Beautiful Male Bodies: Gay and Male Homoerotic Relationships in Caio Fernando Abreu's *Morangos Mofados*

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The works of the Brazilian writer Caio Fernando Abreu (1948-96) deal with a variety of topics, amongst which issues of love, hate, identity, truncated relationships, AIDS, and homophobia play a major role. This essay focuses on how the short stories “Terça-feira gorda” and “Aqueles dois,” from Morangos mofados (1982), portray gay and male homoerotic relationships. Regarding the first short story, I argue that it promotes positive affects towards the main characters and attacks homophobia by showing how harmonic, beautiful, and genuine their relationship is. For the second short story, I propose that the main characters’ harmonic and homoerotic relationship questions the heterosexual agreement of homosociality. In Abreu’s short stories, gay and homoerotic relationships challenge hegemonic discourses and heteronormativity. Additionally, my analysis contends that these texts construct politics of desire based on harmony and on positive affects that expose and attack homophobia and homofear. These politics of desire, although based on a traditional view of male bodies, are part of Abreu’s agenda of promoting queer relationships by showing them as beautiful and opposing them to the ugly homophobic of his Brazilian context. In order to carry out this examination, I first establish the theoretical frame that informs the study of homophobia, homofear, and affects; second, I analyze the harmonic similarities between both short stories and I define homoeroticism; third, I discuss how beautiful male bodies and homophobic bodies and voices are narratively displaced in the texts and, lastly, I elaborate on the politics of desire proposed by both texts.

In Between Men, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick studies the presence of homosocial desire in the English literary canon, as well as the homophobia that has permeated it. This critic contends that homophobia is a fear and hatred of homosexuality (1). Nonetheless, Sedgwick recognizes that homophobia as we experience it has not always existed, which means that it is socially constructed, historically contingent, and subject to change. As a matter of fact, according to Byrne Fone, in Homophobia, by 1975 homophobia came to signify an extreme rage and fear of homosexuality (5). This rage and hatred came from the idea that gay, lesbian, bi, and trans practices, desires, identities, and sexualities, disrupt the “natural” order of things. This disruption distresses legal, social, political, ethical, and economic areas, as well as moral values and norms.

1 Some critics have used the term “heterosexism” instead of homophobia. However, as Sedgwick explains, the term homophobia continues to question the opposition homo/heterosexuality (Between 219).
Regarding the “natural” order of these areas, Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble*, argues that hegemonic ideologies have created norms and rules that aim to repeat themselves in order to project a stable image of the world. In order for these ideologies to succeed, this constructed and stable image of the world has to seem natural and logical. Thus, hegemonic ideologies present an imposed and artificial world that pretends to be natural. This natural feature is what Butler describes as a “natural(lized)” order (xxii-iv). In this sense, because of the disruption of the natural(ized) order that gay, lesbian, bi, and trans relationships and sexuality bring, homophobia cannot be limited to a dislike or hatred—phobia—feeling. Furthermore, as Gregory Herek discusses in “Homophobia,” homophobia involves group conflicts, and it has been used to benefit a hegemonic group (553). Because of this complexity, homophobia extends beyond the area of gender discrimination. As Sedgwick notes, homophobia can be related to fear, as well as to a desire for power, privilege, and material goods (219).

Another issue to consider when referring to homophobia is the creation of the idea of manhood. Referring to it in the context of the U.S. in “Masculinity as Homophobia,” Michael S. Kimmel argues that the great secret is that men are afraid of other men because they constantly have to compare themselves to other men (277). Based on this argument, two requirements of manhood—competition and jealousy—can have a correlation to homophobia, as male bodies are compared, envied and/or rejected. According to Kimmel, also, the fear of failing to be a “man” occurs because masculinity is a homosocial enactment (275). Although this critic refers to masculinities in the U.S., his ideas can be related to manhood and construction of masculinities in Brazil, as this society has been patriarchal and permeated by traditional notions of masculinities. However, the masculine role in Brazil has different connotations because partners in a relationship are often divided into the “active” (the one that penetrates) and the “passive” (the one that is penetrated). This difference continues to be very popular in Brazil, according to James N. Green and Ronald Polito in *Frescos trópicos*. It could be argued, according to Kimmel, that such differentiation between the sexual partners attests to the need to be compared to another man in order to be considered masculine or not—heterosexual. Nonetheless, the specific characteristics of Brazilian society do play a major role when examining homophobia in Abreu’s short stories, because, in Brazil, gay men have been highly persecuted and have suffered biases for having been seen as weaker and threatening. As a matter of fact, this country has one of the highest numbers in assassinations of gays, lesbians, and cross-dressers (*Frescos* 23, 108). Because of this situation, Abreu’s 1982 short stories continue to be relevant, as they refer to a major social problem that unfortunately subsists in Brazil.

In connection with homophobia, I have to clarify that I differentiate between homophobia and homofear, although I consider homofear one of the affects of homophobia. With this division, I highlight the power of affects such as fear because, as Ann Cvetkovich argues in *An Archive of Feelings*, affects function as the base of the construction of public cultures (10). That is, affects are not just psychological states, but cultural and social practices (Ahmed 9). Because affects are regulated by the hegemonic society they can be manipulated to a group’s advantage, typically a hegemonic group’s advantage. Therefore, I emphasize the different homophobic affects latent in both short stories, as each text constructs them differently. In addition, I underscore positive affects at play in the texts in order to make evident Abreu’s agenda of emphasizing certain feelings through the narrators, such as sympathy and admiration, that influence the texts’ reader. I argue that the use and manipulation of these affects create a sense of aesthetics and a teleology with which the narrators—and Abreu by extension—supports and praises desires and identities otherwise discriminated against, and marginalized, in Brazil. These teleological tones and aesthetics, as a matter of fact, build politics of desire in the short stories.

