
Queer Couples in *Señora de Nadie*¹

(María Luisa Bemberg, 1982)

DAVID WILLIAM FOSTER

Mirá si nos viera la tía Lola.

—Pablo to Leonor

Señora de Nadie is undoubtedly one of María Luisa Bemberg's masterpieces, notwithstanding 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 de Nadie* is perhaps the queerest of her filmic texts.² Although *Yo, la peor de todas* is rightly recognized as a significant film for its transparent treatment of the lesbian dimensions in the life of the Mexican poet Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1648–1695), a balanced assessment of Bemberg's ideological commitments along a line that connects feminism with queer attitudes must give preeminence to *Señora de Nadie* for the way it engages in an unflinching and intransigent revision of heterosexist matrimony.³

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 asked her proper married name (for surely any woman her age must be properly married), she looks her former husband in the eye and says, "Mrs. Nobody."⁴ 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, though not the principal one. Rather, it marks the established imperative order of the hierarchy, in which men and women are paired off in what is very much the ground zero of the 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 assignations. But when the circumstance arises to evoke social formulas, such as in the moment of introducing guests to each other, there is a sudden, even if fleeting, reversion to accepted social order in which married affiliations, as signaled by the proper gender distribution of names, assume enormous significance.

As delightful as the moment is when Leonor goes on to introduce herself to her host and to the man from whom she is separated, by using her maiden name, the spectator must realize that Leonor is, after all, in no way 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 he makes sure to show up at a remote and closed-up summer house in Punta del Este that she visits in preparation for trying to sell it in her job as a real estate agent. While they share a bottle of wine in front of the fire and make love on the plush carpet, Leonor realizes in the end that he will never be anything other than a conquering macho. And 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 Islas Malvinas (the Falkland Islands) 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 ended with an 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 1983.⁵ (It was approved by the Congress on May 7, 1987.)

In the film, Leonor uses the term “divorciada,” but clearly she is not referring to what is understood as divorce in post-1987 Argentina. Nor is she referring to the legal process that existed in Argentina before 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 also for child support, but neither partner would have the option of legally marrying again in Argentina, and the father would also, in all likelihood, retain the final word in decisions involving the children.⁶ Leonor’s total abandonment by the legal code, reinforced by social convention, is apparent when she appeals to her boss to let her rent one of the apartments they have on the market, without paying the customary signing expenses. She confesses—with great reluctance, since she is loath to discuss her personal affairs—that she receives no alimony from her husband, has no bank account, and 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 remarkable, in the narrative universe of the film, that she can earn something 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 micronarratives of the heterosexist patriarchy.⁷ 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. In fact, she 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 finds his way of being a husband wholly unacceptable, to which he replies that her case against him applies to all men—or, at least, to 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 insistence on calling her “chiquita” during this discussion. And she replies that he is never to use that diminutive with her again. At issue here, then, is a formula that allows them either to comply with their patriarchally defined 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 is a blunt negation of dependency on him—a point that she makes forcefully by repudiating the affective address of “chiquita.” Leonor speaks to him both directly and indirectly, through other agents of the social system (her mother, her boss, and even the maid, who efficiently administers “her” household after she has walked out). Fernando even gives the maid a raise. If we subscribe to the proposition that language is less a trace of social discourse than it is its very substantiation, the errant instances of actual discourse involved in the micronarrative being described here are resounding.

The other micronarrative at issue in *Señora de Nadie* concerns the dynamics of matrimonial relations. We have already seen how Leonor cannot accept Fernando’s understanding of what it is to be a man and a husband—an understanding that appears rather conventional within the context of a masculinist, macho-dominated society such as Argentina under military tyranny.⁸ What is notable is Leonor’s rejection of this model. And even more remarkable is her apparent ignorance, in the beginning of the film, that such a model even exists. The separation between Leonor and Fernando is set in motion when, while 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 that 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 not have 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 the micronarrative of marital relations, such as the long list of Argentine films that constitute the viewer's horizon of knowledge in this regard, what is surprising is not the existence of Gloria (and many others, from A to Z), but Leonor's blindness to it. In short, she has been a deficient student of the system. Confrontation with Fernando at his office (which we see only 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 colleagues⁹ about how her mother abided unquestioningly by the narrative, at the hands of a physically abusive husband who subsequently abandoned her, and there is the implicit message that Leonor 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 admonition that the two of them 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—that she has never held a job before in her life. But *Señora de Nadie* steps immediately away from the typical Hollywood divorce film in which the fate of the children becomes a high-stakes stratagem in the story. After all, in the stereotypical Hollywood film, the children's very presence is confirmation that the work of the patriarchy is being satisfactorily pursued.

