identity – no longer existed. If someone were to look for Tristán with her married name, s/he would never find her. Though she lives 'freely' among society, she becomes a self-enclosed entity; by changing her name, she removes herself not only from her husband, but also from her children, friends, and any potential business associates.

Still, this disappearance did not mean freedom or escape from possible punishment – quite the contrary. In one excerpt from the narrative, Tristán describes the angst she felt in her constantly monitored, controlled, and disciplined state. Following is my own translation: "Known everywhere as a single woman or as a widow, I was always rejected when someone discovered the truth."[i] She also speaks of the "chains" she lived with and that there was no hope for her liberation. In this excerpt, Tristán makes note of a problem of passing: that what superficially appears as freedom in society can actually be a source of limitation and enslavement. Though one might assume that many women in Tristán's (and even our) society would desire to be like her (young, beautiful, and not 'tied' to a man), Tristán associates these qualities with chains, for these qualities caused society to refute her, thus limiting her opportunities. Moreover, by using the word "fers," Tristán invokes slavery and imprisonment, the latter which was surely a cause of worldwide concern (consider that slavery in the US was a driving force behind European textile production).

This excerpt from Tristán's narrative points out a key point that inspires my theory of transmutivity (v. passing): what at first appears to be well-being, agency, and freedom, can actually cause angst, suffering, and entrapment. What is so significant about Tristán's comment is that her 'prettiness' and 'liberty' had a different connotation when people found out the truth about her marital status. After leaving her husband, Tristán passed herself off as a widow (most commonly when with her children) or as a single woman (when without her children). If her cover were removed, however, she was rejected by society – not just because leaving her husband was considered socially inappropriate (divorce being illegal), but because she was a woman who left her husband and who was *pretty and 'free'* about it. She did not go into physical hiding; rather, she continued to move about the world with *relative* freedom. Her prettiness and sense of liberty incited spite and anxiety in others, thus suggesting that she did not fit into whatever the idea of a woman who left her husband should

be. Even though leaving one's husband was frowned upon, a more acceptable iteration of this situation would be one where the woman keeps herself hidden; if she goes out, she must look homely. Tristán's attractive appearance and self-assurance lay outside normative structures; thus, she was socially condemned.

Still, it was because of Tristán's transmutive action - her negotiation amid and around normative social structures - that she was able to physically move and travel to Perú. It is in Perú where Tristán observes a type of clothing that serves as a visual metaphor for the paradoxical nature of the transmutive space. When traveling in Lima, she sees *tapadas*: women wearing specific pieces of clothing called *mantos* and *sayas*, the latter which she calls Peruvian "national dress."[ii] Tristán explains that all women use this dress regardless of social class; it is respected. All year round Peruvian women go out as such, and anyone who may attempt to remove the dress would be subject to public humiliation and would be severely punished. The attire allows any woman to go out alone.

It may be easy to read the *saya* as another place assigned to an oppressed subject – in this case, to women. However, as even Tristán noted, this compromised position offered many freedoms. It is here that I find specific language of Sollors particularly relevant. In a discussion of the construction of racial identity, Sollors discusses an *illusion of certainty* in relation to race to refer to the idea (albeit falsely constructed) that there are 'essential' characteristics of a particular ethnic heritage. His characterization of the racially passing space as one fraught with uncertainty and contradiction lends itself well to the complexities of the gendered passing space I have discovered. He writes,

> In the era of passing, the notion also found support that one could "always tell" [passing figures] by certain ineffaceable characteristics and visible or otherwise detectable signs such as their eyes, fingernails, or the babies that they or their descendants might generate, even generations later. Because this is, however, not empirically true, as we have seen, passing highlights an *illusory sense of certainty* in what is actually an area of social ambiguity and insecurity. (250, emphasis added)

Without imposing this particular theory on the situation of the *saya*, I would like to use this phrase in a new way and in relation to the possibility inherent in behaviors – specifically, transmutive behaviors – that subjects take on. I see these actions as subjects creating an 'illusion of compliance;' in essence, the wearing of the *saya*, or Flora's wearing of the identity of a single woman offers the illusion that these figures fit into a normative behavior, or at least, more closely approximate one. Under this illusion lies the possibility for freedom; in fact, this space is created by the illusion. Certainly, this freedom is not always the same; at times it is only intellectual, at times it is more, at others, less.