The first text, “Terça-feira gorda,” develops the topic of homophobia through social and physical rejection, violent rage, and beating. In this short story, narrated in first person by one of the main characters, two men meet each other in a disco during carnival; because they are harassed, they decide to go outside the disco and end up having sex. After the sexual relation,
strangers arrive to beat them; the main character manages to escape while his partner is left behind to continue suffering the beating. In turn, the second short story, “Aqueles dois,” focuses on group fears regarding the possibility of a gay relationship, that is, on the fear that two close male friends can have a sexual and love relationship. This text has a third person narrator that explains how two men meet at an office shortly after having agreed to work there. With time both characters develop a very close friendship, up to the point at which their work colleagues suspect that they are a gay couple. As a result of this suspicion, the main characters lose their jobs because they threaten the “morals” and the “reputation” of the office.

These short stories have in common that they show how the main characters meet each other and the resulting harmonic relationship they establish before the attempts to separate them. However, they also have differences. The first one is their length because “Terça-feira gorda” is only four pages long, while “Aqueles dois” consists of nine pages. The second difference is their setting because one takes place at a disco and on the beach, both public spaces, and the other one in the office and in the characters’ studio apartment and boarding house room. In this sense, they both happen in public spaces, although “Aqueles dois” also focuses on private and intimate places, which add to the homoerotic tone of that text. The third and main difference between the texts that I consider is that “Terça-feira gorda” develops harmony to prelude a “beautiful” sexual act, while in the other short story the harmony propitiates and is part of the close—homoerotic—relationship between the characters. This difference suggests that through the development of harmonic relationships both short stories promote two different types of relationships between males and, in doing so, they expose different dimensions of homophobic acts—beating and labor dismissal—and their negative affects—intolerance, envy, and rejection. Because of this exposure, I argue that both texts set the characters’ relationship as beautiful and harmonic, which generates positive affects toward gay and homoerotic relationships, thus creating an atmosphere that stresses homophobia as grotesque. In the next section, I employ close-reading analysis to examine how both sets of main characters develop a close relationship based on mutual attraction, affinity, and harmony.

Harmonic Relationships

Abreu’s short stories illustrate that, even when the characters had not met before, a connection between the characters involves atavist connotations; that is, the characters seem to know each other for a long time because of the immediate compatibility they establish. Additionally, although their relationship is new, it is rapidly consolidated. In “Terça-feira gorda” the narrator says that “[e]u já o tinha visto, mas não ali. Fazia tempo, não sabia onde. Eu tinha andado por muitos lugares. Ele tinha um jeito de quem também tinha andado por muitos lugares” (56). Here, meeting each other seems to belong to a different atmosphere, but not to an ordinary one. It is an atmosphere in which both men represent male encounters and attraction throughout time. That is, they are not one specific couple, but represent male couples in time. This singular ambiance is also visible when the narrator compares his partner to different gods from Afro-Brazilian religions. By associating him to Xangô, Iansã, Oxalá, and Ogum, the character is no longer a simple person in the middle of carnival, but an abstraction or cultural representation of divine male bodies and divine (gay) relationships in Brazil. The reference to gods also establishes the bodies as beautiful—albeit traditional physical beauty—thus creating a sense of corporeal aesthetics. Additionally, their love, or their meeting, is not ordinary because the narrator’s partner represents supreme beings and, in this way, their love elicits affects such as admiration and appreciation. These affects underscore gay couples and sexual encounters not only as positive, but also as beautiful (divine). At the same time, they begin to suggest a gender and sexualities agenda on male relationships embedded in the short stories.
The divine atmosphere is complemented with anonymity because the characters do not share information, “[n]ão vou perguntar teu nome, nem tua idade, nem teu telefone, nem teu signo, nem teu endereço, ele disse” (58-59). In this way, the lack of references to everyday life allows them to be any person during carnival; any person that feels a sexual desire for another person, regardless of sex, gender, class, religion, and background. It also implies that traditional references—such as names, age, phone numbers, and zodiac signs—do not inform the couple’s attraction. To be attracted to another human being, under circumstances of anonymity, signals that the attraction is very genuine up to the point that it can occur with anyone and this very same attraction transforms the male body into a divine male body. I must stress here the importance of images of beauty and affects of harmony because they are set them up against the forthcoming homophobia that separates the male couple. Lizandro Carlos Calegari in “Literatura e homoerotismo” argues that the permissible atmosphere that allows the inversion of social hierarchies during carnival in this short story does not include gay practices (122). Similarly to Calegari, I consider that the homophobia displayed in “Terça-feira gorda” confirms that not even during carnival is gay sexuality either entirely permissible or celebrated by Brazilian society. That is, the attraction between the characters does occur and is harmonic, but they are not allowed a future together. However, unlike Calegari, more than applying Bakhtinian ideas to analyze the carnival atmosphere, I want to emphasize the importance of this ambiance and how the use of masks reinforces the relationship as genuine.

