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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Daring to Love: A History of Lesbian Intimacy in Buenos Aires, 1966–1988

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in History

by

Shoshanna Lande

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Heidi Tinsman, Chair
Associate Professor Rachel O'Toole
Professor Jennifer Terry

2020

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DEDICATION

To

my father,

who would have really enjoyed this journey for me.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ALMA	Asociación para la Liberación de la Mujer Argentina
ATEM	Asociación de Trabajo y Estudio sobre la Mujer
CHA	Comunidad Homosexual Argentina
CONADEP	Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas
ERP	Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo
FAP	Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas
FAR	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias
FIP	Frente de Izquierda Popular
FLH	Frente de Liberación Homosexual
FLM	Frente de Lucha por la Mujer
GFG	Grupo Federativo Gay
MLF	Movimiento de Liberación Feminista
MOFEP	Movimiento Feminista Popular
PST	Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores
UFA	Unión Feminista Argentina

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Daring to Love: A History of Lesbian Intimacy in Buenos Aires, 1966–1988

by

Shoshanna Lande

Doctor of Philosophy in History

University of California, Irvine, 2020

Professor Heidi Tinsman, Chair

The following research focuses on lesbian intimacy in Argentina between 1966–1988, with particular focus on the dictatorship of 1976–1983. I argue that queer women during this era used constructions of lesbian eroticism, pleasure, and friendship as ways to counter authoritarianism by claiming that the equality and equity experienced in intimate moments was evidence of lesbian moral authority and democracy. Moments of intimacy serve as access points to understanding lesbian contestations to Argentina's gender hierarchy, the military's authoritarianism, and Argentina's definition of democracy. Looking at lesbianism through multiple lenses of intimacy has revealed a fragmented, isolated community that, over the course of two decades, worked to claim their collective existence, making lesbianism possible and visible.

Lesbian intimacy in Argentina occurred in multiple spaces, both private and public. By the end of the 1960s when the first gay liberation group in Argentina, Nuestro Mundo, was founded, lesbians in Buenos Aires remained atomized and isolated, lacking the kind of public social organization that other groups had. At the same time, Argentine society was tumultuous, see-sawing between democracy and dictatorship. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, the

government, whether democratic or authoritarian, was particularly ruthless toward leftist groups throughout the nation. This is especially true for the regime that took power between 1976 and 1983. It was responsible for completely disrupting the public and private lives of its citizens through a program of censorship, terror, violence, kidnapping, and torture, ultimately disappearing and murdering 30,000 Argentinians. As a result, moments of intimacy—including conversations between friends and lovers, as well as consuming cultural productions like political writings, poems, drawings, literature, and songs—provided lesbians with the experiences and discourse to situate themselves as sexual minorities and citizens in Argentina.

My research contributes to the growing scholarship that utilizes a methodology of intimacy. Lauren Berlant's concept of the intimate public—composed of strangers who share common historical experiences based on seemingly fixed identities, such as race, gender, or sexuality—challenges us rethink how collective political and social consciousness can be generated during moments of privacy and intimacy. Analyzing lesbian history in Argentina through the lens of intimacy is an apt way to approach this historical moment, because lesbians were working to construct a collective identity that bypassed the categories of nation and family. As a result, my findings about lesbian intimacy change what we know about Argentinian lesbian history. While the existing historiography focuses on lesbian participation in the feminist and gay liberation movements, focusing on intimacy expands the ways that we view lesbians as political actors. Given their lack of self-representation within the activist community, moments of intimacy illustrate how lesbians understood themselves as political actors.

INTRODUCTION

Si te quiero es porque sos	If I love you, it's because you are
Mi amor, mi cómplice y todo	My love, my accomplice and everything
Y en la calle codo a codo	And on the street arm in arm
Somos mucho más que dos,	We are much more than two,
Somos mucho más que dos.	We are much more than two.

Lyrics from "Te quiero," by Sandra y Celeste (1988)[1]

In 1988, the Argentine music duo and local lesbian icons, Sandra y Celeste, recorded and released their song, "Te quiero." A slow, sweet ballad with piano accompaniment, "Te quiero" sounds like a typical love song, the singer exulting the virtues of her lover. Lyrics that describe hands that work for justice, a mouth that tells no lies, and tears that fall for the world not only explicate the singer's attraction to her lover, but also place this song in a moment of social change.

In fact, Argentina in the 1980s was not just a place and time of social change, but also of political change, as the country returned to democratic rule with the election of Raúl Alfonsín on October 30, 1983. The years that followed saw the nation grapple with the fallout of the political violence that had overwhelmed Argentina since the late-1960s, which hit its apex during the so-called Dirty War (also referred to as the last dictatorship and the Proceso; 1976–1983). As Argentinians debated the parameters of democracy, they also closely followed the trials of the former junta leaders who had overseen the violence of the dictatorship. Mass graves were uncovered, physical reminders of the traumas of the previous decade. Those whose family members had been disappeared by the dictatorship demanded knowledge of their missing loved

[1] Sandra y Celeste," Te quiero," lyrics by Mario Benedetti, music by Alberto Favero, 1988, Side B, track 1 on *Somos Mucho Más que Dos*, RCA Records, vinyl LP.

one's whereabouts. Workers, hamstrung by inflation and wage freezes, sought economic stability and labor legislation from the Alfonsín administration. And Alfonsín, fearing that social movements would reignite the violence of the previous years, worked to redirect the political culture in Argentina toward democratic institutions. The return to democracy also saw the return of social organizing. Feminist groups resumed conferences and publishing scholarship. Student organizations began anew. Human rights groups could once again operate with much less fear of reprisal, marching in demand for justice for the disappeared.

Just as the rest of Argentina's public discourse sprang back to life, so too did the gay and lesbian population assert their presence and demand their rights. A nascent gay liberation movement had gone underground—and overseas—at the onset of the dictatorship in 1976. But the end of the authoritarian rule signaled the freedom for gay and lesbian civil rights groups to reactivate. The largest of these groups, Comunidad Homosexual Argentina (Argentine Homosexual Community; CHA), which started in April 1984—only six months following the return to democracy—, largely resembled the groups of the early 1970s in that it privileged a cis-gendered, male, homosexual agenda. Nonetheless, a newly vocal lesbian community began to emerge throughout the decade with a strategy and plan of their own. A small group of lesbians organized the first lesbian workshop at the 1986 feminist conference, Asociación de Trabajo y Estudio sobre la Mujer (Association for Work and Study on Women; ATEM). The following year, this same group of women began publishing *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana*, a zine made specifically for and by lesbians in Buenos Aires. One of the major themes of this lesbian community in the 1980s was the sentiment that lesbians need not suffer the trauma of loneliness and isolation, that there existed a larger community of homosexual and bisexual women who could collectively reimagine lesbianism in Argentina, and also help the nation in its transition to

a more just and equitable society. When they sang, "Y en la calle codo a codo somos mucho más que dos, somos mucho más que dos," Sandra y Celeste placed themselves within this 1980s lesbian community, while also revealing some of the key issues that had defined lesbianism in Buenos Aires for the previous two decades, which is the focus of this research.

This dissertation is a project of reconstruction and recovery of lesbian narratives that have been dismissed as deviant and invisible, but are really part of the municipal and national narrative. I argue that across this period in Argentine history, lesbians in Buenos Aires worked to construct a political lesbian identity based on collective experiences of violence and trauma. The creation of these narratives was framed by the historical moment of the last dictatorship and its aftermath. The repression and violence of the dictatorship, which occurred under the name of the National Reorganization Process, followed by the national project of building a democracy based on the notion of human rights provided the context and the language for the ways that lesbians worked to construct this political identity. Being able to apply knowledge of isolation, atomization, and repression—because they had long experienced these things as lesbians—helped Buenos Aires's lesbian population contextualize their experiences as sexual and gender minorities, as well as to try to relate to the broader populace. When, after the return to democracy, the country was focused on reconciling the abuses of the dictatorship, lesbians used that moment to likewise discuss their experiences of violence and repression. These discussions show how lesbians understood the extension of the state into the personal lives, including into families.

Attempts to construct a lesbian political identity was done via three primary actions. First of all, lesbians wrote and spoke about their experiences of violence and repression. They reflected on experiences of isolation, of living in secrecy, of dealing with homophobia in their

families, of learning misogynist teachings about female sexuality, of being categorized and pathologized.[2] Secondly, they compared lesbian relationships, especially sexual ones, to other kinds of societal relationships. The result of these comparisons was a narrative that inverted traditional configurations of moral authority. Finally, lesbians attempted to construct a political identity be defining lesbian sexuality. This project was largely unsuccessful, primarily because multiple ways of understanding gender, sexuality, and aesthetics existed among lesbians in Buenos Aires. These understandings typically diverged across class and racial lines. An additional challenge to this project occurred because of the paradox created when feminist lesbians asserted that lesbian sex and sexuality was unique while also claiming that all female sex and sexuality was the same. Nonetheless, the various ways that lesbians understood themselves in relationship to the dominant social structures in Argentina was, I contend, a collection of attempts at making lesbianism a comprehensible political identity.

The point of examining lesbianism in Buenos Aires during these years is twofold. First of all, this research illuminates the history of a group of people who have largely gone unexamined in the historiography. To this end, lesbians appear as more than a small group of feminist activists or a smattering of journalists and artists, as the existing historiography tends to situation them. On thin, brittle paper, with handwritten page numbers and hand-drawn cartoons, *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* is one of the few publications made for and by lesbians in Buenos Aires in the 1980s. The physical copies of *Cuaderno* are apt metaphors for the recorded history of

[2] The contagion narrative that pathologized lesbians in Argentina took off in the early twentieth century when the state was preoccupied with labor laws and increased immigration. At that time, intellectuals like Juan Bialet-Massé and Victor Mercante contributed to the discourse about the national body by identifying potential "epidemics" that might cause harm to the "health" of the nation. These men considered women who earned wages and refused marriage as infections "threatening the health of growing national bodies" due to their refusal to adhere to traditional gender roles. Jorge Salessi, "The Argentine Dissemination of Homosexuality, 1890–1914," 339–46.

lesbian and bisexual women in Buenos Aires: slim, grassroots, and rare. Piecing together bits of information found across the extant records reveals a fractured lesbian landscape. Making this project even more challenging is the fact that the Argentine public has not chosen to preserve lesbian history in the same ways and to the same extent that other histories are preserved, including that of gay men. For example, Carlos Jáuregui, an LGBT rights activist and the founder of the CHA, has both a public park and a subway station named for him. There do not exist any public places commemorating a single Argentine lesbian.[3]

Secondly, the recovery of lesbian narratives expands our understanding of categories of violence and repression. As a group that was not publicly recognized until long after the last dictatorship, lesbians remained excluded from the official stories about authoritarian rule in Argentina. The location and types of violence and repression that they experienced were not summarized or recorded in Truth Commission reports. Their numbers were not counted among the disappeared. Therefore, the recovery of this history sharpens the way we look at institutional violence during repressive regimes. This dissertation, therefore, asks us to consider what becomes officially recognized types of violence and which kinds of violence do not. This history shows that categories of violence, when they become recognized by the state, can continue to exclude groups of people, can continue to determine membership in society, and can continue to mediate fault-lines of power among and between people.

History and Historiography

Many historians have already signaled the *Cordobazo*—a civil uprising during the military dictatorship of Juan Carlos Onganía, and the subsequent police repression, in Córdoba,

[3] Monuments privilege particular people and events. At the same time, they ignore other histories. See Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place*; and Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past.*

Argentina at the end of May 1969—as a turning point in the history of social movements in Argentina, noting that the upsurge that followed was expressed in myriad ways, such as trade-union militancy, urban protests, teachers strikes, student-led strikes, and guerrilla warfare. Luis Alberto Romero has described the culture of social movements that emerged in the early 1970s as a "people's spring," by which he means a social imaginary built on a reduction of society's problems to a single cause: "the dictatorship and the small groups that supported it, the direct and willing culprits of each and every form of oppression, exploitation, and violence in society."[4] The appearance of feminist and gay liberation movements within this broader social and political milieu is due, in part, to the culture of protests that occurred in Argentina in response to Onganía's dictatorship. At the same time, these movements, as with all of the country's social movements, were part of a global phenomenon. Student movements in Paris, Mexico City, and Berkeley in 1968, the Stonewall riots in New York City in 1969, and the second-wave liberal feminist movement all saw parallel expressions in Argentina. Amidst all this radical activism, lesbians often found their issues and their voices silenced.

The historiography of Argentine sexuality during the years examined in this study points to small ideological shifts with regard to female sexuality, but the persistence of homophobia. Isabella Cosse's work shows the historicity of the gender and sexuality dimensions within guerrilla groups in Argentina in the 1960s and 1970s. Cosse argues that broader anxieties about gender and sexuality, which were prevalent throughout Argentine society, found space within guerrilla groups, despite their ideological opposition to the military and state apparatuses.[5] In her book on youth in Argentina, Valeria Manzano looks at the embodied debates over the meanings of sex and power among Argentina's leftist youth, though her analysis relies primarily on

[4] Luis Alberto Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, 183.
[5] Isabella Cosse," Infidelities."

heterosexual experiences.[6] The (limited) historiography of lesbians during these years largely focuses on this silencing and marginalization within the gay liberation and feminist movements.[7] María Celeste Viedma argues that lesbians failed to differentiate themselves from heterosexual women and homosexual men during these years, both of whom also pointed to heterosexual men as the political and social adversary that thwarted their attempts at gaining freedom and autonomy. Viedma's schema, which she calls "parallel in opposition," is an interesting way of considering the construction of lesbian identity.[8] To be sure, it relies almost solely on the public writings produced by the Frente de Liberación Homosexual (Homosexual Liberation Front; FLH) and feminist groups without also considering the lived experiences of the members of such groups. My research contributes to this scholarship by considering the intimate choices of lesbians during these years. Scholars who have argued that lesbians were truly invisible in Argentina during the early 1970s have not fully taken into account the personal choices made by some of the lesbians who participated in those groups. Moreover, these scholars fail to consider invisibility as a survival strategy for Argentine lesbians. The intimate social world of these women shows how such a strategy was employed, and how it enabled lesbians in Buenos Aires to live "openly" on their own terms.

Between 1976 and 1983, the authoritarian regime unleashed immeasurable repression and violence against the citizens of Argentina. Schooled in disinformation, torture, and murder, the military officers exercised their total control of the populace in the name of "Western Christian civilization."[9] The Argentine people, terrorized as they were, responded by self-censoring and

[6] Valeria Manzano, *The Age of Youth in Argentina*, 193–220.
[7] See Ana Clara Benavente and Luisina Gentile, "Lesbians en los '70."
[8] María Celeste Viedma, "Aproximación a las construcciones identitarias del Grupo Safo y a su relación con el Frente de Liberación Homosexual."
[9] Martin Edwin Andersen, *Dossier Secreto*, 2.

moving all potentially subversive activities underground. An incident known as the Night of the Pencils exemplifies the need for extreme caution among the Argentine people.[10] In September 1976, six months following the coup that established military rule, a parish priest violated the secrecy of the confessional by turning in a group of sixteen high-school students who had confessed their involvement in an earlier protest against the rise in bus fares. The priest, Christian Von Wernich, was just one of many informants who turned on their fellow citizens. The complete repression of public political activity and the policing of private activities across the country forced all Argentinians to alter the ways that they conducted their lives. But the dictatorship was more than just a censorship campaign; it also enacted staggering levels of state violence against bodies, disappearing and murdering 30,000 Argentine citizens. This number is made more shocking when you compare it to its counterparts in Chile (3,000 to 5,000) and Brazil (under 2,000). Such widespread state violence underscores the pervasive fears that at any moment on might cease to exist.

Only recently have scholars begun to look at the ways that queer people actively challenged the state during this period. Such studies remain focused primarily on gay men and their use of private spheres to openly express erotic desires and find romantic relationships with one another during the dictatorship. What these histories articulate is that the military regime could not wholly eliminate intimate expressions of love, nor could they eliminate "sexual subversives" and establish a nation entirely made up of heterosexual families that (re)produced ideal citizens.[11] The minimal scholarship that exists about lesbians and bisexual women during this same era in Argentine history indicates that queer women were similarly challenging the

[10]" Night of the Pencils" is a reference to both the Night of the Long Knives under the Third Reich, and the Night of the Long Sticks, a raid of Argentina's universities during the Onganía regime.
[11] Flavio Rapisardi and Alejandro Modarelli, *Fiestas, baños y exilios*; and Pablo Ben and Santiago Joaquin Insausti, "Dictatorial Rule and Sexual Politics in Argentina."

heterosexual and patriarchal order.[12] As long as gay men and women continued to love, form intimate friendships and romantic relationships, and engage in erotic sexual behavior, then the military failed to erase all deviations from its patriarchal order.

Therefore, as a project of recovery, this dissertation helps to place lesbian and bisexual women more broadly within the historiography of homosexuality in Argentina. While also rare, the history of homosexual men in Buenos Aires has indeed received more attention.[13] The discrepancy between queer men's and queer women's history is the result of several factors, the most influential, perhaps, being the unquestioned definition of men as citizens. While feminist scholars have long interrogated notions of patriarchal structures, and queer theory disrupts heteronormative assumptions, scholarship on queer women affords us an opportunity to look at the intersections of these disciplines. This is exciting, because queer women in Buenos Aires have long participated in the feminist and gay liberation movements. Their voices, as this research shows, diversify the histories of these dual social movements.[14] Contestations between lesbians also complicate our understandings of how women have negotiated gender norms, constructed ideas about female sexuality, and contributed to ideas about citizenship and the state. Relegating lesbian history to either "women's history" or "gay history" is to further the

[12] Benavente and Gentile; Natalia Milanesio, ¡*Destape!*

[13] Stephen Brown, '"Con Discriminación y Represión No Hay Democracia;'" Juan José Sebreli," Historia secreta de los homosexuales en Buenos Aires," *Escritos sobre escritos, ciudades bajo ciudades, 1950–1997*; Rapisardi and Modarelli; and Ben and Insausti; Salessi.

[14] For histories of the feminist movement in Argentina, see Dora Barrancos, *Mujeres en la Sociedad argentina*; Isabella Cosse, Karina Felitti, and Valeria Manzano, eds., *Los '60 de otra manera*; Débora D'Antonio, *Deseo y repression*; Karina Felitti, "En defensa de la libertad sexual:" Karin Grammático, "Las 'mujeres políticas' y las feministas en los tempranos setenta:" Temma Kaplan, *Taking Back the Streets*; and Catalina Trebisacce, "Feministas en la Argentina de los '70."

marginalization of queer women. My research project adds to the growing literature on the history of queer people and sexuality in Latin America.[15]

This research also complements the historiography of the Dirty War. Traditionally, this historiography focuses on the ideological and political causes of the Dirty War. Social histories of the dictatorship tend to focus on the effects of the violence and political censorship.[16] Some recent scholarship has explored the social movements and resistances to authoritarianism.[17] In her book on women, youth, and direct democracy in dictatorial Chile and Argentina, Temma Kaplan argues, for example, that the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo used the symbolism of motherhood as part of their arsenal against the authoritarian regime in Argentina. She wrote, "the cultural power of mothers to establish morality and shame the junta was the only power the Madres had."[18] The following research pushes Kaplan's analysis to also include other actors and to interpret their actions as similarly symbolic. While the Madres were certainly the most visible group to use their gender as strategic resistance, it is important to understand how less visible groups, like queer women, could employ similar strategies. A recent trend in the historiography is to investigate the causes of the human rights abuses that occurred en masse during the dictatorship.[19] The following research contributes to this rich historiography by expanding the scope of categories like citizenship, resistance, and political actors. Even a disenfranchised,

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[15] See James N. Green, *Beyond Carnival*; Pete Sigal, ed., *Infamous Desire*; Moira Pérez, "We Don't Need Another Hero;" Lionel Cantú, "Entre Hombres/Between Men;" Javier Corrales and Mario Pecheny, eds. *The Politcs of Sexuality in Latin America*; Jordi Díez, "Argentina: A Queer Tango;" David William Foster, "The Homoerotic Diaspora in Latin America;" Laura Andrea Gonzalez, "Betters y Entiendas;" Manolo Gúzman, *Gay Hegemony/Latino Homosexualities*; Cymene Howe, "The Legible Lesbian;"Adrián Melo, *Historia de la literature gay en Argentina*; Sylvia Molloy and Robert Irwin, *Hispanisms and Homosexualities*; Ben and Insausti; Brown; and Salessi.
[16] See Andersen; Romero; Federico Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*; and David M. Sheinin, *Consent of the Damned*.
[17] See Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*; Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*; and Miriam Lewin and Olga Wornat, *Putas y guerrillas*.
[18] Temma Kaplan, *Taking Back the Streets.*
[19] See James P. Brennan, *Argentina's Missing Bones.*

small, and isolated group was affected in profound ways by the national and local events happening around them. And their reflections on what it meant to be a citizen of Argentina and what a democracy could look like help us develop our own analysis of these categories. Moreover, lesbian writings sought to function as a mirror pointed toward Argentine society, hoping to reflect the structures of violence and oppression that helped define the era.

For Argentine lesbians in the 1980s, the intimacy of sexuality was inextricably connected to the national conversation about human rights. Scholars such as Teresa de Lauretis and David Halperin have expounded on the dialectal relationship between the Western erotic ethos and the construction of citizenship.[20] This scholarship has shown the various ways that constructions of the erotic have been intimately linked to social and political notions of Western citizenship, and how people have, in various ways and at various times, contested constructions of the erotic in order to expand citizenship. Lesbians in Buenos Aires in the 1980s, then, were following a long tradition of women and sexual minorities working to transcend or escape the constructions of a gendered sexuality in order to claim citizenship rights. Moments of intimacy and private spaces provided lesbians with the experiences and discourse to situate themselves as sexual minorities and citizens in Argentina. These moments of intimacy serve as access points to understanding lesbian contestations to Argentina's gender hierarchy, the military's authoritarianism, and Argentina's definition of democracy. Sandra y Celeste's lyrics show us that throughout this period, concepts of community, including political community, could be a matter of two people's intimacy. Therefore, the issue is not a question of public versus private. Claiming the intimacy between lovers as "mucho más" is intimate, but perhaps also very public.[21]

[20] Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation;" and David Halperin, "Plato and Erotic Reciprocity.".
[21] See Svetlana Boym, "On Diasporic Intimacy."

The Lens of Intimacy

Intimacy is a crucial analytical category for writing histories of sexual and gender minorities. This dissertation draws on some rich feminist scholarship and queer theory on intimacy.[22] Ara Wilson has offered intimacy as a way of thinking about power relations that bypass traditional categories like gender and sexuality. Wilson writes, "The turn to intimacy speaks to scholars' desire for a flexible term that allows new descriptions that do not reify nation, identity, family, or related categorical units."[23] Here, Wilson is in conversation with the editors of the collected volume in which her chapter appeared. Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner considere the power of intimacy as an analytical category to disrupt "the geographical boundaries and hierarchies that structure our thinking."[24] In this research, I am utilizing intimacy in these terms, as a means of thinking about the ways that people's relationships can collapse particular social structures. This is an apt way to approach the history of lesbians in Argentina because this group was constructing a political identity that bypassed the categories of nation and family. The traditional family unit was not necessarily the place where lesbians could be their most vulnerable. Moreover, the nation was not the only site of citizenship; instead, lesbians also claimed citizenship to a growing global gay and lesbian public. This history requires an

[22] When invoking the term "queer theory," I take into account Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner's warning that queer theory not create a stable category that is *queer.* Additionally, "queer" is anachronistic to this research. As a result, I tend to avoid using "queer" to describe the subjects of this research. Instead, I rely on lesbian and bisexual, though they are also unstable categories, as my research reveals. Nonetheless, they were the labels used by the subjects themselves, so I reproduced them here. See Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, "Guest Column: What Does Queer Theory Teach Us about X?"
[23] Ara Wilson, "Intimacy: A Useful Category of Transnational Analysis," 46.
[24] Geraldine Pratt and Victoria Rosner, "Introduction: The Global and the Intimate," 2.

analytical lens, then, that illuminates this circumvention.[25] Svetlana Boym's discussions of intimacy also helps us to think of the multiple sites in which intimacy is experienced and expressed. She has written that intimacy "is not solely a private matter; it may be protected, manipulated, or besieged by the state, framed by art, embellished by memory, or estranged by critique."[26] Boym's theory shows how intimacy functions as a dynamic and social framework. The following research, therefore, considers multiple types of intimacies.

In one sense, intimacy equates to private acts, especially private sexual acts. As a group of women united by a shared sexual identity, much of the writing and memories produced by lesbian and bisexual women revolved, necessarily, around the topic of sex. The goal here is not to merely describe lesbian sex; such an endeavor would be merely pornographic. Rather, this research explores the ways that lesbians and bisexual women understood these sex acts, how they interpreted lesbian sex to have meaning beyond the physical experience. I argue that gay and bisexual women in Buenos Aires used constructions of lesbian eroticism and pleasure as ways to counter authoritarianism, and their commentary on eroticism furthered discussions of what a true democracy might look like. The horizontal position of (some) lovemaking was extended to arguments for horizontal social organization; equality in sexual pleasure became a metaphor for social equality.[27]

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[25] For feminist discussions of intimacy as an analytical category, see Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn;" Robyn Wiegman, "Intimate Publics: Race, Property, and Personhood;" Andrea Whittaker, *Intimate Knowledge*; Pratt and Rosner; and Wilson.
[26] Boym, 500.
[27] For scholarship that explores the intersections between intimacy and liberalism, see Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Empire of Love*; Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*; Lauren Berlant, *Intimacy*; Lisa Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*; Susan Gal, "A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction;" and Melissa Autumn White, "Archives of Intimacy and Trauma: Queer Migration Documents of Technologies of Affect."

Intimacy can also be an act of self-disclosure, a relational connection. Intimacy, in this sense, exists along a continuum. This is very different than dividing between those people with whom one has been sexually intimate or not. Of course, even with sexual intimacy there can be grey areas, depending on how the particular people involved in any sexual act define sexual intimacy. Beyond sexual intimacy, there are other forms of physical intimacy that one can experience, such as a hug or crying on a person's shoulder. Complicating our definitions of intimacy even more, people can be romantically intimate with others despite having never had physical intimacy. Understanding the ways that intimacy exists along a continuum broadens our analysis. With whom does one choose to be intimate? What experiences or knowledge inform these decisions? How does intimacy differ between family and friends? For lesbians living in Buenos Aires during the 1970s and 1980s, self-disclosure was contingent upon several factors.[28] Some argued for inclusion of lesbian rights issues within the feminist or gay liberation movements; others thought that the structures oppressing lesbians were exactly the same ones oppressing heterosexual women and/or gay men, so their fight was not inherently different. As such, disclosing their sexuality, especially within the feminist movement, was not necessary. Fears of isolation, rejection, or abandonment prohibited some women from disclosing their sexuality to friends and family. The choices that queer women made regarding with whom and to what degree they shared intimate information indicates that lesbianism was not monolithically experienced. The variety of experiences have little to do with a sense of pride—pride is rarely discussed in my sources—; rather, social, political, and economic factors seem to inform how and when and to what degree queer women "came out."

[28] For discussions on the use of the closet, see Eve Kosofsky Sedwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*; and Carlos Ulises Decena, *Tacit Subjects*.

A third use of intimacy in this research relates to the verb, "to intimate," meaning to hint at something or to communicate indirectly. Because of the danger of violence or ostracism, it was necessary for homosexuals to communicate with subtlety, implications, or coded symbols (including language, clothing, and mannerisms). While lesbians did not generate as prodigious a lexicon as gay men did, they still created their own ways of communicating with each other clandestinely. Such coded language relates to the previous two uses of intimacy in that the words often refer to sex acts and gender identity, and the coded language itself allowed queer women to choose with whom they disclosed information. Moreover, coded language allowed queer women to communicate to each other without having to alter their appearances. This was especially useful during an era where the military regimes were particularly repressive toward those who shunned traditional gender roles.

Looking at lesbianism in Buenos Aires through multiple lenses of intimacy reveals a fragmented, isolated community. Such isolation, however, does not negate the possibility that queer women still actively participated in politics. It just presumes that such activities lacked an audience. Still, as Lauren Berlant has shown in her work on intimacy and citizenship, under such circumstances, people often "experience their internal lives theatrically, as though oriented toward an audience."[29] This configuration of intimacy expands our understanding of the second-wave feminist adage, "the personal is political." Whereas this maxim has traditionally been interpreted to either open up private matters to political analysis or to recognize the systemic nature of oppression, Lauren Berlant directs us to rethink how collective political and social consciousness can be generated during moments of privacy and intimacy. In her formulation, private moments of political action both influence and are influenced by collective, embodied

[29] Lauren Berlant, "Intimacy," 284.

experiences. This is how intimate publics are formed; an intimate public is composed of strangers who share common historical experiences based on seemingly fixed identities, such as race, gender, or sexuality. According to Berlant, an intimate public consumes the same cultural productions and then produces new cultural productions that reshape the conventions of the group. Therefore, "from a theoretical standpoint, an intimate public is a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general, what's salient for its consumers is that it is a place of recognition and reflection."[30]

Telling a History of Lesbians

This dissertation primarily narrates the experiences of lesbians between the late-1960s and the late-1980s. This time span is perhaps not the most obvious choice when considering lesbian history in Buenos Aires, especially since a significant portion focuses on the years of the last dictatorship, during which there were exceedingly few opportunities to organize or socialize as lesbians. In fact, the trajectory of lesbian history in Buenos Aires is not linear, nor teleological. Despite the efforts of some lesbians throughout the 1970s and 1980s to construct a singular lesbian political identity, preliminary research into lesbian history of the 1990s and 2000s indicates that even more lesbian identities emerged than had previously existed, especially as more and more people engaged with new discourses about gender and sexuality that came out of queer studies. The various lesbian identities that existed between the 1960s and 1980s in Argentina reveal the interplay between local history and Argentina's presence in a global environment.

[30] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, viii.

By the end of the 1960s when the first gay liberation group in Argentina, Nuestro Mundo, was founded, lesbians in Buenos Aires remained atomized and isolated, lacking the kind of public social organization that other groups had. Argentine lesbians were working against marginalization as women in a patriarchal society (including within the gay liberation movement), and against oppression as homosexuals in a homophobic society (including within the feminist organizations of the era). At the same time, Argentine society was tumultuous, see-sawing between democracy and dictatorship.[31] A military dictatorship under Juan Carlos Onganía lasted from 1966–1970. The democratic rule that followed was short-lived, as another military dictatorship came to power in 1976. Between the late-1960s and early 1980s, the government, whether democratic or authoritarian, was particularly ruthless toward leftist groups throughout the nation. This is especially true for the regime that took power between 1976 and 1983, as it was responsible for completely disrupting the public and private lives of its citizens through a program of censorship, terror, violence, kidnapping, torture, and murder, ultimately disappearing 30,000 Argentinians, many of them young people involved in leftist politics. Following the return to democracy in 1983, the nation grappled with reconciling the violence and trauma of the previous years. Throughout, the government, media, and population emphasized the need to create an Argentine democracy based on the promise of human rights.

