

Queer Couples in María Luisa Bemberg's *Señora de Nadie* (1982)

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Señora de nadie (1982) is undoubtedly one of María Luisa Bemberg's masterpieces, despite the fact that the enormous success of her last film, *De eso no se habla* (1993), with Marcello Mastroianni, and even the success, albeit more academic, of *Yo, la peor de todas* (1990), with Assumpta Serna. Although there is an important queer thread in all of Bemberg's films, *Señora* is perhaps the queerest of her filmic texts. Where *Yo, la peor de todas* is rightfully recognized as a significant film for its quite transparent treatment of the lesbian dimensions of the life of the Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648-95), a balanced assessment of Bemberg's ideological commitments along a line that connects feminism with queer attitudes must give preeminence to *Señora* for the way in which it engages in an unflinching and intransigent revision of compulsory, heterosexist matrimony. Anyone who has seen the film treasures the moment, about two-thirds into the story, when Leonor, played by Luisina Brando, has, with all due deliberation, walked out on her chronically philandering husband in an assertion of prideful self-esteem, when someone who barely knows her unwittingly presents her to the man from whom she is estranged. The man making the introductions, because he barely knows her, pauses, at a loss for her name. When queried as to her proper married name (for surely any woman her age must be properly married), she looks her erstwhile husband in the eye and says "Mrs. Nobody." Of course, the trope works better in Spanish. Since the occasion is a formal party, a married Argentine woman, who is likely for everyday use to be known by her maiden name, becomes a "Señora de," the "wife of," a man. Here the possessive particle exercises not so much the much vaunted function of signaling the way in which a woman must necessarily belong to a man (this is, of course, an operant point, but it is not the principal one). Rather,

it marks the established imperative order of the hierarchy, in which men and women are paired off with each other in what is very much the ground zero of social order. Men and women may be flirting with each other with abandon, disappearing into bedrooms and bathrooms in the recesses of the house, or exchanging phone numbers for subsequent assignments. But when the circumstance arises to evoke social formulas, such as in the moment of introducing guests to each other, there is a sudden, if fleeting, reversion to accepted social order in which married affiliations, as signaled by the proper gender distribution of names, assumes enormous significance.

As delightful as the moment is, in which Leonor goes on to introduce herself to her host and the man from which she is separated by using her maiden name, the spectator must realize that in no way, after all, is Leonor a Mrs. Nobody. Fernando Morales (played by Rodolfo Ranni) is completely comfortable with attempting to woo Leonor all over again both at the party and later when makes sure to show up at a remote and closed-up summer house in Punta del Este that she visits in preparation for attempting to sell it in her job as a real estate agent. While they share a bottle of wine together in front of the fire and make love on the plush carpet, Leonor in the end realizes that he will never be anything other than a conquering macho. Yet, Leonor's renunciation of her married identity at the party and the unswerving conviction that she comes to hold that she can never return to Fernando must inevitably come up against the hard social reality of Argentina in the early eighties.

It is important to remember that when Bemberg made her film, Argentina was still under military dictatorship: indeed, the film premiered the evening before the April 2, 1982 announcement of the invasion of the Malvinas by Argentine forces. The country was still dominated by an effectively unchallenged masculinist supremacy that would attain a new peak as the majority at first supported the military takeover of the British-held islands. Although the initial enthusiasm for the operation, which was a desperate attempt to regain public support for the dictatorship, quickly waned as unquestioned defeat at the hands of the British became evident (the misadventure was over with Argentine surrender on June

14, at a terrible cost in lives to the Argentines), divorce did not formally become legal in Argentina until June 3, 1987, fully three-and-a-half years after the return to constitutional democracy in late 1983 (it was approved by the Congreso on May 7, 1987).

The term *divorciada* is used by Leonor in the film, but it is evident that she is referring neither to what is understood post-1987 by divorce in Argentina nor by the legal process which existed in Argentina prior to 1987, the *separación de bienes*, in which the courts could recognize the separation of the married partners—what in popular terms has been called in the Spanish tradition, *un divorcio de cama y mesa*—and the distribution of common property between them. Such an arrangement might call for alimony for the woman and child support, but neither partner would have the option of legally marrying again in Argentina and the father would also in all likelihood retain final word in decisions involving the children. Leonor's total abandonment by the legal code and reinforced by social convention is apparent when she appeals to her boss to allow her to rent one of the apartments they have on the market without paying the customary signing expenses. She confesses, with great reluctance, as she announces that she is loath to discuss her personal affairs, that she receives no alimony from her husband, that she has no bank account, and that she has no one to turn to as a guarantor. Leonor is truly in a no-win situation: she cannot gain access to her husband's abundant assets and she essentially has no financial standing of her own. Indeed, since she has announced to her sons that she has never worked a day in her life, it is rather remarkable, in the narrative universe of the film, that she is able to earn somewhat of a living selling real estate; no information is given on how she lands such a competitive job.