The carnival as the background represents an atmosphere of celebration and dancing, in which an honest and divine attraction can take place—even if it is rejected later on. During carnival, masks and costumes aim to cover that which would otherwise be visible thus emphasizing the idea of anonymity. In “Terça-feira gorda,” the masks appear when the first person narrator notices, after leaving the disco, that he and his partner are no longer wearing a mask. He thinks it is dangerous not to wear one, especially in carnival (58). This comment states how masks cover and hide transgressions and transgressors from an intolerant society. It is also clear that if the carnival establishes a place where all the people are equal, the mask—as the object that hides the face—reinforces the equality of the anonymity among the characters by further removing social references. Therefore, the attraction is also made even more genuine because the narrating character only realizes the masks are gone once the attraction and desire have been established. The mask’s presence and subsequent absence confirm the harmonic aspect of the characters’ attraction and even validate it as genuine. This harmonic relationship is further reinforced because both characters consume drugs, and within the text this action is associated with living a romance in their own—divine—world and time. With the genuine and harmonic relationship, then, Abreu’s text generates positive affects—sympathy and admiration—because the characters’ interaction is shown as beautiful, egalitarian, and genuine.

In “Aqueles dois,” the second analyzed short story, the harmonic side is evident at the outset because its two epigraphs establish the sense of complementary nature of the male couple’s relationship. The first one resembles a subtitle for the short story: “(História de aparente mediocridade e repressão),” and the second belongs to Walt Whitman’s poem “So Long!” from Leaves of Grass (1867). On the one hand, with the first epigraph, two spaces in the story are established: the real and the apparent. This is due to the fact that it is a short story about growing solidarity and companionship between two characters, which is neither mediocre nor repressive. As a matter of fact, mediocrity and repression belong to the other characters; those—aqueles—who judge people and spread rumors based on fears and biases, as I explain later in more detail. On the other hand, the second epigraph belongs to a poem that promotes a country of togetherness, of friendship. Whitman’s quote reads exactly what the short story shows with the characters: “I announce adhesiveness, I say it shall / be limitless, unloosen’d I say you shall yet find the friend you / were looking for” (132). Considering that critics have studied Leaves of Grass’s homoerotic element (Butters 4), Whitman’s quote in the short story not only establishes...
the idea of harmonic friendship from the beginning, but also aids to introduce the homoerotic dimension in the text.

In “Aqueles dois,” the sense of harmony between the characters is reinforced through various similarities because they establish how the characters complement each other. One of these similarities is their names: Raul and Saul. Other similarities are their loneliness, their physical beauty, and past because both ended long-term relationships with women—marriage and engagement. Moreover, both of them “[t]inham a mesma altura, o mesmo porte. . . . Eram bonitos juntos. . . . o bonito de dentro de um estimulando o bonito de fora do outro, e vice-versa. Como se houvesse, entre aqueles dois, uma estranha e secreta harmonia” (134). As it can be seen, the connection between them is based on physical beauty and affinity more than just on attraction, as in the other short story. Nonetheless, these similarities also generate affects of sympathy towards the characters, and Abreu’s manipulation of affects becomes evident. I do have to mention that the only affect that is not sympathetic, from a feminist standpoint, occurs when both characters complain about their failed relationships with women and mention, while drunk, being tired of women’s complicated plots and stingy demands (136). This comment is a cultural observation rooted in machismo that also hints at misogyny, especially if one considers that a close relationship between men is possible by displacing women (male homosociality). This displacement represents another similarity between the characters, although it is not a harmonic one. In a way, it is linked to the homoerotic tone of the short stories, as I explain later.

Despite this negative affect, in this short story, the relationship between the main characters is established through harmony, honesty, affinity, and the desire to spend time together. In addition, both Raul and Saul appreciate each other’s body, “Saul falou que ia dormir nu. Raul olhou para ele e disse você tem um corpo bonito. Você também, disse Saul, e baixou os olhos. Deitaram ambos nus, um na cama atrás do guarda-roupa, outro no sofá” (139). This comment explicitly states a strong sexual and erotic tension between the characters, as they are observing and admiring each other’s naked body. Although they do not go beyond the gaze stage, this scene reinforces the homoerotic tone in the text. In this sense, the short story’s narrator creates ambiguity about the characters’ relationship. Are they just friends or are they interested—sexually and/or romantically—in each other as in “Terça-feira gorda?” Because the text does not answer these questions, I propose that “Aqueles dois” creates a homoerotic relationship, and at the same time invites the reader to question deep friendships between men, that is, the heterosexual agreement of homosociality. In order to better understand the homosociality and homoerotism, I refer to the work of Sedgwick, Sharon Marcus, and Georges Bataille.

For Sedgwick the term “homosocial” has been applied to activities such as male bonding, and this activity in contemporary societies is characterized by intense homophobia and homofear, even though there are plenty of homosocial activities and places (Between 1). However, because the term “homosocial” cannot fully explain the close relationship between Raul and Saul, the term “homoeroticism” is more pertinent. Regarding this last term, Marcus explains, in Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England, that it is neither a synonym nor an euphemism for sex (113). According to this critic, the erotic and the sexual can and do intersect, but only the sexual denotes acts involving genital arousal (113). Thus, the erotic has to be understood as autonomous from the sexual. Additionally, for Marcus, the artificial distinction between identification and desire aims to separate homosexuality from heterosexuality (115). To have a desire is not to claim an identity and to claim an identity is not necessarily to have a desire. That is, sex, gender, sexuality, and sexual desire are not correlated in a direct and simplistic manner. The erotic goes beyond fixed gender relations or sexual acts.