Writing lesbians into this history required an examination of a limited archival record. This research, therefore, relies on a variety of disparate sources, the most abundant of which are the published articles, poems, and books by lesbians. Many of these sources were made available thanks to Marcelo Manuel Benítez, one of Argentina's leading gay liberation activists in the 1970s and 1980s. Benítez painstakingly catalogued on index cards the titles of every newspaper

[31] The post-war period of dictatorship began in 1955 with the military coup that overthrew Juan Perón, who, himself, had come to public prominence as part of military rule in the 1930s and early 1940s.

and magazine article that mentioned homosexuality throughout this era. Not only did he record the titles and sources of each article, but he clipped and saved many of them, and then donated his entire archive to Centro de Documentación Investigación de la Cultura de Izquierdas (CeDInCI)! Feminist and queer magazines were also a critical resource. Additionally, I am indebted to interviews conducting by others. An invaluable source of interviews was conducted by Alejandra Sardá and Silvana Hernando, which they published in their book, *No soy un bombero pero tampoco ando con puntillas*. While Sardá and Hernando provide summaries of common themes that emerged from their interviews, I interrogate these interviews through the lens of intimacy. At times I have to rely on descriptions of moments, on fragmented memories, on obituaries to piece together intimate details of friendship and romance. I make use of all these sources to make an intervention into the history of Buenos Aires lesbians based on the import of intimacy as an analytical category.

Telling histories of Argentina through the lens of lesbian intimacy, the four chapters in this dissertation are organized chronologically, beginning in the first chapter with the period from 1966 to the start of the last dictatorship in 1976. Chapter 1 looks at the intimate lives of lesbians—moments shared with girlfriends and partners and close friends—, bringing lesbian identity in the years leading up to the last dictatorship into focus. The intimate social worlds of lesbians in Argentina during this period reveal a fragmented, isolated, and juxtapolitical "group." It was during this decade that the nascent gay liberation and second-wave feminist movements took off in Buenos Aires. Many lesbians participated in activist groups, though their issues remained marginalized, at best, and ignored by the gay men and heterosexual women who maintained leadership roles in these movements. The participants in Buenos Aires's activist scene were predominantly from the middle class. They maintained many middle-class values,

especially with regard to gender and sexuality. For example, they disparaged masculine-presenting lesbians, who often came from lower- and working-class communities, because they upheld middle-class aesthetics with regard to femininity. A comparison of the intimate social worlds between middle-class lesbians and working-class lesbians, therefore, highlights the fragmentation that characterized lesbianism during these years.

Chapters 2 and 3 consider the years of the last military dictatorship, each evaluating different themes and problems. The second chapter explores the physical spaces and physical acts through which lesbians created intimate moments within a culture of terror during the Dirty War. Relating either to the physical spaces where women socialized or to the myriad ways they understood their bodies, this chapter considers physical intimacies among queer women in Buenos Aires. The use of intimate spaces and the ways that they understood sex acts illustrate how homosexual women constructed the notion of lesbianism in terms of resistance to the patriarchal and homophobic mores of the Argentine military. A close examination of the available sources has allowed me to map lesbians onto the physical terrain of Buenos Aires. While the records reveal only a single known location, El Sótano, that served as a sporadic meeting space for queer women during the Dirty War, it was possible to track lesbians and bisexuals to cafés, to hotel rooms, to islands in the Delta and, perhaps most significantly, to their bedrooms. Many of the memories recalled by queer women about their experiences during the Dirty War relate to romantic and sexual experiences. The ways that they recalled socializing, sex, and sexuality indicate that they relied on these topics to challenge the dictatorship.

In Chapter 3, I look at the texts through which the lesbian intimate public was constructed during the last dictatorship. Lauren Berlant's conception of the intimate public is fundamental to this chapter. This research, therefore, considers the cultural productions by lesbian and bisexual

women, including political writings, poems, essays, novels, songs, puppet shows, and zines. Most of the sources produced during this period came out after 1980, when the regime lessened its repressive intensity. Still, these texts reveal that it was still not safe to openly critique the dictatorship or its policies. Therefore, lesbians relied on metaphors and allegories in these texts to challenge the concept of the nation and its structural apparatuses. Throughout the texts, then, a specific lesbian intimate public emerges that bypasses these structures. For example, lesbianism was constructed in these texts as moving beyond the notion of the patriarchal family. These texts also indicate that aspects of the lesbian intimate public expanded across political borders. Feminists and queers in Buenos Aires had never isolated themselves from things happening in other places around the world. The history of Argentine lesbians constructing a transnational past is evident even before the dictatorship.[32] During the dictatorship, transnational communications appear to have proliferated. Foreign periodicals served as a means of disseminating information about the situation in Argentina. Moreover, they work to make lesbians visible, even if from foreign viewers. In this chapter, I also look at the coded language used by lesbians and bisexual women, noting how such language helped foment a sense of belonging and secrecy among strangers scattered across a city as large and sprawling as Buenos Aires.

The final chapter looks at the transition to democracy after 1983. Throughout the decade, lesbian writings, social organizing, and political activities increasingly became more and more public. Much of the writing produced by lesbians during these years paralleled the larger national culture of reconciliation following years of extreme violence and repression. Using the language of human rights that proliferated through the country at the time, lesbians inserted themselves into these national conversations. Many of the social and political actions, including lesbian

[32] For example, in 1970, Martha Ferro published a poem in the New York-based Gay Liberation Front's *Come Out!*

workshops and groups of women marching under the banner of lesbianism during the International Women's March, saw lesbian activists working to overcome their collective feelings of fragmentation, isolation, invisibility, and marginalization that had come to define the lesbian experience since the early 1970s. A small group of women—who later dubbed themselves the Generation of '87—worked to expand the lesbian community so that it was not so isolated and atomized throughout the city. Their goal was to organize lesbians on a social level so that their numbers were too big to be ignored by feminist groups. Their accomplishments mark a paradigm shift in lesbian visibility and activism.

The chorus to Sandra y Celeste's song, "Te quiero," follows these changes within the lesbian intimate public in Buenos Aires. In the first lines of the chorus, they sing, "if I love you," signaling not only uncertainty, but also an apprehension to admit romantic feelings out loud. Lesbian culture in the early 1970s reflected this apprehension. By the start of the last dictatorship in 1976, lesbians were even more scattered and isolated, having very few people with whom they could self-disclose details of their private lives. The lesbian intimate public during the dictatorship was formed across the city in many distinct places by many different strangers. One of the fundamental ways they understood themselves as lesbians during a time when "lesbian" could not be a public political identity, then, was through a language of sex and sexuality. Sandra y Celeste sang, "it is because you are my love, my accomplice and everything." These lines highlight the turn toward intimate affairs and the lack of a public life, the intimacy of only two people. Finally, the chorus ends with the lines, "and in the streets, arm in arm, we are much more than two." Here, Sandra y Celeste mark the transition to a public life, walking (marching) on the streets, arm in arm. Most significantly, they sing about being "much more than two," signaling

the collective desire, by the end of the 1980s, to broaden the lesbian community, to come out of isolation and invisibility.[33]

[33] Original: “si te quiero;” “Es porque sos mi amor, mi cómplice y todo;” “y en la calle, codo a codo, somos mucho más que dos.” Sandra y Celeste,“ Te quiero,’’ lyrics by Mario Benedetti, music by Alberto Favero, 1988, Side B, track 1 on *Somos Mucho Más que Dos*, RCA Records, vinyl LP.

CHAPTER 1

The Secret Lives of Lesbians

Between 1966 and 1976, the clandestine social world for some lesbians in Buenos Aires included partying at restaurants and bars and friends' houses, often until six in the morning, sometimes every night of the week. For some, social groups were diverse, including not only other lesbians, but also gay men, artists, authors, and actors. During daylight hours, many lesbians worked or went to school, depending on their ages and social class. By 1970, some lesbians also found themselves participating in the newly active feminist and gay liberation movements. Some identified as militant feminists, others as Trotskyists. Still, other lesbians remained isolated, perhaps only knowing one or two other women who identified as homosexual. Sometimes, the only other gay person that a lesbian knew was her partner. For other women, dating or marrying men helped protect them from ostracization or, perhaps worse, institutionalization. Some lesbians remember this time period idyllically, focusing more on parties and political awakening than on state oppression or general homophobia. Others recall the lack of community and feelings of isolation. In other words, the experiences of lesbians in Buenos Aires in the decade leading up to the last dictatorship were diverse and, often, unstable.

In fact, the ten years preceding the last dictatorship were perhaps as turbulent as any decade in Argentina's history, no matter one's sexual orientation. In many ways, the night of July 29, 1966—which came to be known as "Noche de los Bastones Largos" (Night of the Long Sticks) because of the batons used by the police—lit a spark among leftists, the military, trade unions, Peronists, the youth, and conservative elites, alike. On that night, the police raided a meeting at the University of Buenos Aires, terrorizing and beating hundreds of students and

professors who had gathered to discuss the efforts by the military dictatorship, under the leadership of Juan Carlos Onganía, to restrict academic freedoms. After the Night of the Long Sticks, the military effectively established strict censorship over the university's curricula. The Onganía regime then turned its attention toward—among other things like the media and arts—individual forms of expression. For example, young men with long, hippie hairstyles were forcefully given public haircuts, while "Federal Police Commissar Luis Margaride ordered nightspots to use bright lights to dampen enthusiasm for displays of affection."[1] Leftists in Argentina responded, in large part, by militarizing their own efforts.

The political instability intensified after Onganía was overthrown in a palace coup on June 8, 1970. The commanders of the armed forced appointed Gen. Roberto Levingston as the nation's new leader. But Levingston's reign was short-lived after increased guerrilla mobility and an uprising in Córdaba in March 1971—two years after the more well-known Cordabazo uprising by a coalition of labor and students in the nation's second most populous city—led the military junta to replace him with Gen. Alejandro Lanusse. At the same time, Juan Perón was organizing things on the ground in Argentina, even while in exile in Spain. The Fuerzas Armadas Peronistas (Peronist Armed Forces; FAP) appeared in 1968, composed of small groups of militant guerrillas. Other militant groups appeared on the scene, each with their own ideology. The FAP described themselves as "revolutionary Personist," the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (Revolutionary Armed Forces; FAR) were "Marxist-leaning Peronists, while the Montoneros proclaimed themselves "Peronist, ultra-Catholic nationalists." When Perón finally returned to Argentina on June 20, 1973, the celebration welcoming him home—millions of people showed up to Ezeiza airport, the largest rally in Argentina's history—turned violent as

[1] Martin Edwin Andersen, *Dossier Secreto*, 58.

leftist Peronists clashed with rightist Peronists. The scene turned to chaotic, with at least 20 people killed and another 400 injured in the pandemonium. After Perón's ascension back to the presidency, police repression began anew, with José López Rega overseeing extralegal paramilitary groups tasked with the job of ending guerrilla violence in the nation. Juan Perón died on July 1, 1974; his wife, Isabel Martínez de Perón succeeded him. However, she was soon overthrown in a military coup in March 1976 that ushered in what came to be known as the last dictatorship.[2]

At the same time, lesbians and gay men faced a decades-old pathologizing discourse that linked homosexuality to disease and criminality. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the collaboration between reformist politicians and public health officials helped create a parallel discourse about sex, sexuality, and gender that defined "appropriate" gender and sex roles.[3] This ideology, which Gayle Rubin identified as the "sex/gender system," dominated Argentine society throughout the twentieth century, reinforced by formidable institutions, such as the military, the Catholic Church, schools, the medical community, the national press, and families.[4] Applying these complementary discourses to "moralizing campaigns," the State executed repressive anti-homosexual practices, including terror, torture, and institutionalization.[5] During the early 1970s, the FLH framed the notion of gay liberation within the context of protesting authoritarianism by focusing on this history of repression. In their history of the FLH, Pablo Ben and Santiago Joaquin Insausti argue that ending "police harassment of homosexuals was probably the most

[2] For a detailed retelling of the tumultuous political landscape during this era, see Andersen, 60–183.
[3] Spanish biologist Gregorio Marañón, whose theories on female sexuality were widely distributed throughout Latin America in the 1920s, argued that a feminine woman (read "real" woman) "is always sexually available to her husband but wants sex for herself only as a means to keep her man and get pregnant, seeing marriage and maternity as her highest mission in life." Nina Menéndez, "Garzonas y Feministas in Cuban Women's Writing of the 1920s," 175.
[4] Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women," 159.
[5] Ana Clara Benavente and Luisina Gentile, "Lesbianas en los '70," 7.

important demand" of the organization.[6] Not only did gay and feminist activists challenge the repressive practices of the State, but they also challenged the discourse espoused by many of the youth of the revolutionary left who, like the Catholic Church in Argentina, believed that the sexual revolution was a tool of imperialism.[7] The intimate experiences of lesbians within this cultural and political milieu indicate diverse challenges to repression, authoritarianism, and pathologizing discourses.

This chapter demonstrates that the chasm between working-class and middle-class lesbians was created in the multiple social worlds that existed for them during this era. More importantly, these multiple social worlds show how lesbians employed strategies of isolation to protect themselves during these tumultuous years. The intersection of Argentinian lesbian experiences in the gay liberation movement, in the feminist movement, and in their private lives shows a lesbian identity that was deeply stratified based on social class. Participation in the FLH and the feminist movement in Buenos Aires was only an option for a small minority of middle-class lesbians. The few scholars who have researched lesbianism during this era in Argentinian history have almost exclusively considered lesbian experiences within the feminist and gay liberation movements. For example, in her research on lesbian identity in Argentina during the early 1970s, historian María Celeste Viedma argues that it is not possible to isolate a distinct lesbian identity in those years, that lesbians failed to differentiate themselves from heterosexual women and homosexual men because of their participation in these movements.[8] In their study

[6] A series of edicts dating back to the 1930s had been passed that justified police harassment of homosexuals. During the Onganía regime, these edicts extended to justify lengthy detentions (sometimes up to 30 days) of homosexual men. Pablo Ben and Santiago Joaquin Insausti, "Dictatorial Rule and Sexual Politics in Argentina." 305.
[7] Isabella Cosse, *Pareja, Sexualidad y Familia en los Años Sesenta*, 212.
[8] According to Viedma, lesbians failed to differentiate themselves from heterosexual women and homosexual men because all groups were placed in parallel in opposition to the heterosexual man, since

of lesbianism in Buenos Aires in the 1970s, Ana Clara Benavente and Luisina Gentile agree that a political lesbian identity does not arise in Argentina in these years, asserting that the politicization of lesbianism remained linked to feminism until the return to democracy in the 1980s.[9] While these studies are incredibly valuable for showing the marginalization that marked the lesbian experience within activist organizations, these studies remain limited to middle-class lesbianism. The working and popular classes did not leave behind the kinds of written records that organizations associated with the universities and activist groups did, but the archives suggest a larger lesbian world in Buenos Aires. As this chapter will demonstrate, political activism, more broadly, should be understood alongside a social world, that in this case, was of lesbians. The social world of lesbians, which is considered in the second part of this chapter, was much more intimate and helped foment relationships, ways of understanding, and survival strategies that would protect women from persecution and ostracism.

The one unifying characteristic across all classes was that of secrecy. In Argentina during the 1960s and 1970s, lesbianism was a tightly guarded and protected identity. Moreover, for most homosexual women, sexuality only defined a particular, intimate aspect of her life. Lesbians also considered themselves workers, students, activists, daughters, sisters, and mothers. These others identities were important, not just in the ways that women understood themselves, but also in the ways that they lived their lives. Women did not necessarily come out to family and friends and colleagues. They spoke of girlfriends and partners ambiguously, so as to conceal their sexuality. Some changed the pronouns of their partners or friends when speaking in mixed

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he was the actor that worked to uphold the patriarchal and sexist system of domination that resulted in the political oppression of all others. This positionalitly as "parallel in opposition" is an interesting way of thinking about lesbianism as a political identity, and it deserves further investigation. María Celeste Viedma, "Aproximación a las construcciones identitarias del Grupo Safo."

[9] Ana Clara Benavente and Luisina Gentile," Lesbians en los '70."

company. Others snuck out of their houses so they could hang out with lesbian friends. In many cases, a woman's sexuality remained tacitly acknowledged, something known by family members or close friends, but never mentioned. Paloma remembered that while she believed her family knew of her sexuality, she also kept it hidden because it was "an intimacy of mine".[10]

Lesbian Activists without Lesbian Activism

The nascent gay liberation movement was one of the two main sites for lesbian activism. Both working-class activists and middle-class intellectuals participated in the movement, which provided lesbians with the only opportunity to organize politically as sexual minorities in the years before the last dictatorship. In 1968, the Communist party in Buenos Aires kicked out Héctor Anabitate, reportedly because of his sexuality.[11] Following his ousting, Anabitate founded Argentina's first gay organization, Nuestra Mundo. Around the same time, a group of famous homosexual authors, known as the Profesionales, which included Juan José Sebreli, Blas Matamoro, and Manuel Puig, were working with Anabitate to "articulate a new worldview drawn from a combination of psychoanalysis, Marxism, existentialism, and avant-garde literature."[12] In 1971, Anabitate and the Profesionales combined their two groups to create the FLH. The group attracted homosexuals from the working- and middle-classes who were worried by increasing repression in Argentina, a trend begun by the Onganía regime and continuing after

[10] A key source for this research is a collection of interviews of thirteen lesbian *porteñXs* by Alejandra Sardá and Silvana Hernando. Conducted in the 1990s, these interviews reveal the memories of lesbian lives and experiences between the 1930s and 1976. Sardá and Hernando removed all surnames, so they appear in this research as first names. I am infinitely indebted to the work done by Sardá and Hernando to collect and publish these memories. Original: "una intimidad mía." Paloma, quoted in Alejandra Sardá and Silvana Hernando, *No soy un bombero*, 149.

[11] Benavente and Gentile. While Nuestro Mundo is consider the first gay organization in Argentina, it did not establish any formal political agenda. Therefore, FLH is widely considered Argentina's first gay political organization.

[12] Pablo Ben and Santiago Joaquin Insausti, "Dictatorial Rule and Sexual Politics in Argentina," 311.

his removal from office in 1970. The FLH functioned quite clandestinely, decentralizing all activities in favor of small groups.[13] The stated goal of the group was to fight against the stigmatization and oppression of homosexuals.

The FLH was explicitly militant against all sectors and institutions in Argentine society that upheld homophobia, including some revolutionary organizations on the left. In their essay, "Sexo y Revolución," the FLH wrote, "We homosexuals are a sector of the people that suffers a form of repression that has been concealed and specific, originating from the very interests of the system, internalized by the majority of the population, even by some supposedly revolutionary sectors".[14] Their argument was that a truly revolutionary cause would focus on overthrowing the "bourgeois morality" of Argentina that, they claimed, imposed anti-homosexual social norms.

Drawing on ideas circulating transnationally, the FLH specifically critiqued the "bourgeois morality" perpetuated by the patriarchal family. They claimed that the family unit, as the basic cell of society, was the site for men's economic, political, and sexual domination, as well as for women's subjugation. The FLH wrote that the family reproduced a civilization in which "the males govern, the females obey." Furthermore, they argued, the patriarchal family was also the primary institution responsible for the confinement of the libido and the disassociation of pleasure and sex, because women had been reduced to sexual objects, and so male sexuality was reduced to the domination over objects, rather than the fulfillment of sexual pleasure. In the document, the FLH refers to this process as "the castration of sexuality."

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[13] The number of gay liberation groups that existed in the early 1970s were all absorbed by the FLH. For example, Eros (a student group led by Néstor Perlongher), Bandera Negra (a splinter group from Eros), and several Christian groups functioned under the umbrella of the FLH. For a more complete history of the FLH, see Ben and Insausti.

[14] Original: "Los homosexuales somos un sector del pueblo que padece una forma de represión disciminada y específica originada en los intereses mísmos del sístema, a internalizado por la mayoría de la población, incluso por algunos sectores pretendidamente revolucionarios." FLH, "Sexo y Revolución," 10.

Accordingly, "bourgeois morality" was the ideological basis responsible not only for the subjugation of women, but also of the oppression of homosexuals. They maintained that freedom came from "the multiplicity and richness of [the] potentialities" of sexuality.[15]

Though the FLH clearly claimed that their ideas about sexuality represented both gays and lesbians—they wrote, "Our Movement arises as an organization of homosexuals of both sexes"—, the documents created by the FLH, such as "Sexo y Revolución" and the pages of *SOMOS*, a journal they produced from 1973 to 1976, illustrate that women and women's sexuality were not only secondary, but that the group also did not have a cohesive platform for lesbian issues.[16] Instead, they tried to fit lesbian problems into gay male solutions. For example, the metaphor of "the castration of sexuality" is clearly male-centric. Additionally, the only two written pieces that specifically addressed lesbians in the first issue of *SOMOS* projected differing—though not incompatible—views about lesbianism. In the first piece, a translation of the manifesto, "The Woman Identified Woman," by the New York-based collective who published under the name, Radicalesbians, "lesbian" is defined more as an act of rebellion than as an embodied sexuality:

> A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society—perhaps then, but certainly later—cares to allow her.[17]

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[15] FLH, "Sexo y Revolución," trans. by Sam Larson, in Stephen Likosky, ed., *Coming Out: An Anthology of International Gay and Lesbian Writings*, 184–85. For the original, untranslated document, see http://americalee.cedinci.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/SEXO-Y-REVOLUCION.pdf

[16] Original: "Nuestro Movimiento surge como una organización de homosexuales de ambos sexos." FLH, "Sexo y Revolución," 9.

[17] Radicalesbians, "The Woman Identified Woman," (1970): 1.

The text goes on concur with the FLH that the patriarchal definitions of sex and sexuality reduce women to mere objects of male sexual pleasure. It notes that the then-current ways of thinking about lesbianism necessarily forced women to relate to their own sexuality through men, because lesbianism was a sexual category created by men. The only true way of being free, according to the manifesto, was for women to relate through women. As such, the manifesto was a call for a "new consciousness," a radical rethinking about the categories of gender and sexuality and an articulation of a rebellious epistemology of lesbian sexuality.

At the same time, the FLH proposed thinking about lesbianism in terms of a sexual ontology. In the second piece, a poem written by "Elsa," presumably a member of the FLH, though she was not further identified, lesbianism was understood as sexual attraction between two women, not as a radical reinvention of gender and sexuality. In "de las pasiones humanas" (of human passions), Elsa described a corporeal sexuality. With lines like "sweet smell of your body" and "that you are infinitely warm… and small and soft," she situated lesbian sexuality in the physical connection between two women, though she did allude to societal forces that prevented lesbians from living openly and honestly, like when she mentioned "love kept in the closet."[18] As such, she recognized patriarchal structures that enforced heteronormativity, thereby making its message compatible with that of the manifesto. Nonetheless, the tone of Elsa's poem was romantic, rather than radical or confrontational. Moreover, the two pieces provided divergent ways of thinking about lesbianism: either as rebellious epistemology, or as a sexual ontology.

The incongruity between the manifesto and Elsa's poem is due to several factors. On the one hand, the fact that fewer women than men actively participated in the FLH meant that there

[18] Original: "olor aduraznado de tu cuerpo;" "que sos infinitamente tibia… y pequeña y suave;" and "amor guardado en el ropero." Elsa, "de las pasiones humanas," *SOMOS* 1 (December 1973), 23–24.

were fewer female voices arguing for representation. Secondly, the manifesto was written by North American lesbians whose lives and experiences were not parallel to those of women like Elsa, who lived in Buenos Aires. Following the Stonewall Riots of 1969, homosexuals and trans* people and drag queens in the United States organized on a huge scale, executing mass demonstrations and publishing multiple periodicals by the end of the year.[19] While gay activism in the U.S. developed within a turbulent and radical political environment that included the antiwar movement, the Black Panthers, and Third World solidarity, and while police raids of gay bars did not immediately stop in the aftermath of the riots, one cannot merely translate these experiences to those of people living in Buenos Aires. The political instability in Argentina forced many activist organizations to take extreme caution and establish a series of protective measures that prohibited the kind of demonstrative activism that existed within parts of the U.S.[20] Finally, as will be shown below, ways of understanding lesbianism were multilayered and varied across social classes. The causes aside, the fact of the matter remains that in the first issue of *SOMOS*, the content specifically dedicated to lesbians made up only nine of the issue's thirty-two pages. Content for women fared worse in subsequent issues. Nonetheless, there were a few women who participated in the FLH, such as Elsa and those women who organized Safo, the women's cell of the FLH that formed in 1972.

Very little information remains of Safo, which some estimate to have included about ten members in total. While Safo is mentioned in the archives, neither documents nor first-person

[19] The combined readership of three such periodicals was between 20,000–25,000. See David Carter, *Stonewall*, 242.

[20] For example, most members of the FLH wore masks over their faces when demonstrating in public so that their identities could remain hidden. Also, see the story of Diego Viñales, an Argentine citizen who was arrested after a raid on a gay nightclub in New York in 1970. He was so afraid of being deported back to Argentina, that he attempted to escape police custody. While it does not say what his motivation for wanting to stay in the US was, it is clear that he believed his life as a gay man was better in the United States than it would have been back in Buenos Aires. See Carter, 239.

interviews about its structure, activities, membership, or ideology exist. This is largely due to the security measures that its members followed, which likely included destroying any written record, omitting surnames, and using aliases.[21] Such tactics were necessary. As early as August 1972, the military began torturing and disappearing political activists. At the same time as this illegal repression was taking place, the government instilled an emergency anti-subversive law that stripped guerrillas of the right of habeas corpus.[22] And beginning in 1973, the far-right death squad, Alianza Anticomunista Argentina (Argentine Anticommunist Alliance; Triple A), under the leadership of Juan Perón's private secretary, José López Rega, carried out kidnappings and murders of hundreds of Argentinians. As major actors in Argentina's Cold War culture, the Triple A advocated for the eradication of homosexuals, believing that sexuality was "a primary tool of the imagined Jewish-Marxist-capitalist conspiracy."[23] Despite the necessary secrecy with which it operated given the dangers of its operations, Safo did provide the few gay women who joined with the first opportunity to advocate for the specific political and social issues affecting them as sexual minorities.[24] Nevertheless, its positionality within the FLH was clearly marginal and the concerns of its members certainly secondary to the main faction, which maintained exclusive male leadership.

An illustrative example of this marginalization is found in the topic of coming out. While coming out was still incredibly dangerous for men, it was much easier, perhaps surprisingly, for working-class men than for other homosexuals. According to Pablo Ben and Santiago Joaquin

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[21] Laura Andrea Gonzalez, "Betters y Entendidas,"12.
[22] See Luis Albero Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, 194; and John P. Mandler, "Habeas Corpus and the Protection of Human Rights in Argentina."
[23] Not all of the Triple A's victims were communists. As Federico Finchelstein makes clear, because the Triple A believed that Argentina was a Catholic nation, "any perceived opposition to Christ was clearly against the country." They called for the extermination of Argentine Jews and homosexuals. Federico Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 115.
[24] See Tomás Máscolo, "Grupo Safo."

Insausti, there are enough examples of men living openly in the 1960s and early-1970s to suggest that "homosexual men had access to a degree of integration in their neighborhoods and workplaces, especially in working-class suburbs."[25] Néstor Perlongher, a young activist in the FLH, argued that the group needed to align with left-wing Peronist groups in order to propel the FLH into the public arena. Perlongher saw Juan Perón's arrival at Ezeiza airport on June 20, 1973 as a key opportunity to achieve this goal. He and about 20 other members of the FLH were among the 2,000,000 people who showed up that day.[26] The political discourse about coming out promoted the idea that a reduction in discrimination against sexual minorities could be achieved as a result of collective visibility, yet the social and financial consequences were often too dire for lesbians to actually do so. Coming out narratives did not necessarily take into account the material needs of women who faced job loss, being cut off from family, and being forced into psychoanalysis.[27] Ángela, for example, lost access to her nephew when her brother-in-law forbade her from seeing him. "That was a very traumatic thing for me," she recalled.[28] The preservation of family relationships was a compelling reason to maintain secrecy, to keep one's sexuality invisible or tacit.

As explanation for her brother-in-law's decision, Ángela described him as "muy machista."[29] Machismo was pervasive across the political spectrum in Argentina at the time, including among the men in the FLH. Ana, who participated in the FLH, noted the machismo among the gay men in the group. When asked why she thought there were so few women in the FLH, she, without hesitation, called out "the machismo of the fags."[30] Héctor Anabitarte

[25] Ben and Insausti, 302.
[26] Ibid., 316–17.
[27] See Benavente and Gentile, 7–8.
[28] Original: "Eso fue una cosa bastante traumática para mí." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 47.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Original: "el machismo de los maricas." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 138–39.

concurred with Ana's reasoning: "In the FLH, the presence of lesbians was not significant because of social circumstances and given that there was a lot of male chauvinism in gays."[31] To be fair, things were changing throughout Buenos Aires, especially among middle-class youth. Beginning in the early 1960s, young women began challenging conventional structures that kept them at home. These women "increased educational, leisure, and sexual opportunities" for themselves, forcing society at large to being to question the presumed naturalness of the patriarchal order.[32]

Despite changing family and sexual dynamics in the 1960s and 1970s, and despite the introduction of discourses that challenged the notion of machismo, the patriarchal order and chauvinism persisted, even among those who opposed the government's social repression. Scholars of Latin American guerrilla groups have shown that such groups often held strong, traditional views about sexuality and romantic relationships.[33] This was also true for most of Argentina's left-wing guerrilla groups, such as the Montoneros and the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People's Revolutionary Party; ERP). The first guerrilla groups in Argentina formed in the early 1960s. Following the Cuban Revolution in 1959, several groups formed to radicalize the Peronist movement, which had been banned in Argentina since the coup that overthrew Juan Perón in 1955. Many of these early guerrillas were young people from the middle- and working-classes who had been the first in their families to have access to higher education. Juan Carlos Onganía's coup in 1966, which outlawed all political parties and instituted widespread

[31] Original: "En el FLH la presencia de lesbianas no fue significativa dadas las circunstancias sociales y dado que en los gays había bastante machismo." Quoted in Benavente and Gentile, 10.
[32] Valeria Manzano, *The Age of Youth in Argentina*, 121.
[33] For Argentina, see Osvaldo Bazán, *Historia de la homosexualidad en la Argentina*; Andrea Andújar, "El amor en tiempos de revolución;" Isabella Cosse, "Infidelities;" Valeria Manzano, "Sex, Gender, and the Making of the 'Enemy Within' in Cold War Argentina." For Chile, see Florencia E. Mallon, "Barbudos, Warriors, and *Rotos*." For Brazil, see James N. Green, "'Who Is the Macho Who Wants to Kill Me?;'" and Victoria Langland, *Speaking of Flowers*.

repression, was the impetus for the militarization of these groups. Ernesto "Che" Guevara also provided these groups with a model for the ideal new man, a character who was willing to die for the revolution. Guevara's death, and especially the photographs of his corpse, became "the beacon for those who, from diverse origins and along different paths, agreed in cheering death."[34] Historian Isabella Cosse has described the symbol of Guevara for Argentina's militarized leftists as one of "guerrilla virility."[35] As the ideal revolutionary, then, Guevara represented a specific kind of masculinity, one that was brave, macho, and procreative. Male actors across the left-wing spectrum attempted to emulate this ideal.