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), or see her visit 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, moreover, 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 gives short shrift to the Argentine macho—one of the most pathetic segments of

the film 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 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 sees with a lover, 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 with her, he simply rolls off and seemingly goes back to sleep. Leonor checks the clock: it is time to get on with her 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's demand—indeed, its right—to know that the matrimonial unit is working out, as well it should.¹⁰

Although censorship had not yet been lifted in Argentina (that would 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 that Bemberg's film will assume.¹¹ 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 later ironize this verve a bit because, before this latter-day Nora 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 fixing, the refrigerator that needs defrosting. 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 regarding top-level home economics can hardly be read as Leonor's clinging to her matrimonial base of operations. Rather, the implied message is that she will no longer be there to perform these functions, whether it be remaining at her husband's sexual disposal or checking (as she does at one point) the ring around the collar of one of his 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 become part of the national consciousness, as it is today.¹²

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 he 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). Pablo has invited Leonor to move in with him after his aunt dies suddenly, promising her her own sector of the house. As Leonor returns to the house and turns 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 this 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 (not until several years after the return to democracy will this treatment be proscribed); practicing forms of entrapment of gay men in public spaces, particularly in the restrooms of bars and railway stations; and reserving especially brutal treatment for gays who fell into the clutches of the torture, imprisonment, and disappearance apparatus.¹³

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. But Pablo begs her not only 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, invoking the decency of her home and the respectability of her boarders. It is not clear whether 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 lovemaking between husband and wife. The camera now zooms back, 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 is no longer part of the prevailing heterosexist narrative. It is clear that not only does Leonor have 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.¹⁴

It is important that Bemberg's Pablo is what can be called a conventional *maricón*—that is, a man who is stereotypically gay because he is softly handsome, dressed in a nonstandard fashion, and with precisely the sort of hairdo that was cause for persecution in the early days of the 1976–1983 round of authoritarian/neofascist military tyrannies. He is soft-spoken, attentive, artistic, too good a dancer, and thin, as all Argentine women are supposed to be. He says that Leonor is jealous of his body. And most importantly, he is both attentive and responsive to Leonor. There is a closed-eyes 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 bare backside in view.

Pablo's acting here is emphatically gay, although never swishy or campy.¹⁵ It certainly stands in sharp contrast to the fully embodied masculinity displayed by Oso in Caetano's film.¹⁶ 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. Feminism always has lurking

in the background the crucial question: *Don't these women ever learn?* After passing from her husband to the dentist, back to her husband, then to the quickie artist she meets at a party, Leonor 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 taking their last gasp (she could not have known about the plan to invade the Malvinas—an invasion that was not just the last gasp but the final death rattle of the dictatorship) is what made it an especially propitious moment to launch a film such as *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, the important thing 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 were a synergy to be sought in aligning herself with these two marginal social subjects. Does this mean that Bemberg might support the queer couple as a displacement and replacement of the institutionalized heterosexual one? Perhaps, although this is hardly an ideological pamphlet,¹⁷ since 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 exclude those of queer social subjects, whether a nonconforming man or a nonconforming woman, who must make their own way on their own.¹⁸

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 Argentine filmmaking as Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial* (*The Official Story*, 1985) with its own deconstruction of stable matrimony. And it is singularly important in the context of the discourses over sexuality that will begin to emerge in Argentina after 1983, in terms of both female and homoerotic desire.¹⁹

Notes

1. An electronic version of this essay appeared in 2011 with the same title at <http://argus-a-ensayos.blogspot.com/2011/09/queer-couples-in-maria-luis-bemberg.html>. Here in its first printed form, it is reproduced with the author's permission.

2. I discuss *De eso no se habla* as a queer film text in David William Foster, *Queer Issues* (1–18), separating the concept of the queer from its often intended synonymy with gay sexuality. Rather, “queer” here is to be understood as that which transgresses the entire array of norms of the heterosexist patriarchy, not just the erotic ones. Thus, a heterosexual married couple who refuses to have children is, in this sense, queer.

3. Catherine Grant underscores how Bemberg’s first two films deal with “female stasis” (95). The other film Grant discusses is *Momentos* (1980). See also Eduardo Rojas’s characterization of the issues of women’s lives in these two films.

4. There’s a play on words here, since the English translation could well be “Nobody’s Wife.” We privilege “Mrs. Nobody” because it is symmetrical in English with such introductions in Spanish.

5. Of the four reviews extracted by Raúl Manrupe and María Alejandra Portela, three are very favorable, with one speaking of “la amistad sincera de un homosexual” (530). This is important, since one of the features that the discourse of homophobia at the time associates with the ideogeme “homosexual” is the incapacity for friendship and sincerity. But the fourth review speaks alarmingly of “todo lo que encierra como negativo y riesgoso [el ejemplo dado]” (530). One assumes that what is so dangerous is the audacious liaison of affection between a woman and a gay man, since Bemberg’s film is hardly the first Argentine example of a woman walking out on an unfaithful husband. Miguel Ángel Rosado mentions Bemberg briefly but enthusiastically in his survey of the films of the period of dictatorship, 1968–1983 (156). Because of the clothes and the appearance of Buenos Aires in the film, it is clear that the action of the narrative is simultaneous with its filming.

