

A Queer Approach to the Representations of Argentina's Recent Past: Anxieties around the Subjects of "our" History

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Resumen

El artículo pretende aportar un análisis de un conjunto de representaciones públicas del pasado reciente argentino desde la perspectiva de una filosofía queer de la historia. En él se sostiene que tal enfoque provee valiosas herramientas para indagar cómo y por qué forjamos nuestro pasado como lo hacemos, cuál es el "desorden" que la narrativa histórica con frecuencia intenta "ordenar" y con qué mecanismos lo hace, y cómo se vincula todo ello con nuestros intereses presentes. Con este objetivo, se describen y analizan, en primer lugar, distintos mecanismos que se ponen en juego en la producción de representaciones acerca de los eventos liminales que conmovieron a la Argentina en los años 70, específicamente respecto a los modos en los que se selecciona, presenta y describe a lxs protagonistas de la resistencia al terrorismo de Estado. Finalmente, se propone leer estas prácticas de la memoria pública como fenómenos de ansiedad política, repensándolas a la luz de la potencia que nos ofrece una mirada queer.

Palabras clave: pasado reciente; Teoría Queer; ansiedad; desaparecidxs LGBT; terrorismo de Estado

Abstract

The paper offers an analysis of various public representations of Argentina's recent past from the perspective of a Queer Philosophy of History. It contends that this approach offers valuable tools to look into how and why we shape our past like we do, what comes as the "mess" that historical narratives often try to "tidy up," how they achieve this, and how all of this relates to our present interests. With this aim, the paper describes and analyzes different mechanisms that are put into play when producing representations of the liminal events that shook Argentina in the 1970s, focusing specifically on the ways in which those who were part of the resistance against State terrorism tend to be selected, presented and described. In its conclusions, it suggests reading these practices of public memory as cases of political anxiety, rethinking them through the potential offered by a queer perspective.

Key words: recent past; queer theory; anxiety; LGBT "disappeared;" State terrorism

Introduction

One of the realms in which queer theory has been most influential is the reflection on identity, contributing to its understanding as something dynamic, multidimensional and complex, inserted in (and contributing to) a set of normalization and subversion devices, both individual and social. Whereas in its first stages this framework focused most of its attention on the sexual and gendered aspects of identity, in recent years, and partly due to acute criticisms both internal and external, a considerable amount of queer scholarship has included or shifted towards work on other vectors of identitarian location, such as “race,” class, religion and nationality. In each of these cases, queer studies have offered key insights into the ways in which essentialization and normalization crystallize certain notions of the human, while offering effective—although, fortunately, not infallible—mechanisms of exclusion and abuse towards other modes of existence. Thus, we have been able to shed light on the acts of violence that result from the compulsive universalization of specific configurations, as well as ways of being and relating to one another that follow certain criteria of normalcy or acceptability.¹

The very notion of “queer,” if we consider its genealogy, points at this multi-dimensionality and the confusion inherent to each subject—as well as at the growing difficulty to think subjectivity as something clearly individual, coherent (both synchronically and diachronically) and disassociated from its environment. It is not my aim here to delve into an analysis of the term, which has been extensively addressed throughout queer scholarship. Suffice it to mention Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz’s reflection, which aims directly at the complexity that a queer approach can expose. According to the author, “queer as an adjective means that there is no immediate or simple answer to the question ‘What are you?;’ there is no simple term or definite site with which or in which one could place complex subjectivities, behaviors, desires, abilities and ambitions” (167).² From this perspective, “queer” emerges as a particularly fruitful lens through which to engage in a dialogue with the *ch’ixi*³ (Rivera Cusicanqui), the *mestizaje* (Anzaldúa), and the “mess” (Manalansan) that coexist in all of us.

¹ For a few examples within Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking scholarship, see Córdoba; Pérez, “Teoría Queer;” Trujillo; and Padilha and Facioli.

² In the Spanish original: “queer como adjetivo significa que no existe una respuesta inmediata o sencilla a la pregunta ‘¿Tú qué eres?’; que no hay un término simple o un lugar definido con el que o en el que se sitúen subjetividades, comportamientos, deseos, habilidades y ambiciones complejas.” All the quotations from Spanish-language texts included in this article are mine. Throughout this work, I have chosen to include the original quotations when they are not in English, as a gesture of respect towards non-Anglo scholarship and as a contribution towards a broader linguistic horizon for queer studies.

³ “The notion of *ch’ixi*, as many others (*allqa*, *ayni*) follows the *aymara* idea of something that at once is and is not, i.e., to the logics of included middle. A *ch’ixi* gray is at once white and non white, it is white and it is also its opposite, black. The *ch’ixi* stone hides in it mythical animals like the serpent, the lizard, the spider or the frog, *ch’ixi* animals that belong to time immemorial, to *jaya mara*, *aymara*. Times of indifferentiation, when animals spoke to humans. The indifferentiated is potent because it connects the opposites. Just like the *allqamari* links black and white in symmetrical perfection, the *ch’ixi* connects the Indian world with its

As someone working in the field of philosophy of history, I have always found it odd that in our Spanish-speaking environment these resources should not have rooted more deeply in the analysis of our ways of seeing the past and relating to it.⁴ A queer approach offers valuable tools for looking into how and why we shape our past as we do, what is that “mess” that the historical narrative frequently tries to “tidy up,” and how it is done. It also invites us to face the challenges of producing narratives from, by and for elusive subjects, which do not offer “simple answers” to the question brought by Ceballos Muñoz, nor to many other ones. This is why the paper that follows is not so much an essay *on* Hispanic queer theory (although it does establish dialogues with it), but rather one that adopts queer theory as its theoretical toolbox. By doing this, I hope to offer a Hispanic queer perspective on a topic that is of the utmost relevance to our context, but understudied within the field: the ways in which we relate to our past and, simultaneously, the politics of the present with which such links implicate us. Just like queer critical readings are not pursuing “the chimera of turning these subjectivities into something ‘totally’ explicit, or stabilizing them into a single or unitary speech that aspires to a totalizing comprehension” (L. Martínez 874),⁵ the queer philosophy of history I am interested in incorporates this complexity when thinking about the subjects of history, and has among its main tasks that of recognizing and identifying these “totalizing comprehensions” of the past.