While most leftist organizations in this period did not pay much attention to the role of women and sexuality, there did exist at least one exception: the Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores (Socialist Workers Party; PST). In rejecting all forms of discrimination, including discrimination based on gender and sexuality, the PST differentiated itself from other Marxist organizations that declared that homosexuality existed outside the daily life of the proletariat, and distinguished itself from other leftist groups that rejected homosexuality as being a product of the bourgeoisie.[36] Nonetheless, the PST did not make the rights of homosexuals a formal part of their political agenda because the leadership of PST, headed by the Trotskyite Nahuel Moreno, viewed homosexuality in the same light as heterosexuality, which, following the logic of Moreno, meant that it did not warrant special attention. For the PST, fighting the oppression of homosexuals fell under the general cause of fighting all discrimination.

Despite the indifference and/or outright prejudice against homosexuality among the left, the FLH tried to function within this broader political leftist movement in Buenos Aires. When

[34] Romero, 190.
[35] Isabella Cosse, "Infidelities," 420.
[36] Catalina Trebisacce, "Feminismo, diversidad sexual y relaciones sexo-afectivas disidentes," 11–12.

Héctor Cámpora ran for president in 1973 on the Peronist ticket, there was a lot of excitement and expectations among the leftist youth for the possibility of national and social liberation. In 1971, when Gen. Alejandro Lanusse sought to reestablish a constitutional democracy, Juan Perón became actively involved in Argentine politics again, though from Spain where he had lived for the previous decade. His course of action from exile was to begin to woo the Peronist left, including the armed guerrilla groups, an action that legitimated these groups.[37] So when Cámpora took office in 1973, the Peronist left had every reason to believe that some of the social and political changes for which they had been fighting for nearly a decade would come to fruition. Members of the FLH were among those who participated in Peronist rallies, hoping that they were part of a moment in history that would see the undoing of the sexist and homophobic "bourgeois morality" that had long dominated Argentina. However, by the time they published "Sexo y Revolución" in 1974, "the FLH recognized that their attempts at linking the sexual to the 'social revolution' had been unsuccessful, largely, because, they argued, 'the revolutionary militants are part of a reactionary sexual culture.'"[38]

What was the role of women within this activist culture in Argentina? In some ways, women merely replicated their family roles within leftist groups, becoming the ones who performed many of the behind-the-scenes labor, such as making copies, preparing food, and serving the male leaders. Nonetheless, many women did find power and purpose in these movements: many learned leadership skills and gained opportunities that would otherwise not be afforded them; some took up arms and became activists of equal value as male activists. As a member of the FLH, Ana collaborated with various groups across the leftist movement. She recalled that groups of socialists, feminists, and the FLH came out in opposition of Executive

[37] Romero, 247–49.
[38] Manzano, 204.

Order 659, which prohibited the distribution of contraceptives in Argentina. Nonetheless, she found the Peronist left largely unresponsive to women's rights: "for them the issue of women had to do with the revolution and that after the revolution everything would be solved so there was no reason to waste time before."[39] That, combined with the sense of machismo that dominated the general atmosphere of the FLH, prompted many lesbians to choose to participate in the feminist movement.

The second-wave feminist movement that emerged in Buenos Aires was, in some ways, a response to the supposed-misogyny within the popular mobilization groups. Lisa Baldez reminds us that women organize as women, largely, because they have historically been excluded from political power.[40] The feminist movement in Argentina, which first appeared in an organized way in 1970, developed as part of the nation's intense political activity of the moment, many of its members coming from other leftist organizations. It also developed in the context of the global women's movement. Organized by a cohort of women, including the famed filmmaker, María Luisa Bemberg, the Unión Feminista Argentina (Argentine Feminist Union; UFA) pioneered a movement that would come to include several other groups by the start of 1976. Other groups included the Movimiento de Liberación Feminista (MLF; Feminist Liberation Movement), led by María Elena Oddone, the Movimiento Feminista Popular (Popular Feminist Movement; MOFEP), which formed as a feminist wing of the Frente de Izquierda Popular (Popular Leftist Front; FIP), and the Asociación para la Liberación de la Mujer Argentina (Association for the Liberation of Argentine Women; ALMA), which was started by former

[39] Original: "para ellos el tema de la mujer tenía que ver con la revolución y que después de la revolución se iba a solucionar todo entonces no había por qué perder el tiempo antes." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 140.
[40] Lisa Baldez, *Why Women Protest*, 4.

members of the UFA and MLF.[41] For most of their existence, these groups organized independently of one another, and often espoused divergent goals and methodologies. It was not until 1975, following the United Nation's recognition of International Women's Year, that the disparate groups coordinated their efforts. In that year, they formed the Frente de Lucha por la Mujer (Fight for Women Front; FLM), which set forth a unified platform for Argentina's feminist movement, including salary for domestic work, equal opportunities to access education, the legalization of contraceptives, legal and free (and safe) abortions, and the repeal of laws that forced married women to live with their husbands, among other issues.[42] Only a year later, when the Dirty War began, all feminist groups were forced underground.

The archival record of lesbians in Buenos Aires in the 1960s and 1970s would suggest that a majority of lesbians were heavily involved in the feminist movement of the time. Many of the prominent women who emerged as leaders of the lesbian visibility movement in the 1980s had participated in the feminist movement. Hilda Rais, for example, was a key member of the UFA, while several of the women interviewed by Alejandra Sardá and Silvana Hernando discussed their participation in the movement. For example, Teresa, recalled, "In '70, although I already knew Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex*, I began to meet other authors, to meet people who have been in feminist movements in Italy and France, and we formed the group UFA."[43] Nonetheless, the feminist movement in Argentina was largely a project of middle-class women, the ideology they espoused reflected middle-class values and their membership was made up of women from that social class. Many of those who joined feminist organizations had

[41] Karin Grammático, "Las 'mujeres políticas' y las feministas en los tempranos setenta," 20.
[42] Alejandra Vassallo, "'Las mujeres dicen basta,'" 65.
[43] Original: "En el año 70 aunque yo ya conocía el libro de Simone de Beauvoir, El Segundo Sexo, empiezo a conocer otras autoras, a conocer gente que ha estado con los movimientos feministas en Italia y en Francia, y formamos el grupo UFA." Quoted in Sardá and Herndando, 34.

access to higher education and employment opportunities that those in the lower classes lacked. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind that the following discussion reflects only a segment of the larger lesbian community in Buenos Aires in the decade before the last dictatorship.

For the most part, lesbians who joined feminist groups recalled that lesbianism existed as a kind of tacit identity within the groups. Still, there were those who were openly gay. For example, Teresa claimed that "it was known who was lesbian and who was not lesbian."[44] But more often than not, lesbians concealed their sexualities in mixed groups. Paloma, for example, remembered that some women would change the pronouns of their partner so that they could participate in discussions about sex, sexuality, and relationships.[45] So it seems that while the full spectrum of the metaphorical closet existed in the feminist space, the majority of women remained in the closet.

This spectrum allowed for a variety of experiences for lesbians within the feminist movement. Paloma said that the secrecy and hiding produced a great mental cost for many lesbians. Noting that heterosexual women could openly speak about personal crises, this same liberty was not afforded women who chose to remain closeted. She said there was "a very large internal cost" for being homosexual in those years. This internal cost that she described had to do with living a life that was honest while at the same time maintaining complete privacy from a group of women with whom you were supposedly changing the world.[46] In seeming opposition to the internal costs described by Paloma, Ana recalled a social group that was dominated by lesbians, such that it was the heterosexual women who were marginalized and left out of social engagements:

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[44] Original: "se conocía quiénes eran lesbianas y quiénes no eran lesbianas." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 34,
[45] Sardá and Hernando, 65.
[46] Ibid.

> There were all the security secrets for the political era, plus the security of the lesbian identity … which led to a certain marginalization of heterosexual women because as they were the ones who did not know, they were the ones who stayed alone on weekends, they were the ones that nobody invited anywhere, because if they found out they could say it.[47]

Here, Ana acknowledges that lesbians did not necessarily disclose their sexuality to the straight members of the group (in this case, Ana is speaking about UFA). But she also claims that, because heterosexual women were in the minority in this group, they were the ones who experienced segregation and social isolation. In fact, Paloma also noted that there was a certain amount of segregation in her group when they split between those who were married and those who were not. In the latter group, according to Paloma, lesbianism was more openly discussed because a good majority of the unmarried participants identified as homosexual.

Argentina's feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s sought to fight the oppression of all women, regardless of sexuality, within a patriarchal society. Similar to the writings produced by feminist organizations in Europe and the United States at the time, they used lower pay, fewer opportunities for political participation, sexual abuse, and domestic violence as evidence to their claims of women's subjugation. While feminists were challenging gender hierarchies—something that distinguished their activism within Argentina, since many other leftist female activists did not challenge such hierarchies—, the dominant feminist organizations did not conceive of either gender or sex outside of the binaries of male/female and masculine/feminine.

[47] Original: "Estaban todos los secretos de seguridad por la época política, más la seguridad de la identidad lesbiana … con lo cual se daba una cierta marginación de las heterosexuales porque como era las que no tenían que enterarse, eran las que se quedaban solas los fines de semana, eran las que nadie invitaba a ningún lado, porque si se enteraban lo podían llegar a decir." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 138.

Because men were the perpetrators of violence and the oppressors of women, this led to a schema whereby they associated men with violence and victimhood with femininity. Accordingly, they argued that there could never be equality between the sexes within a patriarchal system.

Lesbians who participated in feminist organizations or read feminist writings transferred this schema onto their romantic relationships, often arguing that relationships between women were, necessarily, equal and equitable. This ideology, however, was firmly rooted in middle-class values. Middle-class and feminist lesbians often claimed that same-sex relationships in which the couple took on patriarchal gender roles reproduced the dominant and submissive dynamics of heterosexual relationships, and were, therefore, unequal. Moreover, they upheld middle-class standards of beauty, which prioritized blonde, white, thin, and young women. This was a privileged way of thinking, rooted in racism and classism. Many lesbians from the lower classes took on more masculine roles as part of erotic play or as part of their identity. Known as *bomberos*, these women were not only critiqued by feminist lesbians, but were also more at risk of being persecuted because they were outwardly subverting assumed gender roles.

While the feminist movement may have given some middle-class lesbians opportunities to expand their social circles and given them access to political activism, it also helped create barriers within the larger lesbian community. One result of this was that lower- and working-class lesbians often felt more of a sense of isolation, having to endure discrimination from all sectors of society, including from other lesbians. This kind of isolation has often been interpreted by scholars as evidence that lesbians in Buenos Aires in the 1960s and 1970s lacked a political identity. However, experiences of isolation provided lesbians, across classes, with tools for surviving the tumultuous political landscape during this era in Argentina.

Social Intimacy

On February 12, 1975, more than a year before the last military coup, José Lopez Rega, the Minister of Social Welfare, announced a formal campaign against homosexuality. In an article printed in the government-mouthpiece publication, *El Caudillo*, Lopez Rega linked homosexuality to leftwing politics: "Marxism has utilized and utilizes homosexuality as an instrument for its penetration and as an ally in its objectives." In congruence with the official rhetoric regarding the importation of Marxist ideology, Lopez Rega argued that homosexuality was not native to Argentina. It was this logic that allowed him to call for the extermination of homosexuals from Argentine society. Twice in this article he says, "We have to get rid of the homosexuals."[48]

To be sure, Lopez Rega's main concern was for the supposed masculinity of Argentina's men; the article begins, "As children they played with dolls," indicating that the object of his disdain is effeminate males." Nevertheless, he also included lesbians in his program of extermination:

> The women who run against the stream have their own little games. A while ago they put out a magazine; half bull, half Marxism. They're the ones who trip around on motor bikes, the ones who think they're the equal of men. Burly women, drinking male hormones, with deep voices, have more than once taken part in attempts to murder policemen and soldiers.[49]

[48] Quoted in *Gay Sunshine* 26/27 (Winter 1975–1976), 12. I have not been able to obtain an original version of this article, but it is cited by many gay men and women throughout the period as evidence of the government's official stance on homosexuality.
[49] Ibid.

The state targeted lesbians—especially masculine-presenting lesbians who outwardly transgressed gender norms—even before the Proceso. Therefore, it was necessary for gay women to socialize in secret. Not only was this secret and private social world a survival strategy, but it helped produce divergent social norms and codes of conduct, ones that could be understood as specifically lesbian. As such, the intimate lives of lesbians is a key way of understanding lesbianism in the decade prior to the dictatorship.

In fact, the social world for lesbians during this era was possible because it was all done in secret. Socializing as a lesbian, which often have meant going to parties, *boliches*, or cafés with other lesbians, involved living a double-life for most. Family and friends were often left in the dark about these activities. One woman interviewed by Alejandra Sardá and Silvana Hernando, Viviana, discussed how she had to sneak out of her parents house at night in order to hang out with a group of older lesbians.[50] Another interviewee, Rosita, recalled that she only told one of her straight friends about being a lesbian. It was after a breakup, and she needed someone to talk to. Luckily, her friend supported her. However, even after finding that this friend would not shun her, she did not tell other friends, because, as she claimed, "now I already have someone to talk to about all this, so I do not have to tell the others."[51]

Women employed a range of strategies to maintain this secret social world. Lying about where one was going or with whom she was going and changing the pronouns of partners were tactics that many women used to conceal their sexuality. One particularly clever couple, Marina and Magdalena, developed a secret code so that they could send letters to one another while they

[50] Sardá and Hernando, 128.
[51] Original: "ahora ya tengo con quién hablar de todo esto no necesito contárselo a las otras." Rosita, quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 111.

still lived with their families. To unknowing eyes, their coded letters looked like a series of algebraic equations. When decrypted, one such letter read:

Amor mío:

Te quiero, te adoro, te extraño. Quiero estar en tus brazos, que me beses, que me acaricies, que me muerdas, que me hagas tuya, que me marques.

Te espero con amor.

(My love:

I love you, I adore you, I miss you. I want to be in your arms, you kiss me, you caress me, you bite me, you make me yours, you mark me.

I wait for you with love.)[52]

Marina kept her notes from Magdalena hidden in cigarette cases, because they were both precious and dangerous. While Marina and Magdalena could read their coded love letters to each other in front of their mothers—the mathematical equations made it appear that they were studying for school—, there was still a risk in being caught. Hence, the need for the secret code in the first place.

Perhaps one of the biggest factors in determining a woman's social experience in these years was her economic background. Constraints on sexuality differed across class lines. As one anonymous member of the homosexual community in Argentina said to a Swedish journalist, middle-class parents could be perplexed by their daughter's activism and socializing among leftists: "My family never could understand why I acted as I did. 'But you are so well off, 'they told me."[53] This activist's parents could not understand why their child engaged in specific

[52] Marina, quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 94.
[53] "Gay in Argentina." *Gaysweek* 1 (May 1978): 16. Archives of Human Sexuality and Identity. Accessed July 5, 2016. http://tinyurl.galegroup.com/tinyurl/3XJHm3

activities with regard to their sexuality (whether in terms of activism or sexual acts, it does not say). In other words, according to the parents 'logic, one's economic status should dictate their behavior, including sexual behavior. Middle-class lesbians had perhaps the most opportunities for socializing in the capital city. The middle-class youth of the 1960s were often the first ones in their families to attend college, a result of the educational and economic gains of the Peronist era.[54] Social circles were expanded at universities. For many of Argentina's youth of this era, the university was the place where their activism began, where they first read and discussed Marxist ideology, where they joined groups that sought to effect social change. For many lesbians in Buenos Aires, the university was where they entered the feminist movement. Moreover, for middle-class lesbians, their lives were a bit less constricted by social norms. While they certainly did not all adopt radical conceptions about sex or gender—in fact, the middle-class often maintained some rather conservative attitudes—, it was this group, rather than the lower- or upper-classes, who pushed the populace to the left.

Women from the lower- and upper-classes often experienced greater social restraints from friends and family. Women from the lower classes, for example, were more likely to remain living in their family homes well into their adult lives, which could hinder their opportunities for socializing. Cachita, who came from a working-class family, met her first girlfriend while working at a factory in her early twenties. Throughout their nine-year relationship, they both lived at home with their families, and most of those with whom they socialized were *gente paqui* (straight people). They could not come out in their working-class neighborhood because "there they marked you right away" for transgressing gender and social

[54] Manzano, *The Age of Youth in Argentina*, 3–4.

norms.[55] The social pressures to maintain "appropriate" behavior kept women like Cachita and her girlfriend keeping their relationship a secret.

Women from the upper class faced a different set of challenges that, nonetheless, still created experiences of isolation and forced many to live in secrecy. These women often expressed family pressures to uphold patriarchal standards, especially that of "purity" and chastity. Some of these women chose to become nuns instead of marrying a man or having their social lives held under a microscope by conservative family members. Theresa came from an upper-class family that was deeply religious. At eighteen, she dated a man whom she intended to marry. To escape this prescribed life for her, she entered an all-female school where she studied religion. After many years of avoiding her sexual attractions, she finally entered into relationships with women. However, Theresa never came out to her family. She noted that they were so appalled by her stances on contraception and abortion, that she could only imagine how they would react if she told them she was a lesbian: "I would never tell them because I know they would be horrified."[56] Such women were also more susceptible to enforced psychiatric treatment by relatives. Viviana's father told her, more or less, that her attraction to other women was a sickness. Despite his warnings to not engage in same-sex attraction, Viviana did have girlfriends and she did hang out with other gay men and women. When she disappeared for several days, her parents called the police. Undeterred, Viviana maintained her "rebellious" social lifestyle, eventually leading her parents to have her institutionalized. Though she admitted that the clinic was nice—they did not administer electroshock therapy; she had her own room; the place was clean—, she noted that it was ineffective in changing her behavior or sexuality. But she also recognized that the situation was difficult for her parents, who maintained

[55] Original: "ahí te marcaban enseguida." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 24.
[56] Original: "nunca se los diría porque sé que se horrorizarían." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 35.

heteronormative aspirations for her: "they had to direct my life to the other side, to heterosexuality, for me to marry, have children and fulfill my mandate."[57]

In very few instances, wealth afforded lesbians some form of protection from police repression, at least prior to the heightened tensions of the 1970s. A story from Mónica relates an anecdote about an argument between two wealthy women, a couple that was known for their mercurial romance, that escalated to such extremes that the police ended up getting involved. In the story, the women openly tell the police that they are "*betters*" (homosexual). According to Mónica, "it passed as nonsense, an eccentricity of people with a surname."[58] Mónica's reference to "people with a surname" indicates that these women had money, and, as such, could get away with a certain amount of behavior that would otherwise be policed.

By the 1960s, Argentina had a long history of policing its citizen's bodies. At start of the twentieth century, Argentina, like other Western nations, was involved in a project of linking national (especially urban) order to bodily order. In Argentina, and throughout Latin America, Buenos Aires was considered the model hygienic city, whereby medical discourse influenced city planning. This involved regulating bodies, especially working bodies, in terms of psychology, morality, and physical health. Sexuality was one area where these issues converged.[59] According to the dominant ideology, women's sexuality was associated with either motherhood or its opposition, prostitution. These opposing discourses cast women in one of two roles: "either as a defender of the republican order or as an instigator of chaos."[60] The role of the

[57] Original: "ellos tenían que encauzar mi vida por otro lado, por la heterosexualidad, que me casara, tuviera hijos y cumpliera con mi mandato." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 125–28.
[58] Original: "pasaba como una pavada, una excentricidad de gente con apellido." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 55.
[59] See Jorge Salessi, "The Argentine Dissemination of Homosexuality;" Gabriela Nouzeilles, *Ficciones somáticas*; Carlos Figari and Florencia Gemetro, "Escritas en silencio;" and Sylvia Molloy, "The Politics of Posing."
[60] Figari and Gemetro, 37.

medical community in early twentieth-century Buenos Aires was to provide curatives for the newly created pathologies: "everything that violated the obligatory heterosexual model entered the field of disease/crime and was plausible to be cured/punished."[61] Same-sex sex between women, then, was associated with prostitution and, hence, chaos and a disruption to the national project.

For the most part, the leftist youth that emerged in the 1960s did not challenge the dominant configuration of sexuality, though they did provide new ways of thinking about romance, which resulted in a culture of revolutionary love.[62] In this configuration, "romantic devotion was equated to revolutionary commitment."[63] A brief anecdote illustrates this new culture. Two members of the PRT, Roberto and Clarisa, were pressured to end a relationship because Roberto was married to someone else. According to Roberto's younger brother, Julio Santucho, also a member of the PRT, the revolutionary moment they were living in "was not about trying out new forms of relationships." Julio reminded Roberto that selflessness and fidelity were the key components of "an honest and solidly build home." Isabella Cosse has shown that this meant that an individual would, theoretically, sacrifice self-interests for the larger project, whether that project was romantic or revolutionary. Personal interests, then, were understood as undermining relationships if they skirted the goals of the revolution.

There is evidence that some lesbian couples adhered to this philosophy. In the early 1970s, Juana lived with her girlfriend in Buenos Aires. Both women participated in the feminist movement, which, for them, meant attending meetings and reading feminist writings. Within the

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[61] Ibid., 38.
[62] Valeria Manzano has written on the sexual politics of left-wing militants. Using the document, *Moral y proletarización*, crafted by a PRT-ERP leader in 1972, Manzano argues that the left "often labeled as petit-bourgeois individualism both consumption and sexual behaviors that deviated from the ideal of the monogamous heterosexual couple" (*The Age of Youth in Argentina*, 205).
[63] Cosse, "Infidelities," 422.

group space, lesbianism was not openly discussed, though Juana admits that it was tacitly accepted. At home, the couple discussed their everyday lives in terms of the new feminist theory that they were learning. What did it mean that one did all the cooking? Were they reproducing social inequalities at home? As Juana recalled, "it was like thinking about feminism in the political space and also rethinking it all the time between us."[64] The commitment that Juana and her girlfriend had to their feminist activism extended to their relationship. In this way, the intimate details of their lives were appraised for their revolutionary value.

Despite their joint participation in the militarized feminist movement, and despite other common interests, the couple also intentionally maintained separate lives. According to Juana, this individualism had cost her an earlier relationship with a woman named Sandra:

> And what we both achieved, what we could both do, is that thing that I wanted, which with Sandra cost me so much, to live together and be together as a couple but to have totally separate lives. [65]

Juana's later relationship shows how lesbians might have adopted the concept of "revolutionary love" that Julio Santucho implored his brother to follow. The lived experiences of Juana and other lesbians who grew up believing that they were the only ones like them, the only "deviant" or "sick" girl who desired other girls, help explain why such women would disregard complete devotion and fidelity to a romantic partner. Experiences in adolescence informed women like Juana that isolating within the couple could cause harm.

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[64] Original: "era como pensar el Feminismo en el espacio político y también estar repensándolo todo el tiempo entre nosotras." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 121.

[65] Original: "Y lo que logramos, lo que sí pudimos las dos, es esa cosa que yo quería, que con Sandra me costó tanto, de convivir y estar juntas como pareja pero tener vidas totalmente separados en todos los sentidos." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 120.

In fact, some lesbians outright rejected the notion of fidelity by celebrating sexual liberation.[66] The expansion of one's social world to include other women who engaged in same-sex sex meant that there were now more people with whom to explore sex and sexuality. It seems as though some lesbians also understood sexual liberation as a means of expressing certain privileges of masculine sexuality, including promiscuity. Juana noted that women who had money to spend were especially more likely to express such braggadocio: "the successful women who had the ability to earn money—and spend it—[also had] the capacity to seduce all the women around them."[67] It is hard to say whether or not those with money projected masculine associations of financial independence onto their erotic practices. Having multiple sexual partners, and being proud of having had multiple sexual partners, had long been a privilege extended to men, while women who had multiple sex partners were categorized as prostitutes. Perhaps those women who flaunted their supposed sexual prowess believed that their financial independence allowed them all the privileges of men in their society? Or perhaps some women found in this moment the opportunity to shine a light on the hypocrisy of bourgeois society?[68] Nonetheless, while some lesbians celebrated these new sexual opportunities, others maintained more patriarchal views, associating female promiscuity with negativity and chaos. It was

[66] Unfortunately, even in my research, female sexuality is filtered through a lens of male sexuality. I want to be able to speak of lesbian sexual liberation on its own terms, but it seems that even within their own circles, lesbian sexuality in the 1970s was socially constructed in relation to—whether in opposition, as a reflection of, or via the adoption of—male sexual practices. The following discussion relies on patriarchal constructions of female sexuality.

[67] Original: "las mujeres exitosas que tenían la capacidad de ganar dinero—y gastarlo—y la capacidad de seducir a todas las mujeres que tenían cerca." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 119.

[68] Roger Lancaster has noted how common it has become in Latin American historiography to connect the notion of sexual conquest to the historical processes of the conquest in the formation of machismo. He warns us against assuming uniform sexual structures across Latin America, however. See Roger Lancaster, *Life is Hard*, 306–7, note 2. In Argentina in the 1960s–1970s, there were gay men who "exhibited their bodies to conquest" in order to "bring the moral hypocrisy of a bourgeois, respectable society to the surface." See Valeria Manzano, "The Blue Jean Generation," 661. I use "conquests" here in a seemingly nebulous space that exists between connotations of masculine violence and expressions of bodily autonomy.

especially common for middle-class lesbians to denigrate those who were more liberal with their sexuality.[69]

But for those women who found pleasure, positivity, or freedom within the concept and/or practice of promiscuity, there existed a discourse where they could understand lesbian sexual freedom as revolutionary. Within the culture of the gay liberation movement in Buenos Aires at the time, there was the understanding that gay and lesbian sexuality was inherently revolutionary because it specifically undermined the procreative family unit. Employing Marxist language in their critique, the FLH claimed that men maintained economic, political, and sexual power in modern families for the purpose of controlling the means of (re)production: "Intercourse becomes an institution culturally structured for the satisfaction of the man, who retains all initiative and who alone possesses the legitimate right to pleasure."[70] The authors of the document went on to assert that the reduction of sexuality to reproductive ends results in the condemnation of all other forms of sexual activity, including homosexuality. This was the very system against which the FLH was fighting. Therefore, gay men and women in the 1970s were equipped with a sexual ideology that empowered them to think about same-sex sex acts as revolutionary expressions of human sexuality, in stark contrast to the alienating sex acts practiced within normative marriages. For them, the revolution was precisely the time to try out new forms of relationships.

No matter a woman's social class or her perspective on sexual practices, for those lesbian women who found groups (whether political or social), membership to that group became a vital tool in combatting internalized homophobia and feelings of isolation. Friendships between women provided opportunities to discuss and work through the ways that their lives transgressed

[69] Gonzalez, 9.
[70] FLH, "Sexo y Revolución," trans. by Sam Larson, 184. See also Ben and Insausti.

the dominant mores of their neighborhoods. It gave women evidence that they were not the only ones who desired other women, that they were not sick or diseased. Social interactions with other lesbians resolved many of the negative feels that some women had associated with their sexualities.[71] Sociologist Laura Andrea Gonzalez argues that a woman's network of friends was also essential to entering the world of parties and finding potential partners.[72] Secrecy was an especially useful tool for lesbians to form and maintain social groups in Argentina during this era. Mónica recalled that during the Onganía regime, the police would stop taxis randomly on the street, separate the passengers and question them about the identities of the others. If a person did not know the others with whom they were riding, "you were thrown in jail."[73]

Even though the police had disrupted the social lives of Argentinians across the board, many lesbians spoke of a vibrant nightlife. This nightlife was not exclusive to sexual minorities; instead, it was a key characteristic of Buenos Aires's youth culture in the sixties.[74] In fact, some lesbians recalled a rather expansive social group, consisting of other lesbians, gay men, artists, and actors. For example, Mónica spoke of having many gay friends even before she, herself, came out as homosexual, because she lived "within the world of painters, poets, theatre people, writers, people with another vision", which included many gays and lesbians. Mónica and her friends typically socialized at house parties: "Marta and I liked in a huge house at the time and we bought empanadas and wine and people came by bringing something sweet."[75] Beyond house parties, *boliches* (nightclubs) opened in the 1970s as spaces where gay and lesbian *porteñxs*

[71] Figari and Gemetro, 47.
[72] Gonzalez, 11.
[73] Original: "ibas en cana." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 53.
[74] See Manzano, *The Age of Youth in Argentina*, 69–96.
[75] Original: "dentro del mundo de los pintores, de las poetas, de la gente de teatro, escritores, que esa gente ya tenía otra visión" "Marta y yo vivíamos en una casa inmensa en esa época y comprábamos empanadas y vino y la gente caía trayendo algo dulce." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 53.

congregated. Ana recalled a *boliche* on Pavón street, near San Telmo in Buenos Aires, where many women went to dance—disco, as was the style of the era—with other women. According to Ana, this nightclub "functioned clandestinely, it was like they were something else and it was not official."[76] And while this kind of nocturnal socializing was not immune to police aggression, many lesbians were able to escape some of the more violent assaults because of their abilities to maintain secrecy, to not tell their parents where they were going, to change to pronouns of their friends, to invite men—especially gay men—to parties so that if the police raided the place, they could pretend that they were heterosexual. Youth and adolescence spent in isolation had provided lesbians with many tools for maintaining this secret social world.

Conclusion: Fomenting the Lesbian Intimate Public

It has been well-documented that lesbians were marginalized within both the gay liberation and feminist movements in Buenos Aires in the early 1970s. Some historians of Argentine homosexuality concur that because of this marginalization, lesbians were truly invisible throughout the 1970s.[77] Based on such evidence, Ana Clara Benavente and Luisina Gentile argue that there are limitations to thinking about the beginning of the politicization of homosexuality in the same way for men and women."[78] However, this statement requires qualification. Even if some of the men in the FLH displayed machismo or failed to fully comprehend women's experiences in a patriarchal society, the organization did declare, at least publicly, their support of lesbians, and Safo, a lesbian-run group, existed as an offshoot of the organization. Likewise, many lesbian women who participated in feminist organizations have noted a certain amount of

[76] Original: "funcionaba clandestinamente, era como que eran de otra cosa y no estaba oficializado." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 158.
[77] See Flavio Rapisardi and Alejandro Modarelli, *Fiestas, baños y exilios*.
[78] Benavente and Gentile, 10.

openness within their groups, even if their sexuality remained only tacitly acknowledged. And, as María Celeste Viedma has shown, feminist organizations were actively fighting the same sexist system that the FLH identified as one of the causes of homophobia in Argentina. Therefore, lesbians obtained some visibility within these organizations and shared the political and social goals of overthrowing a system of oppression that marginalized and stigmatized women and sexual minorities. Lesbians in these groups may have felt seen, if only partially.