What I do think is fruitful is to consider the potential in the seemingly constricting, oppressive nature of certain identity categories forced upon certain subjects (of which these

cloth garments are physical manifestations) and to explore how such potential can offer a subject agency. According to Tristán, the taking on of certain conforming yet alienating characteristics (manifested in the *saya*) allows Peruvian women individuality, community, and freedom of movement, for it is upon this movement that all other types of movement are predicated (class movement, for example). In other words, the saya serves to illustrate the paradoxical nature of the transmutive space, as it is simultaneously constrictive and liberating, it allows a woman to be seen while remaining entirely anonymous, and it allows freedom of movement within preestablished boundaries.

As I write of movement, I acknowledge the intellectual movement I now make. I move from 19th century Peru to 20th century Argentina; from a voyage across the ocean to a small cell in a Buenos Aires prison; and from the problems of a woman wanting to escape a marriage to the problems of men trying to tolerate incarceration. Among all of these differences, I find that there is also much the same.

Tristán was shunned, to a certain extent, in both French and Peruvian societies. *El beso de la mujer araña*, written by Manuel Puig and published in 1976, was banned in Argentina during the years of the military dictatorship. Balderston and Masiello explain that

> [i]n 1972 and 1973 [Puig] visited Argentina to interview political prisoners for a new book project, but the chaotic and violent political situation forced him to seek exile in Mexico, where he remained until 1976. That year marks two significant events for our consideration: the 24 March coup in Argentina that installed a military junta that stayed in power until 1983 and the publication of Puig's novel *Kiss of the Spider Woman* in Spain, four months after the coup. (4)

It seems, then, that Puig was doubly exiled, and, in this sense, has much in common with Tristán. In essence, one could say that Puig was banned from Argentine culture as well.

The characters in the novel are also pariahs; for various reasons, they have been banned from society, their lifestyles existing too far out of normative social categories. In the context of the dictatorship in the narrative (whose depiction of society under military rule is not entirely fictional), the punishment for characters' behavior lands them in a real, physical prison (whereas in Tristán's case, the prison was a figurative one). Finally, though there are not occurrences of obvious passing in *El beso de la mujer araña*, the novel offers much in the way of performativity and transmutive action. It demonstrates the myriad nuances of performative actions while chipping away at the idea of polarized and/or fixed categories of many social identities: man, woman, male, female, straight, homosexual, prisoner, free person.

In *El beso de la mujer araña*, I am compelled to confront many of the same issues that I explored in *Pérégrinations d'une paria*. However, *El beso de la mujer araña* illustrates an expression of transmutive action under a policed state that is arguably not fictional.

Moreover, as virtually the entire novel takes place in a prison, it lends itself especially well to a Foucauldian reading that explores this particular expression of a carceral system and what is at least a figurative panopticon.

The cell serves, in some ways, as a microcosm of society at large. Molina's dialogue with Valentín can be read as homosexuality dialoguing with heterosexuality, and Molina does indeed expose Valentín's uncertainty about his own views. Though Molina's behavior seems that it would be non-normative and appropriately punished wherever he may go, once inside the prison, the weight given to Molina's non-normative actions shifts. Within the normative hierarchy of the prison, Molina is no longer a criminal; in fact, his compliance attracts the attention of the warden enough to take on a special job. Not only is he not punished in prison (I am taking the fact that he is imprisoned as a 'given' – he does not have to endure further punishment), he is rewarded for his behavior. In fact, when Molina accidentally gets the poisoned rice intended for Valentín, the warden apologizes to him and commends Molina for handling the situation so well:

> DIRECTOR: ¿Ayudó o no que lo debilitáramos por el lado físico?
> PROCESADO: El primer plato que vino preparado me lo tuve que comer yo.
> DIRECTOR: ¿Por qué? Hizo muy mal…
> PROCESADO: No, porque a él la polenta no le gusta, y como vino un plato más cargado que el otro…él insistió en que me lo comiera yo al más grande, y hubiese sido muy sospechoso que yo me negase. Usted me había dicho que el preparado venía en el plato de lata más nuevo, pero se equivocaron al cargarlo más. Y me lo tuve que comer yo.
> DIRECTOR: Ah, muy bien, Molina. Lo felicito. Perdónenos el error. (Puig 133)

This apology reveals something quite unusual about the power dynamic; by apologizing, the warden is, in effect, regarding Molina not as a prisoner, but as a fellow human being – and not just any fellow human being, but one to whom he owes something. In essence, the most powerful in the prison has lowered himself to *lower* than a prisoner; in certain aspects, Molina has the upper hand in this relationship due to how he has transmutively 'played the role' of the compliant prisoner. I believe how he does this might offer some possibilities to further deconstruct this figurative *saya* and help us to see why, in captivity, the captive can be particularly well-placed to engage in wielding agency. I use the word agency here, not power. Power connotes will over another person (which Molina certainly does have to some extent); agency connotes ability to act on one's own behalf. In the end, that is all Molina, or Valentín, or arguably most any of us, really wants.

Exploring the dialogue between Molina and the warden reveals Molina's own gaining of agency and gives us clues to how he gets it. Molina complies with the warden's calls to see him; the jailers tell him he has a visitor, and he always leaves without hesitancy. More

importantly, he never divulges the charade to Valentín. In fact, he offers the warden specific information on the type of package he should take back to his room:

> PROCESADO: Mi mamá compra todo en el supermercado que hay acá a pocas cuadras del penal, para no cargar en el ómnibus con el paquete.
> DIRECTOR: Pero más fácil nos es comprar todo aquí en la proveeduría. Aquí le haremos el paquete.
> PROCESADO: No, sería sospechoso. Por favor no, que vayan al supermercado de aquí de la avenida. (135)

To the warden, it looks as if Molina is being especially thoughtful so as not to let Valentín in on their scheme, yet Molina's performance is wholly about him exerting agency over his own situation. The more he modifies his behavior so as to fit the category of compliance, the more likely his will be to gain early release. In the meantime, he would like to be comfortable, so he asks for – and receives – delicacies he may not even be able to afford as a free man outside of the prison. In the following example, Molina shows even more thought to the scheme than in the previous one, suggesting to the warden that he spends considerable time thinking about and planning their covert operation when in his cell. His suggestions even more strongly than the previous example put him 'on the side' of the warden (at least against Valentín, or so the warden thinks):

> PROCESADO**:** Entonces… por ejemplo, si él se entera, por ejemplo, que viene un guardia y dice que en una semana me cambian de celda, porque ya entré en categoría especial, por la cuestión del indulto, o más despacito todavía, por la cuestión de que mi abogado ya tiene presentada la apelación, entonces si él cree que nos van a separar de celda, se va a ablandar más. Porque me parece que está un poco encariñado conmigo y ahí se va a largar a hablar más…
> DIRECTOR: ¿Usted cree?
> PROCESADO**:** Creo que vale la pena hacer la prueba.
> DIRECTOR: Lo que a mí me pareció siempre un error es que usted le dijese de la posibilidad del indulto. Eso a lo mejor le hizo atar cabos.
> PROCESADO**:** No, no creo.
> DIRECTOR: ¿Por qué?
> PROCESADO**:** Bueno, me pareció…
> DIRECTOR: No, dígame por qué. Usted debe tener sus razones.
> PROCESADO**:** Bueno…así me cubrí un poco yo también. (174)

Several aspects of the above exchange between Molina and the warden suggest that Molina, through his transmutive performance as the compliant prisoner, is able to, at least intellectually, *move* freely in the warden's presence. First of all, he is able to present various suggestions to the warden, to which the warden listens intently. This is not the normal behavior of a warden to a prisoner and is certainly not part of the normal prison structure.