On this occasion, the analysis will take as case studies several representations circulating in the public sphere in relation to the victims of State terrorism in the 1970s in Argentina, understanding that context as an “event at the limits” or “liminal event” in the country’s recent past.⁶ If I have chosen to apply my queer analysis to this case in particular, it is because in my understanding, these events have been accompanied by a distinct difficulty in escaping certain political anxieties

opposite, without ever mixing with it. But its heteronym [*sic*], *chhixi*, refers to the idea of a bad mixture, a loss of substance and energy. *Chhixi* is what we call a log that burns too fast, or something that is runny and mixed up. Thus, it corresponds to that fashionable idea of ‘light’ cultural hybridization, which is conformist towards contemporary cultural domination” (Rivera Cusicanqui 69–70).

⁴ This is not to say that there are no such reflections, but that they are considerably fewer than the studies on *the history of* those subjects usually addressed within a queer framework. This scarcity also affects, although to a somewhat lesser degree, queer Anglo production. For some hypotheses about the reasons for this tendency, see Duggan. For an interesting exception incorporating a Spanish-speaking perspective, see the study *Bodies of Evidence* made by Horacio Roque Ramírez along with Nan A. Boyd on queer oral histories.

⁵ In the Spanish original: “la quimera de volver ‘totalmente’ explícitas a estas subjetividades, o estabilizarlas en un discurso único o unitario que aspire a una comprensión totalizante.”

⁶ By “liminal event” or “event at the limits”, terms that I will use interchangeably throughout these pages, I refer to “an event which tests our traditional conceptual and representational categories” (Friedländer 3) due to the unprecedented levels of cruelty and systematism it applies to harm other human beings. Although in this work I focus on the Argentine recent past, and specifically on the relationships between State terrorism and resistance (armed, in many cases), it is important to stress that not only does Argentine history contain other examples of liminal events, but it in fact began with one, which is still ongoing: the systematic and purposeful extermination of the populations that inhabited this land before the Spanish arrived, still inhabit it (although in conditions of extreme marginalization), and are entitled to it. For a reflection on the continuities and ruptures in Argentine public history regarding this genocide and the one operated in the 1970s by the military régime, see Rufer 161–65.

that push us to set aside the complexity of each subject, and to forge instead binary, discrete and one-dimensional portrayals of its protagonists. In what follows, then, I will try to show the ways in which a queer approach allows us to understand how these representations are configured, which anxieties support them, and in which ways they could be rendered under a different perspective.

Before moving on, it should be noted that such “liminal events” in the Argentine past, including some of the questions I have mentioned so far, have been addressed by Memory Studies, both in our region and worldwide—where Argentina is frequently taken as a case study, albeit not always in dialogue with Argentine or Southern scholars and their categories. Given the scope of this special issue of the *InterAlia* journal, and the extension of the paper, I have chosen to focus my theoretical spectrum on queer and/or LGBT perspectives, with a particular emphasis on Southern Hispanic production. Unfortunately, this has meant leaving out many interesting reflections offered by Southern Memory Studies, particularly those not directly involved in queer or LGBT reflections. It is my hope that the specificity of the queer perspective I am presenting here will nevertheless contribute to the rich ongoing dialogues on public history, memory and past-present relationships in the South.⁷

With these aims in mind, in the following section I will present my object of analysis, contextualizing the events in our recent past as well as the sites and contexts in which these documents were produced. After that, the third section will be dedicated to analyzing the objects from a queer perspective, bringing into the conversation other queer scholars, along with my own work on queer philosophy of history. Here we will have a chance to observe an array of mechanisms that are put at play when producing representations of these liminal events, specifically in relation to the ways in which the exponents of the resistance against and/or victims of State terrorism are selected, presented and described. Finally, in the last section I will suggest reading these practices of public memory as cases of political anxiety, and seek to rethink them in the light of the powerful tools a queer approach offers us.

The paper is thus at the convergence of the anxieties produced by our recent past and those generated by queer existences. Far from seeking to resolve such anxieties, it advocates facing them and entering upon all their richness. It is, above all, an invitation to embrace the ambiguity of our predecessors, of our past and of ourselves as subjects formed by the clay of that history. By doing this, it seeks to contribute to the construction of narratives that take on the (not always self-indulgent) complexity of the existent, both in the past and in the present, as an heir to it.

⁷ For an alternative analysis of the Argentine case that does adopt a queer perspective, but is rooted in the North, see Sosa, *Queering Acts. Apart from our academic and geographic location, one key difference between my work and Sosa's is that, while I am offering a philosophical approach focused exclusively on representations produced by the State and/or activist groups, Sosa works around the idea of performance to take as her main objects of inquiry a variety of artistic representations produced in the realm of what M. Hirsch has called “postmemory,”* i.e., “the ways in which new generations recreate and connect with past experiences they have not directly experienced themselves” (Sosa, “Humour” 75).