Nonetheless, the marginalization, if not the erasure, of lesbians within these groups is quite evident from the archival record. Except for calling for the destruction of structures that have long worked to prioritize the heterosexual, patriarchal family unit, neither the FLH nor any feminist organization made a call to action in support of specific issues that delineated lesbian experiences from those of their gay male or straight female counterparts. For example, economic independence does not appear as a primary goal for either the FLH or feminist groups, largely because men and heterosexual women often had access to financial stability (either through their own jobs or that of their husband's) that could sustain a household. Juana's mention of "successful women" and their seemingly unrestricted access to sexual partners within the lesbian community is evidence that queer women experienced economic independence differently than did gay men and heterosexual women. Perhaps, then, the schema of understanding lesbian identity solely in terms of their experiences within the gay liberation and feminist movements remains inadequate.

While the lesbian political identity that emerged in the early 1970s is certainly bound to the experiences of lesbians within both the feminist and gay liberation movements, the social worlds that they built for themselves are equally, if not more, important to the overall lesbian identity. These experiences are necessary to understanding how lesbian communities continued

after 1976 when the military dictatorship outlawed political identities. What this history of the intimate social lives of lesbians illustrates, then, is that a woman's social world provided key ways of understanding what it meant to be a lesbian, and that there were likely as many definitions as there were women who identified as homosexual. Class divisions created a variety of ways of socializing, and multiple ways of understanding the intersections of gender and sexuality.

This history helps us understand strategies employed during the dictatorship that enabled lesbian women to forge an intimate public when such a thing was seemingly impossible. When the military executed another coup in March 1976 to remove Isabela Perón from office—who was secretly elevated to the presidency when her husband became gravely ill in June 1974—, the new dictatorship largely eliminated the abilities for middle-class youth to socialize as they had during the previous decade. With their activist groups banned and their nightlife effectively shut down, middle-class lesbians no longer enjoyed the kind of social privileges that were afforded them before 1976. In fact, the dictatorship drove many queer activists into exile in the United States, Europe, and other Latin American countries. One of the women interviewed by Sardá and Hernando, Juana, straightforwardly stated, "until 1976, Argentina is one story and then everything changes."[79] For those lesbians who remained, however, the experiences of maintaining secrets, of socializing clandestinely, of using coded language provided a blueprint for how to survive the dictatorship.

[79] Original: "Hasta el '76 Argentina es uno history y después cambia totalmente." Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 118.

CHAPTER 2

In the Basement and in the Bedroom

On a summer afternoon in 1978, around 5 o'clock in the evening, two women were walking in the Plaza San Martín in the central district of Buenos Aries. Approaching them from the opposite direction were two federal police officers, who stopped and questioned them about where they lived and worked, and searched their bags for "subversive" material. One of the women asked the officers why they had been stopped, since they were not breaking any laws. An officer responded that it was his job to question people on the street, and besides, they didn't seem like other women, since they appeared in public without boyfriends. Despite this apparent violation of the gender code, the police officers returned the women's belongings and left. Clearly shaken and scared of further harassment, each woman went to her respective home.

This story illustrates two key aspects of the police and military's role in society following the March 1976 coup d'état. The first is that, as the enforcers of the state's repression, their job was to intimidate the public. This is seen when the women are stopped and their belongings are searched, despite having not broken any the laws. Search and seizure were legal mechanisms during the dictatorship, and a favorite tool of both the military and the police to terrorize the general population. Secondly, this story highlights the dictatorship's expectations for women. If a woman was to appear in public without any evident purpose—strolling in a plaza is not the same as going to a market or a laundry service—, then it was expected that a boyfriend or husband accompany her.

Argentina's March 24, 1976 coup ushered in a new kind of authoritarianism, one that waged a war against "subversives," those seen and those unseen, in what has commonly been called the Dirty War. The so-called Dirty War, which the military junta tritely called the Proceso

de Reorganización Nacional (The Process of National Reorganization; Proceso for short), became one of the most brutal and repressive dictatorships in history, disappearing, murdering, kidnapping, and torturing upwards of 30,000 Argentine civilians.[1] The Dirty War should be understood as an incredibly modern type of war, one that employed the most violent methods of torture to eradicate "not only an enemy but an entire society."[2] As with many other twentieth-century wars, the enemies of the state in Argentina were ideas as much as they were people. The military justified their actions by arguing that the fate of the country resided exterminating the enemy. Thus, the Argentine Army established a period of extreme repression and violence toward "subversives," a loosely defined term to designate all internal enemies of the state.

A decades-long alliance between the Catholic Church and military dictatorships in Argentina—like the one that ousted Juan Perón in 1955 and the one that ushered in Juan Carlos Onganía in 1966—provided the ideological roots for the state-led terror and repression exercised in during the Dirty War.[3] The imagined enemy of the state was conceived as an enemy of god, which, according to the right-wing *nacionalista* rhetoric of the era, included Marxists, Jews and atheists, and democracy. The ideal citizen, then, was one who not only complied with the nationalist political order, but one who also upheld Catholic values, including an obedience to traditional sex and gender roles.

Gender, in fact, was a key component to the military's sense of national duty. As they understood it, "Order begins at home."[4] By this, the military regime relied on its "Christianized" ideology that presumed the necessity and superiority of the patriarchal family structure. Accordingly, they prioritized gender roles that saw men in positions of leadership (and

[1] Federico Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 2.
[2] James Brennan, *Argentina's Missing Bones*, 5.
[3] See Finchelstein; and Marcos Novaro and Vicente Palermo, *La dictadura militar (1976–1983)*.
[4] *Gente (*April 15, 1976): 17.

citizenship), and women as mothers and guardians of the home(land). The assumption that "subversives" transgressed gender roles was seen in the treatment of detained women in the concentration camps, forcing them to wear skirts or dresses, rather than pants, and proclaiming that part of rehabilitation was a complete internalization of "proper" gender performance.[5] Historian Valeria Manzano notes that "the 'guerrilla woman' epitomized the sexual, cultural, and political meanings of subversion in mid-1970s Argentina."[6] Manzano's conclusion is consistent with Diana Taylor's scholarship, which shows that the Argentine state was greatly invested in returning to a supposed "golden age" of this gender ideal, one that was not challenged by feminists and homosexuals. Taylor argues that misogyny and homophobia were fundamental to the junta's narrative about the Dirty War.[7] In fact, according to Jordi Díez, the military "declared homosexuality as one of the many types of subversions" to eliminate from society.[8] While part of the military's discourse about homosexuality was to undermine Communism, it is clear from the historiography that they also actively targeted people who transgressed "appropriate" gender expressions.[9]

Same-sex love and intimacy, then, can be understood, in part, as opposition to the patriarchal order in Argentina throughout the last dictatorship. Specifically, I argue that lesbian love and intimacy should be understood, at least in part, in terms of resistance. This is not to say, of course, that any and all moments of erotic pleasure or intimate bonding between gay women were carried out with the intention of symbolically contesting the military dictatorship.

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[5] In her study on the embodied experiences of women during the last dictatorship, Barbara Sutton states that the military also asserted gender roles in the concentration camps that they ran, Barbara Sutton, *Bodies in Crisis*, 67.
[6] Valeria Manzano, *The Age of Youth in Argentina*, 231.
[7] Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 89.
[8] Jordi Díez, "Argentina: A Queer Tango between the Lesbian and Gay Movement and the State," 17.
[9] For more on the military's discursive link between homosexuality and Communism, see Pablo Ben and Santiago Joaquin Insausti, "Dictatorial Rule and Sexual Politics in Argentina," 314.

Obviously, women who loved one another or engaged in sexual and romantic intimacy with other women during this period did so because it made sense to them on numerous levels, not because it strategically challenged an oppressive regime. However, in the context of a dictatorship that responded to gender and sexual deviance with unrelenting violence, same-sex love was, in and of itself, a defiant act.[10] Instead of thinking of sexuality in terms of naturalized identities, if we consider sexual differences as forms of dissent, then we are able to consider sex acts as speech acts.[11] I argue that same-sex sex and romance between women in Argentina during the dictatorship should be understood as an active speech act against conformist practices and the ideology of the military.

This chapter explores the physical spaces and the physical acts through which these speech acts were performed. In the first part, I map the social lives of lesbians onto the city of Buenos Aires, recreating, to whatever degree is possible, the places where lesbians and bisexual women socialized with one another. Because of the extreme dangers of entering the public sphere as women—not to mention as women who might have previously been active in leftist politics or who were "sexual subversives"—, lesbian and bisexual women took specific

[10] Ben and Insausti argue that gay and lesbian sexual politics emerged in Argentina specifically in terms of a struggle against authoritarianism. Unlike North American and European expressions of gay liberation, which occurred in democratic nations, activists in Argentina framed "the notion of liberation as a collective struggle against oppression and capitalism" (Ben and Insausti, 299). For further scholarship that has helped to place same-sex love in opposition to authoritarianism, see Carlos Decena, *Tacit Subjects*, 111–38; Rahul Rao, "Re-membering Mwanga;" and de la Dehesa, *Queering the Public Sphere in Mexico and Brazil*.

[11] Teresa de Lauretis has called out Simone de Beauvoir's "notion of a 'natural' homosexuality of women" (de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*, 185). In pushing back against such tautological configurations of gender and sexuality—whereby gender/sexuality is shaped by the narrative that it shapes—, scholars such as de Lauretis, Judith Butler, Heather Love, and Gayle Rubin have, instead, offered an "antinormative rather than identitarian basis for sexual politics" (Love, "Introduction," 6). See also Butler, *Bodies that Matter*; and Rubin, "Blood Under the Bridge." Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner argue that heteronormative forms of intimacy have institutional discourses that allow them to be easily understood. In the absence of such discourses, they claim, queer culture has always had to improvise what is considered a speech act (Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 562). See also Judith Roof, *Come as You Are*.

safeguards when navigating the city.[12] Women, especially lesbian women, were not considered legitimate citizens, and so their lives were, in part, lived outside of public discourse.[13] To a certain degree, lesbians took advantage of this relegation, using an epistemology of invisibility and a history of secret-keeping as ways to move about the city safely.[14]

In addition, lesbians used physical spaces to challenge the dictatorship. Maps and territories are bound to military power.[15] By circumventing the need for maps—in one story below, lesbians did this by never learning the physical address of a meeting space—, homosexual and bisexual women challenged the dictatorship's vision of the city as a space where they exerted absolute control over people and ideas. Mapping lesbians onto the geography of Buenos Aires during the dictatorship is a difficult task. Nonetheless, I have tracked some of their movements and registered some of the spaces where queer women met. What ultimately comes across in this reconstruction of the social lives of lesbians is a strategy of survival based on

[12] David Sheinin has written that "with jarring misogyny," the dictatorship "saw a direct connection between women who sought independence from traditional domestic roles and moral breakdown" (Sheinin, Consent of the Damed, 35). See also Claudia Nora Laudano, *Las mujeres en los discursos militares*.

[13] As Lauren Berlant articulates in her work on sex and citizenship, the production of national subjects is a public project. Even subaltern or minoritized citizenships require public acknowledgment, even if "they allow for no subtlety or uniqueness in mass society" (Berlant, "Theory of Infantile Citizenship," 36). Building off of Berlant's scholarship, I argue that this study of lesbian intimacy pushes us to consider ways in which citizenship is constructed outside of the public sphere.

[14] Any conversation about lesbian invisibility should begin with Adrienne Rich's essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in which she articulates the various ways "through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible" (632). Rich's essay seems to have enacted a paradigm shift in the ways that scholars have understood various lesbianisms, as a far-reaching spectrum of scholarship has been written based on Rich's basic premise. Moreover, lesbians in Argentina were clearly influenced by Rich's work; they began to talk about their own existence in terms of invisibility following its publication.

[15] Marguerite Feitlowitz has shown how the military regime manipulated public space so thoroughly that even seemingly trivial or mundane public spaces, such as buses, became sites of military power. She recounts a story of the military disappearing a young woman, Susana, in broad daylight and full view of several passengers on the bus that Susana rode. No one spoke or fought back. Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 173–74. For the foundational work on how totalitarian regimes isolate individuals in the public sphere, see Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

invisibility and silence. Not leaving records, not remembering addresses, not sharing personal stories, hiding underground and in the cover of darkness—lesbians employed all of these strategies to ensure that they did not draw attention from the police, the military, or other civilians. Moreover, they relied on established gender roles to hide in plain sight, only altering their gender performance below the surface, such as when they refused to shave their legs.

Moreover, same-sex sex acts between women came to be understood as challenges to the dictatorship's vision of subjecthood and citizenship. Lesbians who maintained intimate relationships with each other, both romantic and platonic, functioned as insubordinate bodies that did not conform to the heteronormative and patriarchal mandates of the regime. In the second part of this chapter, I investigate the meanings of lesbian sex acts. Sexual pleasure came to be understood as a defiant speech act. Through these speech acts, queer women asserted that lesbian sex was democratic, and that the clitoris was a symbol of equality. The narrative that emerges about sex acts in the archives recognizes the revolutionary power of sexual pleasure.

Invisible Intimacy

In January 1976, on the corner of Defensa and Pasaje San Lorenzo in the neighborhood of San Telmo, Martha Ferro opened El Sótano. Amongst the colonial buildings that help signify San Telmo as the oldest barrio in Buenos Aires, a green, padlocked door marked the entrance to this clandestine meeting space, where feminists, and especially lesbian feminists, gathered to discuss sexuality and politics, class-consciousness, and leftist activism. It was also a space where women could create, perform, observe, and participate in cultural events, such as dance, movies, and live theatre. On the street above, one could grab a *cortado* (espresso and milk) with a friend. But it was below ground where lesbians and bisexual women could "encontrar una mujer, una

pareja mujer o tener una novia o una compañera" (find a woman, a partner or have a girlfriend or a companion).[16]

Born in 1942, Martha Ferro came from a lower middle-class family of Italian and Basque immigrants, who instilled in her anarchist ideals and a sense of class-consciousness.[17] In the 1960s, she studied psychology at the University of Buenos Aires before traveling to New York "to meet Irwin Allen Ginsberg, beatnik poets of the fifties and the hippies of the sixties."[18] After seven years in New York, she returned to Buenos Aires in 1973 and joined the Partido Socialista de los Trabajadores (PST). As discussed in Chapter 1, lesbian concerns remained unseen within leftist organizations, although feminist and homosexual issues were at least acknowledged, though not directly addressed, within the PST. As a result, in 1976, Martha opened a space that sought to fill a missing space for leftist lesbians.[19] After the military coup in March 1976, the ability to "come out of the closet" and take to the streets—as much as that was ever possible in the preceding years—was blocked by state repression.

In many ways, El Sótano exemplifies clandestine meeting spaces of the era, and the experiences of its patrons are representative of the underground social lives of all Argentinians during the Proceso. The military worked to silence all oppositional voices and ensured compliance to political censorship through devices like intimidation, as well as through a clandestine terror campaign. As historian Luis Alberto Romero has written, "Only the voice of the state remained, addressing itself to an atomized collection of inhabitants." [20] The prohibition

[16] Ely Lugo Cabral, quoted in Valeria Flores," El sótano de San Telmo," 7.
[17] Mabel Bellucci," El Grito," *Página 12* (March 4, 2011). Accessed December 1, 2020. https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/las12/13-6361-2011-03-04.html
[18] Original: "para conocer a Irwin Allen Ginsberg, poeta beatnik de los cincuenta y del hippismo de los sesenta." Ibid.
[19] Flores, 12–15.
[20] Luis Alberto Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century,* 219.

of all collective action, including labor organizing and political activism, meant that the army quickly repressed any activities that appeared oppositional, leftist, or radical. In his summary of the Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP; Commission on the Disappearance of Persons) report, Martin Edwin Andersen describes the kinds of terror that the army exercised over its citizens: "If they kidnapped a victim at night in his or her own home, armed commandos surrounded the entire block, entered the dwelling by force, terrorized parents and children, often gagging them, and obliged them to watch as they overpowered their prey."[21] The terror and torture were significantly more calamitous for the kidnapped victim; still, it is clear that failing to (refusing to?) adhere to the military's dictates was a perilous endeavor for all of Argentina's citizenry.

Speaking in hushed voices, socializing in secret, self-censuring—all these behaviors help illustrate not only the effectiveness of the military's repression, but also the ways that people modified their social bodies and social languages to survive. In September 1976, six months following the coup that established military rule, an incident known as the Night of the Pencils illustrated the need for extreme caution among the Argentine people.[22] In that incident, a parish priest violated the secrecy of the confessional by turning in a group of sixteen high-school students who had confessed their involvement in an earlier protest against the rise in bus fares. The priest, Christian Von Wernich, was just one of many informants who turned on their fellow citizens. Not only did some people decide to report on their fellow citizens, but sometimes those who were captured would, under duress or coercion, reveal colleagues's names. In her memoir, former political prisoner, Alicia Partnoy, described the aliases that political activists used during

[21] Martin Edwin Andersen, *Dossier Secreto*, 11–12.
[22]" Night of the Pencils" is a reference to both the Night of the Long Knives under the Third Reich, and the Night of the Long Sticks, a raid of Argentina's universities during the Onganía regime.

the dictatorship, and how after a colleague's arrest, they would all change their aliases in case the person folded under the pressure of extreme torture and revealed the names of other activists. Writing about how the military used every bit of information they could get, she said, "We learned slowly. Each pebble of information helped create the avalanche that would crush the rest of our friends."[23] Furthermore, historian Temma Kaplan has recorded how the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Madres) spoke in code: "if they were to meet in the Violet Tea Shop, for example, they would refer to a meeting at the Café of the Flower."[24] The need to shroud or conceal information was very real.

The women who patronized El Sótano understood this well. The windows of El Sótano were covered, meeting times became sporadic—in order to ward off police and military raids—, and all knowledge of El Sótano was put to memory, so that a paper trail could not inform "outsiders" of its existence. True to its name, El Sótano was an underground space, in that it was both physically below the surface of the ground and also functioned in secrecy, advertising solely through word of mouth. Ely, a young lesbian who frequented El Sótano, made sure that she never learned the address of the building. She also recalled that the cafés on Corrientes (in the heart of Buenos Aires) served as spaces in which to meet others with whom one could engage politically and intellectually. And when a specific café was raided by the police, word got out to avoid it for a while: "be careful because last week they took so many people from the café La Paz, or so many people from La Giralda."[25]

Word-of-mouth became the modus operandi for all "subversive" activities, since in the context of disappearances, state repression, and censorship, many people in Argentina remained

[23] Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School*, 42.
[24] Temma Kaplan, *Taking Back the Streets*, 115.
[25] Original: "tené cuidado porque la semana pasada llevaron tantas personas del café La Paz, o tantas personas de La Giralda." Ely Lugo Cabral, quoted in Flores, 6.

silent to protect not only oneself, but also one's friends and family. As Marguerite Feitlowitz has shown, state terror "made for a complicated mix of reactions: cunning and regressed obedience; complicity and shame; opportunism and terror."[26] Not only does such word-of-mouth policy protect the people in case of detention, but it also displays a rejection of state power. If the state had the power to draw maps, then the people would function without maps. If the state had the power to navigate via official addresses, then the people would never learn an address of a place. In making sure not to learn the street address of El Sótano, instead finding the place by landmarks and rote memory, Ely, like many other Argentinians, displayed cunning, opportunism, choosing to frequent the cafes and then avoiding them when necessary.

El Sótano is the only known documented semi-public meeting space for feminist lesbians during the dictatorship. The fact that there is so little documentation about the places where queer women gathered during this era is not surprising. First of all, in keeping with the need to conceal information, creating records was, in and of itself, a dangerous act. Sara Torres, a feminist activist and good friend to FLH founder, Néstor Perlongher, recalled: "And we were in the '70s! With all the security requirements that implied … That's why there aren't many papers … because we all knew someone who had been taken and we didn't know where."[27] People, especially those who were active in any kind of leftist political movement, were necessarily cautious about keeping documents that might lead to their disappearance. Secondly, more work has been done to collect the memories and to document the experiences of gay men. In preparation for writing their book about gay *porteñXs* during the dictatorship, Flavio Rapisardi

[26] Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 183.
[27] Original: "¡Y estábamos en los '70! Con todos los requisitos de seguridad que eso implicaba … Por eso también no hay tantos papeles … porque todos conocíamos alguien que se habían llevado y que no sabíamos dónde está." Quoted in Javier Gasparri, "Los Días del Grupo Política Sexual, Y Después Entrevista a Sartia Torres y Osvaldo Baigorria."

and Alejandro Modareli interviewed several men and collected their testimonies of life during the dictatorship. No parallel work has been done for queer women.

Although members of the FLH, especially Néstor Perlongher, worked closely with the feminist movement in the early seventies, it seems that most forms of socializing between lesbians and gay men ceased when their political activities stopped. There is no evidence that gay men attended events at El Sótano. Nor is there evidence that lesbians attended the cinemas where gay men gathered (or frequent the train station bathrooms where gay men cruised for anonymous sexual partners).[28] It appears that apart from individual friendships, there was very little crossover between the two groups during the years of the dictatorship. Natalio, one of the men who provided his testimony for Rapisardi and Modarelli's manuscript recalled that he only knew two "*tortas"* (lesbians) in those years, but did not see them very often. While he assumed that they must have had their own social lives, he did not know what that might have looked like. "We were, I know now, two different worlds," admitted Natalio.[29]

When lesbians and gay men did attend the same social events, their sociability was another cloak of invisibility, designed to throw off detection by the state. This tactic, learned throughout the previous decade, was done as a safety measure in case the police or military raided the party. Ana, who recalled her social world within the gay community during the dictatorship, noted the significant safety measures taken throughout those years:

[28] Trans women also gathered in these spaces. Without knowing how trans women identified their sexualities, it should be noted that it is entirely possible that women who identified as lesbian or bisexual did socialize with gay men during the dictatorship. However, I cannot say definitively that this is the case. When I distinguish between gay men and lesbians here, I am (unfortunately) limiting myself to thinking in terms of cis gendered individuals.

[29] Original: Éramos, ahora lo sé, dos mundos distintos." Natalio, quoted in Flavio Rapisardi and Alejandro Modarelli, *Fiestas, baños y exilios*, 217.

> We were always having a birthday (smiles). "What are we celebrating today?" We met but with very clear safety instructions, we consulted: "Today, what are we celebrating?; Fulanita took an exam and passed, that Menganito blah blah." And we did try not to hold meetings of women alone. There my social panorama was expanded. The men also had the theme of not having meetings of men alone, so they had parties for anything and always invited us because they need to have a woman.[30]

Ana's recollection indicates that the primary reason for mixed socializing between gay men and women was to address safety concerns. The need to be celebrating a specific occasion was another tactic they used to prevent unwanted police attention. The morality police throughout the country would drive around the city in Ford Falcons looking for any kind of suspicious activities that they could quash or interrogate. A party of all men or all women, especially if there was no clear reason for the gathering, would have easily drawn the notice of the men in the Ford Falcons. Therefore, it was safer to celebrate a fake birthday in mixed company. However, with many members of the FLH having fled to Europe or other Latin American countries, the social circles that included queer men and women remained quite small and uncommon in Buenos Aires during the dictatorship.

The Delta region, near the city of Tigre, serves as a good example of the separate social worlds that gay men and lesbians inhabited during the dictatorship. The islands and cottages of the Delta, which are only accessible by small boats that can navigate the labyrinthine waters, served as safe havens for some gays and lesbians, among other leftists, during the dictatorship.

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[30] Original: "Siempre estábamos de cumpleaños (risas). '¿Qué festejamos hoy?' Nos reuníamos pero con consignas de seguridad muy claras, nos consultábamos: 'Hoy ¿qué festejamos?: que Fulanita dio examen y aprobó, que Menganito bla bla.' Y sí procurábamos no hacer reuniones de mujeres solas. Ahí mi panorama social se me amplió. Los varones también tenían el tema de no hacer reuniones de varones solos, entonces hacían fiestas por cualquier cosa y nos invitaban siempre porque necesitan tener alguna mujer." Quoted in Sardá y Hernando, *No soy un bombero*, 141.

Gay men from Buenos Aires had been throwing parties in the Delta for years. However, there does not appear to have been much co-mingling between gay men and lesbians at such parties. One man—an anonymous respondent who Flavio Rapisardi and Alejandro Modarelli interviewed—recalled knowing very few lesbians, and those he did know did not attend the parties in Tigre. Instead, he claimed, "[lesbians] celebrated differently. They got together, for dinner or to play the guitar."[31] The social world of lesbians and gay men, therefore, remained largely separate during the dictatorship, even if both groups were known to seek the relative safety of the same space, such as the Delta.

Argentine poet Diana Bellessi arrived at Felipe Creek in the Delta just before the coup, and remained there throughout the years of the dictatorship. Bellessi, born in 1946 in the province of Santa Fe, north of Buenos Aires, described the Delta during the dictatorship as, "an earthly paradise in the middle of hell that was Argentina at the time."[32] Bellessi first rented a house in 1976 with her Uruguayan friend, La Negra. Images of the two friends from the period show a simple domestic life: guitars, cigarettes, and bottles of wine the only elements of entertainment on display. Life on the Delta was not public. There were no morality officers or soldiers gazing and listening and watching for suspicious activities. There were no Ford Falcons driving by to harass the people. Bellessi has said that she could hear sirens at night, but the Naval Prefecture, who would have had the boats necessary to navigate the rivers and creeks, did not come down her creek. Instead, the only other people with whom one would engage were the few neighbors on the island and friends who came to visit. Otherwise, life in the Delta was isolated, which is perhaps why queer men and women like Diana Bellessi and La Negra chose the location

[31] Original: "[las lesbianas] festejaban de otro modo. Se juntaban sí, a cenar o a tocar la guitarra." Quoted in Rapisardi and Modarelli, 217.
[32] *El jardín secreto*, dir. by Cristián Costantini, Diego Panich, and Claudia Prado.

as a refuge throughout the dictatorship.

Renting a house in Tigre was a luxury afforded to only a small number of *porteñXs* who were somehow financially independent. Instead of escaping to the relative isolation of the Delta, most lesbians stayed in the city. There, a few *boliches* (nightclubs) in the Abasto neighborhood remained open, at least initially, where women could dance and flirt with other women. An anonymous respondent to a lesbian zine in the 1980s recalled her experiences attending one such *boliche* in 1977. This particular woman did not enjoy the general atmosphere at the *boliches*, which she described as "by/for the masculine world."[33] She recalled that lesbians replicated binary gender roles in these spaces, where masculine-presenting women would court the feminine-presenting women, asking them to dance or striking up a conversation with them. According to this respondent, the women who attended *boliches* reproduced the notion that masculinity was an active characteristic, while femininity was decisively passive. Unfortunately, the archives only include this one hostile informant's recollections about the ways that women engaged with each other at *boliches*. Nonetheless, her conclusions show that she maintained middle-class assumptions about gender and sexuality, as discussed in Chapter 1. Therefore, it is plausible to conclude that *boliches* predominantly existed as a social space for working-class lesbians. Many of the middle-class lesbians who had previously joined feminist groups might have resisted binary gender constructions in their romantic lives. For them, El Sótano was likely a more welcoming space.

Nonetheless, any of the small numbers of women who gathered at El Sótano, *boliches*, or

[33] Original: "por el mundo masculino." Anonymous, "Testimonios 5," *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* (March 1987), 11.

other spaces where queer women could interact with each other took great risks to do so.[34] While the state efficaciously maintained control of the public sphere through terrorizing methods, they also succeeded in establishing a normative gender order, whereby the performance and portrayal of proper gender roles was crucial to the one's personal safety. Specifically, the military expected women to wear modest clothing and to keep their hair long, whereas men were properly masculine when their hair was cut above their ears and they wore trousers.[35] Avoiding attention from the military or police would have been easier, therefore, for those who conformed to gender expectations. The masculine-presenting women who attended the *boliches* were more at risk of scrutiny. While this has historically been true, no matter what kind of government was in charge, the stakes were even greater after José Lopez Rega's anti-homosexual manifesto in 1975, in which he specifically identified "burly women… with deep voices" as social threats.[36]

Recognizing that outward expressions of one's sexuality were too dangerous, many queer women chose to make their resistance to gender conformity invisible to others. For example, Barbara Sutton has shown that many lesbians opted to rebel against bodily expectations put on them by the dictatorship via subtle techniques, such as letting their hair go grey or ceasing to wax, when more outwardly transgressions would have been too risky.[37] In Sutton's work, lesbian rejections of traditional feminine physical appearance informed the methods through which they could express their gender and sexuality in bodily ways that did not leave them vulnerable to unwanted attention during the dictatorship. Walking the streets of Buenos Aires, enjoying a *cortado* at a café, or traveling to Tigre was made easier when one did not attract attention from

[34] The historian can only guess where such places might have been since they left no permanent records of their existence, except perhaps in personal keepsakes and memories, like the brief mention of a *boliche* in the Abasto neighborhood by the anonymous respondent mentioned above.
[35] Taylor, 105.
[36] Quoted in *Gay Sunshine* 26/27 (Winter 1975–1976), 12.
[37] Sutton, 92.

the morality police, whose job it was, in part, to regulate the gender code.

When lesbians were confronted by the police, their recourse was to ensure the officer that they were not political. A story that appeared in the Spring 1981 issue of *Connexions*, a U.S. feminist periodical, illustrates this tactic. Two women, Sara and Mónica, met just before the coup. Instead of getting involved in leftist politics through activism or at the university, Sara and Mónica both worked in downtown offices and met through work-related activities. Mónica lived with her parents, who were devout Catholics, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. Sara had relocated to Buenos Aires from the interior of Argentina, and lived in a boarding house for young, single women. Despite the obvious obstacles to their relationship—the repressive regime, as well as their living situations—, a romance blossomed between them. One Friday night, they met for dinner and decided afterward to look for a place where they could be alone. On their walk to a neighborhood in the city where respectable hotels were located, they snuck in a kiss, believing that they were concealed by darkness. However, they were being followed by a plainclothes police officer. After they checked into a hotel, and were in the privacy of the hotel room, the owner of the hotel knocked on their door and told them they had to leave, that a police officer had spoken with him and that they were no longer welcome. They left, crossed the street, and entered another hotel. There, the cop came in, asked for their documents and told them they were under arrest. He explained that a police patrol had seen them kissing on a corner and he had been following them ever since. Despite having been caught sharing an intimate moment with one another, Mónica assures the cop that they are not political. She says, "Us suspect? How? We're not mixed up in politics; we don't go to the university."[38]

[38]" Shrouded in Silence," in Stephan Likosky, ed., *Coming Out*, 77. "Shrouded in Silence originally appeared in the US periodical, *Connexions.* Stephan Likosky reprinted, in its entirety, in his edited volume *Coming Out*.