Discussing the erotic, Bataille, in Death and Sensuality, argues that eroticism always entails a breaking down of patterns established by the regulated social order (18). Therefore, it can be argued that the erotic challenges binaries and has the potential to question heteronormativity and homophobia. It can break traditional relationships between the members of a same sex in order to introduce different and nontraditional dynamics. Homoeroticism, thus,
questions hegemonic definitions and rules and norms pertaining to friendship, heterosexuality, as well as gay, lesbian, bi, and trans sexualities. In Abreu’s short story, it emphasizes the artificiality of fearing close homofriendships. At the same time, it underscores the highly—and hidden—erotic charge of this type of friendship that naturalized hegemonic rules aim to hide.

The homoeroticism in “Aqueles dois” can be seen in a strong desire for the other man’s companionship: “Sem tempo para compreenderem, abraçaram-se fortemente. E tão próximos ficaram que um podia sentir o cheiro do outro: o de Raul, flor murcha, gaveta fechada; o de Saul, colônia de barba, talco. Durou muito tempo” (138). In this quote, in addition to desire, the long hug establishes a physical proximity that both characters want to maintain, and this proximity opens space for a homoerotic and even gay relationship, however ambiguous. In “Small Epiphanies,” Fernando Arenas states that “[s]exuality and gender identity categories appear as highly unstable sites of signification in Caio Fernando Abreu’s fictional world, where fixed notions of hetero-, bi-, or homosexuality are constantly put into question” (243). Following Arenas’s argument, the homoerotic tone is the one that breaks hegemonic categories and fixed notions of sexual and gender identity in this short story. The homoeroticism of the characters’ relationship highlights as rigid the rules of heteronormativity and the fear of male intimacy or gay sexuality. Even when the other characters at the office do not have evidence of a gay relationship between Raul and Saul, the fear of a gay relationship leads them to reject both characters—homofear (and homophobia).

Based on this fear, the characters are labeled as gay because they are seen as a gay couple. Visually, they represent a specific image associated with a type of couple. Here it is important to remember that visual images are superficial in the sense that they neither fully represent a scene nor characterize the complexities of human interaction. As Richard Howells and Joaquim Negreiros indicate in Visual Culture, visual literacy needs to be taught (1). Additionally, visual images can be easily manipulated. Because of this manipulation, the homophobic emphasis on Raul and Saul as a gay couple is a visual image that obstructs other readings for both characters’ relationship. The reductionist view of homofear and homophobia does not go beyond the visual image to embrace other possibilities and dynamics. Considering the topic of visibility, in Ensayos sobre culturas homoeróticas latinoamericanas, David William Foster indicates that it is of special importance in Latin America because this region still maintains the Napoleonic Code (the 1804 French civil code) in which issues of body privacy are essential (88). Therefore, the critic argues that Latin American homophobia targets public manifestations of dissidence and transgression because they go against the Napoleonic code of privacy (88). In “Terça-feira gorda” the characters are seen and are rejected in the disco and on the beach, whereas in “Aqueles dois,” the sexual act—understood as public defiance and affirmation of same-sex desire—is not necessary for the characters’ social rejection. The visibility of their close friendship in the workplace creates a fear of gay sexuality—homofear—; a fear of what could be happening. This is why I consider that this short story develops the topic of homofear as a specific affect of homophobia.

Despite this difference, I have to stress two aspects the short stories have in common and that pertain to the construction of each harmonic relationship. The first one is that both sets of main characters have the same level or access to power: they meet during carnival and they have the same type of work. This situation implies that they can develop relationships based on equality, which marks a major difference when compared with another short story of Morangos mofados. “Sargento García” narrates a sexual relationship between two male characters, but the sergeant’s character has an age, experience, and military position with which he overpowers Hermes, the other character.

The second characteristic that the two analyzed short stories have in common that adds to the harmonic tone is that both main characters neither fight nor enter themselves into conflicts. As a matter of fact, both sets of main characters are acting almost in complete isolation from society, as they barely interact with other characters—except for themselves. In “Terça-feira
gorda,” the two characters only look at each other, and in “Aqueles dois” they neither interact with other people at the office nor have friends or relatives in the city. This isolation is more emphasized because the point of view of both short stories is centered on the two sets of main characters, either by the first person narrator in “Terça-feira gorda,” or by the third person narrator in “Aqueles dois.” Therefore, the narrators place the characters in a space where their harmonic and honest relationships can flourish. This focalization effectively generates positive affects for the main characters, at the same time that other characters—the homophobic and homofearful—are associated with negative affects. In a way, the texts locate both main characters in a privileged place while other characters are displaced because they break or reject harmonious relationships.