Subjects of the recent Argentine past

There is something in the history of our continent, and particularly of what I have called the “events at the limit” in our recent past, that makes them somewhat impossible to address. The cycles of violence replicated throughout Latin America in the last decades of the 20th century, where the sources I am working with here are located, face us with the difficulty of conceiving these as State projects that were systematic, organized, and in many cases absolutely explicit in their aims. On this occasion, I will not go into detail on the problem of the impossibility to think certain events in history and certain human actions due to their unprecedented levels of cruelty, since this has long been an object of inquiry for the philosophy of history⁸ and for the visual arts and literature.⁹

Beyond the complexity of processing the inconceivable existence of the events themselves, the fact that they happened and that we are all traversed by them, we find a second difficulty: that of attending to the many ridges of the myriad positions and subjects that were (and are, us included) part of those processes. Far from binary structures or partisan fundamentalisms, we are faced with a scene in which notions such as “politics,” “identity,” “loyalty,” “courage,” and “survival” intermingle to form profoundly dense human textures. This is the complexity that can be found, for example, in the cultural productions by some sons and daughters of people *disappeared* by the Argentine State, who enter the public debate mostly after the beginning of the 21st century, bringing their own understandings of history, memory, family and identity.¹⁰

However, the conceptual (and affective) density of many representations produced by the *hijos* and *hijas* is not reflected in the vast majority of those discourses on Argentina’s recent past that circulate in the public sphere. Rather, the latter tend to uphold fixed and unambiguous portrayals of their protagonists, as I hope to show throughout the following pages. In this section I am interested in turning to such representations and analyzing some of their themes and resources, in order to give way, in the subsequent one, to considerations on how they are created and what their concrete consequences are.

I have selected discourses that circulate in the public sphere, about the people who took part in the resistance to State terrorism, and/or were its victims. This analysis is limited to two cases: a collection of portraits and descriptions of people who were detained-*disappeared* at one of the largest detention centers in Argentina during the last military régime (the Army School of

⁸ For two of the most renowned examples of this debate, see Friedländer and Kellner.

⁹ See footnote 10.

¹⁰ Among the abundant cultural production of this generation of *hijos* (“sons,” the name generally used to refer to the people born towards the end of the '70s, whose parents were assassinated by State violence), I would like to point out two cases that are particularly involved with the complexity of thinking subjectivity, along lines similar to the ones I will suggest here: the book *Diario de una Princesa Montonera* (*Diary of a Montonera Princess*) by Mariana Eva Pérez (2012), and the film *Los Rubios* (*The Blondes*) by Albertina Carri (2003). For an analysis of the latter, see Pérez, “Qué querés.” For a take on the complexities of the representations produced by this generation as forms of postmemory, see Sosa, “Humour.”

Mechanics, located in the city of Buenos Aires), and several recent public interventions that call for the visibilization of LGBT people in discourses on the *disappeared*.

It might come as something of a surprise that my analysis does not cover the discourses opposing these struggles, i.e., those that defend the military order (generally through ideas of “internal war” or “social chaos”). Undoubtedly, the binary image of the past and the unambiguous description of its protagonists is made most evident when working with such representations, or when contrasting them with the ones that uphold resistance. But this is precisely why I consider that the interest lies, rather, in working on the same side of the political spectrum: the one with which we identify, that has social justice as its horizon, and even promotes (in the case of contemporary discourses on the LGBT *disappeared*) difference and inclusion. I am interested in seeking and confronting precisely here the modes in which we relate to “our” historical figures—a possessive “our” that accounts for a sense of belonging, which might be an interesting first step towards thinking why we are inclined to represent “our” figures in certain ways, and to display (only) certain aspects of them.

The “Memories of Life and Militancy” Project (“Memorias de Vida y Militancia;” see Ente Público) is a joint initiative of three Argentine State institutions currently located in the premises of the former Army School of Mechanics¹¹ (ESMA, by its Spanish acronym): the Public Entity “Space of Memory” (Ente Público “Espacio Memoria”), the National Memory Archive (Archivo Nacional de la Memoria) and the Haroldo Conti Cultural Center for Memory (Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti).¹² The Project has as its aim to “narrate and represent the life stories” of those detained and/or *disappeared* in that center. It is not meant to function as a biographic or historic archive, but rather as a contribution to “collective memory” (Ente Público). The narratives and photographs that can be

¹¹ During the 1970s and early '80s, State Terrorism in Argentina used over 500 detention and assassination centers throughout the country. Some of them, such as ESMA, are currently museums and/or information centers related to the events that took place in those times. It is important to stress two things in relation to the time line in which these events occurred. Firstly, that the practices of persecution, torture and extermination did not begin with the *coup* that took place in March 1976, but were already a *modus operandi* of paramilitary groups such as the Argentine Anti-communist Alliance (AAA), financed and supported by the successive Peronist governments that ruled the country after 1973 (for references on how this worked specifically in the case of sexual and gender minorities, see Malva and Insausti). Secondly, that even after the return of democracy, and up to our days, many of the practices that were undertaken in those detention centers are implemented in local and federal prisons and jails throughout the country, although their main target is not so much political activists as the most economically marginalized collectives, mainly young men from the most neglected areas in Argentina, and trans* women and *travestis*. For detailed information on the continuities between State violence then and now, see CORREPI.

¹² The recurrence of “Memory” in these denominations is not fortuitous. As Ludmila da Silva Catela has noted, Argentina has witnessed a reduction of the concept of Human Rights to struggles related to State terrorism in the '70s, while initiatives such as the ones mentioned here make “a monopolic use of the category of ‘memory’ to refer to the recent past of Human Rights violations” under the military régime (15). Da Silva Catela stresses that here “Memory” is written in the definite singular (“la memoria”: “the memory”), so much so that many other mobilizations have incorporated the symbols and rhetoric of “Memory” related to State terrorism in the '70s as a way of legitimizing their own claims. For more details on the specific case of LGBT memory, see footnote 19.

found there were selected and elaborated in collaboration with the families and friends of the people to which they refer, in an exercise that conjoins the intimate and domestic with the State and with our collective memory. Nowadays, apart from being available on-line, these materials are displayed along the internal streets of the ESMA.