For whatever reason, the cop seemingly felt sympathetic towards them, or perhaps he wanted to show that he was more respectful of women than the military police who he claimed would not "think twice about beating you with his billy club, and he'll rape you to boot."[39] Sexual violence of all kinds was common in the military's concentration camps. In their book about the sexual crimes that took place in clandestine detention centers during the dictatorship, Miriam Lewin and Olga Wornat describe the ways in which sexual violence functioned as a tool of the military. They describe how the military used sexual violence against women to denigrate men and show women who actually controlled their bodies: "he tells the raped woman: 'Do you see how I'm the only male here? Do you see how your man does not guarantee you security because he is not brave or virile, and how I reduce him to the most absolute abjection?'"[40] By violating both women and men in detention centers, the army asserted its masculine power, which they understood as superior to the "femininity" displayed by all leftists, regardless of their sex or gender.

Sexual violence, or the threat of sexual violence, during the Proceso was used to subdue citizens to authoritarian rule. In the case of Sara and Mónica, the threat of sexual violence ensured their compliance with the police officer, who, for reasons unknown, offered the women a ride home. Such a reaction from a police officer was not unprecedented. Moira Pérez has shown that "the fate of queers [in the presence of the police] depended more on the officer's mood than on the structural conditions of the State."[41] Here, Pérez is referring to the capriciousness of police officers during the dictatorship, as well as during democratically elected

[39] Ibid.
[40] Original: "le dice a la mujer violada: ¿'Ves cómo acá soy el único macho? ¿Ves cómo tu hombre no te garantiza la seguridad porque no es valiente, ni viril, y cómo lo reduzco a la abyección más absoluta?'" Miriam Lewin and Olga Wornat, *Putas y guerilleras*, 187–88.
[41] Moira Pérez, "We Don't Need Another Hero," 204–05.

governments. The police officer in this story could exert his power and his control over the women by offering a ride home because he has already said that he could rape them if he wanted. It was not a kindness to offer them a ride home after scaring them with the threat of sexual violence. Moreover, by accompanying the women home, the officer extended his and the state's surveillance into the intimate lives of women, and, in particular, lesbians.

After the offer of a ride home, Sara asked to be taken to Mónica's house with her, scared of being alone with the officer. The story ends with the following paragraph:

> It was very late when they got to Mónica's house. Her family was furious, but nothing mattered after what they'd been through. They made love, forgetting [the police officer] and the rest of the nightmare. It was not until the next day that they realized how difficult it is to find a place for oneself.[42] ."[43]

Sara and Mónica tried to remain invisible, taking to the shadows for their kiss and retreating to the privacy of the bedroom where they could finally express their affection for one another. Ironically, the couple finds respite in a "devout Catholic home." One explanation of this could be that during the dictatorship, parents of teenagers and young adults became increasingly more permissive toward their children's sex and sexuality. Natalia Milanesio explains that "parents allowed or at least did not object to their children's sex life as compensation for the lack of freedom and the oppressive climate these teenagers and young adults experienced in different spheres of their lives."[44] However, Milanesio's argument does not necessarily extend to parents of queer children. Her analysis points to relaxed rules regarding premarital sex, but does not provide insight into similar changes within the family regarding lesbian sex.

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[42]" Shrouded in Silence," 78.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Natalia Milanesio, *¡Destape!*, 167.

One of the reasons, then, that helps explain why it was possible for Sara and Mónica to find such respite in the home of devout Catholics was because lesbianism was not often visible, especially to those outside of the queer community. Even the officer who saw these women kiss and then check into a hotel room did not arrest them nor turn them over to a detention center for subversive behavior, despite clear evidence. Perhaps this is because lesbian sexuality did not exist within the realm of possibility for him. This inability to see lesbian sexuality for what it was sometimes expanded to friends and family. For example, V.O., a pseudonym provided by one of the respondents to a 1987 questionnaire about lesbian experiences, acknowledged that during the 1970s, when she cohabitated with her female partner, she not only had to answer the questions from friends and family about why she wasn't married or whether or not she wanted children, but she and her partner also had to hide their relationship from family members: "My friend's mother complained, 'My daughter is never going to get married, she will be an old maid.' And I could not answer her, 'Ma'am, your daughter is already married to me.'"[45] This kind of erasure rendered lesbian relationships invisible to those outside of them. Learning to negotiate this sexual invisibility became a key component of lesbian experiences during the dictatorship.

Invisibility was one of many methods by which women negotiated living under a dictatorship. For some women, relying on older expectations of women's relegation to the private sphere allowed for different responses to the dictatorship. For example, the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Madres) embraced the ideals of motherhood and the domain of the private sphere in their politics. According to Marguerite Guzman Bouvard, "(t)he Mothers are not interested in eliminating maternity as gender identification, but rather in creating a political role

[45] Original: "La madre de mi amiga se lamentaba 'mi hija no se va a casar nunca, será una solterona. 'Y yo no podia contestarle 'señora, su hija ya está casada conmigo'" V.O., "Testimonios 4," *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* (March 1987), 9.

for the values of love and the caring work associated with maternity."[46] Similarly, Doña Petrona, Argentina's most famous *ecónoma* (corporate home economist), used her popularity and expertise in domestic issues to speak out in favor of changing gender roles in the 1970s. Doña Petrona appealed to women's roles as wives and mothers to advocate in favor of raising "daughters so that they can make a life for themselves outside of the home."[47] According to Rebekah Pite, making sure that women still had important roles within the home "made this a safe gender politics to articulate under a dictatorship that sought to encourage gender norms tightly linking women and domesticity."[48] While Doña Petrona was never interested in challenging the military regime, she was able to argue for certain aspects of women's liberation by seemingly adhering to her gendered role in society. Likewise, the Mothers used the ideology of motherhood as the platform by which they argued against the regime. It is unclear what, if any, aspects of motherhood or domesticity were available for lesbians as spaces in which to challenge societal norms under the military regime.

Of course, in reality, it was not possible for the regime to relegate women to the private sphere. In her work on the Madres, historian Temma Kaplan noted that "by June 1977, some hundred mothers completed the *ronda*" (walk around the Plaza de Mayo).[49] Women worked in greater numbers throughout the 1970s, their numbers increased at universities, and the anecdotes above show that women did not all "stay home." This history of queer women's abilities to move about Buenos Aires in cafés, *boliches*, hotels, the Delta, parks, and clandestine venues also reveals the usage of the notion of invisibility. To a certain degree, these women relied on the preexisting narratives about female gender and sexuality that dismissed women as legitimate

[46] Bouvard, 187.
[47] Doña Petrona, quoted in Rebekah E. Pite, *Creating a Common Table*, 207.
[48] Pite, 207.
[49] Kaplan, 110.

citizens. This is not to say that women were not targets of the military's violence and repression. They, of course, were. The *Nunca Más* report created by CONADEP concluded that 30% of the disappeared were women.[50] Moreover, the military murdered or disappeared 400 gay men during the dictatorship.[51] Similar statistics for lesbians who the military disappeared or detained during the dictatorship do not exist. The lack of evidence is not reason enough to conclude that lesbians were not targeted by the military specifically because of their supposed gender and/or sexual "subversion." But the archival records evaluated here point to a clear strategy of survival. This strategy was to hide, sometimes in plain sight. Hiding hairy legs beneath clothes, hiding affection in the shadows, hiding information, hiding a meeting space below ground, hiding in the labyrinthine rivers of the Delta, or hiding one's sexuality were all methods used by lesbian and bisexual women to safely negotiate living through the dictatorship. To a certain degree, all Argentinians were forced to adopt similar strategies. However, lesbian and bisexual women already understood themselves in terms of invisibility at the start of the Dirty War. What we see during the dictatorship, then, is a reconstitution of this notion of invisibility that had partly defined the lesbian identity during the years preceding the Proceso.

Sexual Intimacy

Mónica and Sara's story not only reveals the ways that lesbians could rely on invisibility for protection, but it also exposes some of the ways that women understood sexual intimacy as a mode of resistance. The night that they were stopped and harassed by the police officer, the two women had attempted to check into a hotel where they could make love. As unmarried women, neither of them lived alone, and so they needed a private place where they could be intimate.

[50] David Rock, "Nunca Más: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared."
[51] Stephen Brown, '"Con Discriminación y Represión No Hay Democracia,"' 121.

Their plan thwarted, they returned to Mónica's house, and there they made love. These two women were in a romantic relationship with one another and, lacking a space in traditional Argentine society, they carved one out for themselves. Despite a real threat to their livelihoods, given the probability of losing their jobs had they been arrested for subversive behavior, as well a threat to their lives, given the great number of people who were detained, tortured, killed, and disappeared throughout the Proceso, Mónica and Sara still retreated to a private place where they could be intimate. Therefore, sexual acts and acts of romantic intimacy required not only bravery, but also a complete unwillingness to acquiesce to the patriarchal order. The national political emergency gives private acts new meanings.[52] Same-sex erotic intimacy between women, though private, was a form of resistance in its denial of the dominant ideology's construction of female sexuality.[53]

In their story, Sara and Mónica contested the gender hierarchy on two main levels. First of all, their foray into public without male companions at night opposed the gender logic of the military regime. Secondly, Sara and Mónica's sexual relationship undermined the construction of women's sexuality in terms of men's desires and needs. By the 1970s, it was not expected that *porteñXs* appear in public with men. In fact, there is much evidence that beginning in the mid-twentieth century, women socialized and shopped in the capital during the day without male

[52] An expansive historiography exists that has examined the dichotomy between public and private. In her review of the public/private divide, Leonore Davidoff has noted that, as concepts, public and private "have become a basic part of the way our whole social and psychic worlds are ordered, but an order that is constantly shifting, being made and remade" (*Worlds Between*, 228). While always a historically situated category, private is used here in the sense provided by Ann Twinam when she writes, "The private world included family, kin, and intimate friends" (*Public Lives, Private Secrets*, 28).
[53] The concept of resistance has been highly debated by scholars across disciplines. Lila Abu-Lughod inverts Foucault's claim that where there is power, there is resistance. She wants us to think about resistance as "a diagnostic of power." As such, she claims that "where there is resistance, there is power." In making this shift, she offers us a way of thinking about resistance as more than just a public response to power. Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance," 41–42.

chaperons.[54] However, women who appeared in public unaccompanied by men were fair game to be approached by police officers. In this case, it seems likely that the policeman was invoking an older tradition as part of the current patriarchal right of police: women without men are a problem, and women's place was in the domain of the home.

A key component of the dictatorship was to reassert these older norms by ridding society of the leftist youths who had, they believed, perverted, among other things, traditional gender roles and sexuality. Performing one's gender was a key survival strategy during the Proceso. The military was so concerned about the role of gender in their program for order and hierarchy that they produced a flyer illustrating correct and incorrect appearances for male and female youth.[55] On June 1, 1976, the *Consejo Publicitario Argentino* (Argentine Publicity Commission), a civil association founded in 1962 to promote social causes for the government, posted an ad in *La nación*, Argentina's leading conservative daily newspaper, that specifically called for people to correctly play their allotted role in life, including their gender role. In "Calls for Individual Responsibility," the association claimed:

> You who are a woman, you are young, you work, maybe you are overwhelmed by all the risky bifurcations that present themselves on your chosen path. You must avoid those dangers, you must not stray from the main path. One day, when you face your children, you will rejoice that you knew how to do it. This country is what you make of it.[56]

Some of the expectations for women's behavior during the dictatorship are clear in the lines of this brief quote. Not only were women expected to maintain traditional comportment, to not "stray from the main path," but it was also understood that women were to become mothers.

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[54] See Manzano, 97–122
[55] See Taylor, 95–109.
[56] Quoted in Taylor, 104.

More striking is the implication that the actions and choices that women made in their youth would have a lasting impact on their as-of-yet unborn children. The expectation was that not only were women to become mothers, but also that their behavior in their youth would have consequences for future generations. With such high stakes assigned to gender performance, then being seen in public while performing outside of one's normative gender was dangerous. As Diana Taylor makes clear, "[i]ndividuals policed themselves, internalizing the surveilling eye—Were they doing it right? Was their shirt too flashy, their hair too long? What would their bodies signal to others? … Obedient bodies publicly enacted submission."[57] Therefore, by not "publicly enacting submission," Sara and Mónica challenged—quite dangerously—the military's gender logic.

There is evidence of state institutions maintaining and reinforcing these older norms well into the 1970s and 1980s. Hebe, who participated in a workshop on lesbianism in Buenos Aires in 1986, recalled that in secondary school, which she attended during the years of the dictatorship, she and her fellow classmates were educated about female sexuality in very specific terms: "the sense of those Biology classes was to prepare us for reproduction, to be mothers."[58] In Hebe's school, it was not the military enforcing a particular ideology; rather, it was the educational system (whether Catholic or secular, it does not say) working as a guardian of traditional gender roles. Another participant, V.O., echoed this sentiment in her testimony, noting that she was taught that reproductive love was the only kind of (romantic) love that was

[57] Taylor, 107.
[58] Original: "el sentido de esas clases de Biología era prepararnos para la reproducción, para ser madres." Hebe, "Testimonio 2," *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* (March 1987), 7.

acceptable. She concludes that this way of thinking helped to reproduce the dominant ideology: "The norm of the patriarchy, of the master, of the fatherland?, clearly emerges."[59]

The experiences of Hebe and V.O. are representative of other Argentinians. Their recollections were presented in the first issue of *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* in 1987. *Cuaderno* was a zine created by and for lesbians in Buenos Aires. The editors of the issue, Ilse Kornreich (later known as Ilse Fuskovich) and Adriana Carrasco (Martha Ferro's partner), wrote that in the middle of 1986, they had gotten together to study lesbianism. During their discussions, they realized that the problems they repeatedly acknowledged were not so much about the negation or marginalization of lesbian sexuality, as had been one of the focuses of the discussions at El Sótano, but of the repression of all women's sexuality and sexual pleasure. To contribute to this larger discussion, they included testimonies from six lesbians of different ages and experiences to illustrate the ways that lesbian sexuality confirmed the constructions of female sexuality in general.

Nonetheless, some feminist lesbians understood lesbian sex as a contestation to this dominant ideology of female sexuality, since neither was a man involved, nor was pregnancy a desired outcome of the sexual act. In 1981, at the age of 16, Hebe read Anne Koedt's essay on the pleasures of female sexuality, *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm*. Upon reading this essay, Hebe claims to have come to realize a new possibility: "that of autonomous pleasure, different from the notion of 'donated pleasure' that the patriarchy subjects us [to]."[60] The 'donated pleasure' to which Hebe refers is that provided by male penetration. It is to say that men have the power to give women sexual pleasure. Hebe's realization that men were unnecessary for her

[59] Original: "Surge claramente la norma del patriarcado, del patron, ¿de la patria?" V.O., "Testimonio 4," *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* (March 1987), 9.
[60] Original: "la del placer autónomo, distinto de la noción de 'placer donado 'conque nos sujeta el patriarcado." Hebe, "Testimonio 2," *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* (March 1987), 7.

sexual pleasure reflected what other women have said about their experiences of same-sex sex during the years of the dictatorship echo. The pattern that emerges from these testimonies is that the clitoris, being the focus of the respondents 'sexual pleasure but also unnecessary for reproduction, was not just a nerve center, but also the symbolic center of the lesbian feminist revolution.

This notion was ubiquitous across feminist writings of the era. For example, the authors of *Diario Colectivo* wrote, "I believe that the exploration of sexuality is a crucial factor in the formation of a revolutionary consciousness."[61] Jointly authored between 1980 and 1982 by a group of four feminists (Maria Ines Aldaburu, Ines Cano, Hilda Rais, and Nene Reynoso), *Diario Colectivo* presented feminist approaches to topics including abortion, patriarchal violence, and women's sexuality.[62] One reason that exploring women's sexuality was potentially liberating was that stimulus of the clitoris does not require penetration. The authors of *Diario Colectivo* argued that the internal organs of the female anatomy (the hymen, the uterus, or the vagina), those which require "penetration" to access "are precisely the parts of our bodies that bear the stamp of colonization—carried out by lies, violence or both at the same time."[63] The logic and language of this text confronts the violent misogyny of the military's use of sexual torture and rape. The clitoris, then, was revolutionary because it symbolically avoided the narrative of penetration and sexual violence.

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[61] Original: "Creo que la exploración de la sexualidad es un factor crucial en la formación de una conciencia revolucionaria." Aldaburu, et al. *Diario Colectivo*, 46.

[62] The book reads as a conversation between the four women, and a specific line identifies one of them as lesbian: "Siento que, para dos de ustedes, sigo siendo "diferente" en tanto se manifieste mi lesbianism" (I feel that, for two of you, I am still "different" as long as my lesbianism is manifested). While none of the writing is attributed to a specific author, it is known based on her later coming out that the contributor who identified as lesbian was Hilda Rais. Aldaburu, et al. *Diario Colectivo*, 206.

[63] Original: "son, precisamente, las partes de nuestos cuerpos que más llevan el sello de la colonización—efectuada por la mentira, la violencia o ambas cosas a la vez." Aldaburu, et al., 46.

The clitoris also became a liberating symbol for Argentine feminists precisely because it represented sexual pleasure for women, a concept about which women were not taught in school or at home. The idea that their bodily pleasure could be the focal point of sex became symbolic of women's liberation. Journalist Erika Kirchner's column in the countercultural periodical, *Cerdos y Peces*, provided a heteronormative feminist perspective.[64] Although published in the post-dictatorship period, Kirchner's weekly column, entitled "Clitóris," represents conversations that happened during the Proceso. Kirchner's discussions about female sexual pleasure, especially, mirror the discourse that circulated amongst lesbians and bisexual women during the preceding decade. Among her discussions on abortion, fidelity, masturbation, and motherhood—all topics by which she assumes normative heterosexual configurations—, Kirchner also critiqued vaginal sex for not always bringing women pleasure. She rhetorically asked, "when it comes to sharing and enjoying a sexual encounter with a man, is the vagina the only possible way to achieve pleasure?"[65] The title of her article seems to point to a resounding response in the negative. Throughout her column, Kirchner described the alienation, rather than the intimacy, feelings of aloneness, rather than connectedness that she experienced during some sexual encounters. She poetically characterized orgasms as "that great disagreement symbolized by two bodies that move unbridled to achieve 'ending,' the parody of feeling united to the other."[66]

[64] *Cerdos y Peces* began publications in 1983, immediately following the election of Raúl Alfonsín. Started by Enrique Symns, it focused on all topics considered taboo at the time, including prostitution, drug use, and homosexuality. Heterosexual women's sexuality was also recognized as a taboo subject by the editors. Lesbian sexuality is mentioned only briefly throughout the publication.
[65] Original: "cuando se trata de compartir y disfrutar el encuentro sexual con un hombre, ¿es acaso la vagina, la única posible para lograr placer?" Erika Kirchner, "Clitóris," *Cerdos y Peces* (June 1984), 16.
[66] Original: "ese gran desencuentro simbolizado por dos cuerpos que se mueven desenfrenadamente para lograr 'acabar' con la parodia de sentirse unido al otro." Erika Kirchner, "Clitóris," *Cerdos y Peces* (April 1984), 24.

The "parody of feeling united to the other" is absent from accounts of lesbian sex. In fact, the exact opposite was often reported: "With another woman everything seems to be understood. I don't need to express what I like and what I don't. It's as if I love myself."[67] While this might be a romanticized or idealized characterization of lesbian erotic experiences, it still reflects the contrasting sentiments held by heterosexual and homosexual women. More importantly, this divergence points to the ways that lesbians understood sex acts as political speech. While Erika Kirchner and other heterosexual feminists at the time were calling for women's sexual liberation, they still assumed the role of men in their bedrooms, and thus, in their social and political lives.

Conversely, lesbians and, especially, bisexual women were much more outright about the political directive to remove men from having access to their intimate lives until there was socioeconomic and sociopolitical equality in Argentina. Lesbian sex, they argued, mimicked a horizontal model of structuring society. The respondents to *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* and the authors of *Diario Colectivo* viewed sexual acts between women and men as unequal. Therefore, those who did not discount the possibility of engaging in sex with men again asserted that they could only ever do so if radical social and political change occurred such that men and women were equal. In fact, the women in these testimonies attribute the increased sexual pleasure they experience with other women, as opposed to with men, based on the equality they felt with other women. Those who talked about sex with both men and women didn't deny that they had enjoyed sex with men. But they all, without exception, declared that same-sex sex was more pleasurable.[68] In addition to a sense of equality between women in the bedroom, these

[67] Original: "Con otra mujer parece estar todo sobreentendido. No necesito expresar qué me gusta y qué no. Es como si me amare a mí misma." Quoted in *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* (March 1987), 3.
[68] The published responses were curated by Ilse Fuskova and Adriana Carrasco. It is possible that they selected those responses that fulfilled their agenda and did not present an adequate representation of the different kinds of responses they received during their workshop. See *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* (March 1987).

testimonies asserted that sexual pleasure was a result of women knowing how women's bodies work, which, accordingly, made them more skilled lovers. Finally, same-sex sex could not result in pregnancy, which was a relief for women who thought of motherhood as an obligation imposed on them within a patriarchal system. Taken all together, these factors helped women who engaged in same-sex sex understand lesbian sex as a rejection of traditional society with the potential of forging radical societal change.

Therefore, sexual practice emerged as central to the politics of lesbianism during the dictatorship. Same-sex sex became speech acts that homosexual and bisexual women used to resist the military dictatorship. By conceiving of sexual penetration as emblematic of the patriarchy, sex without penetration presumed a logic and language that resisted the mores of the dictatorship. Whether or not fingers or toys were used for penetration, the narrative about lesbian sex during the dictatorship rejects penetration because of its focus on men's pleasure and men's ability to reach orgasm. More importantly, perhaps, the anti-penetration rhetoric fiercely defies the brutal misogyny of the military. When the police officer who picked up Sara and Mónica claimed that the military would have raped them, he was underscoring one of the military's common torture tactics. By constructing a discourse about lesbian sexuality that rejects the logic of violence and dictatorship, then, lesbian sex acts, themselves, became anti-violent, pro-democratic speech acts.

This construction of lesbian sex as one of equality is a continuation of experiences from before the dictatorship. For their history of Argentina's lesbians between 1930–1976, Alejandra Sardá and Silvano Hernando interviewed 13 women. While many of those interviewed claimed that they had assumed gendered roles within their relationships with other women, they also claimed that such roles did not extend to their sexual lives. One respondent, Carmen, is quoted,

"No, there were no roles between us … There were roles, yes, for outsiders."[69] Here, Carmen is claiming that people assumed, based on appearances and mannerisms, that she was "la femme" in the relationship, but that there were no sexual roles that translated to gender roles between she and her girlfriend. Valeria, another respondent, said that even though her girlfriend sometimes called her "señor," they, too, did not assume gendered roles during sex.[70] Mónica concurred: "one is always more feminine than the other but in bed we are all equal."[71] By the time Sardá and Hernando interviewed Carmen, Valeria, and Mónica in the 1990s, second-wave feminism and lesbian activism had been part of Argentina's social milieu for at least two decades; therefore, it is possible that these women were romanticizing their past relationships. Nonetheless, these recollections help illustrate that lesbian sex was, by the 1990s, understood in terms of fairness and evenness. Part of that construction was built during the Proceso when lesbian sex functioned, in part, as speech acts in opposition to the dictatorship.

Conclusion

The story that opened this chapter—about the two women walking in a park in downtown Buenos Aires when they were stopped by police officers—reveals that lesbians were sometimes able to hide in plain sight. Though the women in the park were a lesbian couple, the fact that their "subversive" sexuality was not even considered by the police officers is a crucial aspect of understanding how lesbians were able to protect themselves and to move throughout Buenos Aires during the last dictatorship. Lesbian bodies and sexualities remained unthinkable to the

[69] Original: "No, entre nosotros no había roles … Había roles, sí, para los de afuera." Carmen, quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 81.
[70] Sardá and Hernando, 77.
[71] Original: "una siempre es más femenina que la otra pero en la cama somos todos iquales." Mónica, quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 56.

gatekeepers of the patriarchal system. The political and legal systems that produced subjects and citizens did not recognize lesbians. By not constituting lesbians as subjects, Argentine society participated in the construction of a lesbian epistemology of invisibility that helped homosexual women negotiate not only the repression of the era, which was profound, but also the city landscape, which was heavily surveilled. Being able to map out spaces where lesbian and bisexual women could socialize was part of understanding lesbianism as defiant subjecthood.

Diana Bellessi has said that many people could not write during the dictatorship "because bodies disappeared and voices disappeared." In this procedure of disappearing, she remembered, "you gave your attention to other things, to living life, to the small and futile things that would save you from the fear and the horror."[72] Bellessi may be right that voices disappeared, but speech acts did not. Sex acts provided Argentine feminists, whatever their sexuality, with opportunities to contest the mores of the dictatorship. Sex acts as speech acts became ways for lesbians to focus on "the small and futile things." Moreover, invisible resistances became speech acts. We can even, perhaps, understand Bellessi's retreat to the Delta, to live in the wild away from the "civilized" world, as a speech act. As I've understood resistance in this chapter, even invisible moments of resistance—especially invisible moments of resistance?—, even "the small and futile" moments of rejecting the standards of the dictatorship should be understood as speech acts. Defiance, even in the simplest of forms, such as not shaving your legs or kissing someone of the same sex, was a way of taking control of one's own life, of rejecting the dictatorship. Meeting a girlfriend at a café, at El Sótano, or at a hotel presented very real risks. Getting away with it must have felt empowering and invigorating. Knowing how to hide in plain sight, knowing how to think of yourself as invisible was a useful tool for getting away with defiance.

[72] *El jardín secreto*, dir. by Cristián Costantini, Diego Panich, and Claudia Prado.

Lesbian and bisexual women were cognizant of their contestation of the military's gender logics that attempted to influence their intimate lives. This way of thinking about sex and sex acts as metaphors for citizenship fits with other narratives about the relationship between sex and the state. In fact, gay men in Buenos Aires also thought about sex acts as acts of resistance. For example, they considered train station bathrooms as places of democracy. One man recalled, "The railway stations were and continue to be those of a portable and democratic Sodom."[73] Here, the claim is that because of the anonymous sex that the train stations offered, whereby names—and sometimes faces—were rarely known to one's sexual partners, there existed a kind of social equality not experienced in other aspects of life. The military also recognized the intersection between citizenship and sex, though in a violent and macabre way. They used rape and sexual torture to assert their power over the people they detained and kept in concentration camps. In the next chapter, I examine the ways that artists and writers constructed narratives about lesbianism that specifically positioned homosexual and bisexual women in contrast to the immorality perpetrated by the military and police.

[73] Original: "Las estaciones de ferrocarril fueron y siguen siendo las de una Sodoma partátil y democrática." Quoted in Rapisardi and Modarelli, 10.

CHAPTER 3

Textual Intimacy: Creating the Lesbian Intimate Public

The Argentine press experienced direct and extreme consequences when the military gained power in 1976. A month after taking control, the military's press director issued an official ban on reporting or referencing the deaths of "subversives" in the nation, unless the government had given prior official notice. Much of the mainstream media outlets adhered to the edict; *Clarín* even took their outward support of the dictatorship a step further, posting a full-page ad declaring that there were no restrictions on the press. Still, some 400 journalists fled the country and many publications ceased operations. *Buenos Aires Herald* was one of the few publications that refused to follow the censorship rules and, instead, routinely published missing persons notices until the editor, Robert Cox, was forced to flee Argentina in 1979. The treatment of the press is a microcosm of the state's immorality during the last dictatorship, by which they imposed their authority over all of Argentina in order to carry out the violence and brutalities of the Dirty War. As Marguerite Feitlowitz has made clear, "All of society's institutions—political, military, and legal, religious, social, and domestic—were mobilized or appropriated for the purposes of clandestine torture and public complicity."[1] Until state terrorism precipitously declined in 1980, the established press did not cover the incidents of the Dirty War.

The few texts that homosexual artists and writers created during the dictatorship appeared after 1980. Prior to that, the state had effectively silenced the countercultural press, just as it had the mainstream press. Even when gay and lesbian voices began appearing in print again, their texts tended to avoid direct criticism of the military. Instead, these texts alluded to the violence

[1] Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 70.

of the military, using metaphors and allegories to avoid explicitly pointing a finger at the dictatorship. Throughout these texts, lesbians collectively created new ways of imagining lesbianism. Of course, not all of these efforts were built within strictly lesbian settings. At times, they were joint projects with other feminists, gay men, sometimes forged transnationally. In their critiques of the patriarchal family, lesbian writings not only repudiated traditional power structures and violences, but they also imagined new social relations that made room for homosexuality. In their discourse on morality, lesbians inverted the traditional ethical code and reimagined one that assumed lesbian superiority. In their discussions about romance, the lesbian intimate public deviated from the discourse of fidelity to the nation. Lesbianism also moved beyond the nation via participation in a transnational collective. Additionally, the use of coded language and slang helped lesbians in Buenos Aires think of themselves as part of the popular class. The collective outcome of these multiple settings and genres was an intimate public that made lesbianism intelligible as a working-class, moral alternative to elite authoritarianism.

The term intimate public is borrowed from Lauren Berlant's work. By intimate public, she means ways of "imagining and cobbling together alternative construals about how life has appeared and how legitimately it could be better shaped not merely in small modifications of normativity."[2] Here, Berlant has described a collective, subaltern identity based on shared experiences and forged in the production and consumption of culture. Using Berlant's conception of the intimate public, this chapter explores the shared meanings that emerge from lesbian texts—including poems, puppet shows, slang, fiction and nonfiction writings, and transnational communications—during the years of the dictatorship. This discourse provides access to the lesbian intimate public of the era. Looking at language as the primary product

[2] Lauren Berlant and Jay Prossner, "Life Writing," 182.

through which lesbians produced and consumed a shared history shows that lesbians, by and large, bypassed state structures, including the patriarchal family, militarism, patriotism, and authoritarianism, to interpret their shared history.