Next, not only does the warden listen to Molina, but he shows respect for his proposal; "Do you really think so?", he asks – a question that would only result from respect and interest on the part of the speaker. Next, Molina disagrees with the warden, and he does so casually, without hesitation or fear of retribution. Though it would normally be deemed a bold move for a prisoner to overtly disagree with the warden, Molina's contradiction does not seem out of place to either of them. They are both quite secure in their roles at that moment – in their own and in each other's. Finally, when the warden asks for an explanation for Molina's disagreement, he changes his mind, telling Molina, "Don't tell me why. You must have your reasons" – thus allowing a prisoner intellectual space, freedom and movement regarding a matter that concerns his own prison term and an affair that involves the warden and others in power. As Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish*, carceral regimes are intended not just to control physical bodies, but souls as well (295). Though Molina may have to submit his body to regulation, arguably the more important aspect of him – his mind – remains out of reach for the warden and the military regime the warden represents.

Molina's transmutive performance as the compliant prisoner allows for the development of a secondary benefit (secondary to early release): a friendship with Valentín. More than a simple association, this friendship allows for intellectual freedom, much freedom of expression, and sexual behavior that would all be deemed 'non-normative' in society. Ironically, all of this happens in what would seem to be a space of utmost confinement: a small, contained prison cell. Their relationship challenges our notions of confinement and of freedom; of friendship, of possibility, of revolution, and of subversion. Ultimately, the prison cell functions as a creative space for intellectual freedom, self-expression, and sexual exploration. What we can learn about this process may offer us solutions and possibilities for challenging hegemonic order outside of a standard prison cell, in supposedly free society.

It is Molina's transmutive behavior – his ability to offer the warden and jailers the illusion of compliance – that he is able to create the potential for creative and sexual freedom and political subversion. In other words, by taking on the role of the submissive, conforming, compliant subject *externally* – that is, when interacting with others (predominantly more powerful others) in the public space (which, in the context of the prison, is the time when he is outside his cell), he is able to *internally* – that is, within himself and in the most intimate situations with others – *reject* compliance. Molina escapes surveillance in the cell because he submits to it outside of it. He gets privacy because he waives it. The fact that his waiver of privacy is only superficial – that is, that the information that he proffers the warden is false or at least disguised is beside the point; it is an illusion of compliance that affects the warden enough to modify standard surveillance and treatment of prisoners in order to give Molina some leeway. It is, in fact, a prisoner's play with the panopticon: Molina has discovered a place outside of its view. As Valentín describes it, they have created their own deserted island free from external oppression.[iii]

This prison cell – like the Peruvian *saya* and *manto* in Tristán's narrative – serves as a physical metaphor for the functioning of the space created by transmutivity. Transmutivity – in both the narratives by Tristán and Puig – functions as a passport to all places. It is transmutivity's illusion of compliance that sends a message to oppressors to leave the subject(s) inside it at bay. It is a powerful tool, as we have seen in *Pérégrinations d'une paria* and in *El beso de la mujer araña*, for subversive action. Its resistance, however, is not expressed in the overt activist activities enacted by a figure like Valentín; it is covert and quiet; under the veil; behind the door; a subtext to a message. It is slower and quieter than all-out activism; it is also, especially under extremely oppressive regimes, one likely to last longer and be more effective over time. As long as the illusion of compliance remains, the subject remains outside of governing bodies who punish polluting (aka non-normative or delinquent) behavior.

Despite the tragic ending of Molina, *El beso de la mujer araña* is, I argue, a socially progressive narrative. Aside from challenging normative views of gender and sexuality, it offers what I think what might be deemed a 'non-normative' resistance or protest – at least in terms of the US culture in which I write. In a culture where freedom of speech is thought to reign, where subjects are, at least in theory, encouraged to protest and speak out against what they believe is wrong, *El beso de la mujer araña* offers a different path of resistance – one that is quiet, that has airs of compliance, that is slow and methodical, and that values the community above the individual. The boldness and compassion Molina and Valentín express within a prison cell should offer limitless inspiration for those of us in the 'free' world. Finally, Molina's transmutive action offers a glimpse of how agency can begin to revert back to the disenfranchised subject.