Dislocated Positions and Bodies

Through the narrators and focalization, characters and main characters are located and dislocated in both texts. Regarding the main characters, both short stories place them in the center of the narration. Traditionally, as a space, the center represents values associated with what is “normal,” “honest,” natural, and natural(ized) in a society. Having gay and male homosocial and homoerotic relationships located at the center permits both texts to present these relationships as honest and normal—according to hegemonic standards. The first person narrator of “Terça-feira gorda” highlights his own attraction and his partner’s beauty. In turn, the third person narrator of “Aqueles dois” introduces his own perspective to the reader in order to emphasize as beautiful and harmonic the relationship between the characters. The narrators’ emphases also suggest that the homophobic and homofearful characters are located in the margins, that is, in the place that traditionally has been considered as that of the rejected and marginalized other. In other words, ignorance, homofear, homophobia, and violence are located in the place traditionally allocated to the deviant. Because of this positioning, hegemonic ideologies and homophobia are questioned and delegitimized in the short stories, as the negative affects of homophobia are rendered as incoherent and, literally, “marginal.” In this section I develop the analysis of how bodies are dislocated and positioned in both texts. I argue that this dislocation continues to promote positive affects towards the main characters and condemns their rejection and, in doing so, it adds to the short stories’ narrator’s agenda of promoting gay and homoerotic relationships in a patriarchal society that establishes rigid roles for male bodies.

In “Terça-feira gorda,” the dislocation of hegemonic ideologies and emerging of negative affects is present because the homophobic characters inhabit both the social and the narrative margins. This positioning is even more emphasized because those characters neither have gender nor bodies. They are voices without bodies, let alone beautiful bodies, which places them in a non-privileged location within the text’s economy. Additionally, they contrast with the beautiful bodies of the main characters. The homophobic voices, thus, do not have bodies that can be appreciated or that can provoke affects of admiration and appreciation. This lack of appreciation further displaces the voices, as they lack basic human characteristics within the short stories. This dehumanization can be seen in that even when they physically hit the main characters, they neither have precise physical traits nor a defined profile. The narrator says “n̂os empurraram em volta, tentei protegê-lo com meu corpo, mas ai-ai repetiram empurrando, olha as loucas, vamos embora, ele disse” (58). The others are a “they” that pushes and insults the male couple using stereotypical feminine tones associated with feminine male gays—apparently weak males. Additionally, near the end of the short story the narrator says “[m]as vieram vindo, então, e eram muitos” (59). Here, the others have increased in number, but their faces and bodies are, once again, not described. Through the narrator and the narration of his own experience, the reader discovers offensive voices that push beautiful male bodies and interrupt a harmonic relationship. These voices represent the ubiquity of homophobia because they judge, scorn, aim to bother the
male couple, and lack bodies. This disembodiment relates to what Sedgwick and Herek argue regarding the construction and extension of homophobia. Hence, this short story shows how homophobia is constructed because it neither has a particular face nor gender, as it can have many, and does not have to be located in one particular set of subjects or bodies.

In “Aqueles dois,” homophobic characters inhabit the margins, but unlike “Terça-feira gorda” they do have a gender and specific bodies. They are the female and male work colleagues of the main characters, and their gossiping creates doubts (137). Female colleagues are attracted to Raul and Saul because they both “eram dois moços bonitos também, todos achavam. As mulheres da repartição, casadas, solteiras, ficaram nervosas quando eles surgiram, tão altos e altivos, comentou, olhos arregalados, uma das secretárias” (134). The narrator of the texts shows how female characters look and desire the beautiful male bodies through the heteronormative gaze. In turn, male colleagues look but are jealous of the physical attractiveness of the main characters, as “[a]o contrário dos outros homens, alguns até mais jovens, nem tinha barriga ou aquela postura desalentada de quem carimba ou datilografa papéis oito horas por dia” (134). The bodies of the main characters are tall, proud, fit and have a good posture, which makes them different from their male colleagues. On the one hand, this gaze establishes a competition regarding images of traditional masculinity—fit body. The ideal masculine bodies are the ones threatening the manhood and heterosexuality—according to Kimmel’s argument—of the other characters. On the other hand, the difference between male bodies implies that while the homophobic and jealous male characters do have bodies, their bodies are “ugly” and they are filled with envy, a negative affect. In contrast, the bodies of the main characters are beautiful. Here, I have to stress that an emphasized appreciation of beautiful male bodies is traditional and conservative because it continues to favor privileged bodies and creates hierarchies between male bodies. Customarily, male bodies have been located in positions of power and beautiful male bodies have been the object of envy and competition, as Kimmel explains regarding masculinities in general. However, even though the appreciation of the physicality of male bodies in the short stories is traditional and limited—it reifies male bodies—, I argue that the main characters’ bodies are beautiful not because they reproduce patriarchal codes of desired masculinity, but because traditional beauty can have a sociopolitical strength with which to attack homophobia. That is, by linking that which destroys beautiful bodies and harmonic relationships to ugliness, envy, and intolerance, homophobia is rendered as incoherent and damaging in the text. Abreu’s sociopolitical agenda in the short stories, then, is to demonstrate the pointless damage that can be done with negative affects to true friendship, desires, and beautiful male bodies.