The lesbian intimate public undermined a discourse of fidelity to the nation. Whether same-sex sex was imagined as the inverse of rape and sexual violence, or whether lesbians imagined themselves as the moral authority in an immoral society, the lesbian intimate public was constructed as a clear contradistinction to the military regime. By centering lesbians as the imagined "immoral other" against which dominant society created its own sense of morality, lesbians asserted an understanding of lesbianism as the true moral authority. Lesbian slang, which often enabled gay and bisexual women to express notions of sexuality and gender in public, also reflected a sense of moral superiority. The lesbian intimate public that emerged during the dictatorship, therefore, occupied a space in opposition to authoritarianism.[3]

Lesbian activist Elena Napolitano's writing, some of which is analyzed below, is illustrative of the methods through which lesbians created an intimate public throughout the Proceso. Via artistic productions and written work, lesbians under dictatorial rule worked to construct a sexual intelligibility for themselves.[4] The patriarchal family and the national culture

[3] The historiography of lesbian politics in Argentina during the 1970s puts forth the argument that lesbians existed juxtapolitically to both feminist and male homosexual activists. Nonetheless, all groups promoted antiauthoritarian platforms prior to the last dictatorship. It follows that they would maintain these positions during the Proceso, as well. See Ana Clara Benavente and Luisina Gentile, "Lesbians en los '70 Felitti;" Karina Felitti, "En defensa de la libertad sexual;" Valeria Flores, "El sótano de San Telmo;" Florencia Gemetro, "Lesbianas jóvenes en los 70;" Laura Andrea Gonzalez, "Betters y Entendidas;" and Karin Grammático, "Las 'mujeres políticas' y las feministas en los tempranos setenta."

[4] Beginning in the 1980s, some homosexual activists began to speak of a desire to be recognized as legitimate citizens. This was a sharp turn from some of the earlier manifestations of gay liberation which relied on Marxist rhetoric to argue against normative institutions, such as the patriarchal family. The desire to be recognized as legitimate is one way of understanding intelligibility, albeit from an outsider's viewpoint. However, when I invoke "sexual intelligibility" here, I am thinking about Ernesto Javier Martínez's work on queer race narratives when he writes that a preoccupation with intelligibility by queer people of color "is best understood as a concern with the everyday labor of *making sense of oneself* and of

had made heterosexuality intelligible, but had excluded lesbianism. Therefore, lesbians confronted these sites that had traditionally left them unintelligible, or, as the lesbian-feminists of the early 1970s had articulated, impossible. In order to make lesbianism intelligible, they focused on shared experiences within those spaces that had been the most oppressive, such as the family. They also inverted traditional concepts of morality in the nation. These themes appear across the work produced by lesbians during the dictatorship. Therefore, Napolitano's work shows that she was not only participating in the construction the lesbian intimate public via writing, but also that she was participating by consuming other people's work. Throughout this discursive project, lesbians worked to make lesbianism intelligible to other lesbians. In rejecting traditional life narratives, this group of women constructed an understanding of lesbianism that reflected collective experiences of repression and violence. The lesbian intimate public that emerged from the cultural productions during the dictatorship was one that recognized lesbianism as intelligible via its opposition to the patriarchal family and national culture. The lesbian intimate public of the era collectively imagined new social relations and life paths. In other words, they argued that lesbianism had something to teach society about itself.

Critiquing the Family

In 1983, during the final months of the dictatorship, Elena Napolitano [Image 3.1], a young lesbian in her early 20s, spent her days on the Avenida Santa Fe in Buenos Aires, personally distributing photocopies of an open letter she wrote to Argentina's women.[5] She was one of the few lesbians who publicly outed herself during the years of the dictatorship, even

making sense of others in contexts of intense ideological violence and interpersonal conflict." Martínez, *On Making Sense*, 14–15.

[5] "Elena Napolitano," Archivo Monali, https://archivomonali.com/2017/10/08/elena-napolitano/

providing her full name in interviews and allowing her photograph to be taken.[6] In 1982, she, along with Marcelo Benitez and Zelmer Acevedo, founded the clandestine Grupo Federativo Gay (GFG), a short-lived activist group that helped to lay the groundwork for Comunidad Homosexual Argentina (CHA), Argentina's largest post-dictatorship gay and lesbian organization. In "Carta de persona a persona" (Letter from person to person), Napolitano implored her readers to take action in support of gay men and women, to "talk, study, form groups of self-awareness."[7] In order to build her case that the nation's gay and lesbian population needed support, Napolitano listed several examples of homosexual adults and children being persecuted. Except for one mention of a gay man being sexually assaulted in prison, she did not speak of state repression. Instead, Napolitano identified the home as the primary site of violence Argentina's homosexuals. Her focus on the home and family as a key extension of the state illustrates her keen awareness of how normative discourses and power structures functioned dialectically between the political/public and the apolitical/private spheres[8]. Integral to her discourse was the idea that lesbian intelligibility was founded, in part, on experiences of isolation, trauma, and violence. Incidents within the home stand as a key component of the shared experiences that helped formulate the nebulous boundaries of the lesbian intimate public in Buenos Aires.

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[6] State terrorism declined beginning in 1980, making it considerably safer for Napolitano to be interviewed, have her image printed, and start a gay liberation group. The turning point in the state's violence was due in large part to the investigation conducted by the Inter-American Human Rights Commission in September 1979. The commission released its conclusion that the military had violated the human rights of its citizens on April 18, 1980. See Martin Edwin Andersen, *Dossier Secreto*, 287–88.

[7] Original: "conversar, estudiar, formar grupos de autoconciencia." Elena Napolitano, "Carta de persona a persona," August 1983, CeDInCI, Fondo Sara Torres, Carpeta 5.

[8] According to Marguerite Feitlowitz, the military manipulated public space to be disorienting during the dictatorship. Moreover, "communal space ceased to exist" (*A Lexicon of Terror*, 176–77). The military's goal was to isolate people within the "presumably apolitical category of the 'private'" sphere (Rafael de la Dehesa, *Queering the Public Sphere in Mexico and Brazil*, 30).

Image 3.1: Elena Napolitano. Date unknown. Archivo Monalí.

Napolitano's focus on the home comes, in part, from the popular understanding of the domestic sphere as the site of containment, discipline, and safety.[9] In fact, several institutions throughout Argentina, such as the Church, schools, and the military, recognized the importance of the home in developing nationalist ideologies. On December 16, 1976, the military regime published an open letter in *Gente*, a pro-military magazine, titled "Carta abierta a los padres argentinos" ("Open Letter to the Argentine Parents"). In it, the regime warned that if parents do not prevent their children from being indoctrinated with subversive ideas, their child could die:

> And one day, when your child starts arguing with you, they question your views, they talk about "generation gap," they say that everything they learn at school is good and everything they learn at home is bad or wrong, it is already too late. Your child is

[9] See Natalia Milanesio, *¡Destape!*, 166–67.

> hypnotized by the enemy … If that happens and one day you have to go to the morgue to recognize the body of your son or daughter, you cannot blame destiny or fate. Because you could have avoided it.[10]

The military's letter made a clear argument that ideology could lead directly to death—presumably at the hands of the state, though they did not outwardly admit that. To avoid such a dismal fate, they explicitly argued for the role of parents in quelling subversion at home.

A comparison of the two letters—the dictatorship's and Elena Napolitano's—shows that lesbians could discursively use the family and home as stand-ins for authoritarian rule. This was made even easier by the military's own reliance on parents to police the behaviors of their children. Instead of directly calling out the violence of the military, Napalitano referred to the domestic sphere. The direct correlation was easily recognizable to a populace that had experienced a lifetime of repression, violence, censorship, and terror. Napolitano argued that parents could ensure their child's safety by providing a home for them. She wrote, "there is a 17-year old boy who is afraid and is asking for forgiveness. there are parents banishing a child from their house."[11] Here, she was drawing attention to the fact that some gay and lesbian youth were kicked out of their homes because of their sexuality. While she did not directly state what dangers displaced gay youth faced, the implication was that parents had the responsibility—and ability—to prevent this kind of violence from occurring to their children.

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[10] Original: "Y un día, cuando su hijo empieza a discutir con usted, cuestiona sus puntos de vista, habla de "brecha generacional", afirma que todo lo que aprende en la escuela es bueno y todo lo que aprende en la casa es malo o está equivocado, ya es demasiado tarde. Su hijo está hipnotizado por el enemigo … Si eso ocurre y un día usted tiene que ir a la morgue a reconocer el cadáver de su hijo o de su hija, no puede culpar al destino o a la fatalidad. Porque usted pudo haberlo evitado." "Carta abierta a los padres argentinos," *Gente* (December 16, 1976): https://www.educ.ar/recursos/128857/carta-abierta-a-padres-argentinos-en-revista-gente-1976.

[11] Original: "hay un chico de 17 años que tiene miedo y pide perdón. hay padres desterrando un hijo de su casa." Elena Napolitano, "Carta de persona a persona," August 1983, CeDInCI, Fondo Sara Torres, Carpeta 5.

In “Carta,” Napolitano relied on experiences in the home to draw attention to a presumed shared history among Argentina’s homosexual population. But she was not the only author writing about the role of the family in the lives of homosexuals. In fact, critiques of the traditional family was a common trope found in gay and lesbian writing, even before the dictatorship. During the nascent gay liberation movement of the early 1970s, such critiques largely utilized Marxist arguments about the family unit as one of the capitalist institutions that upheld and reproduced misogyny, homophobia, and classism.[12] What was new during the dictatorship was that such writing went beyond critiquing of the family as a capitalist institution.

Instead, using the family as a symbol of state-sanctioned violence, homosexual authors constructed a shared gay and lesbian history of lifelong, personal trauma and oppression. Many lesbians who read Napolitano’s list of injustices might have recognized their own stories in them. Or, if not their own story, then perhaps they recognized the story as belonging to a close friend or romantic partner. For all the finger-pointing toward the heteronormative family in the letter, it ultimately called upon shared experiences among homosexuals. Napolitano’s letter, therefore, reflected on the notion of isolation or rejection from one’s parents. References to experiences of isolation and violence within the family would have been recognizable to other lesbians. Therefore, instead of relying on the notion of an identity based on sex, Napolitano provided a way of recognizing lesbian identity as one constructed, in part, from shared social experiences within the family.

[12] Pablo Ben and Santiago Joaquin Insausti have shown that the FLH critiqued the heterosexual family as “crucial in the ideological reproduction of capitalism” (“Dictatorial Rule and Sexual Politics in Argentina,” 314). See also FLH, “Sexo y Revolución.”

Morality

In the early 1980s, lesbian activists like Napolitano joined other gay organizers to assert homosexuals as the nation's moral authority. It is striking that part of Napolitano's textual activism was a collaboration with gay men, and not about creating space or remarking on a shared history "just for lesbians." Her letter specifically mentioned gay male youth, and her partnership with Marcelo Benitez and Zelmer Acevedo indicated her interests in some larger gay and lesbian activism. In fact, many queer artists and writers of the time considered lesbian and gay experiences as more or less comparable. This kind of collaboration is evidence of two key shifts in the social world of lesbians. First of all, it signals a return to pre-dictatorship activism. There was not much socializing between gay men and lesbians after the regime closed *boliches*, theatres and other spaces where people met up. The founding of GFG, however, provided a space for collaboration between gay men and women again. It is also noteworthy that Benitez and Acevedo, who had both participated in the Frente de Liberación Homosexual in the years before the last dictatorship, condemned the silencing of women's voices within the organization. The second shift signaled by Napolitano's collaborative textual activism relates to the issue of morality. In these writings, we see that the larger homosexual community in Argentina began to think of itself as the nation's moral authority.[13]

The first issue of *Sodoma*, a magazine published by Grupo de Acción Gay in 1984, included a poem by Napolitano, titled "Pesado Roll (Rock en 'mi')," in which she claimed that

[13] Beginning during the Onganía regime and continuing throughout the last dictatorship, the military "sought to recover the climate of lost morality, trying to control the private life of citizens" (Felitti, 50). Karin Felitti makes it clear that the military censored and repressed a broad variety of customs and daily activities, including all manifestations of what they considered improper gender expression. Ana Clara Benavente and Luisina Gentile assert that it was during "the last military dictatorship where the greatest escalation of violence and repression is unleashed with the arrest of young homosexuals, in addition to the closure of gay-lesbian-trans venues" (7). See also Gemetro, 76.

her lesbian existence was crucial because it established the opposite against which normative society could judge its own morality. She asked, "If I did not exist / how would you / be a decent person?" And later, "tell me / how would you / be a moral person / if you had no one to charge / the sins of evil."[14] In these lines, Napolitano was rhetorically asking how the dominant culture could understand itself as moral if it did not have an opposite, immoral other—in this case, Napolitano as a stand-in for all homosexuals—by which to compare itself. In doing so, she asserted that lesbians were critical to helping the nation make sense of itself. They were, she claimed, part of a larger group of subalterns who made up the "negative" against which the "positive" was comprehensible.

Certainly, Elena Napolitano was not advocating that lesbianism should be understood as immoral. In an interview the same year, she told the interviewer, "I study and work and I do not have problems of concealment. I am an assumed lesbian and fight together with Zelmar and Héctor within the Grupo Federativo Gay for the demands of our rights."[15] Though using different language, her message was essentially that she was out and she was proud. Her writings, then, were not pointing to an inherent immorality in lesbianism. Rather, by articulating the ways that lesbianism had been constructed as immoral by the dominant ideology during an era when mainstream institutions were responsible for incredibly inhumane, cruel, and violent acts against the Argentine people, Napolitano was, in fact, inverting the moral schema that relegated gay and lesbian people to the category of "subversives."

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[14] Originals: "Si yo no existiera / cómo harías / para ser una persona decente?;" "decime / como harías / para ser una persona moral / si no tuvieras a quién cargarle / las culpas del mal." Elena Napolitano, "Pesado Roll (Rock en 'mi')" *Sodoma* 1 (1984).

[15] Original: "Yo estudio y trabajo y tampoco tengo problemas de ocultamiento. Soy lesbiana asumida y lucha junta a Zelmar [Acevedo] y Héctor [Casariego] dentro Grupo Federativo Gay por la reivindicaciones de nuestros derechos." Quoted in Marta Schmidt, "Los Homosexuales Buscan la Libertad," *Revista Dar la Cara* 1:7 (July 1984), 7.

In this respect, Napolitano's writings should be understood as being in conversation with other homosexual artists of the time, many of whom, created content that specifically juxtaposed homosexual morality with the state's immorality. At El Sótano, Martha Ferro's puppet shows became a key source of criticism of the supposed moral authority of the military dictatorship. When Martha Ferro died in 2011, Olga Viglieca, a journalist reporting for Red Informativa de Mujeres de Argentina (Women's Information Network of Argentina) eulogized the late activist as, among other things, a "gran titiritera" (great puppeteer).[16] Throughout her life, Martha trained several students in the art of papier-mâché marionette puppetry. Puppetry has a long history in Argentina, introduced in the eighteenth century by Spanish and Italian immigrants.[17] An uptick in puppetry productions and theatres occurred during the mid-twentieth century, the time of Martha's youth and adolescence. Martha's interest in puppets followed the style of Javier Villafañe, perhaps the most influential puppeteer in Argentine history. Beginning in the 1930s, Villafañe toured throughout Argentina via a horse-drawn cart to "travel the country's roads… and [meet] the people in their villages."[18] Like Villafañe, Martha eschewed middle-class aesthetics—like those embraced by the participants in Buenos Aires's feminist movement—, belonging, instead, "to the universe of the puppets" and "inclined toward the products of the

[16] Mabel Bellucci, "El Grito," Página 12 (March 4, 2011). Accessed December 1, 2020. https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/las12/13-6361-2011-03-04.html
[17] Pablo L. Medina has traced the history of Argentine puppetry, noting that the "theatrical art form first appeared in Argentina during the eighteenth century," brought by Spanish and Italian immigrants. Though Medina's history of puppetry and puppeteers does not explore the cultural meaning of puppetry for the masses, he does remark upon the evolution of the art form across centuries as "practitioners perfect[ed] the art as entertainment, teaching/training, and doing research." Pablo L. Medina, "Out of the Trunks of Immigrants," 26–28.
[18] Javier Villafañe. Quoted in Medina, 28.

popular classes and the marginal," as her longtime partner, Adriana Carrasco, said about her.[19] Through Martha Ferro, puppetry was part of the lesbian discourse at at El Sótano.

Puppetry provided an opportunity for the lesbians at El Sótano to engage in conversations about how the military used violent, authoritarian, and terrorizing tactics against the people of Argentina. A common scenario that Martha portrayed in her puppet shows was that of a policeman and a thief. She portrayed the policeman as the object to be feared, an authoritative figure who held power because he represented the law, and, as such, all of society's sanctioned institutions. The policeman, then, represented the state, while the thief represented subversives and deviants, which, during the dictatorship, anyone was suspect of being.

For the predominantly lesbian audience at El Sótano to be able to recognize themselves within the character of the thief, they needed to share a way of thinking about lesbians and lesbianism. Merely being cast in opposition to the police officer helps us understand how the lesbians at El Sótano saw themselves as the thief, since they could easily be the targets of police attention. However, during the dictatorship, most people were the targets of police attention, and so the thief, in this sense, could be understood as symbolic of the general Argentine public. Nonetheless, several factors illustrate why the thief was a deliberate and significant choice by Martha Ferro. First of all, there were many archetypes that Ferro could have pulled from Argentine literary traditions instead of a thief, such as the ingénue, the gaucho/hero, or the philosopher, any of whom might have found themselves at the mercy of the police during the dictatorship.[20] Choosing the thief over other options to represent lesbians was, therefore,

[19] Original: "al universo de los títeres;" "se inclinaba hacia los productos de las clases populares y de los marginales." Adriana Carrasco, quoted in Valeria Flores, "El sótano de San Telmo,"14.
[20] For Argentina's literary tradition and print culture during the long nineteenth century, see William Garrett Acree, Jr., *Everyday Reading*. For tropes found in the national romances of Argentina's epics, see Doris Sommer, *Foundational Fictions*, esp. 83–113. For iterations of these literary traditions in film, see Emilie Bergman, "Abjection and Ambiguity."

intentional. Secondly, Argentine criminologists and psychoanalysts had long associated homosexuality with criminal activities, so the use of a criminal as a stand-in for lesbian women would have been readable.[21] Thirdly, Ferro's intention might have been to play with the notion of thievery and stealing. Because of the clandestine nature of the lesbian community during the dictatorship, their activities in the basement in San Telmo could be understood in terms of stealing space, of taking what was not intended for their use (i.e., a semi-public social space) and making it their own. Finally, because thieves operate in the shadows and intend to go unseen, Martha Ferro was referencing the notion of lesbian invisibility and clandestine activities when she chose the character of the thief.

During these puppet shows at El Sótano, Martha Ferro claimed the moral authority to critique state institutions. The policeman in her puppet shows was not the hero. Instead, he was consistently cast as the corrupt and unethical character, whereas the thief appeared as the victim of the policeman's moral and social crimes. So, Ferro played with the notions of morality and visibility in her puppet shows to make meaning of her audience's role in society. Cariad Astles, a scholar of puppetry in Latin American theatre arts, has written, "(w)e live in a world where the corporate and the commercial dominate; where race, gender, religion and nationhood are once more fiercely contested sites of meaning amongst hegemonies of fear and varying states of 'otherness'. Puppetry—always to some extent 'othered'— enables us to disentangle these complex threads of cultural ambivalence and re-examine what it means to be."[22] What Astles is arguing here is that puppetry provided the popular classes with a means of situating themselves

[21] Jorge Salessi's history of the role of criminologists in documenting and categorizing homosexuals in Argentina as deviant. Moreover, Salessi shows how the processes through which all people living in the margins of society came to be categorized as homosexual. Salessi, "The Argentine Dissemination of Homosexuality, 1890–1914."
[22] Cariad Astles, "Puppetry Research," 70–71.

in the nation. Puppetry at El Sótano, then, enabled lesbian and bisexual women to see their transgressions from the norm as moral, since the character of the thief was positioned in contrast to the immoral, corrupt, and fear-inducing policeman. While the gender and age of the thief are not mentioned, the police was represented by a grey-haired, male figure. The message was clear: patriarchy was an old, outmoded social order that was clinging to its hold of power by terrorizing those who had the capacity to subvert it. Furthermore, the audience of Martha's puppet shows became the observers of police violence. Ironically, in a time and place that was heavily surveilled by the powers-that-be, these women inverted this situation and became the ones who surveyed society, albeit only within a clandestine space like El Sótano. And during a regime that claimed to be restoring morality to Argentina, the lesbians in El Sótano became the moral authority.

Homosexual authors and artists contested the moral authority of the Argentine state by juxtaposing consensual and loving same-sex sex with the state's violence. Colm Tóibín, an Irish writer, worked as a journalist in Argentina in the 1980s, covering the trials of the military generals. In his novel, *The Story of the Night* (1996), his protagonist was a gay Argentine man who lived with his mother and hid his sexuality from her and from society. In one scene, the main character, Richard, is having sex with another man against a window. Through the window, they can view the building across the street and hear car engines continuously running. Richard asks his partner why they were repeatedly revving the engines, to which his partner replies, "They need extra power for the cattle prods."[23] Cattle prods were used by the military to torture, rape, and sodomize detained Argentinians during the dictatorship.[24] The revving of the cars gave power to these instruments of torture. Richard says, "It made no difference then, because I did

[23] Colm Tóibín, *The Story of the Night*, 8.
[24] See Alicia Partnoy, *The Little School.*

not pay much attention to what he said, and I remember the pleasure of standing at the window with him, my hands running down his back, more than anything else."[25] Tóibín's scene reveals a way that homosexuals in Argentina collectively thought about sex during the dictatorship. Although Toibin was neither Argentinian nor living in the country during the dictatorship, his experiences in Buenos Aires in the years following the return to democracy informed his writing. His novel reflects the discourse about sexuality and morality that emerged within the homosexual community during the Proceso.

Though both scenes, the one portraying gay sex and the one portraying torture, appear to mirror each other—both occur in private, across the street from each other, and involve penetration—, it is understood that they function in opposition of each other. One is erotic, sensual, and consensual; the other is humiliating, violent, and violating. Tóibín reminds the reader that while the military dictatorship authorized, condoned, and legitimated violent torture, they simultaneously condemned homosexuality. By juxtaposing these two scenes, Tóibín argued that only one can be moral. Moments of same-sex sexual pleasure, then, stood in stark contrast to the inhumane actions of the military, thereby legitimating and making humane the former. Even though Tóibín was writing more than a decade after the return to democracy, his novel is situated within the local discourse about moral authority. Specifically, it highlights the narrative within the larger homosexual community in Buenos Aires that presumed that moments of homosexual love and intimacy were moral counterbalances to the military's terrorizing actions.

[25] Tóibín, 8.

Romance

While conversations about sexuality were largely centered within the greater gay and lesbian community—which, as will be shown later, should be understood as transnational in nature—, lesbians who found their voices within the feminist movement tended to focus on romantic or companionship aspects of relationships. Using romance as an access point allowed lesbians to enter into conversations about women's oppression within the patriarchal system. The differences between heterosexual relationships and lesbian ones enabled lesbians to construct lesbian intelligibility in contrast to their erasure under heteronormativity. Hilda Rais's participation in the collective manuscript, *Diario Colectivo*, is illustrative of this paradigm. Following the loosening of media censorship in 1980, a group of four feminists—Hilda Rais, along with three of her heterosexual associates, Maria Elena Aldaburu, Inés Cano, and Nene Reynoso—met weekly to discuss a variety of topics that affected them as women and as feminists in Buenos Aires. Following their in-person discussions, the four women put into writing their individual reflections. They then compiled these written reflections into a coauthored book, *Diario Colectivo*, published in 1982.[26] Despite the general absence of lesbian-centered topics in Argentina's feminist publications, such writings remained a key site for

[26] Interestingly, the four authors do not identify themselves within the text, so it is difficult to ascertain which author wrote which part. Had the authors not been named on the book cover, it would be reasonable to assume that their anonymity was a result of self-protection during the dictatorship. However, that is not the case. Instead, it is likely that the decision to not attribute specific sections to their authors was to project a sense of shared and collective experience. This literary decision presumes that specific experiences lead to general conclusions that hold universal truths for all women. Lesbians reading the text, however, could suss out Rais's voice at times because, despite her claims that her oppression is the same as that of all women, her specific experiences were sometimes unique. Because of the shared history of homosexual women—the kind that Elena Napolitano helped point out in her writings—, lesbians who read the book were equipped to read between the lines and produce meaning specific to the lesbian experience.

lesbian consumption, especially for the generation who had participated in the feminist movement prior to the dictatorship.

Hilda Rais, whose writings and lectures on lesbianism in Argentina remain some of the only published work on the topic from the early 1980s, identified as a feminist activist more than as a lesbian activist. In accordance with the feminist movement of the early 1970s, Rais considered lesbian oppression along the same spectrum as other kinds of oppression within the patriarchal system. She prioritized the oppression of women above that of lesbians, arguing that "lesbians were oppressed because of their gender."[27] While this line of thinking distinguished Hilda Rais from her younger counterparts, like Elena Napolitano, it also illustrates the fact that feminist writing was both produced and consumed by a significant number of lesbians in and around Buenos Aires. As such, *Diario Colectivo* stands as an important source for understanding the various, and sometimes conflicting, components that made up the lesbian intimate public, especially as many of the discussions about romance in the book helped to queer traditional definitions.

One such discussion in *Diario Colectivo* centered around ways of understanding romantic love, moving the definition beyond the traditional, patriarchal formations. One section on this topic focuses on the notion of "possible love," a term which the four coauthors seem to agree was both limited to the heteronormative, patriarchal model of romantic relationships, and was also something destructive to women. The discussion began with a memory from one of the authors about how she imagined love as it was described in two French films written by Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and *Moderato Cantabile* (1960), both of which touch on themes of failed relationships between men and women. Using these films as models of

[27] Quoted in Milanesio, 224.

women's experiences in heteronormative relationships, she defined "possible love" as one accompanied by grief and an annihilation of the self. She wrote, "Love was then for me … a passionate massacre, a desire that could not be exhausted without altering the order of the universe."[28] This bleak outlook on love and desire was a tacit denouncement of traditional romantic relationships, in which women's desires and passions were often subdued in favor of those of men.

The second part of this conversation, which appears as a response by a different author, uses the subject of fidelity in a romantic relationship to argue that one need not be faithful to the state. The author argues that love should be viewed from both long-term and short-term vantage points. A lifetime is long, she argues, but is made up of many minutes and each minute can be distinct. In her summation, the whole is less than the sum of its parts.[29] By showing that individual moments might be more meaningful than years or lifetimes, the author queered the notion of the traditional couple, which was imagined as a lifelong relationship. She wrote:

> Being faithful every minute of life is such a huge thing that I can't even conceive of it. To be faithful all the years of life seems to me the least we can offer to love. I would not lie if I say every time I love someone I am and will be faithful forever. But what about the next minute? That's another topic.[30]

This is a poignant statement coming from someone living in a climate of state terror. While on the surface this discussion is a commentary on the supposed lack of sustainability of romantic

[28] Original: "El amor fue entonces para mí … una masacre apasionada, un deseo que no podía ser agotado sin alterar el orden del universo." Aldaburu, et al., *Diario Colectivo*, 70.
[29] Ibid., 71.
[30] Original: "Ser fiel todos los minutes de la vida es algo tan enorme que no puedo ni siquiera concebirlo. Ser fiel todos los años de la vida me parece lo mínimo que podemos ofrecer al amor. Quisiera no mentir si digo cada vez que amo a alguien soy y seré fiel eternamente. ¿Pero y el minuto siguiente? Ese es otra tema." Ibid.

partnerships, being faithful (ser fiel) can be interpreted here to go beyond the topic of romantic relationships. Given the dictatorship's requirement of fidelity, what is inferred here is that people cannot be faithful to the nation or the government at all times. In fact, the authors are claiming that loving someone (the nation) is so precipitous that one's feelings might change minute to minute. When the author claims that fidelity is the least one can give to love, it presumes that there is more that one can do beyond mere tacit devotion. Negotiating the terms of commitment as individuals grow and learn and change could strengthen the bonds of the relationship. Like in romance, fidelity to the state is something that is constantly negotiated, not something that you promise once and maintain forever without question. The last lines about "the next minute" show that they anticipated a return to democracy, but would have to wait to see what kind of government they got before claiming that they would make any vows of fidelity to it. During the dictatorship, however, the state required blind faith to its platform of national reorganization. The authors of *Diario* used the metaphor of romantic fidelity to argue against such blind faith.

This conversation about romance in *Diario Colectivo* reveals itself to be a critique of nationalism and fidelity to the state. In describing the despair, the massacre, and the annihilation of romantic love, these women were condemning the patriarchal order that dominated the public and the private worlds in Argentina. While they could not openly critique the state, even in the relaxed media culture of the early 1980s, they could draw attention to experiences of psychological despair. The psychological terror of the era is well-documented. While the physical violence of the dictatorship was its own kind of terror for the victims and their family members, the "psychological terror was a deliberate outcome of the abductions and disappearances, one that affected far more people in the city than the victims of the task forces

and political prisoners of the detention centers."[31] The authors of *Diario*, then, were commenting on the psychological terror of the dictatorship that assumed the patriarchal figure in the nation. Many women, feminists included, did not find romantic love full of despair or annihilation. So, in their discussion, the authors of *Diario* used romance as a metaphor, arguing not that the only outcome of romantic involvement with men was that of anguish and destruction, but that fidelity to the patriarchal dictatorship resulted in anguish and destruction. Their annihilation was the result of authoritarianism.

In *Diario Colectivo*, the discussions about romantic love and fidelity were limited to the heterosexual configuration. In fact, they refer to the kind of love that they discuss as "the only one possible."[32] When reading *Diario Colectivo*, many lesbians, especially those who, like Hilda Rais, participated in the feminist movement, would recognize the tacit reference to lesbian romantic love, which had long been described as "impossible," in this discussion of "possible love." Literary and feminist scholars have long taken note of the ways that lesbianism appears as an impossibility, a death knell, or, at best, a sexless type of intimacy in films and literature. María Claudia André summarizes how feminist theorists have written about lesbian subjectivity in films and literature "as a ghostly presence that is consistently out of focus and evanescent."[33] Similarly, Janis Breckenridge points out that early lesbian literature in Argentina "conceals lesbian desire through ambiguity and encoding."[34] In outlining the characteristics that defined "possible love," the authors of *Diario Colectivo* provided a narrative about "impossible love." It follows, then, that impossible love, including that between two women, was contrary to "annihilation," "the fantastic destruction of any everyday form," and "the passionate

[31] James Brennan, *Argentina's Missing Bones*, 29.
[32] Original: "la única posible." Aldaburu et al., 70.
[33] María Claudia André, "Empowering the Feminine," 167.
[34] Janis Breckenridge, "Outside the Castle Walls," 123.

massacre."[35] In other words, love and romances in which women's desires were equal to that of their partner were, according to this discourse, productive rather than destructive.