A final example of transmutive behavior can be found in exploring the intricacies of a figure who, living in a 'free' world, is never free: that of Alex from the film *XXY*, based on the short story "Cinismo" by Sergio Bizzio. The story tells us of Rocío, a 12-year-old child born with both male and female genitalia. In the short story, Rocío (a hermaphrodite child passing as a girl) befriends and sleeps with Álvaro, the son of her parents' friends (who are staying with her family). In addition to the hiding of Rocío's condition and her 'passing,' the story also raises the issue of sexuality (Álvaro's parents are fearful that he is gay).

For the purposes of my discussion involving gender-related passing and associated consequences, I will focus primarily on the film adaptation by Lucía Puenzo as it contains added scenes that are particularly relevant to this discussion. In the film, Rocío's name is changed to a unisex Alex, and she ages three years to the age of 15. The plot of the film is quite simple: Alex lives with her parents, in a remote area of Uruguay. Her father, Néstor Kraken, is a marine biologist who wrote a book called, in English, *The Origins of Gender* (in the short story, Kraken is a sociologist; his wife, Suli, is a homoeopath in both [Bizzio 8]). In the film, Suli has invited friends of theirs, Muhabid and Érika, to stay with them for a two-

week visit with their 15-year-old son, Álvaro. However, Suli's invitation was not socially motivated. Muhabid is a plastic surgeon, and Suli would like him to meet Alex and also to discuss with him the possibility of operating on her daughter.

Like Tristán and Molina, Alex is a pariah. In the film, we learn from Kraken that the family moved to Uruguay from Buenos Aires in order to escape social persecution; Alex had, apparently, moved from school to school in the city. Thus, like the aforementioned characters that have been discussed in the previous chapters, Alex is in exile, having had to move from Argentina across its northern border to Uruguay. However, the striking difference between Alex's situation and the others is that Alex is in exile yet is still *in her own home*. Moreover, even in her own home and small city, Alex is still outcast, still alone, and still at risk for persecution. Where the prison in *El beso de la mujer araña* offered a microcosm of society, the home plays this role in *XXY*. The irony is that in *El beso de la mujer araña* the cell, normally a place of potential danger, is the only safe place for Valentín and Molina; the home, what is to be one's sanctuary, is still in many respects one of oppression and potential danger for Alex.

The suffering that a disenfranchised figure experiences – the suffering that is normally not considered in established theories of passing – is prominent in *XXY*. Though born a hermaphrodite, the film clearly shows Alex passing as a female; she has numerous bottles of pills she takes in order to impede the production of male hormones and thus the gaining of masculine characteristics. The film distinctly illustrates that this passing is not enacted by Alex to deceive or move up in class; in fact, Alex seems chronically frustrated by her life that revolves around the fact that her physical body is somehow seen as wrong and therefore must be fixed. Alex's fictional experience, if we hold Garfinkel's findings to be true, sounds remarkably akin to the experiences of real intersexed persons who pass:

> In each case the persons managed the achievement of their rights to live in the chosen sexual status while operating with the realistic conviction that disclosure of their secrets would bring swift and certain ruin in the form of status degradation, psychological trauma, and loss of material advantages. Each had as an enduring practical task to achieve rights to be treated and to treat others according to the obligated prerogatives of the elected sex status. They had as resources their remarkable awareness and uncommon sense knowledge of the organization and operation of social structures that were for those that are able to take their sexual status for granted routinized, "seen but unnoticed" background of their everyday affairs. They had, too, great skills in interpersonal manipulations. While their knowledge and interpersonal skills were markedly instrumental in characters, by no means were they exclusively so. (Garfinkel 59)

There are three aspects from this excerpt that most interest me for the purposes of this

discussion: 1. The passing figure lived with the knowledge that disclosure would mean ruin, which implies that the figure lived in a chronic state of fear and anxiety; 2. The events that would be involved in this ruin are quite serious, implying that were the figure's status known, s/he would likely be perpetually disadvantaged anyway; and 3. The figure had an "enduring practical task" of maintaining this status, implying that maintaining this camouflage was likely psychologically exhausting. These three aspects alone suggest that whether 'passing' or 'out,' the intersexed person is doomed to live a life of frustration, suffering, and disenfranchisement.