Some common traits can be found in nearly all the narratives in the Project. Firstly, they weave together the personal life of their subjects with their political activity, including information on their favorite pastimes (painting, sports), their tastes (preferences in music and food), and family ties (anecdotes brought forth by their siblings, descriptions of family life, religious practices), along with information on the different political groups in which they were involved and the role they played within them. When describing their personalities, we find frequent allusions to determination at school, reliability and intelligence, the latter even in the cases in which the portrayed subjects were not so prone to studying. All the narratives present their protagonists as noble or “good hearted” people, loved by their families and friends, and, of course, strongly idealistic or committed to social justice. In some cases, this is expressed in their conviction and leadership skills, whereas in others it is more evident in their dedication to the cause and their solidarity. Finally, they are frequently portrayed as being the nexus in their family or social circles, endearing characters who gathered those surrounding them thanks to their love and generosity.

The second object of analysis is the initiative “Memory is not a Heterosexual Privilege” (which in its second year incorporated the term “Cis-Heterosexual”), born from a variety of collectives within the LGBT and/or queer circles in the city of La Plata (province of Buenos Aires, Argentina). These groups sought to raise the issue of sexuality and gender identity in the mobilizations that take place every year across Argentina on the anniversary of the last military *coup* (March 24th, 1976). In the press release of their 2016 call (the second one), one of the groups demands “rejecting with all our rage the historical invisibilization of the fag, tranny, dyke, trans, bisexual, intersex, and pansexual *disappeared*, as well the methods of silencing, repression, exclusion and extermination of our identities” (Coordinadora Antirrepresiva, “A 40 años”). It must be noted (since it is as necessary as it is uncommon) that both this call and the previous one in 2015 stress the continuities between the acts of violence practiced during the military régime, and the ones perpetrated in our days: “We understand that the impunity, silence, and structural violence that the last military dictatorship installed are also present in the constant invisibilization of the oppression, targeting, and criminalization of the community of dykes, fags, bisexuals, *travestis*, trans, and intersex people” (Coordinadora Antirrepresiva, “La Memoria,” n. pag.).¹³ These two calls mobilized what many understand as a debt within the Argentine human rights movement: to look into the repression of LGBT people as a specific (and particularly fierce) mode of State terrorism. As one of the activists from this initiative explained, “among the unsettled scores and within the idea of a right to the truth, we claim our right to know what happened to the LGBT detained-*disappeared*, and to know

¹³ In the Spanish original: “Entendemos que la impunidad, el silencio, y la violencia estructural que instaló la última dictadura militar, también están presentes en la permanente invisibilización de la opresión, persecución, y criminalización de la comunidad de tortilleras, maricones, bisexuales travestis, trans, y personas intersex.”

their militant stories" (Máximo, n. pag.).¹⁴ Having access to "the missing narratives" (Prieto, "Los relatos") and claiming reparation for those who suffered State violence in those times, are two of the demands that these groups voiced in the last two yearly rallies on what is called the Day for Memory and Justice in La Plata.

Both the "Memories of Life and Militancy" Project and the "Memory is not a Cis-Heterosexual Privilege" initiative present key aspects of how we relate to "liminal events" in our recent past. In particular, they tell us a lot about how we think about the protagonists of that past, in this case "our *disappeared*" (as they are called in one of the banners of the La Plata initiative). A queer theoretical framework emerges as a particularly useful approach to look into the mechanisms behind these representations and, above all, their implications. As María Elena Martínez has noted, "a queer approach to archives requires an exercise of the mind that endeavors hard to treat classification schemes not just as abstractions but as systems of power that have multiple effects on lives and bodies" (175). It is precisely to this queer analysis of the two selected cases that I will dedicate the following section of this work.

Queer approaches to the recent past

Scholars who study temporality from a queer perspective have frequently noted that all history can and must be thought also as a history of affect: the affects of the subjects of historical analysis, those that propel our current society to look into the past in search of something, and also those experienced by the researchers themselves as they face the archive, independently of what kind of sources they are.¹⁵ Undoubtedly, this demand for "a new model of historical understanding animated under the sign of the affective" (Eng 22) bursts in with all its force and harshness for anyone who decides to work with the histories of "our *disappeared*." Facing these stories, or the silence of their absence, stirs affects that are difficult to convey in a text like this, but that most certainly accompany my writing. It is from this site, and with an (affectionate) respect towards the people who shared their stories in both initiatives, that I dwell upon the reflections that follow. My aim is most certainly *not* to question the ways in which the loved ones of "our *disappeared*" relate to their past (and to the emotions that persist in the present), nor is it to refute the representations they offer us. Rather, I am interested in looking into the more "public" side of that intimate sphere, reading the circulation of representations in the social space (in this case, through a State initiative and another one originated in the civil society) and their ties to our ways of understanding and configuring ourselves as a community and/or society.

¹⁴ Similarly, on the occasion of another anniversary of the coup, Cristian Prieto affirms: "Once again, the request to open all files of the military ranks in our country should be demanded by everybody, in order to know what happened with all the *disappeared*, the kidnapped children and those *disappeared* during the last military régime due to their orientation or gender expression" ("Salir del archivo"). The very issue of whether these subjects were *disappeared* due to their gender or sexuality is in itself a matter of debate; see: Insausti.

¹⁵ In this respect, see for example Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings* and "Legacies of Trauma"; Freccero, *Queer/Early/Modern*.

In the beginning of this work I referred to some ways in which queer studies scholars understand identity, and particularly to the notions of every subject's indeterminateness and multi-dimensionality. As Luciano Martínez recalls when he goes over the contributions of this field,

queer theory turns to considering sexuality as something mobile, ambiguous and ambivalent, always mutable according to the historical and cultural context. [...] The aim is to deconstruct the ontological bases on which they operate, and highlight how what is considered "normal," "natural" or "essential" at any given time, is actually constructed. By undermining the notions of continuity, stability and integrity that found the identitarian, the homosexual identity and the binaries that support it are also being questioned. (863)¹⁶

What would happen if we moved this interpretative framework from a reflection about the discourses that circulate around sexuality, towards those referring to the protagonists of the resistance against State terrorism in Argentina? What will it tell us, not about the families and friends that produced the narratives, nor about the protagonists themselves, but about ourselves as a society carved out of these kinds of representations? In order to answer these questions, I would like to go back to the sources, in order to analyze them with the tools offered by queer theory.