The narratives outlined above reflect the despair of the Proceso. Without freedom and liberty, all human relations—parent/child, romantic partners, teacher/student, etc.—were scrutinized by a public unable to speak freely about the state. Instead of critiquing the military, therefore, lesbians focused on critiques of political relations. The only open critique of a state representative in the examples above took place during Martha Ferro's puppet shows, which literally occurred underground and clandestinely. All published or public critiques, like *Diario Colectivo* or Elena Napolitano's pamphlets and interviews, targeted more personal and intimate relationships, such as family relations and romantic partnerships. These relationships provided artists and authors with relatively safe avenues to articulate their despair, fears, anger, isolation, and opposition to the authoritarian regime. During the Proceso, these writings helped construct a lesbian intimate public based on a shared history, common experiences, and ways of imagining alternative social worlds. Their critiques of the dictatorship helped make lesbianism intelligible as a moral counterbalance to heteronormative and patriarchal structures, and, by extension, to Argentine authoritarianism.

Transnational Letters

Among the prose, the authors of *Diario Colectivo* often included quotes from homosexual and feminist scholars, songwriters, poets, and authors, including other Argentinians, other Latin Americans, as well as those from the United States and Europe. These references illustrate a kind of collective knowledge that they and their audience shared. Notable among

[35] Original: "la aniquilación;" la fantástica destrucción de cualquier forma cotidiana;" and "una masacre apasionada." Aldaburu, et al., 70.

these references is the first stanza of a song by Susana Rinaldi (b. 1935), an Argentine tango singer who gained fame in the late-1960s. In *Volvé Ciudad* (1980), Rinaldi sang about the loss of a Buenos Aires that once existed. Where once there existed "blue shade soil and jacaranda flowers," there were now no "streets for walking" nor "houses where you share happiness."[36] Both Susana Rinaldi and the author of the lyrics, Griselda Gambaro, lived in exile during the dictatorship. The song and its inclusion in *Diario Colectivo* are evidence of the import and impact of transnational communications during the dictatorship. The message throughout these communications was that lesbians were members of a transnational citizenship of homosexuals. In this way, the lesbian intimate public advanced a political critique of the military dictatorship's nationalism.

The international press proved critical to combatting the effects of censorship and became the main source of information regarding the Dirty War in Argentina. The international press reported on the allegations of disappearances, on the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, and on human rights abuses, especially as Argentina prepared to host the FIFA World Cup in June 1978. In fact, any reports on the topic of human rights, even those occurring outside their own borders, was largely ignored by the Argentine press.[37] Argentine engagement in a transnational sphere was bolstered by those living in exile who contributed interviews and information to the international press. Additionally, some people living in Argentina managed to send letters and articles to foreign newspapers. Homosexuals in Argentina, especially, used this mode of communication, relying on the gay and lesbian press in places like Brazil, Australia, France, and

[36] Original: "suelo azul de sombra y flores jacarandá;" "calles para caminar;" and "casas dónde compartir felicidad." Rinaldi, Susana. "Volvé Ciudad." Lyrics by Griselda Gambaro. Music by Hilda Herrera. 1980, side A, Banco del Buen Ayre. Vinyl LP.
[37] See Jerry Knudson, "Veil of Silence," 103.

the United States to alert the broader transnational gay community about repression and violence in Argentina.

Two main reasons explain the appearance of letters by Argentine homosexuals in foreign periodicals. First of all, because the military banned all homosexual organizations, there did not exist a gay press in Argentina until the terror of the dictatorship declined in the early 1980s. Only then do feminist and queer activists, such as the *Diario Colectivo* authors and Elena Napolitano, begin publishing within Argentina. The extreme censorship in Argentina prevented the existence of most subversive literature and journalism before then. Therefore, the only means of publishing gay stories in the late-1970s was to write to a sympathetic audience abroad. Secondly, as the gay and lesbian activist movements around the world formed, in part, in the aftermath of the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969, there was, from the outset, a transnational component to the gay liberation movement.[38] The short-lived history of the gay liberation movement in Argentina prior to the outset of the dictatorship in 1976 provided some Argentine lesbians with the know-how and experiences of solidarity to write to overseas papers. Doing so helped to spread awareness to a growing transnational community about their situation under a repressive regime. For example, in 1979 a queer activist in Argentina wrote a letter to *Gay Liberation*, an Australian publication, which then shared the letter with *Gay Sunshine*, a magazine based out of San Francisco, California. In the letter, the author, who did not provide their name, likely as a safety measure, implored the magazine "to explain to the homosexual community in the

[38] See Pablo Ben and Santiago Joaquin Insausti, "Dictatorial Rule and Sexual Politics in Argentina;" Stephen Brown, "Con Discriminación;" and Néstor Perlongher, "Historia del Frente de Liberación Homosexual de la Argentina."

countries you have contact with what our situation is."[39] The author also made it clear that despite the repression of freedoms in Argentina, "the life of our community goes on."[40]

Moving into a transnational public allowed lesbians in Argentina to imagine an alternative to their situation that bypassed the nation. The letter published in *Gay Sunshine*, for example, contains eleven short poems by Argentine poet Alejandra Pizarnik (1936–1972). The author of the letter, who only identifies themself as a member of the FLH, wrote:

> "I'm enclosing some material by and about Alejandra Pizarnik. You could say that she was the most outstanding contemporary poet in Argentina. And we would like for her to be more widely known, especially since her books are out of print now and there's little chance of their being reprinted. Of further special interest to us is the fact that this woman was homosexual."[41]

The recourse of gays and lesbians publishing outside of Argentina was a key transnational component of the formation of the lesbian intimate public. By displacing the national public sphere onto a transnational one, some lesbians were constituting a shared history beyond the notion of the nation. While the author of the letter refers to Pizarnik's books as being out of print, therefore noting the kind of censorship that occurred in Argentina at the time, the piece of information that they emphasize was that Pizarnik was homosexual. The importance of Pizarnik was as a figurehead for the Argentine lesbian. It is especially striking that she was not alive to insert herself in this role. Like the Madres who symbolically took the place of their children in society, who for years would stand in for the disappeared, recording them as "presente," lesbians

[39] "Letter from Argentina," *Gay Sunshine* 26/27 (Winter 1975–76): 12.
[40] Ibid.
[41] "A Letter From a Founder of the Argentine Gay Liberation Front to a North American, A Few Poems by Alejandra Pizarnik, and a Biographical Note," *Gay Sunshine* 38/39 (Winter 1979): 8.

here used a fallen figure to be the representative, the Argentine delegate to the transnational community of queer people.

The revival of Pizarnik's poetry to Argentine gays seven years after her death was part of a tradition of claiming certain historical figures as important members of the homosexual community. Reviving Pizarnik was important because she could represent Argentine lesbians in the pantheon of a global homosexual icons. Claims to historical figures flowed across borders along with letters. For example, Elena Napolitano translated and published an article by the Brazilian writer, María Carneiro da Cunha, in the first edition of *Postdata*, the short-lived periodical by Grupo Federativo Gay. In the article, Carneiro da Cunha challenged lesbian stereotypes. She wrote:

> And in referring to homosexual women, some very interesting confusions continue to be reinforced by the system, such as identifying lesbianism with feminism, or also the belief that all homosexual women are masculine or imitate the behavior of the male (and just think of personalities like Cole[?]o or Virginia Woolf, to verify how far that is from the truth.[42]

Here, a Brazilian author has claimed a British woman (Virginia Woolf) as part of the lesbian pantheon, which was then borrowed and disseminated by an Argentine lesbian activist. The distribution of these letters across borders illustrates that the lesbian intimate public understood itself as belonging to a global network.

The transnational media provided gay and lesbian activists with a means to combat the

[42] Original: "Y al referirse a las mujeres homosexuales, se siguen reforzando ciertas confusions muy interesantes para el sistema, como identificar lesbianismo con feminismo, o también la creencia de que todas las mujeres homosexuales son masculinizadas o imitan el comportamiento tenido como masculino (y basta pensar en personalidades como Cole[?]o o Virginia Woolf, para verificar cuan lejos está eso de la verdad)." María Carneiro da Cunha, "Tolerancia hasta cierto punto," *Postdata* 1 (March 1984), 5.

homophobia of the Argentine mainstream press.[43] The primary reason for this reliance on a transnational press was for self-representation. Mainstream media tended to write about homosexuals, rather than provide a platform for them to write about themselves. And such writing tended to focus on homosexuality as a sickness, aberration, psychopathy, or contagion. By producing their own magazines, homosexuals could counter those narratives or create their own narratives. One of the primary results of this self-representation was the construction of a shared history, such as when they claimed (deceased) homosexual artists as part of their collective history.

The message in some of these transnational letters illustrates the ways that homosexual men and women worked to transcend nationalism, to build coalitions across borders. In many cases, it seems that the gay press in the United States published texts from Argentina because journalists working for the papers had lived in Latin America and, therefore, had friends and contacts who implored them to publish information about what was occurring to gay men and women living under Latin American dictatorships. Additionally, it seems that gays and lesbians in North America were also involved in a project of critiquing U.S. imperialism. Much of the writing points to U.S. intervention in Latin America. For example, in a 1981 article in *Gay Community News*, the author calls out the Reagan administration for overturning President Carter's policy of blocking military aid to Argentina.[44] The essence of the article seems to be about critiquing the role that the United States was playing in creating precarious living conditions for gays and lesbians in Argentina. In doing so, they helped create an

[43] Recent scholarship has shown that the "gay and lesbian press became a key medium of transnational communication between homosexual activists in different Western countries, at least until the popularization of the internet and invention of the World Wide Web." Lukasz Szulc, *Transnational Homosexuals in Communist Poland*, 125.
[44] Scott Tucker, "Gays and Lesbians and Latin America," *Gay Community News* (May 16, 1981): 8–9.

interconnectedness between homosexuals living everywhere that U.S. economic and political interests reached. During the Cold War, Latin America was the primary focus of these interests.[45] The project of constructing a shared history was no longer just part of the past. Through the transnational press, the global gays and lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s were tying their material worlds to each other. During the dictatorship in Argentina, when censorship prevented the existence of a gay press nationally, those who wished to publish had to turn outside of the nation.

Intimate Semiotics

The irony of these efforts to make lesbianism possible and visible in these years is that it was done in hiding, in secrecy. Such was the reality for a group of sexual minorities during a right-wing dictatorship. Because of the danger of violence and ostracism, it was necessary for homosexuals in Argentina to communicate with subtlety, implications, or coded symbols (including language, clothing, and mannerisms). This process of communicating indirectly adds nuance to the intimate public. To be certain, much of this language predates the last dictatorship. Nonetheless, the use of coded language illustrates one of the ways that lesbians translated prior experiences of secrecy to strategies of survival during the Proceso. While lesbian slang did not often appear in the texts produced during the years of the dictatorship, this coded language has been recorded in the subsequent years. Decoding this language helps us to understand how the lesbian intimate public constructed itself in opposition to the dominant structures and institutions in society.

Being able to intimate wants, needs, and desires without explicitly saying anything had been a tool of homosexual communities throughout the twentieth century.[46] Gestures, looks,

[45] See Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop*.
[46] See Salessi; and Flavio Rapisardi and Alejandro Modarelli, *Fiestas, baños y exilios.*

signals, and coded language had long enabled lesbians to protect themselves and go unnoticed when needed.[47] Lesbians in Buenos Aires would have also been well-versed in *lunfardo* (plebeian slang spoken in Buenos Aires).[48] *Lunfardo* originated in the city's jails at the turn of the twentieth century. Those who were often in and out of jail, such as petty thieves, prostitutes, and homosexuals, developed a coded language that prevented their jailers from comprehension.[49] Much of this slang had spread throughout the capital via tango lyrics, so that, by century's end, it was no longer merely the speech of the lower-classes and marginalized populations, but of most *porteñXs*. Nonetheless, the culture of *lunfardo* provided lesbians not only with a particular vocabulary, but also a way of thinking about themselves as part of the popular class.

Moreover, being able to communicate in coded language had enabled queer folk to discern who they could trust and who they could not. Political Scientist Mario Pecheny has noted that homosexuals in Buenos Aires relied on codes and secrets: "social bonds are differently structured within each world—the world of those who do not know, the world of those who do, and the world of homosexual peers—based on knowledge, or lack thereof, of the secret."[50] For example, the word "tetera" (teapot) signified a gay man exposing himself. The etymology of this usage comes from England, where gay men shortened "toilet-rooms"—regular clandestine meeting spots for gay men—to "t-rooms." Said aloud, t-rooms became tearooms, and their patrons became teapots. That nomenclature traveled to Argentina, where gay men maintained the

[47] Sardá and Hernando, *No soy un bombero*, 176–84.
[48] For the history of the connection between *lunfardo* and Buenos Aires's homosexuality population, see Salessi, 360–63. Salessi claims, "The *lunfardo* underworld of turn-of-the-century Buenos Aires (and its language of secret codes) was the core of the mythical construction of today's *porteño* 'identity.' And in its time this keystone of an imagined Argentine identity was defined as a community of homosexuals" (362).
[49] Marguerite Feitlowitz, *A Lexicon of Terror*, 95.
[50] Mario Pecheny, "Sociability, Secrets, and Identities," 107.

English "tearoom" but translated teapots to the Spanish "teteras."[51] In their cultural analysis of gay men in Buenos Aires during the last dictatorship, Flavio Rapisardi and Alejandro Modarelli describe some graffiti that appeared on the wall of a train station bathroom in 1980, which read, "Lissette, lover and general of the teapots, 1980."[52] To those unfamiliar with the secret meaning of *tetera*, the graffito appears as an innocuous, if somewhat confusing, message about teapots. To those in the know, however, this message identified Lissette as the leader of the men who frequented public bathrooms for sex. [53]

Coded language had new import for the homosexual community during the dictatorship. The disappearance of gay social spaces, such as bars, clubs, bathhouses, and movie theatres, left many feeling isolated.[54] However, the previous experiences of living in the closet and the possession of a secret coded language enabled homosexuals to find new ways of building community. Secret, coded language also assisted gay and lesbians Argentinians in fomenting an intimate public. The example of graffito above illustrates the ability to employ secrecy in public spaces. In this way, the intimate world of gay men found its way into the public world of Buenos Aires, albeit shielded from public knowledge. While some work has been done to write the history of gay men's coded language, such as the example of *tetera* above, there is a lack of scholarship that treats lesbian terminology equally. To be fair, another result of the invisibility of queer women in the 1970s is the dearth of lesbian-specific vocabulary. That is not to say that there was none, however.

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[51] For more on the usage of tearooms and teteras, see Juan José Sebreli, "Historia secreta de los homosexuals en Buenos Aires," 275–370; *and* Flavio Rapisardi and Alejandro Modarelli, *Fiestas, baños y exilios*.
[52] Rapisardi and Modarelli, 21.
[53] Lissette was most likely a pseudonym for a gay man. Neil Miller writes that male members of the FLH often took women's names, though he provides no explanation for this practice. See Miller, *Out in the World*, 187.
[54] Miller, *Out in the World*, 197.

An entire terminology was in use during this period that identified queer women, especially in terms of sexual preferences or gender presentation. Paired opposites emerged, often relegating women to one of two categories: masculine-presenting or feminine-presenting, indicating that many lesbians relied on a certain amount of the dominant sex-gender ideology to make sense of their own relationships. One woman recalled, "we would say it was a pre-established norm to define oneself, that is: you were *celeste* or you were *rosa*."[55] *Celeste* (light blue) signified the active, and *rosa* (pink) the passive role. The gendered associations of these two colors informed these definitions, such that the "masculine" blue connoted the active sexual role, while the "feminine" pink connoted passivity. Other paired terms included *bombera/o* (fireman) and *mucama* (maid). While there is little evidence that *mucama* has survived the decades, *bombera/o* is still in use among some lesbians in Buenos Aires. The pairing with *mucama* seems to indicate a gendered socioeconomic component to the origin of the term, in that the domestic servant is assigned the feminine role. Nonetheless, the etymology of *bombera/o* remains contested. Some have argued that because firefighters carry around a hose (specifically one that is not attached to their bodies), this is said to represent the proclivity of butch lesbians to use strap-on dildos during sex. Others have claimed that the masculinity that is associated with firefighting is the original association. These gender pairs point to strong popular-class mores, since lower-class lesbians were more likely to maintain traditional gender roles in their relationships.

Lesbian-feminists were more likely to use slang that reflected their middle-class status. For example, they had a specific phrase that disavowed *bomberas.* The term, *te queman* (they

[55] Original: "diríamos era norma preestablecida definirse, es decir: eras *celeste* o eras *rosa.*" Quoted in Sardá and Hernando, 43–44.

burn you), was used to disparage *bomberas* for being too masculine.[56] Perhaps the most widely-used term for lesbians during the era was *tortillera*, which middle-class lesbians liked because it was rooted in femininity and did not have a paired opposite.[57] The origin of *tortillera* (sometimes also shortened as *tortilla* or *torta*) is unknown; however, some have argued that this metaphor, which is used throughout Latin America, is likely to have derived by comparing lesbian sex to the process of making *tortillas de masa*. Several non-scholarly sources make various claims that compare lesbian sex to tortilla-making: both are activities conducted by women; both primarily require the use of hands; and both produce a specific sound that are said to resemble each other.[58] Others have argued that the term derived as an invocation of female genitals, probably as a folded tortilla resembles the shape of a vulva. Still others have claimed that the etymology of *tortillera* is about cake or omelet, referring to the Spanish, rather than Mexican, tortilla. Because the word has traveled across the Atlantic, the origin and history of the word remains blurred. However, the continued appearance of it and attempts to understand the metaphor reveal the importance of the word within the Latin American lesbian social zeitgeist.

Various other words that also appear in the archives are derogatory terms, such as *marimacho* (tomboy; used derogatorily about lesbians to reflect their supposed lack of femininity), *machonas* (tomboy or butch woman; seems to be used pejoratively by others and perhaps only adopted by lesbians later), and *machorras* (dyke; vulgur). Testimonial evidence shows that often the first time gay women heard such language was from outside the lesbian community. One woman wrote, for example, that other children called her *machona* when she

[56] Ibid., 149–53.
[57] Florencia Gemetro has noted, "popular uses of stigmatizing terms such as "tortilleras" and "degeneradas" were recognized. They indicate that the pejorative term "tortillera" was reappropriated and resignified" (43).
[58] For a non-scholarly discussion of the origin of *tortillera*, see the blog, "Moscas de Colores," https://www.moscasdecolores.com/en/lesbian-slang-collection/tortillera-lesbian-dictionary-spain/

was a little girl, and that she didn't realize until she was older that they were using a word for lesbian.[59] That is not to say that pejorative words were not redefined within the lesbian community. Fabi Tron has said:

> Yes, I am a *tortillera*. I and many other lesbians, we like to use that word to refer to ourselves, because we positively resignify it, because we live our dissident sexualities … and our gender expression proudly, without shame, without fear, without guilt. But let's not get confused, we do not like that heterosexual people use it when they refer to us to mock us, despise us, disqualify us, in short to unload their homo/lesbophobic hatred against us or other gays or trans people.[60]

Using such words could illustrate that lesbians and bisexual women could embrace derogatory terms and reassign their meanings to have positive connotations. This rhetorical move might not be recognizable to outsiders, but those who traveled within the lesbian intimate public would understand such appropriation.[61]

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[59] Argentine lesbian activist and author, Fabi Tron, recalled, "Muchas veces no entendía lo que los grandes u otrXs chicXs del pueblo querían decirme cuando me decían 'machona'" (Many times I did not understand what the older kids or other chicXs of the town wanted to tell me when they called me "machona"). Fabi Tron, "El armario, la niña y un sombrero de cowboy."

[60] Original: "Si, soy una tortillera. A mí y a muchas otras lesbianas, nos gusta usar esa palabra para referirnos a nosotras mismas, porque la resignificamos positivamente, porque vivimos nuestras sexualidades disidentes … y nuestra expresión de género orgullosamente, sin vergüenza, sin miedo, sin culpa. Pero no nos confundamos, no nos gusta que la utilicen las personas heterosexuales cuando se refieren a nosotras para burlarse, despreciarnos, descalificarnos, en definitiva para descargar su odio homo/lesbofóbico contra nosotras u otros gays o personas trans." Fabi Tron, "El armario, la niña y un sombrero de cowboy."

[61] These terms do not appear in the few documents that were created and published during the dictatorship. Instead, as should be expected with regard to colloquial slang, their use was primarily relegated to the spoken word. A wonderful source that includes many of these terms and illustrates their everyday use is Alejandra Sardá and Silvana Hernando, *No soy un bombero*. Sardá and Hernando conducted and printed several interviews with lesbians who lived in Argentina throughout the twentieth century. The interviewees use many colloquialisms in their responses, illustrating the ways that these terms would have been used by lesbians within their own community. The words that appeared in print tended to reflect the more formal rules of the written language. As such, "lesbiana" is the word that most often appears in print.

By utilizing slang and coded language, lesbians could express their gender and sexuality without having to physically alter their appearance in public. The dictatorship engaged in the discipline of appearance, which included clothing and bodily appearance they deemed appropriate to one's gender. Diana Taylor's examination of conservative gender norms and dress standards during the military dictatorship illustrate that the military envisioned the "bad" woman, against which "good" women were compared, as a militant, masculine woman.[62] These gender expectations had consequences for lesbians, specifically those who were more traditionally masculine in both dress and comportment. Faced with potentially life-threatening backlash, many lesbians quieted their appearance. However, there were still ways for them to mark themselves as noncompliant. Barbara Sutton shows that several queer women opted to rebel against bodily expectations put on them by the dictatorship via subtle techniques, such as letting their hair go grey or ceasing to wax, when more outwardly transgressions would have been too risky.[63] In Sutton's work, lesbian rejections of traditional feminine physical appearance informed the methods through which they could express their gender and sexuality in bodily ways that did not leave them vulnerable to unwanted attention during the dictatorship. By expanding our lens of analysis to include other forms of language, we see that lesbians could also reject traditional feminine aesthetics by appropriating specific words.

The comparison between terms that lesbians used to refer to both homosexuals and heterosexuals distinguishes the former as qualitatively superior. For example, *better* signified a gay person of no particular gender or sex. This term for homosexuals is significant for two main reasons. First of all, borrowing from English illustrates the transnational component to the formation of Buenos Aires 'gay and lesbian community. Argentine lesbians borrowed other

[62] Diana Taylor, *Disappearing Acts*, 59–89.
[63] Barbara Sutton, *Bodies in Crisis*, 92.

words from English, such as party, butch, femme, and look (which meant style of dress, as it can in English). Similar to the way that t-room traveled across borders, these English words appear to have been borrowed from the United States, Australia, and England. Secondly, the use of *better* conveys the belief among Argentine homosexuals that to be gay was to be superior to heterosexuals. Similarly, lesbians referred to other gay folk as *gente de ambiente* (friendly people). The term that lesbians had for heterosexuals underscores this interpretation. *Paqui*, which comes from the Spanish for pachyderm, is a term meaning heterosexual. Some women have also used this word as a pun, saying "pa 'qué sirve," meaning, "what is it good for?"[64] The implication here was that heterosexuals were useless and inferior to the *better*, friendly, gay people. *Pa 'qué sirve* is especially telling in the context of the Proceso when queer women were engaged in a collective discourse that compared the oppression imposed by the heteronormative family with that of the military dictatorship. Rhetorically asking what heterosexuals were good for, then, was akin to asking what the entire patriarchal structure was good for. The shared—yet tacit—response is that they were not good for anything positive or constructive. This language underscores lesbian writings on morality, showing the social processes by which that discourse was translated into a collective intimate public.

Conclusion

The lesbian intimate public was constructed by various women—most of them strangers—occupying multiple, individual spaces. It was created by the authors of the books and poems and leaflets passed out on the street, as well as by those who consumed these cultural products. It was forged across space and time in words that worked to construct a shared history

[64] Sardá and Hernando, 182.

among queer women. Whether this was the history of being a homosexual in a heterosexual family, or the shared knowledge that one's "impossible" love can have specific meanings beyond unimaginable, hopeless, or futile, these narratives were built on mutual epistemologies. And, at the same time, they were helping to construct mutual epistemologies.

Shared histories and shared language are key aspects of understanding the lesbian intimate public during the last dictatorship, because they illustrate not only the ways that lesbians in Buenos Aires could communicate with each other, but also the ways that they constructed lesbian identity. Much of their slang distinguished masculine-presenting women from feminine-presenting women, which enabled them to communicate sexual and gender preferences to each other. It also illustrates that middle-class aesthetics, which had dominated the earlier period in lesbian identity in Buenos Aires, had given way to more popular expressions of sex and gender. Other words, especially those that maintained their original English, signified a transnational component to the construction of the lesbian intimate public. Still other words indicated that lesbians considered themselves as qualitatively superior to others, especially to straight people. Each of these points underscores my interpretation of the texts that lesbians wrote during the dictatorship, which I have argued show that the lesbian intimate public during the dictatorship understood itself as transnational and superior to the traditional, patriarchal, and national structures that dominated Argentine society.

This is not to say that national boundaries did not matter. The repeated critiques of the last dictatorship, though cloaked in metaphors, clearly illustrate the import of the nation to the construction of their intimate public. The reality of living under a dictatorship that was kidnapping and disappearing thousands of its citizens mattered very much. But they also imagined lesbianism as bypassing the nation, such as when they critiqued fidelity in romantic

partnerships. Subnational scales, such as the city, also mattered. This was seen in the previous chapter when lesbians bypassed street names and maps to navigate Buenos Aires. The construction of this lesbian intimate public emerged as the Argentine nation was collectively imagining a return to democracy. Conversations about what democracy might look like began to dominate certain groups, including the once-quieted activists and the new activists who either came of age during the late-1970s or found their voices because of the circumstances of those years, such as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo. The lesbian public, dispersed and isolated as it may have been, used literature, poetry, and other forms of language to situate their community within this historical moment. While most scholarship of this history accurately points to the military defeat to the British during the Fauklands-Malvinas War in June 1982, as well as the financial debacle a year earlier as the catalysts for making clear the crisis of the military regime, a look at the lesbian intimate public expands our understanding of the untenability of the dictatorship.[65] In this sense, lesbian texts point to the instability of the authoritarian regime by pointing to the instability of the normative discourses on which the regime was founded. While these critiques were not enough on their own to topple the dictatorship, they do further our knowledge of the ways that texts can destabilize normative categories. Moreover, they point to the ways that democracy was envisioned as a panacea for the nation.

[65] See Luis Alberto Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, 240–54.

CHAPTER 4

After the Dictatorship: Lesbians Negotiate for their Existence

"Nosotras, las de este pequeño grupito que salió a la calle en 1987, fuimos las primeras que tuvimos el coraje de identificarnos públicamente, con nombre y apellido, con la palabra 'lesbianas 'en todas partes' (We, of this small group that took to the streets in 1987, were the first to have the courage to identify ourselves publicly, with first and last names, with the word 'lesbians 'everywhere).[1]

- Araceli Bellota

On Friday, November 14, 1986, the Comunidad Homosexual Argentina (CHA) executed its first large-scale public activity when a group of about one hundred gay men and women marched in front of the Catedral Metropolitano across from the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. They were protesting the Second Vatican's recent document on homosexuality, which they argued, "qualifies homosexuality as morally bad, imposes sanctions and encourages fears and sufferings of all the homosexual people who adhere [to it]."[2] For over two hours, this relatively large group of gay activists sang and marched and rallied in the most visible public square in all of Argentina. Noticeably, however, the majority of those participating wore homemade paper masks over their faces, effectively concealing their identities and maintaining their anonymity [Image 4.1]. Four months later, at the March 8 women's march in Buenos Aires, seven women became the first group of lesbians to appear in public under the banner of lesbianism. They wore no masks to hide their identities; instead, they wore sashes that read, "apasionadamente lesbiana"

[1] Quoted in Adriana Carrasco, "Hemos recorrido un largo camino muchachXs," *Pagina 12* (March 8, 2019), https://www.pagina12.com.ar/179072-hemos-recorrido-un-largo-camino-muchach-xs

[2] Original: "califica de moralmente mala a la homosexualidad, impone sanciones y alienta miedos y sufrimientos de todas las personas homosexuales que [la] adhieren." CHA, "Homosexuales," *Nueva Presencia* (Date unknown), CeDInCI, Fondo Marcelo Manuel Benítez, Carpeta 7.

(passionately lesbian). The contrast between the two styles illustrates a shift within lesbian activism throughout the 1980s.

Image 4.1: Members of the Comunidad Homosexual Argentina protesting in front of the Catedral Metropolitano, November 14, 1986. Alejandro Salazar and Teresa de Rito, President and Vice President of the organization, respectively, appear without masks (to the right of the image).

The national elections held on October 30, 1983, which officially marked the end of military rule in Argentina, ushered in an era of national reconciliation. On a formal level, the new president, Raúl Alfonsín (1983–1989), in an attempt to establish legitimacy and distance himself from the dictatorship, created the *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas* (CONADEP), an organization charged with the task of investigating human rights violations and disappearances during the last dictatorship.[3] Alfonsín also put military leaders on trial for crimes

[3] Though "human rights" appears undefined throughout the historiography, it seems likely that the most widely accepted definition in post-dictatorial Argentina came from the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). As Marguerite Bouvard has shown, the Madres invoked the issue of human rights beginning in early-1979 when three members traveled to the United States to meet with Theo Von Boven, head of the UN's Human Rights Commission. See Bouvard, *Revolutionizing*

committed during the dictatorship. These trials would result in a manner of accountability that Argentina's military dictatorships had never before experienced. Human rights groups also went to the courts, presenting "huge dossiers on past crimes" committed by armed forces.[4] Alfonsín made torture a crime equivalent to murder. State-led efforts to hold those responsible for the atrocities of the dictatorship would eventually taper. In response to military pushback, Alfonsín established two amnesty laws, which ensured that "justice stayed within carefully prescribed limits," and his successor, Carlos Menem (1989–1999), began pardoning members of the dictatorship in 1989. Still, in the years immediately following the return to democracy, the nation embraced the moment to publicly and visibly speak about the violence and repression they experienced during authoritarian rule.[5] CONADEP allowed victims of the dictatorship or their family members to have their stories of kidnapping, torture, and disappearance officially recorded.

It was not just through government avenues that the country processed the violence of the dictatorship; all sectors of society, including the media, intellectuals, educators, students, religious leaders, human rights groups, and the general population participated in the processes of reconciling the violence and trauma.[6] In the first year following the return to democracy, most of the major newspapers in Buenos Aires published multiple articles—sometimes daily—about human rights violations during the Proceso. Their headlines did not hold back on condemning

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Motherhood, 84–89. Indeed, in 1984, the gay rights activist and journalist, Jorge Gumier Maier, specifically mentioned the Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966; 1976) and the American Convention on Human Rights (also known as the Pact of San José; 1978). Jorge Gumier Maier, "La Cruzada Anti-Gay," *Cerdos y Peces* (April 1984), 13. See also Elizabeth Jelin, "The Politics of Memory."

[4] Martin Edwin Andersen, *Dossier Secreto*, 310.