This explication of the work of the passing intersexed person aligns with my definition of transmutivity and also illustrates why theories of racial passing are not wholly relevant to gender-related passing. Garfinkel's above description of the act of passing does not suggest that the passing figure is out to deceive nor that s/he is passing to move 'up' in the world; rather, the suggestion is that s/he is passing to simply survive being in a world in which figures like them *are not even supposed to exist*. Speaking of his client, Garfinkel writes, "[p]assing was not a matter of Agnes' desire. It was necessary for her. Agnes had to be a female. Whether she liked it or not she had to pass" (70). Passing for transgender or intersexed figures is about being seen– being 'on the map' of the social geographic space. Thus, these figures' acts of passing better align with my definition of transmutivity.

The actions of Alex's parents, especially Alex's mother, reinforce these strict social boundaries around gender; in fact, Alex's home is a microcosm of society and Alex's mother, ironically, replicates the actions of a patriarchy that holds gender as a normal, natural, unquestionable truth. Though we are not told it overtly, we are led to believe that the visit by the plastic surgeon and his wife was suggested by Suli. Early on in the film we see Suli and Érika discussing the 'secret' with each other as if they are plotting some kind of scheme. Later, after their friends have been visiting for some time, Suli asks Néstor if he has talked to the plastic surgeon yet, suggesting that the trip was planned by her with a clear motivation – to find a way to normalize her child. The director makes a less than obvious commentary on Suli's character later in the film in a scene where Suli and Érika are in the kitchen making dinner. We see a close-up shot of a pair of hands (who we later learn to be Suli's); the hands are somewhat violently chopping a carrot. One hand slips and cuts the thumb of the left hand. The cutting scene doesn't last but a few moments, but the sparse screen, the close-up of the wound, and the clear sound of the cutting forces us as an audience to more acutely experience the cutting. The scene is a clear reference to the violence that would be enacted upon Alex should her parents decide to place her on the operating table. The carrot serves as a phallic symbol; the mother cuts it off, and, in the end, only damages herself.

Suli's imposing of gender categories upon her child is also expressed in medicine. There is a two-fold paradox here: Suli is a homeopath, yet she provides her child with hormones (like corticoid which, as Alex explains to Álvaro, is to make her 'not grow a

beard'). Homeopathic medicine does not favor use of synthetic hormones. Moreover, medicine is intended to be a healing element, but in Alex's case, it only causes more frustration. Alex has countless drugs in her room and in her bathroom; early in the film, we see her take some of them reluctantly. Later, however, after a particularly difficult scene where she is violently disrobed by a group of boys, Alex escapes to her bedroom in order to comfort herself. Her mother enters; on the verge of tears, Alex tells her that she doesn't want to take medicine anymore.

As these actions by Alex's mother show us, the family is not exempt from the power structures that govern the rest of society. Foucault explains in *Discipline and Punish*:

> 'Discipline' may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology. And it may be taken over either by 'specialized' institutions … or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end (schools, hospitals), or by pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or reorganizing their internal mechanisms of power (one day we should show how intra-familial relations, essentially in the parents-children cell, have become 'disciplined', absorbing since the classical age external schemata, first educational and military, then medical, psychiatric, psychological, which have made the family the privileged locus of emergence for the disciplinary question of the normal and the abnormal)… (215-6)

Certainly, the later part of this quote from Foucault's work is eerily appropriate to this discussion. It is crucial to note here that all parents discipline their children, and all discipline is not created equal. In other words, I argue that the discipline, a.k.a. normalizing of Alex is poignantly different that general discipline enacted upon any child for, say, taking something that is not his or hers or speaking inappropriately in church or school. What is different about the discipline enacted upon Alex (predominantly by her mother) is that it is not a temporary, inconsistent behavior that is disciplined: it is a permanent physical reality of Alex's *body* that is disciplined. No 'time-out' or modification on Alex's part will adjust this fact. Thus, Alex's mother is relaying society's message, or the governing state's message, to her own child: you don't belong.