Throughout the film, we see the interplay of two micro-narrative of the heterosexist patriarchy. One involves the way in which Leonor must be convinced that she has made a mistake in walking out on her husband. The principal agent of this micronarrative is her mother (played by China Zorrilla). When her mother tells her that she had better be careful or she will lose her husband, Leonor is quick to reply that he may lose her; she, in fact, is

determined to forget him and refuses her mother's advice to talk to him, for “hablando la gente se entiende.” Later, when Leonor does in fact talk to her husband, after they have made love, she describes to him why she believes that his way of being a husband is wholly unacceptable, to which he replies that her case against him applies, in fact, to all men—or, at least, all Argentine men as he understands them to be/as they must be, in conformance with the role he is playing. It is abundantly clear that talking things through has hardly been a profitable undertaking. One trace of the unequal role is his calling her during this discussion *chiquita*, and she replies that he is never to use the diminutive with her again. At issue here, then, is a formula or reciprocal or complementary needs and fulfillment between a man and a woman that either allows them to comply with their patriarchal roles or to fall short of them. In this formula, women's needs must be greater because of the dependent role women must play. Therefore, they have much to lose when the formula goes awry. Yet the stance that Leonor assumes, both in direct dialogue with him as well as in indirect dialogue with him thorough other agents of the social system (her mother, her boss, even the maid, who efficiently administers “her” household after she has walked out; Fernando even gives her a raise), is a blunt negation of dependency on him, a point that she makes forcefully by repudiating the affective address of *chiquita*. If we subscribe to the proposition that language is less a trace of social discourse than it is its very substantiation, the discourse instances involved in the micronarrative being described here are resounding.

The other micronarrative at issue in *Señora* concerns the dynamics of matrimonial relations. I have already described how Leonor is unable to accept Fernando's understanding of what it is to be a man and a husband, an understanding that appears to be rather conventional within the context of a masculinist, macho-dominated society such as Argentina under military tyranny. What is notable is Leonor's rejection of this model, and even more remarkable is her apparent ignorance, in the beginning of the film, of its existence and that she is expected to comply with it. The separation between Leonor and Fernando is set in motion when, out shopping for a birthday present for him, she spies his car with

another woman in it. That woman kisses Fernando and gets out with affectionate gestures, including the hand gesture indicating that they will be in touch by phone later—one will later assume—for purposes of setting up a new tryst.

Leonor follows the woman, Gloria (played by Susú Pecoraro) into her place of business, an antique store. She gets Gloria's attention by knocking over a valuable crystal chandelier. Apologizing and offering to have her husband pay for any damage, she hands Gloria Fernando's business card (that Leonor would be carrying her husband's business cards is one of the many passing details of the patriarchal identity she is about to rupture). Gloria looks at the card and realizes what is going on. What is interesting here is that Gloria does not apologize in any way, but rather confronts Leonor to the effect that she could hardly have not known what was going on, that businessmen like Fernando are inevitably going to have lovers. Leonor thinks aloud of the trips abroad, of late-night board meetings and similar commitments, weekend symposia, and the like.

In terms of the micronarrative of marital relations, such as the long list of Argentine films that constitute the viewers' horizon of knowledge in this regard, what is surprising is not the existence of Gloria (and many others, from A-Z), but Leonor's blindness in this regard. In short, she has been a deficient student of the system. Confrontation with Fernando at his office (which we only see as a flashback when they end up making love in the house in Punta del Este) may be a conventional chapter in the micronarrative, but Leonor's decision to abandon Fernando is very much a rupture in that narrative. Leonor will later tell her group therapy colleagues about how her mother abided unquestioningly by the narrative, at the hands of a physically abusive husband who subsequently abandons her, and there is the implicit message that she will not.

There is an ironic twist here, because Leonor's mother reads the cards to her and prophesies that she will meet a handsome bearded stranger. When the handsome Fernando shows up, he has acquired a beard, thereby not only fulfilling the mother's prophecy, but also complying unknowingly with her injunction for the two of them to meet, talk their

differences out, and get on with their lives. There is no mention of the children here, and it is a master stroke of Bemberg that we see the two young male children (about seven and nine), to whom Leonor confesses—as though somehow asking permission from her sons—she has never held a job before in her life, but *Señora* steps immediately away from the typically Hollywood divorce film in which what is going to happen to the children (whose presence, after all, is the confirmation that the work of the patriarchy is being satisfactorily pursued) becomes a high-stakes ploy in the story.