One of the traits that emerge in both of the initiatives I presented, is precisely their support of the "continuity, stability and integrity" of their characters. In the narratives of the "Memories of Life and Militancy" project, for example, these characterizations are guaranteed by the traits and episodes that are chosen for the portraits: an intellectual and political potential that already became apparent early on in their lives (thus ensuring the continuity of their subjects through time); a subjective coherence in every realm of life (their human quality was expressed within the family, as students, then as teachers, militants and romantic partners); as well as a sense of security on what was their own place and mission in the world. We find people who fought inequalities and injustice throughout their life, and in contexts as disparate as armed struggle, the distribution of their lunchbox at school, or the socialization of a severance pay. On the contrary, what we do not find are stories in which doubts, contradictions, regret or ambiguities are allowed to emerge. I would like to point out two issues in relation to this.

Firstly, it is worth noting that there are those who link these stable and monolithic subjective configurations precisely with the mechanisms of normalization and violence, including State violence. Adriana Novoa and Mónica Szurmuk, for example, find queer gestures in the ways in which *La nave de los locos* (1984), by Uruguayan novelist Cristina Peri Rossi, deals with subjectivity in relation to the totalitarian context from which the author herself had fled into exile:

¹⁶ In the Spanish original: "la teoría queer pasa a concebir la sexualidad como algo móvil, ambiguo y ambivalente, siempre mutable de acuerdo al contexto histórico-cultural. [...] El objetivo es desconstruir las bases ontológicas con las que operan y poner de relieve cómo se construye lo que se considera 'normal,' 'natural' o 'esencial' en un momento dado. Al socavarse las nociones de continuidad, estabilidad e integridad que fundan lo identitario se está cuestionando también la identidad homosexual y los binarismos que la rigen."

[the novel] questions the existence of these complete and developed subjects, and instead proposes the existence of fragmented subjects. But fragmentation ends up being a creative option in the face of totalitarianism. A being that confronts, through fragmentation, the possibility of being multiple because, ultimately, it all ends up being positional and alien. [...] The novel opens a possibility towards the creation of a being that simply is, and that cannot (and, finally, does not want to) structure itself as an assimilating totality. (114)¹⁷

These words can be read as an invitation to rethink the ways in which we portray the events of our recent history and its characters. Are “complete and developed” subjects the only ones that will help us in our relationship to our past? Or are they, quite on the contrary, unacknowledged (and unintentional) ways of reinforcing the rigid identitarian structures that can materialize, among other things, in State violence? If fragmentation is “a creative option in the face of totalitarianism,” then we might be better equipped to face past and present totalitarianisms by investing in representations that convey subjects in all their complexity, contradictions and discontinuities.

Secondly, the affects associated to those characters also speak to the ways in which we relate to our past, and particularly to its most painful moments. As noted above, the “Memories of Life and Militancy” project conveys a limited range of feelings, which are invariably positive and flattering in relation to the portrayed subjects, and celebratory and proud in the case of those who contribute with the narratives. Nobleness, courage, modesty and solidarity are the notions usually affixed to “our *disappeared*” in these and other representations that circulate in the public sphere. The “Memory is not a Cis-Heterosexual Privilege” initiative builds its relationship with “our *disappeared*” by a similar pattern, as it emphasizes their courage and strength and draws inspiration from them to advance similar struggles—and affects—in the present.

There is a range of possible explanations for this. In the first place, as we will see in the last section of this work, positive representations are frequently understood as a way of countering years of silencing and repression, and any negative affect that might slip may be interpreted as a defeat of that political, social and cultural project that finds its ancestors in the Seventies. Furthermore, as Heather Love and others have shown, there is a prevailing idea that “negative” feelings (most notably, shame and melancholia) might not be “productive” in political terms, i.e., would be a poor basis for constructive projects (in this case, political emancipation and social justice). Thus, inaugurating a genealogy with ancestors that appear confused, ashamed or immobilized by fear might not seem like an effective strategy for action, nor an encouraging message for the younger generations to continue their struggles. Nevertheless, those lives were surely accompanied by such

¹⁷ In the Spanish original: “[en la novela] se cuestiona la existencia de estos sujetos completos y desarrollados y se propone, en cambio, la existencia de sujetos fragmentarios. Pero la fragmentación se termina convirtiendo en una opción creativa ante el totalitarismo. Un ser que confronta, a través de la fragmentación, la posibilidad de ser múltiple porque, en definitiva, todo termina siendo posicional y ajeno. [...] La novela abre la posibilidad hacia la creación de un ser que simplemente es y que no puede (y finalmente no quiere) estructurarse como una totalidad que asimila.”

feelings, and effacing them from our representations could result in a misidentification and the frustration of feeling once again “out of place.”

I wish to emphasize again that the observations I present here are unrelated to the protagonists of those narratives, nor to their loved ones who, by mobilizing unimaginable amounts of affect, made the effort to portray each one of these fighters. I am more interested in considering the representations we have as a society to think of ourselves in relation to our past. From this perspective, and if history should also be a history of affects, then we might want to accommodate other affects, if nothing else, in order to be able to build collective strategies to navigate them.¹⁸

Queer studies have also contributed important reflections on the relational nature of identity and of our ways of being sexed, racialized and embodied subjects. Juana María Rodríguez, for example, links identity to “a self that is constituted through and against other selves in contexts that serve to establish the relationship between the self and the other” (5). By placing it in specific spatial and corporeal coordinates, the author pursues the challenge of conceptualizing the ways in which subjectivity is configured in semiotic structures (“discursive spaces”) and in agency (“identity practices”). In order to achieve this, she turns the question of “What is identity?” into “What is identity for?” and “under what circumstances is it constructed and whose interests does it serve?” (5). Thus, an analysis focused on identity opens its spectrum well beyond individuals, allowing us to also consider how that configuration is linked to other subjects and to the contexts in which it is (or is not) “for” something.