6. One of the arguments in favor of divorce consisted of underscoring the considerable irregularities arising from subsequent non-legalized unions of the original spouses, including marriage in countries where divorce was legal. It should be noted that annulment of marriage for cause has also been a part of the Argentine legal system. Further restrictions may also arise from church weddings, although in Argentina marriage is always a civil matter and only occasionally a religious affair. Since churches in Argentina do not perform civil marriage, the concept of so-called gay marriage is not an issue on the level of civil law: all unions are civil unions. As for the father’s default control of the children of any marriage, Argentina has long abided by the Roman concept of *patria potestas*.

7. Ana Forcinito’s discussion of the feminist gaze of Bemberg’s films is unquestionably the best analysis of her filmmaking. But the article places emphasis on Bemberg’s last films; *Señora de Nadie* is not discussed.

8. Ana María Shua undertakes a fine parody of the Argentine husband in her *El marido argentino promedio* (1991).

9. Like a good Argentine, Leonor joins such a group. Psychoanalysis and other kinds of psychological therapy are the inevitable option for middle-class Argentines in times of crisis and conflict.

10. It is worth remembering here that in this patriarchal dynamic, a man can never rape his wife, for, with few exceptions (menstruation in some formulations), the wife must be always at her husband’s beck and call.

11. Grant relates how the making of *Señora de Nadie* was blocked in the late 1970s by military censors, and includes the famous anecdote about how she was told that it would be better to have a son with cancer than one who is gay (92).

12. At this writing in mid-May 2009, Judith Butler has just been one of the featured authors at the Buenos Aires Feria del Libro; she also conducted a doctoral seminar at the Universidad de Buenos Aires. Coverage on her presence abounds in the local press, including the prestigious pages of the daily *La Nación*, which, in addition to a lengthy interview with Butler, published an equally long primer on Butler's contributions to queer theory. The presence of queer theory in Buenos Aires is yet one more demonstration of how its intellectuals must always be *toujours modernes, toujours à la page*. For an outstanding example of Argentine filmmaking in this respect, see Lucía Puenzo's *XXY* (2007), which won the 2007 Goya for the best film made in Spanish outside Spain. The film is a deft and persuasive queering of the important Argentine cultural narrative strain involving obstacle-fraught young lovers, as in David José Kohon's award-winning *Breve cielo* (1969).

13. For this history, see Flavio Rapisardi. Osvaldo Bazán devotes the ninth part of his history of homosexuality in Argentina to "La Dictadura."

14. It is worth mentioning that the film's theme song, "El tema de Leonor," was composed and is sung by María Elena Walsh, one of Argentina's legendary lesbian cultural figures.

15. Not that there is anything wrong with being swishy or campy. However, it is here a question of what the Argentine market would likely be able to bear in the closing years of the military dictatorship, when a swishy or campy character had little hope of engaging the sympathy of film audiences and could never be taken seriously as a human being of lasting interest.

16. Julio Chávez won the award at the Festival Internacional de Panamá in 1982, the Premio Mejor Actor de Reparto. And yet, interestingly, none of the three stills from *Señora de Nadie* in Clara Fontana's book includes Pablo, while two include Fernando (and one of these is reversed [15]). There is a nice still of Imanol Arias and Susú Pecoraro in bed together in the 1984 María Luisa Bemberg film *Camila* (21); it would have been nice to see it complemented by the scene of Chávez and Brando in bed together in the closing scene of *Señora de Nadie*.

17. Fontana, however, identifies a "soplo didáctico" in the film (26), although she does go on to recognize the importance of the film's closing scene. Of particular importance is her excellent metaphor regarding Argentine machismo: "Los varones tienen una concepción autista de la relación heterosexual" (29).

18. In a sense, *Señora de Nadie* prepares the way for the two major Argentine gay films to emerge from the return to democracy: Enrique Dawi's *Adiós, Roberto* (1985) and Américo Ortiz de Zarate's *Otra historia de amor* (1986). The two films are examined together in Foster, "El homoerotismo y la lucha." *Otra historia de amor* is also discussed in Foster, *Contemporary Argentine Cinema* (135–49).

19. John King recounts how Bemberg filmed two endings for *Señora de Nadie*. The one she did not use has Leonor returning to her children (21). The importance of the film as a queer document would certainly have been completely vitiated by

such an ending, and Pablo would have been only a way station in her return to heterosexual “responsibility.”

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