Despite the gendered and ugly bodies of homophobic characters, an additional “character” in “Aqueles dois” is genderless and bodiless: the attentive moral guardian. In this short story, the male couple’s dismissal is not based on concrete visual evidence, but rather on fear, gossip, and anonymous letters that denounced Raul and Saul as a gay couple. These letters were signed by an “Atento Guardião da Moral” (140), and although the word “guardião” seems to represent the male gender, their anonymity reinforces the idea that homophobia is not located in a specific face, name, or body. Thus, the moral guardian’s anonymity functions as a mask that implies a distance that masquerades or distorts the accuser(s) and spreads the ill-intentioned rumors—unlike the carnival mask as in “Terça-feira gorda.” The lack of body also removes responsibility because there is neither a specific location nor person with a name to blame for the homophobia and homofear. Because in “Aqueles dois,” the characters lose their jobs—they are dislocated—thanks to ill-intentioned gossip and anonymous letters, the homofear reveals heteronormativity as an artificial discourse, and confirms how homophobia destroys or attempts to destroy harmonic male couples.

While both short stories expose the disharmony and ugliness of rejecting these couples, “Aqueles dois” also emphasizes that fear—as phobia and anger—is an affect that has a political force capable of accessing mechanisms of power and disempowering and displacing specific members of society. This power of fear demonstrates the importance and the impact affects can
have. As previously mentioned, Cvetkovich suggests that power can be manipulated through affects. Moreover, as Sara Ahmed argues in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, emotions instead of residing in subjects or objects are produced as effects of circulation (8). Thus, the power that comes from circulating fear explains why the characters are dismissed from their jobs even though no evidence of their being a gay couple is available. At the same time, the short story also explicates that homophobia only needs unsubstantiated fear to act.

Given the rejection of homophobia in the texts, it is clear that the unique location of both sets of main characters results from how the narrators portray their homoerotic relationship and their physical appearance. Because they are desired, envied or rejected male bodies, they are objects subject to the rules of their society. According to patriarchal rules, they have to be displaced and marginalized if they transgress those very same rules. Referring to homophobia, Foster suggests that one of its purposes is to omit from legitimate sexuality subjects that do not obey the norms of heteronormativity (“Michael” 80). In this sense, the characters in Abreu’s texts must perform a specific gender role within their society; otherwise, they are beaten or dismissed.

In “Terça-feira gorda,” when both men dance together, the first person narrator says “[e]u queria aquele corpo de homem dançando suado e bonito ali na minha frente” (57). Their mutual attraction is rejected as they are forced to leave the disco and, later on, they are beaten. At the same time, their beautiful bodies and mutual sexual desire differentiates them from other people at the disco. Additionally, their lack of inhibition or fear of the effects of homophobia distinguishes them. They are not hiding their sexual desires from the public and during carnival—they are not wearing masks—, even though they live in a homophobic and repressed society that rejects them. This transgression—the refusal to hide and the loss of their mask—along with being a visible couple, as Foster analyzes in the Latin American context, is what brings the homophobic physical violence upon them for publicly defying hegemonic gender rules.

In “Aqueles dois,” the characters become desired and, at the same time, targeted bodies of homophobia and homofear. Raul and Saul are excluded from “legitimate” sexuality because of their homoerotic relationship. They are also objectified because the narrator emphasizes that their work colleagues desire or envy their beautiful male bodies. This emphasis evidences the heteronormative gaze that pervade male bodies in the short story. As a result and considering Kimmel’s discussion of manhood, the characters are rejected and displaced because they do not perform according to the heteronormative male body behavior. As a result, they are displaced and become the site of violence and rejection. By showing how the main characters are displaced and marginalized by that which is already marginal and damaging, both narrators denounce the incoherence of homophobia and make evident Abreu’s agenda on homoerotic and sexual relationships between men. Nonetheless, the texts do more than depict harmony and male bodies as beautiful and placing negative affects and violence as marginal. I argue that the emphasis on harmony and beautiful male bodies—teleology and aesthetics—develops politics of desire that reevaluate heteronormative rules and phobias, even though it is based on a traditional view of the male body. In the next section, I explain how both short stories present those politics of desire, as well as how gay and homoerotic (queer) relationships can indeed escape homophobic violence, and what this escape means in the context of the texts.

**Politics of Desire**

The aesthetics of innocence, honesty, love, harmony, and corporeal beauty—according to hegemonic standards and ideals of size, health, and shape—that pervade both short stories develop what I call “politics of desire.” These politics of desire indicate that a body feels an honest desire for another, whether it is sexual or not. In “Terça-feira gorda,” the first person narrator explains “[e]u era só um corpo que por acaso era de homem gostando de outro corpo, o dele, que por acaso era de homem também” (57; emphasis is mine). As a matter of fact, to
describe each character’s interest in one another, the narrator uses this very same sentence twice. This iterative description of desire, as a body liking another body, presents the relationship between two people as one in which bodies matter regardless of gender/sexual distinctions. This lack of importance of traditional markers is also suggested in the previous quote by another repetition, that of the words “por acaso” (by chance).

I argue that this quote provides the basis for Abreu’s politics of desire, which are complemented by the harmonic relationship the characters develop because bodies unite, regardless of sex, gender, other people, and hegemonic biases. Attraction for someone and for someone else’s body does not take into account hegemonic divisions and, because of “Aqueles dois,” attraction can also refer to companionship and homoerotic relationships. Therefore, in Abreu’s short stories, the politics of desire, which can be sexual or not, entail a desire without gender regulatory rules; the other’s body could have by chance (por acaso) the same genitalia. Attraction and desire can take place during carnival, in a place of equality and honesty, as in “Terça-feira gorda.” In turn, attraction, desire, friendship, and homoerotic relationships can take place in an ordinary office, as in “Aqueles dois.”