XXY reveals how parenting is normally gendered and how Alex's parents invert normative parenting; in fact, it is the latter that reveals the former. As explicated in the preceding paragraphs, Alex's mother, Suli, is the driving force behind the parental impulse to normalize Alex; it is Suli who manages Alex's medications, who thinks it may be time to operate on her, who arranges for a plastic surgeon to visit the house, who pressures her husband to talk with the surgeon. The compassionate, caretaking, non-judgmental parenting

style of Néstor contrasts sharply with that of Suli, forcing us to realize that it is Suli who is the domineering one and Néstor who exhibits more maternal qualities. For example, it is Néstor who comes to Álvaro's defense at the dinner table when Álvaro refuses a drink. Next, when Néstor catches Alex having sex with Álvaro in the barn, he simply walks away and casually mentions it later to his wife. Finally, Néstor's behavior regarding Alex's biological anomaly is markedly different than that of his wife. While Suli is intent on 'fixing' the problem, Néstor has a deliberate, methodical approach to the situation. He researches the case of another local person who was born with a similar condition (who had previously lived as a woman) and who opted for surgery; he visits the person (who now lives life as a man), and the man invites him in for coffee. The two talk for quite some time, and Néstor inquires what the man's life was like both before and after surgery. The man tells Néstor of the multiple surgeries he had even before one year of age. He has clear views on the beliefs of those who are proponents of surgery. The man says that it is often called 'normalization,' but he calls it 'castration.' Moreover, he adds that it will make a child afraid of his/her own body, and that is the worst thing you can do to a child. The man is now married and has a child of his own. Overall, he seems well adjusted and content. Where Suli brings in someone from the outside to potentially force a permanent change upon Alex, Néstor explores the topic on his own, away from the house, without involving his wife or his child.

Regardless of Néstor's thoughtfulness and sensitivity, when the family has had to move from their home country, medicate their child, and pass her off as a gender she is not, it is clear that there is truly nowhere that Alex can go without living in a transmutive space – not even in her own home. The frustration she feels from the fatigue of maintaining this performance is clear; she, towards the end of the film, asserts her refusal to self-medicate any longer. Though the film's tone is less than hopeful, it is in this assertion, perhaps, where we see Alex's agency – we see the part of her outside the confines of the oppressive environment that her home has become. We saw her agency earlier where, in a scene reminiscent of *El beso de la mujer araña,* Alex engages in sexual exploration with Álvaro in a shed outside the home. Up to that point Alex had been compliant with her parents, and thus she was allowed to venture outside of her mother's disciplinary reach. Just as the cell was simultaneously a space of confinement and freedom for Molina and Valentín, so is the home for the adolescent Alex.

As Flora Tristán, Molina, and Alex have illustrated, the illusion of compliance is effective because it begins to shift power back to the individual; it provides a sense of ownership, of agency, of self-determination. Transmutive behavior is more than just playing the role to get what someone wants; it is specifically relevant in situations where a hierarchical structure is in place that relates to socially constructed sites of difference. And even though the agency allowed by transmutivity is still contained within a larger social frame, its illusion of compliance is, at least, the start to power germinating from within the

individual, of social change from the inside out.

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i Following is the original text in French: "Biene accueillie partout, comme *veuve* ou comme *demoiselle*, j'étais toujours repoussée lorsque la vérité venait à se découvrir. Jeune, jolie et paraissant jouir d'une ombre d'indépendance, c'étaient des causes suffisantes pour envenimer les propos et me faire exclure d'une société qui gémit sous le poids des fers qu'elle s'est forgés, et ne pardonne à aucun de ses membres de chercher à s'en affranchir." (51)

ii "La *saya*, ainsi que je 'ai dit, est le costume national…" (601).

iii En cierto modo estamos perfectamente libres de actuar como queremos el uno respecto al otro, ¿me explico? Es como si estuviéramos en una isla desierta. Una isla en la que tal vez estemos solos años. Porque, sí, fuera de la celda están nuestros opresores, pero adentro no. Aquí nadie oprime a nadie. Lo único que hay, de perturbador, para mi mente…cansada, o condicionada o deformada…es que alguien me quiere tratar bien, sin pedir nada a cambio. (Puig 177-178)

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