The two boys soon disappear from the film, and the fact that we do not hear Leonor refer to them again, except in passing (to the effect that she has nothing to offer them) nor do we see her visiting them again is a very hard-nosed decision on Bemberg's part. She is, in effect, dismissing the role that these children play in the matrimonial dynamic of which they are, in a very real way, the expected fruit—and the privileged fruit, since both are boys. As the younger one says in the one conversation between the two of them in the film, things are better with just us men here in the house: Seven years old and already well on his way to win honors in the training course for preparing fully functioning Argentine males. Just as Bemberg has short shrift for the Argentine macho—one of the most pathetic segments of the films is when Leonor has a humiliating tryst with a client—she appears to be unmoved by the emotional clichés attached to children, as one can perceive in her filmmaking in general.

Señora de nadie opens and closes with a man and woman in bed. In the case of the opening scene, it is Leonor and her husband, making morning love before the alarm clock goes off and they start the routine of their bourgeois day (which in Leonor's case, will include buying a birthday present for her husband, whom she subsequently spies and so on). It appears to be a conventional sexual act, missionary style, with the man apparently in control in the top position. Now, this is a very remarkable scene, for it effectively establishes the patriarchal control of his wife's body by Fernando, and when he finishes servicing her,

he simply rolls off and seemingly goes back to sleep. Leonor checks the clock: it is time to get on with the many responsibilities.

Moreover, this scene is notably invasive, as the camera makes the bedroom its set. After all, patriarchal sex is a matter of the public record, because it is what gets the business of control and reproduction done. Perhaps not quite an act of voyeurism, Bemberg's record of appropriate matrimonial commerce nevertheless satisfies the audience demand—indeed, right—to know that the matrimonial unit is working out as well it should.

Although censorship had not yet been lifted in Argentina (that will come in November 1983), the portrayal of such a scene, no matter how brief, and no matter how fleeting the view of Fernando's stockily masculine *derriere*, prefigures the transgressive nature Bemberg's film will assume. Not surprisingly, Leonor appears to be appropriately satisfied by her husband's manly attentions, as she faces her domestic responsibilities with exemplary verve.

Bemberg will subsequently ironize this verve a bit, because, before this latter-day Nora (the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* [1879]) shuts the front door, she has taped instructions all over the place about the cleaning that needs to be picked up, the leaky faucet that needs to be fixed, the refrigerator that needs to be defrosted. One such note is the message she tapes to the gift she has bought for Fernando, wishing him a happy birthday. This nice touch of irony as regards top-level home economics can hardly be read as Leonor's clinging to her matrimonial base of operations, but rather the implied message to the effect that she will no longer be there to perform these functions, whether it be continuing at the sexual disposal of her husband or checking (as she does at one point) the ring around the collar of one of her husband's dress shirts.

The opening sexual scene of the film, complete with the sounds of good copulation, is complemented by the final scene of the film. In the course of her life away from Fernando, when Leonor joins a therapy group, she meets a young gay man (played by Julio Chávez, whose most notable parts will come in 2002 as the lead in Adrián Caetano's *Un oso*

rojo, the story of a brutish ex-convict who is a case study of Argentine masculinity in crisis; and Rodrigo Moreno's *El custodio* (2006), where he plays a murderous bodyguard at the service of corrupt politicians). Pablo's part has much of the gay stereotype about it: after all, it is still 1982, the gay movement has not yet come to Argentina, and nothing approximating a queer discourse has yet to become part of the national consciousness, as it is today.

Thus, Pablo is called a pitiful *maricón* by Fernando and is persecuted by the aunt with whom he lives as *puto y depravado*. Pablo is engaged in a humiliating relationship with a married Brazilian, who pithily observes that Pablo acts just like a woman in their relationship. Finally, as Leonor goes out one night to a party in which she allows herself to be set up by another conquering macho, only to come to her senses and bluff her way out of his arms (actually, she is not in his arms, because he quickly gets his hands up her dress, apparently closing in for the five-minute kill as he pins her against a tiled bathroom wall). Leonor has been invited by Pablo to move in with him after his aunt dies suddenly, promising to her her own sector of the house. As Leonor returns to the house and puts on the lights, she sees a battered Pablo barely conscious on the bottom steps of the staircase. He had gone out hoping to engage in his own sexual "killing" (he actually uses this sort of forceful Porteño vocabulary), but instead has almost been killed himself.

We do not learn the circumstances of his gay bashing, but the military regime explicitly encouraged this sort of social hygiene, engaging in it itself in the particular violence reserved for men in the armed forces suspected of being gay (it will be several years after the return to democracy for this treatment to be straightened out); practicing forms of entrapment of gay men in public spaces, particularly in the rest rooms of bars and railway stations; and in the especially brutal treatment reserved for gays that fell into the clutches of the apparatus of torture, imprisonment, and disappearance.