The politics of desire also involve a harmonic complementarity that goes beyond the harmonious relationship. In “Terça-feira gorda,” the two characters complement each other, especially regarding the sexual act, as “[a] gente queria ficar apertado assim porque nos completávamos desse jeito, o corpo de um sendo a metade perdida do corpo do outro” (59). In this sense, the narrator poses the sexual act in terms that resemble Aristophanes’s ideas as described in Plato’s Symposium. According to Aristophanes, a half searches for the other half to fulfill itself, to be complete, regardless of sex and gender categories. Thus, in this short story, the politics of desire neither entail gender binaries, nor exclude gender sameness. Desire is harmonic and complementary. This complementarity of the politics of desire, in “Aqueles dois,” relates to Saul and Raul’s similarities, companionship, friendship, and homoerotic relationship. Therefore, two men can develop a close homoerotic relationship—sexual or not—and complement each other, regardless of their past, and surrounding homophobia/fear. This relationship, according to the short stories narrator, is to be admired and appreciated and the fear is to be questioned.

Other short stories of Abreu’s Morangos mofados that depict relationships neither reach this same degree of intimacy and harmonic success nor develop politics of desire as the ones I examine here. In “Caixinha de música,” for example, the woman oppresses the main character who then assassinates her. Despite the misogyny of this short story, in the anthology the harmonic relationship is the gay and/or male homoerotic one based on equality—equality, as mentioned, not featured in “Sargento Garcia.” The relationships of both analyzed texts establish other patterns of behavior and connection—complementarity—among people. These patterns can also mean that female bodies and female homoeroticism are excluded. However, when considering that the politics of desire are degenderized—marked by the words por acaso—, both short stories propose queer sexuality and relationships based on equality as the site of achieving sincere and harmonic relationships. Because in the short stories these relationships and sexualities are not controlled by norms or rules, they become more valid than traditional heterosexuality. Queer relationships—sexual and erotic—are the ones that can bring a more honest, perhaps unpolluted, relationship to a homophobic and homofearful society.

These politics of desire also imply that both male bodies are beautiful, which suggests a positive—albeit limiting—interpretation on gay and homoerotic relationships because it uses conventional images to convey this message. As explained before, Abreu’s use of beautiful male bodies, while it does not include bodies that do not conform to certain physical standards, aims to present as positive desires and relationships that have been considered as negative in Brazil. This association between the socially “assumed” as negative and the socially “assumed” as beautiful allows Abreu to expose homophobia and propose an agenda to make a call for ethics and justice: queer bodies and genuine desires cannot continue to be either rejected or marginalized.
While both short stories promote queer—as non-heterosexual and non-traditional—relationships, a major difference regarding the status of both sets of characters at the end of the texts complements this call for ethics. In “Terça-feira gorda” the relationship is possible from the first moment in which the characters meet—in the disco. However, this relationship is frustrated because the couple is beaten and the narrator runs away leaving his partner at the mercy of the homophobic criminals. In this way, the relationship is possible, but is truncated. The end of the short story shows how the couple is separated and distanced, and even killed physically and socially: “Quis tomar-lo pela mão, protegê-lo com meu corpo, mas sem querer estava sozinho. correndo pela areia molhada, todos em volta, muito próximos” (59). This ending is open because the narrator does not indicate what will happen to them. However, there is no justice and no hope of escaping; what remains is the memory of the broken idyllic sexual encounter on the beach. In this manner, the finale of this short story generates affects such as injustice, frustration, and sadness that highly contrast with the politics of desire. Through the manipulation of these affects, their radical difference with beautiful male bodies and relationships, and the narrator’s own testimony, Abreu builds a case for gay relationships.

In the second short story, injustice and frustration are also affects that appear at the end of the text, as the characters lose their jobs and, in this sense, they are figuratively beaten by the homofear—they are rejected and marginalized. Nonetheless, at the very end of this text, both characters take the same taxi when leaving the office. As such, although the future might be uncertain, it seems that Raul and Saul will continue their friendship, unlike the characters in the other short story. The narrator even goes on to say that “[q]quase todos ali dentro tinham a nitida sensação de que seriam infelizes para sempre. E foram” (140). Calegari proposes that “unhappy people” can refer either to the male couple or to the other characters (132). Similar to Luana Teixeira Porto in Morangos mofados, I do consider that the narrator only refers to the characters in the office as the ones who will pay for what they did. These characters will be permeated by a negative affect (unhappiness) because the part of the phrase “quase todos ali dentro” (140; emphasis is mine) refers to the people in the office, to the closed world of the building within the short story. The office is a secluded space, a sort of prison or mental institution that discriminates against the characters (140). Therefore, the end of the text is a rebuke of an intolerant, homophobic, and homofearful society. As Arenas states, in “Estar entre o lixo e a esperança,” it is not “Aqueles dois” the condemned characters, but “Aqueles outros” (64). At the same time and considering that both main characters lose their jobs but continue together, the intolerant and fearful society does not manage to separate and distance the male couple, as in “Terça-feira gorda.” In this way, in “Aqueles dois” there is hope for the male couple and a future together. The complete sadness of the other short story does not exist, which means that the politics of desire promoted by this short story seem to hold, despite the many obstacles.