When applying this approach to the materials under study here, we find that they shed light on how these representations build their main characters “through and against” other subjects. One issue that emerges from the analysis of the “Memory is not a Cis-Heterosexual Privilege” project, is that of the historical figures selected as representative of the collective “our *disappeared*.” Which figures are “ours” and which are not? How is this distinction drawn and what interests does it serve? Unpacking these issues may help us better understand the processes through which we forge our identity through our relationship with the past.

The selection of ancestors and “heroic” figures shapes the ways in which a community or culture builds its past and, through it, its present identity. Each new element that is added to our family tree not only redefines that element itself, but also redefines us: as heirs to a particular figure, we take its traits (or, rather, those we choose to make explicit) and legitimize our own reality as a successor to that figure. How we build these lines of “kinship” also has a lot to say about our affects, since the feeling of identification—or lack thereof—can place those who write or read at some point of the spectrum between heroism and marginality. Such affects can even include shame, when we try to hide figures of the past that bring forth elements in which we do not want

¹⁸ In fact, Cvetkovich’s project mentioned in footnote 13 aims precisely at this: “to create political history as affective history, a history that captures activism’s felt, and even traumatic, dimensions. In forging a collective knowledge built on memory, I hope to produce not only a version of history but also an archive of emotions, which is one of trauma’s most important, but most difficult to preserve, legacies” (“Legacies of Trauma” 436-37).

to be reflected. In this sense, notwithstanding which LGBT figures “really” inhabited the past, it is interesting to observe which are chosen in the present and which are not, and how this expropriation of specific characters of the past is produced through a retrospective and genealogical construction rooted in present interests.

As in the case of “Memory is not...,” LGBT or queer collectives frequently seek to insert their own figures of the past in the traditional heroic mausoleum, generally through narratives in which “a queer victim stands up to his or her oppressors and emerges a hero,” “a heroic freedom fighter in a world of puritans” (Halberstam 149-50). Having a place in the cast of events and characters who “made history” is seen, from this perspective, as a powerful tool to transmit the reassurance that it is possible to “resist” and also to “make” present and future by and for the collective. In many cases, however, this also means that the defense of “grand figures” is presented in an entirely positive and celebratory fashion. In the interest of this, the contrasts and contradictions in such figures must be hidden, and/or the most controversial characters must be effaced from historical records. A queer perspective, on the contrary, aims not at “ironing out” the “creases” of LGBT or queer history, but rather at exposing the contradictions, shames and darkneses of the past, among other things because hiding them means hiding whatever traces of them may linger in the present. As Heather Love has asserted, “[t]he emphasis on injury in queer studies has made critics in this field more willing to investigate the darker aspects of queer representation and experience and to attend to the social, psychic, and corporeal effects of homophobia” (2). In this case, we are not only dealing with homophobia, or with violence against a specific group exerted from people external to it (a heterosexist State against homosexual population; a totalitarian, illegitimate government against leftist resistance). Embracing the creases and darkneses of history also means coming to terms with injuries exerted within our own collectives, to ourselves and each other.

This last point allows us to return to the case of the historiographic recovery of “our *disappeared*” under a different light. In the first place, because such discourses would seem to contribute to the fixation of sexual and gender identities, even as the organizations that propel them identify as queer, that is, as aspiring to achieve precisely the opposite. Some individuals and organizations have chosen to add the figure 400, to the one already established in the Argentine public sphere as the total number of people *disappeared* by the last military government: 30,000.¹⁹ This requires us,

¹⁹ The first reference to this number (400 “homosexual” *disappeared*) appears in Jáuregui (170-71). For an analysis of the dynamics that led to the current version of this narrative, including the reasons that prompted the largest homosexual organizations in Argentina to focus their attention on the repression exerted during the latest military régime, see Insausti. An alternative view can be found in the three articles by Cristian Prieto quoted elsewhere in this paper, where the author not only adopts this figure, but also seems to suggest that these 400—and perhaps many more, missing in the records—should be taken as cases of a specific repression against the LGBT (such is the word the author chooses) population. As Insausti has noted (78-81), the over-quotation of that figure initially mentioned by Jáuregui tends to omit his own provisos in this respect and the winding course it took throughout the years. This simplification may be understood as a necessary step for the number to go well beyond a mere historical description, and instead become a symbol with which many LGBT organizations, as well as the society in general, could identify. It should be added that, as Insausti has also shown, the adoption of “our (400) *disappeared*” as a symbol of the LGBT struggle has also allowed an alignment with the memory politics advanced by the State between 2003 and 2015, when, as we

among other things, to endorse notions of sex, gender and sexuality as transparent and visible, be it for the subjects in the past, for the State that exerted violence against them, and for us in the present. It implies knowing who (and how many) were “fags, trannies, dykes, trans, bisexual, intersex, pansexual” (according to the 2016 call) or “lezzies, fairies, bisexuals, travestis, trans, and intersex people” (in the one issued in 2015).²⁰ It also implies that their identity was stable, coherent, intelligible (for themselves and for others) and could be described in one of these terms.