Leonor helps Pablo up to his bed, treats his wounds as best she can, serves them both up a Valium, and turns to leave for him to rest as the drug takes effect. However, not

only does Pablo beg for her not to leave him but, moreover, to spend the night with him, she crawls dressed into his bed and they snuggle like comfortable lovers, holding hands and kissing (albeit not on the mouth). It is at this point that Pablo asks Leonor what Tía Lola would think. Tía Lola is the stern, Spanish-accented administrator of a boarding house for older women. Although the sister of Leonor's mother, she has none of the other woman's sympathy, and it is apparent that her establishment is rule driven. Leonor at first lives in Lola's boardinghouse after she leaves Fernando. When Leonor invites Pablo to an intimate dinner in her room, Lola invades their space, puffed up with disapproval, evoking the decency of her home and the respectability of her boarders. The fact that it is not clear if she disapproves of Pablo's presence because she sees him as a sexual predator (when she walks out of the room, Pablo pretends that he has impressed her with his studliness) or because she sees him as sexually abnormal. It is difficult to understand which condition, in Tía Lola's moral universe, is more reprehensible, but, then, possibly in her asexual world of aging pensioners, all sex is reprehensible.

The closing scene of the film must be considered in tandem with the opening scene of lovingmaking between husband and wife. The camera now moves, in a panoramic fashion, outside the bedroom where Pablo and Leonor lie acting silly as sincere lovers are wont to do, and as we hear their giggles and laughter, the final credits begin to roll over Pablo's warmly lighted bedroom window (pink curtains, of course). The lovemaking (regardless of how conventionally erotic or non-erotic it may be) is now a private affair, not open to public scrutiny, and part of the personal narrative between Leonor and Pablo that it is no longer part of the prevailing heterosexist narrative. It is clear that Leonor not only has no adverse feelings toward Pablo, but the level of intensity their relationship has reached underscores how, after a series of disastrous relationships with putatively real men, Leonor has found a measure of peace and happiness in the arms of a gay man.

It is for this reason important that Bemberg's Pablo is what can be called a conventional *maricón*—that is, the man who is stereotyped gay because he is softly handsome,

dressed in a nonstandard fashion, with precisely the sort of hairdo that was cause for persecution in the early days of the 1976-83 round of authoritarian/neofascist military tyrannies. He is soft-spoken, attentive, artistic, too-good a dancer, and thin like all Argentine women are supposed to be (he says that Leonor is jealous of his body). And, most important, he is both attentive and responsive to Leonor. There is a closed-eye touching scene conducted by the director of their therapy group that could be judged to be far more erotic than the scene of copulation that opens the film, even with Fernando's *derriere* on view.

One could insist that Pablo's acting here is emphatically gay, although never swishy or campy: It certainly stands in sharp contrast to the fully embodied masculinity displayed by Oso in Caetano's film. But what Pablo's character accomplishes is to stand in vivid contrast to the unsavory machismo of Fernando, which he says and the others demonstrate, is the masculinity of all (Argentine—i.e., all real Argentine) men. If feminism always has lurking in the background the crucial question, Don't these women ever learn?, Leonor, after passing from her husband, to the dentist client, back to her husband, to the quicky artist she meets at a party, does finally learn, and her decision to spend the night with Pablo in his bed is her definitive passage out of the jungle of the compulsory heterosexism enforced in especially exaggerated terms by the military dictatorships of the period. The fact that those dictatorships may have been perceived by Bemberg to be giving their last gasp (she could not have known about the plan to invade the Malvinas, but that invasion was not just the last gasp, but the final death rattle of the dictatorship) is what made it a particular propitious moment to launch a film like *Señora de nadie*.

It is immaterial what Leonor and Pablo may eventually do together in bed, although to laugh and talk together might be more important sexually, given the circumstances, than the gymnastics that open the film. Rather, what is important is to consider carefully the point Leonor has reached in her education as a woman and the determining role played in that education by, as her husband calls him, *ese maricón lamentable*; it is an education also abetted by a notably liberated female friend, as though there a synergy to be sought in

aligning herself with these two marginal social subjects. Does this mean that Bemberg might support the queer couple is a displacement and replacement of the institutionalized heterosexual one? Perhaps, although this is hardly an ideological pamphlet, as it focuses on only two socially isolated individuals working out their own place in Argentine society. The patriarchy does a very good job of guarding its own interests, which excludes those of queer social subjects, whether they be either a nonconforming man or a nonconforming woman who must make their own way on their own.

Because of its deconstruction of the naturalized category of marriage as propounded by the heteronormative social matrix, Bemberg's film is every bit as important ideologically for mid-1980s Argentina filmmaking as Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial* (1985) with its own deconstruction of stable matrimony. And it is unquestionably singularly important in the context of the discourses over sexuality that will begin to emerge in Argentina after 1983, both in terms of female and homoerotic desire.

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