This change in the treatment of homophobic violence between the two short stories is connected to their location within Morangos mofados’ structure. This anthology is divided into three sections (“Mold,” “Strawberries,” and “Moldy Strawberries”), in which “Terça-feira gorda” belongs to “Mold,” or to that which is rotten, and “Aqueles dois” belongs to “Strawberries.” Thus, a general structural and thematic difference between the short stories becomes evident. In “Terça-feira gorda” the ending is nothing but mold because the couple is separated and beaten. In “Aqueles dois,” while mold—understood as ugliness, violence, homophobia, and homofear—exists, the focus is on the strawberries and their possibility of a future together. Therefore, the anthology’s structure and the location of the short stories also indicate that violence stops being physical (mold) and, even when mold might exist or become apparent, it does not spread as much because it cannot split Raul and Saul’s homoerotic friendship. It is, in fact, the scheming characters who are and who become moldy in their secluded space.

As such, this short story further elaborates on the aftermath of the violence/rejection and the call for ethics. Arenas argues that “Caio Fernando incita o leitor a repensar o seu ponto de vista e conceito próprio de moral. O autor condena toda moral autoritária e monológica que
esmaga a liberdade individual” (“Estar” 65). Unlike Arenas, I consider that the narrator’s criticism is not judging the morals, but that it is judging the ethics. By ethics I refer to procedures and behavior exercised based on moral principles. In both short stories, these procedures are the scornful voices, the violent beating, the gossip, and the letters. In this sense, “Aqueles dois” through the third person (and extradiegetic) narrator calls for justice, for understanding that those bodies and relationships that are displaced should be considered normal and be located in the center. Even when violence is no longer physical—such as that from the other short story—it is still found in Brazil. Therefore, this short story denounces other types of homophobic violence—the non-physical—that need to end as well in order for Brazil to achieve more honest relationships between people and work colleagues—a better sense of ethics. It also appeals to positive affects that can overcome the injustice, sadness, frustration, and trauma of homophobia.

Regarding Abreu’s works, Arenas also suggests that homophobia “appears as yet another formidable obstacle to self-realization of the desiring subject and the erotic communion with the loved other” (“Small Epiphanies” 251). In order to oppose and invalidate the power of homophobia and homofear, both short stories create politics of desire that build upon an aesthetic of harmonic and honest attractions—sexual or erotic—between two physically beautiful male characters in public spaces. Furthermore, these politics of desire involve a voluntary union, and the desire/admiration for the other character’s body and/or companionship. The willingness and desire imply that Abreu locates male bodies and male interaction in a privileged place, where each character admires each other’s body, as in “Terça-feira gorda;” and where others admire them and they admire themselves, as in “Aqueles dois.” Because of this location, the politics of desire contain a celebratory discourse on the male body, which involves queer relationships.

This celebratory discourse on the body and on beauty generates positive affects, as gay and male homoerotic relationships are as beautiful as the physical traits of people involved in them. As discussed before, Abreu’s use of only beautiful male bodies to promote queer relationships is reductionist because bodies that are neither “beautiful” nor fit are not mentioned. However, beautiful male bodies play a social and political role that has to be reassessed because they have the possibility of denouncing homophobia as unnecessary and incoherent; the homophobic violence that affects beautiful, harmonic, and genuine relationships is in itself damaging and unnecessary. This denouncement can also be seen in that bodies that belong to homophobic characters are ugly or bodiless and generate negative affects. I argue that this selection of bodies and portrayal of them demonstrates Abreu’s positive agenda on non-hegemonic gender and sexualities. Furthermore, I propose that the use of beautiful, ugly, and bodiless bodies is a reference to the Brazilian context of the early 1980s. I am referring to a Brazil that was reproducing patriarchal rules and was governed by a military dictatorship that had been in power since 1964, although it was a country claiming for democracy and in which LGBTQ groups were becoming more autonomous.

Therefore, male bodies are a trope for Abreu to criticize his sociopolitical context and promote a new society. Through ugly male bodies or bodiless characters, Abreu links homophobic, ugliness, and lack of corporeality to the dictatorship’s ubiquitous body of violence and torture. Negative affects, such as frustration, fear, and sadness echo the oppression and censorship that permeated Brazilian society under the repressive military regime. Using ugly/bodiless characters highlights that Abreu criticizes a Brazil still embedded in oppressing and rejecting, actions that evoked the cruelty of the dictatorship at all levels. At the same time, portraying beautiful male bodies and positive and genuine relationships and allowing a future for the male couple in “Aqueles dois” demonstrates that Abreu proposes politics of desire and claims for new ethics that can build a future of respect and even admiration toward queer relationships. While the use of male bodies in the short stories is limited and Manichean, it has a political strength and persuasion capable of transforming homophobic patriarchal societies that abide by natural(ized) visual images of the body. One of these societies is the Brazilian in the early 1980s because Abreu’s short stories evidence the ubiquity and incoherence of the homophobia that
attacks beautiful bodies. By working with the same elements that conform the epistemology of his patriarchal and homophobic society, Abreu’s work successfully changes perspectives and affects to make a call for ethics in a Brazil that has to appreciate bodies and relationships that challenge hegemonic rules on gender and sexualities.

Works Cited