Secondly, the idea of “our *disappeared*” disturbingly separates the sexual/gendered aspect from other forms of oppression (which in the case of detentions-*disappearances* were mostly political), resulting in the idea that some *disappeared* are “ours” and others are not. As I mentioned in the Introduction of this work, a considerable portion of the most recent developments in queer theory—and, from my perspective, the most interesting ones—have shifted the focus from biopower as the production and regulation of sexuality and gender, towards its functioning in “the production and regulation of populations, race and state racism,” colonialism, imperialism, and national and transnational violence (Rault 97). Actually, one needs only go back to the genealogy of queer movements in Argentina²¹ to encounter this type of work in collectives such as *La Queerencia*, which already towards the mid 1990s attempted to go well beyond sex and gender issues, positioning itself within the ongoing dialogues with broader social movements. As two of its founders recall,

[w]e started to perceive that queerness didn’t defy so much due to what it could designate about an alleged sexual scandal or a theoretical revision, but rather due to the articulation between historical struggles that appealed to our own political culture as much as that of allied organizations. [...] We then affirmed that queerness did not appeal to us as an attribute—be it of subjects or of their productions—but as a form of action and collective organization. (Delfino and Rapisardi 11-12)²²

In the case I am analyzing here, bringing in this queer approach to think about our recent past would mean observing the ways in which the structures of production and repression of political

saw above, signifiers such as “memory” and “Human Rights” were nearly monopolized, in both cases restricting them to issues related to the latest military régime (Silva Catela, “Derechos humanos” and “Lo que merece”).

²⁰ In the Spanish original: “putos, travas, tortas, trans, bisexuales, intersex, pansexuales” (2016) and “tortilleras, maricones, bisexuales, travestis, trans, y personas intersex” (2015).

²¹ Cecilia Palmeiro recounts that towards the end of the '90s local queer groups, inspired by the most radical Argentine gay organizations from the '70s, “articulated inequality and difference to read and confront the conditions of the present, that is, the complex modes of exclusion, repression and discrimination that had been produced in two decades of democracy” (Palmeiro, n. pag.).

²² In the Spanish original: “Empezamos a percibir que lo queer no desafiaba tanto por lo que podía designar de un supuesto escándalo sexual o de una pretendida revisión teórica, sino por las articulaciones entre luchas históricas que interpelaban tanto nuestra propia cultura política como la de las agrupaciones aliadas. [...] Postulamos entonces que lo queer no nos interpelaba en tanto atributo ya sea de los sujetos o de sus producciones, sino como forma de acción y organización colectiva.”

“subversion” are inextricably intertwined with the ones related to sex and gender “deviation.” It would also mean, as a counterpart, building relationships, articulations and networks that could help us work inside them.

Finally, there is a third realm in which a queer perspective may help us rethink projects of memory reclamation, such as the attention to gestures of inclusion and exclusion of figures of the past within LGBT or queer narratives. As a call for action, and as an intervention in the public space during the day of the rally, “Memory is not a Cis-Heterosexual Privilege” sought to make visible the existence of “dykes, fairies...” among those *disappeared* in the hands of State terrorism. This initiative included, for example, an installation that displayed materials such as memos, files from the National Strategic Intelligence office in which certain people were registered as “homosexuals” or “*travestis*,” and other official documentation issued by the *de facto* government, as well as newspaper articles that supported the official discourse. When observing these objects, spectators could very well think that there were no “dykes, fairies...” on the repressive (or collaborationist) side, and that the movements that were persecuted by the State exerted no violence whatsoever on LGBT individuals. On the contrary, there is ample evidence that suggests that homophobia and transphobia were widely practiced by many Leftist and *Peronist* organizations, and transphobia was for long a central feature of gay organizations, and for the few gay and lesbian ones. In a brief political history of *travestismo*, Lohana Berkins recounts that

[a] large portion of gay and lesbian organizations in those times felt our presence as an invasion. Lesbians discussed our ‘femininity’ and encouraged us to realign with gays, seeing us as one of the many versions of this sexual orientation. Gays oscillated between being enchanted by *travesti* glamor and rejecting it. This is where our first struggle for visibilization took place. [...] It is with even more sadness that I must say that neither did the Madres de Plaza de Mayo take the *travesti* struggle as their own, as a struggle for human rights. Their commitment to this subject was mild, save for some individual exceptions. (Berkins 146-49)²³

Once again, the questions Rodríguez posed earlier (6) come back, and we could rephrase them as: what are “dyke, fairy...” identities for, when they are built in this way? Whose interests do they serve? In order to answer these questions, we may return to Jack Halberstam’s work.

²³ For other examples, see Rapisardi and Modarelli (157-63), Bellucci (61-63, 179-82), Insausti (66), Prieto (“¿Dónde está...?”). In Berkins’ Spanish original: “Buena parte de las organizaciones gays y lesbianas de entonces, sentían nuestra presencia como una invasión. Las lesbianas discutían nuestro ‘femenino’ y nos alentaban a realinearnos con los gays, viéndonos como una de las tantas versiones de esta orientación sexual. Los gays oscilaban entre el maravillarse por el glamour travesti y el rechazo al mismo. Aquí se dio nuestra primera lucha por la visibilización. [...] Con más tristeza debo decir que tampoco las Madres de Plaza de Mayo tomaron la lucha travesti como una lucha propia, como una lucha por los derechos humanos. Su compromiso con el tema fue tibio, salvo alguna excepción de tipo individual.”

In *The queer art of failure*, Halberstam analyzes a situation analogous to this one in many respects, related to the nuanced relationship between (mainly male) homosexuality and Nazism. He is specifically interested in thinking the ways in which gay-lesbian history has preferred to lay emphasis on the persecution of homosexuality during Nazism, rather than on the forms of collaboration among both, and the erotic uses of totalitarian iconography by some sectors within the LGBT community, even in our days. In a reflection that brings together the notions of identity and our use of a heroic mausoleum, Halberstam considers that the reduction of the past to only a handful of grand heroes and events implies erasing other elements, and denounces “an unwillingness to grapple with difficult historical antecedents and a desire to impose a certain kind of identity politics on history” (Halberstam 158). He does not derive from this a need to replace the usual figures with other, more “appropriate” ones, nor to abandon the study of the past altogether. Instead, he suggests following “a model of queer history that is less committed to finding heroic models from the past and more resigned to the contradictory and complicit narratives” both from the past and the present (148): histories that “seek not to explain, but to involve” (28). In this respect, building against the grain of the canonization of certain ancestors also entails an investment in the queer lines of work defended throughout these pages: ambiguity instead of fix identities, contradictions over coherence and uniformity, multifarious analysis over one focused solely on sex and gender, and critique over celebration.

Past and Present Anxieties

In the introduction to this essay, I suggested that there could be a link between one-dimensional, coherent representations of the subjects of our history, and the political anxieties incited both by our recent past, and by queer existence in our society. I would like to examine this issue in my closing remarks, in order to look not into *how* the representations of “our *disappeared*” are built, but rather into *why*.

In its presentation, the “Memories of Life and Militancy” Project refers to two aims that these stories would achieve. On the one hand, the Project “allows for a contribution to collective memory, consciousness raising, knowing what happened to us as a people, and then being able to better understand how our recent history is and what we want as a future project” (Ente Público, n. pag.). On the other, it is presented as a way to “‘retrace’ the purpose of the military regime, which was about effacing, erasing, and disappearing thousands of people, mainly due to their political militancy” (Ente Público, n. pag.). Those who drive the Project consider that “it is almost the duty of these places to reconstruct and narrate the life stories of the people who were murdered and/or *disappeared*” (Ente Público, n. pag.).²⁴ From the analysis in “Memory is not a Cis-Heterosexual

²⁴ In the Spanish original: “[El Proyecto] permite contribuir a la memoria colectiva, despertar conciencia, conocer lo que nos sucedió como pueblo, y entonces poder comprender mejor cómo es nuestra historia reciente y qué queremos como proyecto futuro;” “‘desandar’ el objetivo de la dictadura militar que estaba vinculada con eliminar, borrar y hacer desaparecer a miles de personas, principalmente por sus militancias políticas.” “...[E]s casi un deber de estos lugares el reconstruir y contar las historias de vida de las personas que fueron asesinadas y/o desaparecidas.”

Privilege," it should be clear that this presentation of the Project could apply to the grassroots initiative as well, although the latter also incorporates explicit references to present violence in the case of *travesti* and trans*²⁵ (female) prostitutes. This is an important difference, since given the national political landscape at the time of these demonstrations, social movements—including LGBT ones—that addressed issues related to the military régime tended to focus their energy on the wrongs in the past, and not those in the present. In any case, both examples involve projects fueled by the anxiety and urgency to know the past, because it can be useful for us to think about (and act upon) the present. We are also faced with the anxiety and urgency of countering years of silence, violence, and death. Knowing what was not supposed to be known, unveiling the intentionally hidden, understanding what happened and learning from it, lead us to go back, almost feverishly, to that liminal past, inescapably marked by the way in which it overflows human comprehension.

Maybe this is the key to thinking about the relationship between the anxiety with which we turn to our recent past, and the one awoken by queer existences. Again, we are talking about an object that exceeds our limits of intelligibility: subjects, modes of life and relationships that have no place in the categories (at least the hegemonic ones) culturally available to understand the human. Here, the anxiety to process those subjectivities is related to what Ceballos Muñoz has interpreted as a kind of fear of transmission, in that "queering"

as a subversive strategy means 'spoiling' or 'ruining,' and even 'ridiculing' or 'messing up.' The fear lies in the fact that the name [queer] may become a transitive verb and extend its 'strangeness,' convert others, provoke discontent and end up undermining the system. 'Queering' does not convey destruction in itself, but it does suppose a particular threat to the classificatory systems that affirm their own timelessness and fixity. (167-68)²⁶

There are obviously fundamental differences between these modes of "anxiety," as well as between the unintelligible objects they refer to. In the first case, we are talking about an anxiety caused by human horror in its most extreme form, and by the passing of time that necessarily tears us further apart from it—but it also prevents us from understanding it and supposedly, as a consequence, not repeating it. The anxiety *vis à vis* the liminal events in our recent past has not only produced this urgency to narrate lineal and coherent stories of the unspeakable: it has also allowed us to identify its most nefarious characters, to implement both judicial and social punishment, and even to find those who, in what is perhaps the most extreme twist of liminality, were taken from the hands of

²⁵ The asterisk after "trans" indicates its use as an umbrella term to designate the people that transgress binary norms of sex and gender. I owe its understanding to Mauro Cabral, and particularly his work in *Interdicciones*.

²⁶ In the Spanish original: "como estrategia subversiva significa 'echar a perder' o 'arruinar,' e incluso 'ridiculizar' o 'desordenar.' El temor reside en que el sustantivo [queer] pase a ser verbo transitivo y extienda su 'rareza,' convierta a otros, provoque el descontento y acabe por socavar el sistema. 'Queerizar' no lleva consigo destruir pero sí supone una particular amenaza a los sistemas de clasificación que afirman su propia intemporalidad y fijación."

their parents at their most tender age. In the case of anxieties *vis à vis* queerness, on the other hand, we are talking about the refusal by a large portion of our society to acknowledge and embrace the wide array of differences within the human—a refusal that, on many occasions, has consequences as violent as those implemented by State terrorism.

Nevertheless, both anxieties revolve around the need to order, to “iron out” the “creases” of the landscape that surrounds us so as to render it intelligible according to our categories or our political project. I suggest that it is precisely this anxiety, one Manalansan has called “the discomfort elicited and provoked by the idea and realities of mess” (94) and queer dissonance, that pushes us to “tidy up” the past of “our” predecessors, purge it from its more uncomfortable traits, and even avoid an approach of those predecessors who are “ours” in some respects (political, sexual) and not in others. By positioning ourselves within a queer framework, on the contrary, we acknowledge that it is precisely “mess, clutter, and muddled entanglements” that make up “the ‘stuff’ of queerness, historical memory, aberrant desires, and the archive” (Manalansan 94). Thus, the question “And what are you?” opens up, in all its messiness, contradictions and affects, to the past, to the present, and to the future of what we wish to be.

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