[5] James Brennan, *Argentina's Missing Bones*, 77.

[6] See Brennan, 89–104; Luis Alberto Romero, *A History of Argentina in the Twentieth Century*, 255–83; and Andersen, 305–12.

the military regime, stating, for example, "Por el Proceso, hay más insanos mentales" (By the Proceso, there are more mentally insane), and, "El Estado se permite todas las injusticias" (The State allows all injustices). The *Nunca Más* ("Never Again") report that emerged from the Commission's work became a best seller in Argentina. Several oral history projects followed the publishing of *Nunca Más*, illustrating Argentine people's inclination to reconcile the trauma of the dictatorship through the process of public memory.[7] After more than seven years of complete political suppression—plus a decade more of human rights violations in the 1960s and 1970s—, Argentina, from the president to the media to the masses, made use of this moment to freely express their political and social beliefs. What emerged was a national conversation around the topic of human rights.

In the immediacy of the return to democracy, lesbians entered into this national conversation via their participation in the newly reassembled gay liberation and feminist movements. In doing so, lesbian activism had returned to the sites where it existed prior to the last dictatorship. In feminist spaces, lesbians contributed to conversations about the violence and trauma caused by patriarchal systems, like the family and the Church. Human rights discourse informed lesbian articulations of their right to exist, and critiques of state violence informed their broader gendered analysis of the patriarchy.[8] Within gay liberation spaces, the human rights discourse was central to debates about sexual rights and freedoms for gays and lesbians.

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[7] National projects like *Nunca Más* and Memoria Abierta (Open Memory) separately collected hundreds of testimonies from political prisoners and the family members of those who were disappeared. Smaller provincial projects, such as Córdoba's Archivo Provincial de la Memoria, followed similar processes of collecting the social histories of those who were victimized and traumatized by state terrorism.

[8] Celia Kitzinger has argued, "Central to radical feminism is the belief that the patriarchy (not capitalism or sex roles or socialization or individual sexist men) is the root of all forms of oppression" (*The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, 64). Here Kitzinger, and by extension my research, is in conversation with Adrienne Rich and Jill Johnston, who, among others, have put forth theories about lesbian insights into the operation of male power. See Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence;" and Johnston, *Lesbian Nation*.

Lesbians specifically used this moment to dispute the contagion narrative.[9] At a time when many Argentinians were talking about the trauma of state-sanctioned kidnappings, torture, murder, and disappearances, lesbians used this moment to contribute the specific kinds of trauma and violence that they experienced as sexual minorities and women. The moment seemed right for such conversations to be had. Such conversations indicate that lesbians began to make claims for inclusion in the national project, hoping to expand the definition of citizenship in Argentina to recognize gender and sexual minorities. The first section of this chapter examines the multiple ways that lesbians contributed to these national conversations about human rights and democracy within the spaces created by the feminist and gay liberation movements in the 1980s.

However, because of earlier experiences of marginalization within these movements—and perhaps because conversations democracy prompted ways of thinking about citizenship and community in terms of human rights—, a small group of lesbo-feminist activists diverged from the feminist and gay liberation groups. Instead, they sought to create spaces where lesbians organized and led lesbian activism. This group, which would later dub itself the Generation of '87, was the one that broke with CHA's strategy of masking themselves. The choice to openly march as lesbians during a feminist rally was a calculated move by these women. By taking off their masks, they were saying that they no longer accepted being negated. Such a public display during the largest feminist demonstration of the year shows how these women were working to

[9] The contagion metaphor was repeatedly adapted throughout the century to fit the specific presumed exigencies of any given government. In 1975, José López Rega, the Minister of Social Welfare, called for the extermination of homosexuals, relying on the contagion narrative to argue that homosexuals were the vectors through which foreign and Marxist ideology entered the country. He wrote that the nation needed to "eradicate" the "creatures" who "spread vice and corruption." The language used by the dictatorship of the Proceso likewise showed their reliance on the contagion narrative to establish legitimacy and justify their actions. They found it necessary to "purify" educational spaces. Even after the dictatorship, the contagion narrative was used to draw links between homosexuality, drug use, and prostitution, indicating that a given deviation from the norm was potentially epidemic. Quoted in *Gay Sunshine* 26/27 (Winter 1975–76), 12.

establish their existence both within the feminist movement and on their own terms, moves they thought necessary before they could broaden their focus to society at large. The second part of this chapter looks at this change in lesbian activism, showing how they built on and expanded upon earlier conversations about sexual freedom and existence to foment a new kind of public lesbian activism, one not seen before in Argentina.

Human Rights and Democracy: Lesbianism, Feminism, and Gay Liberation

In 1989, Ilse Fuskova, a lesbian-feminist activist, journalist and the first woman in Argentine to publicly identify as a lesbian on national television, wrote that the heterosexual norm was the "verdadera dictadura sexual" (true sexual dictatorship).[10] Referring to something as a "dictatorship" in Argentina in the 1980s was not just a rhetorical device. Certainly, such language was intentional, meant to invoke a whole set of associations, including violence, trauma, death, authoritarianism, and oppression. But more than that, in calling heterosexuality a dictatorship, Fuskova was situating the heteronormative social order in Argentina as a key part of the oppressive patriarchal structure that worked to inflict violence against lesbians and their bodies. Given the history of bodily and sexual violence at the hands of the state during the Dirty War, lesbian contributions to the national discourse maintained that a democracy founded on human rights needed to include sexual freedom.

One of the most prominent discourses to emerge from this moment in lesbian history is the repudiation of the contagion narrative. Instead of countering the contagion narrative by

[10] Ilse Kornreich (Fuskova), "El Continuum Lesbiana," *Revista Brujas* XV (November 1989): 12. She previously published using her married name, Kornreich, but later returned to using her maiden name, Fuskova. I refer to her by Fuskova throughout, though cite her using Kornreich where appropriate. In 1991, Fuskova appeared on the national television program, "Almorzando con Mirtha Legrand," introducing herself as a lesbian. When she did that, she became the first woman to out herself on national television in Argentina.

pointing out that the real "sickness" or "crisis" in society originated in capitalism, as had been the strategy of the FLH in the early 1970s, after the dictatorship, lesbians refuted the pathologization of sexual minorities through appeals to human rights. In July 1984, three young gay activists, Elena Napolitano (age 23), Héctor Casariego (age 32), and Zelmar Acevedo (age 33), all members of the Grupo Federativo Gay (GFG), gathered for a conversation about homosexuality for the magazine *Entrevista*. In their conversation, the three activists forthrightly refuted the classification of homosexuality as "a deviation, in quotes, or a pathology," and instead asserted that gay people were "the same as everyone."[11] In the context of human rights, claiming that a group of people were "the same as everyone" was an intentional move to call attention to the ways that homosexuals had been cast of non-human, and thusly not afforded human rights.

In the aftermath of the dictatorship, then, lesbian reactions to the contagion narrative had adapted to fit a national culture of memory that revolved around questions of violence and trauma. Hilda Rais's presentation at the 1984 Asociación de Trabajo y Estudio sobre la Mujer (ATEM) conference, which was organized around the subject of violence that year, connected the contagion narrative to violence in very specific ways. She wrote that this violence originated in "the definition of lesbianism as a disease—psychic rather than organic, although there remain traces of this latter orientation," and that such a definition "supports nuances of religious and moral order."[12] Here, Rais was arguing that the combined efforts of the state, the medical community, and the church to label lesbians as mentally unbalanced were violent acts because

[11] Original: "una desviación, entre comillas, o una patología;" and igual a todos." Quoted in Marta Schmidt, "Los Homosexuales Buscan la Libertad," *Revista Dar la Cara* 1:7 (July 1984), 7.
[12] Original: la definición del lesbianismo como enfermedad—psíquica más que orgánica, aunque susbsisten [sic] resabios de esta última orientación;" and "soporta matices de orden religiose y moral." Hilda Rais, "Lesbianismo," 3.

they resulted in political repression and social ostracization. Her paper also noted the affected behavior that resulted from the pathologization of homosexuality, highlighting the prevalence of guilt, shame, fear, isolation, and suppression among lesbians. She even mentioned the lengths to which some gay women would go to hide their identities, such as "marrying a homosexual male to attenuate familial and social persecution."[13]

Hilda Rais's claim was supported in the lived experiences of women who encountered this kind of pathologization in Buenos Aires in the 1980s. A 1985 article cited a poll of 134 lesbians between the ages of 18–26, which corroborated Rais's claim that lesbians internalized some of the social stigmas of being lesbian:

> Most hid it and admitted that recognizing themselves as lesbians had meant suffering and loneliness for them. A high proportion defined their sexual inclination as "a disease," others considered it a "deviation" and there were even those who spoke of "perversion."[14]

The internalization of social stigmas led many to seek therapy, while others had psychotherapy imposed on them. Elena Napolitano wrote that her family doctor advised her to see a psychiatrist—rather than her beloved psychoanalyst—due to her "deviation."[15] The recording artist, Sandra Mihanovich, also saw a psychiatrist at the behest of family pressures. At the age of sixteen, she received a diagnosis of psychological conflict due to "ignorance of the masculine world."[16] Mihanovich spent several years in and out of therapy, trying to understand her

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[13] Original: "el casarse con un varón homosexual para atenuar así la persecusión familiar, social." Ibid., 5.
[14] Original: "La mayoría la ocultaba y admitía que el reconocerse lesbianas había significado para ellas sufrimiento y soledad. Una alta proporción definió su inclinación sexual como 'una enfermedad', otras la consideraban una 'desviación' y hasta hubo quienes hablaron de 'perversion.'" "134 tímidas lesbianas," *El Porteño* (May 1985): 78.
[15] Elena Napolitano, "Para Hacerla Corta…," *Postdata* 1:1 (March 1984), 19.
[16] Original: "el desconocimiento del mundo masculino." Sandra Mihanovich, "lo que soy," *aquí estamos* (April–June 1995), 26.

sexuality and whether or not she was sick. Other families pressured their daughters to join religious groups to seek spiritual curatives.

As a result of these family interferences, many lesbians directed their comments toward psychiatric institutions and the Church, recognizing that the contagion narrative had not only been constructed from multiple sites in Argentina, but that these spaces also contributed to the violence and trauma that lesbians experienced. For example, the following passage, from an essay written by Elena Napolitano and published in *Postdata* in 1984, specifically references the roles of the church and psychiatrists (she uses the word *ciencia*, or science) in marking lesbians as circumspect, deviant, or disruptors of the dominant sex-gender system:

> being normal or abnormal does not bother me. that the church excommunicates me. let science debate around me. to do what they want when they have nothing to do. but do not expect me to tie the stone of guilt around my neck. they will not take away my joy and the right to love fully; to live my sexuality based on pleasure and not on the needs of production. i am not a work-generating machine. i'm a woman. a person. and i'm in this world to live. not to be classified.[17]

In this passage, Napolitano has highlighted the psychic pain that resulted from the pathologization of lesbians by the church and psychiatric institutions. Just as Hilda Rais had done in her presentation at ATEM, Napolitano claimed that this psychological trauma was a form of oppression.

[17] Original: "ser normal o anormal me tiene sin cuidado. que la iglesia me excomulgue. que la ciencia debata a mi alredador. que hagan lo que quieren cuando no tienen nada que hacer. pero no esperen que me ate al cuello la piedra de la culpa. no me quitarán la alegría y el derecho de amar plenamente; de vivir mi sexualidad basada en el placer y no en las necesidades de la producción. no soy una máquina engendradora de fuerzas de trabajo. soy una mujer. una persona. y estoy en este mundo para vivir. no para ser clasificada." Elena Napolitano, "Para Hacerla Corta…," *Postdata* 1:1 (March 1984), 19.

In this way, these lesbians were keenly tuned into and contributed to the larger conversations about national reconciliation. Many Argentinians were talking about the psychological effects of living in fear during the dictatorship, of having to suppress and censor one's behavior, and pointing to this psychic trauma as part of the intended consequences of the authoritarian regime.[18] Here, then, lesbians were illustrating the ways that they had experienced, and continued to experience, these same kinds of psychological traumas. In doing so, they were drawing comparisons between the ideology and praxis of the military regime and that of other social institutions, such as Argentina's patriarchy.

Lesbians confronted the national contagion narrative in the 1980s by employing rhetoric of the larger gay liberation movement. In the media, gay journalists like Marcelo Manuel Benítez often confronted the Catholic church for imposing an arbitrary sexual norm on all people. For example, in an article written for *Nueva Presencia*, Benítez charged the Pope with promoting morality campaigns that attacked and labeled homosexuality as a "disorder."[19] In a letter to the editor in the magazine, *Paz y Justicia*, Benítez specifically called out the church leadership in Argentina, arguing that they were culpable in allowing the torture of citizens. His call was for the Catholic church to prioritize human rights by embracing love.[20] The gay press and gay journalists also produced an abundance of articles that compare the language used to mark homosexuals, prostitutes, and drug addicts as diseased to that used by the military to mark people as "subversives" and "threats to the nation." In their publication, *Boletín de la CHA*, which was

[18] See James Brennan, esp. 89–104.
[19] Though not part of Argentina's gay press, *Nueva Presencia* did publish several articles about homosexuality and written by gay authors. The weekly paper began its publication in 1977. It was one of the few progressive papers that denounced the massive disappearances during the dictatorship. Marcelo Manuel Benítez, "La Iglesia Católica y la sexualidad," *Nueva Presencia* (September 14, 1984): 16–22.
[20] Marcelo Manuel Benítez, "Los Capellanes que están funestamente en la memoria de todos," *Paz y Justicia* (February 22, 1984).

published at irregular intervals between 1984–1992, the CHA warned against assuming that homophobia had lessoned in Argentina just because society was, on the whole, more sexually liberated. They wrote, "The common currency of 'liberated' media outlets consists of mixing up homosexuality, drugs, perversions and from accusing us of being terrorists and clamoring for us to be taken away to concentration camps, just the way the press controlled by [José] López Rega was doing 10 years ago."[21] Such a comparison highlighted, it was hoped, the congruence between the two systems of oppression. They hoped to make a clear argument that the sociopolitical system that had cast homosexuals as dangerous, as threats, as sick, and as contaminants was akin to the extreme violence of the dictatorship. This openness with which they were willing to discuss the violence of being cast as a social disease was new in Argentina's gay history.

This moment in Argentina's gay history also shows trends toward a new kind of collaboration between lesbians and gay men in Buenos Aires. Lesbians were almost exclusively sidelined in the early gay liberation movement by the male leadership in the FLH. It is striking that in the 1980s, the textual activism coming out of groups like the GFG and CHA shows not just a collaboration between gay men and lesbians, but also an opening of voices to trans people. In a special issue on homosexuality in the magazine, *Eroticón*—which boastfully claimed to have revolutionized sex in Argentina—, a few members of the CHA responded to a series of questions about being homosexual. Alongside the cis-gendered male voices, which still occupied the majority of the spaces, Teresa de Rito, editor of the CHA's lesbian magazine, *Vamos a Andar*, and Vanesa Leroy, a transgender actor contributed their responses, too. In participating in the interview alongside Carlos Jáuregui, the CHA's first president, homosexual and queer

[21] Quoted in Natalia Milanesio, *¡Destape!*, 76.

activists were showing, at least externally, that their movement was equitable. In reality, however, lesbians and transgender people were still less likely to hold positions of leadership within the CHA and other gay liberation organizations. Moreover, within the culture of sexual liberation that the new Argentina was creating, lesbophobia remained stronger than homophobia against gay men, and transphobia was ubiquitous.[22]

In their joint interview in 1984, Elena Napolitano, Zelmar Acevedo, and Héctor Casariego collectively spoke about their hope that the "new Argentina" would recognize their rights to sexual freedom. Elena Napolitano spoke about the structures in society that helped maintain power for the ruling class. She described the social hierarchy produced by oppression as organized around "the power of one above, well above, and the other below, well below and well fucked."[23] In essence, her argument asserted that one preserves power by oppressing others. Certainly this argument, which recycles time-tested critiques of power dynamics, would be familiar to many in Argentina, especially given the recent experiences under the dictatorship. What is striking about her use of language, however, is the use of the phrase "well fucked." On the one hand, the use of (what some might consider) vulgar slang identified her group of activists as a members of the popular class. Calling upon images of "passive" sexuality—the active participant does the fucking—situated homosexuals as part of the society that was just emerging from a period of extreme state repression that often included sexual violence by the military and police against the populace. Moreover, for Argentina's homosexual population, the experiences of trauma and violence were intimately linked to their survival as queer people, such that even

[22] See Milanesio 72–81.
[23] Original: "el poder de uno arriba, bien arriba, y el otro abajo, bien abajo y bien jodido." Marta Schmidt, "Los Homosexuales Buscan la Libertad," *Revista Dar la Cara* 1:7 (July 1984), 8.

the language they used, such as "well fucked," evoked the connection between oppression and sex.

Elena Napolitano's discussion with Zelmar and Héctor about the ways that homosexual men and women experienced oppression based on their sexuality shared the rhetorical devices utilized within the national discourse about human rights. Human rights in Argentina in the 1980s focused a great deal on the state's violence against the body, particularly on sexual violence. To be absconded from their homes, to be sexually and physically tortured, to have one's children taken away, to be condemned because of personal associations, to not be able to maintain opposition to the official ideology—in all of these ways, the dictatorship violated the private, personal, and intimate lives of the Argentine people. With the end of the dictatorship, these issues all became parts of the discussion about how the government should maintain human rights. Therefore, the public discourse about human rights violations in the 1980s extended into the intimate lives of all Argentinians.

Elena Napolitano's platform for discussing these issues was tied to her activism with the GFG; for Ilse Fuskova, it was the feminist movement. The early writing of Fuskova, a longtime participant within the feminist movement, shows that she approached the topic of human rights through the lens of feminism. Her 1986 poem, "Amargo versito para la día de la madre," does not address lesbian identity or issues. Rather, it is a poem to mothers, which shows how mothers were productive—"como la vaca,"—and giving, and used, and cast aside.[24] This is a feminist poem that illustrates the various ways that mothers were treated as dependent people, rather than

[24] Research on Argentina's LGBT history tends to focus almost exclusively on activism. Therefore, the scholarship ignores writings like Ilse Fuskova's submission to the First National Poetry, Storytelling and Essay Contest for Argentine Women in March 1986. Nonetheless, her poem, which she submitted under a pseudonym (Anaix) and which earned second place in the contest, can, and I argue should, be read for understanding lesbian ideas about the relationship between democracy and human rights. Anaix, "Amargo versito para la día de la madre." Also see Stephen Brown, "Con Discriminación," 136, note 11.

as autonomous persons. In the poem, mothers are negated as subjects; instead, they are reduced to objects that others use until they are no longer needed: "usable, / until the day you no longer serve). Fuskova's poem recognizes that mothers were not free subjects because even their bodies—"you give us your belly, your breasts, your milk"—did not belong to themselves.[25] This critique of motherhood is representative of the ways that feminists focused on women's autonomy. While the Argentine public was not denying the existence of mothers, Fuskova's poem reflects the discourse emerging from her lesbo-feminist community regarding a concern that women and their experiences were negated.

The feminist conclusion that women's bodies did not belong to themselves was directly translated into the lesbian narrative about negation. To be sure, lesbian bodies were understood as being exploited in different ways than were mothers or women who entered into heterosexual relationships. In her 1984 ATEM presentation, Hilda Rais straightforwardly articulated the ways that the general population worked to negate lesbian existence. In "Lesbianismo," Rais argued that lesbians were negated in the definitions of sex and sexuality that required the presence of a male participant. The only situation, she argued, in which lesbian sex was accepted as sex was in pornography when lesbians were reduced to erotic stimulation for men. But this toleration still negated lesbians because in this construction of their sexuality, the subject was the male viewer. Lesbians became mere objects for male pleasure and desire. These conversations were infused with a critique of state violence as much as they were about the specific violence of the male gaze. The state had disappeared 30,000 people, so any conversations about negation would have invoked the pervasive fears that at any moment one might cease to exist.

[25] Original: "aprovechable, / hasta el dia en que ya no servís más;" "nos das tu panza, tus pechos, tu leche." Anaix, "Amargo versito para la día de la madre."

Therefore, in the context of the immediate aftermath of extreme state violence against women's bodies, there is perhaps an additional meaning here: men figuratively occupied a role similar to the authoritarian state, unable to see women as other than objects of violation. Nonetheless, feminist and lesbo-feminist arguments both followed the same logic in this period: if society had come to negate or deny female existence because it had negated or denied female sexuality, then it was necessary to either prove one's existence, in order to gain bodily autonomy, or to gain bodily autonomy, in order to prove one's existence. Lesbo-feminist contributions to the national discourse about human rights, then, often focused on public existence, rather than the private freedoms with which gay men preoccupied themselves.

Gay men in Buenos Aires often articulated a definition of democracy that protected private acts. Because of the vast human rights violations under the anti-democratic military dictatorship, discussions of Argentine human rights became inherently linked to discussions of democracy. When the dictatorship ended in 1983, Argentina was, once again, forced to think critically about defining the nation. The eleven military dictatorships of the twentieth century had continuously evoked the national mythology that Catholicism and democracy were incompatible in Argentina.[26] With the exception of the 1920s and Juan Perón's populist government, Argentina had very little experience with formal democracy. This meant that by the 1980s, the concept of Argentine "democracy" was available for categorization and definition. The government under Raúl Alfonsín, journalists, and intellectuals throughout the country began to consider possible definitions. If Argentina was going to move into the twenty-first century without repeating the political cycles of the twentieth, then they needed to define Argentine democracy. Gay male activists felt an expediency to this project, due to a string of murders of

[26] See Federico Finchelstein, *The Ideological Origins of the Dirty War*, 33–51.

gay men in Buenos Aires that occurred throughout 1983. Among the victims was a former member of the FLH, Marino Suarez. According to Marcelo Manuel Benítez, a colleague of Suarez's in the FLH, a member of GFG, and a contributor to *Postdata*, (Why in the democratic opening did the ultra-right want to kill the gays? For me this was an important axis to measure the democratization of society).[27]

Less than a month into 1984, a group of gay men organized a campaign against police edicts that "suppress[ed] the free and spontaneous expression of vitality." They contended that a true democracy could not exist if repressive mechanisms that worked to control "the customs of the community" continued. This campaign argued that the most repressive of these "legal" mechanisms was the background check, which allowed the police "to arrest any citizen in any circumstance, on public roads or in a bar, to demand documents and arrest him for 24 or 48 hours in order to investigate his past."[28] These activists invoked the right to not be bodily detained, to not have to show papers, to not be at the whim of state officials for detention in order to gather support for their cause. Their aim was to appeal to the general population's opposition to military rule and, specifically, the modus operandi of the dictatorship to detain people without just cause.

Gay activist, artist, and intellectual, Jorge Gumier Maier, argued that Argentina needed to extend its definition of democracy to protect private acts, whether or not one considered them moral. He argued that democracy included the right to a private, intimate life, free of state interference.[29] A month later, in May 1984, the CHA posted an ad in *Clarín*, Argentina's largest

[27] Original: "¿Por qué en la apertura democrática quería la ultra derecha matar a los putos? Para mí esto era un eje importante para medir la democratización de la sociedad." Emmanuel Theumer, "La vieja guardia," (December 9, 2016). Accessed December 7, 2020. https://www.pagina12.com.ar/7657-la-vieja-guardia.
[28] Original: "reprimen la libre y espontanea expresión de la vitalidad;" "las costumbres de las comunidades;" "a detener a cualquier ciudadano en cualquier circunstancia, en la vía pública o en un bar, para exigirle documentos y arrestarlo durante 24 o 48 horas con la finalidad de investigar su pasado."
[29] Jorge Gumier Maier, "La Cruzada Anti-gay," *Cerdos y Peces* (April 1984): 11–13.

selling newspaper, under the headline, "CON DISCRIMINACIÓN Y REPRESIÓN NO HAY DEMOCRACIA" (WITH DISCRIMINATION AND REPRESSION THERE IS NO DEMOCRACY). After asking specifically for liberty, the right to freely exercise sexuality, an investigation into the disappearances and assassinations of homosexuals, and an end to arbitrary detention, the CHA ended their ad by claiming, "That is why we advocate the total restoration of individual freedoms and the validity of Human Rights guaranteed by the National Constitution."[30] Stephen Brown has argued that the specific language used in this ad "invited readers, who, whatever their views on homosexuality, were almost sure at that point to be opponents of military rule, to identify with gay men and to back their struggle for a democracy without discrimination or repression."[31] These arguments promoted the idea that there could not be true democracy until the state stopped legislating private sexual behavior.

Lesbian activists and journalists, however, had different articulations of democracy because they had to first gain public recognition of their existence. The police edicts, the extralegal detentions, and right-wing media mostly focused their anti-homosexual actions and rhetoric toward gay men. So, lesbo-feminists often invoked feminist arguments about negation and existence to expand the conversation about democracy and human rights. In fact, in her discussion with Zelmar and Héctor in *Entrevista*, Elena Napolitano illustrated how feminist discussions about existence informed the way she engaged with—and diverged from—her male colleagues. In their dialogue about Christianity, Zelmar noted that the Bible only mentioned male homosexuality. His point was to illustrate one of the various ways that male homosexuality had been institutionalized as aberrant. He finished by claiming that this does not affect women

[30] Original: "Por ello propugnamos el total restablecimiento de las libertadaes individuales y la vigencia de los Derechos Humanos garantizados por la Constitución Nacional." "Mundo Gay," *Revista Dar a la Cara* 1:7 (July 1984), 10.
[31] Stephen Brown, 124–25.

because "women's [homosexuality] is not named at all." Elena pointed out that that was because "no existimos" (we do not exist).[32] For Napolitano, the subjugation of all women and their bodies within the patriarchal system had led to the complete erasure of lesbian sexuality. Therefore, feminist ways of thinking about the exploitation of female bodies came through in lesbian ways of understanding human rights. Lesbians understood the relationship between human rights and sexual freedom as inseparable from issues of existence. Therefore, lesbians focused more on the right to be recognized publicly as sexually legitimate beings, rather than on the right to private acts.

For the federal capital's lesbian population, feminist, gay liberation, and human rights discourses all informed the ways that they discussed issues of trauma, violence, democracy, and citizenship. In the 1980s, these women were not fighting for legal recognition. They were not fighting for job security or gay marriage. They were not fighting for gay adoption. All of these fights—and wins—would come later.[33] Rather, they were fighting for their bodily autonomy and existence. They knew they existed; the issue was not ontological in the material sense. But various elements functioning within the patriarchal society had defined their existence for them. Psychiatrists had labeled them sick. Men had denied them their eroticism. The Catholic church viewed homosexuality as "an objective disorder" that required "attentive study, active concern and honest, theologically well-balanced counsel."[34] They had been silenced and atomized within the feminist movement. The ways in which they entered the public sphere, then, were directly related to their intimate lives. Defining their own existence was the most intimate thing they

[32] Original: "no se nombra para nada a la de mujeres." Marta Schmidt, "Los Homosexuales Buscan la Libertad," *Revista Dar la Cara* 1:7 (July 1984), 8.
[33] Same-sex marriage and adoption was legalized in Argentina in 2010. For a summary of the LGBTQ movement in the 1990s, see Stephen Brown, "Con Discriminación."
[34] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons," (October 1, 1986).

could publicly do. As more and more lesbians entered into these conversations as the 1980s progressed, a small group of lesbo-feminist activists began to separate their activism from that dictated by both the male-headed gay liberation movement and the heterosexual-headed feminist movement in Buenos Aires

Toward a Lesbian Activism for Lesbians

Throughout 1986, Josefina Quesada (age 64), Ilse Fuskova (age 54), and Adriana Carrasco (age 22), three lesbian activists living in Buenos Aires, met regularly on Saturday nights to discuss activism, the role of lesbians within the feminist movement, and social and political opportunities for lesbians in a democratic Argentina. At one of those meetings, they came up with the idea of organizing a lesbian workshop at that year's ATEM conference. The workshop, which took place in November 1986—two years after Hilda Rais's presentation of "Lesbianismo" at the same conference—, was the first of its kind in Buenos Aires. A few months later, on March 8, 1987, Quesada, Fuskova, Carrasco, and four friends openly marched as proud lesbians during the International Women's Day march in the Plaza Congreso. The group was a mixture of peronistas and militant lesbians, young and old women, and one woman, Ilse Fuskova, who had spent much of her adult life in a traditional heterosexual marriage. Later dubbing themselves the Generation of '87, this small group of women represented the most vocal and visible lesbian presence in the capital throughout the late 1980s. They published hand-copied zines. They carved out an unofficial space for themselves at Lugar de Mujer, a community center founded by feminists in August 1983 that aimed at studying the legal, cultural, health, and educational issues affecting Argentine women. They also appeared in public spaces that were not signified as feminist or activist in nature, such as busy plazas and pedestrian streets. In 1991, Ilse

Fuskova became the first woman to publicly out herself on national television. The ways that this small group of lesbians engaged with other lesbians, with other feminists, and with the public at large had not been seen before in Argentine history.

One of the first contributions they made to this new moment in lesbian history in Buenos Aires was the creation of the city's first journal made for and by lesbians, *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana*. *Cuaderno* was a truly grassroots publication. Freehand text, drawings, and collages filled the legal sheets, that were then photocopied. As one journalist has described the effort to create *Cuaderno:* "Without financial resources and without a computer or Internet, a small feat of women dedicated themselves to this editorial work, destined solely for lesbo-feminist outreach."[35] Given the goal of lesbo-feminist outreach, it follows that *Cuarderno* covered themes of love, sex, romance, and solidarity between women. They approached these themes through a variety of genres. The initial issues mostly included testimonials from participants at the workshop on lesbianism that took place at the 1986 ATEM conference. But they also included opinion pieces, reprints of articles from foreign publications, such as one written by a Chilean lesbo-feminist group, drawings, and poems. At the International Women's Day march in 1987, they sold the first copies of *Cuaderno*. Adrianna Carrasco remembered that they were working "to show that lesbians existed and that we were not fantasy characters of morbid melodramas."[36]

In addition to producing *Cuaderno*, this small group of women worked to establish a lesbian presence on the streets of Buenos Aires because, as Adriana Carrasco recalls, "lesbians

[35] Original: "Sin recursos económicos y sin computadora ni Internet, una pequeña gesta de mujeres se dedicó a esta labor editorial, destinada, únicamente, a la divulgación lesbofeminista." Paula Jiménez, "Escribo, luego existo," *Página 12* (December 12, 2008): https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/soy/1-487-2008-12-12.html

[36] Adriana Carrasco, "Hemos recorrido un largo camino muchachxs," *Página 12* (March 8, 2019): https://www.pagina12.com.ar/179072-hemos-recorrido-un-largo-camino-muchach-xs.

did not exist in Argentine society."[37] On Saturday nights, they would head down to the cinema district, which was then situated on Calle Lavalle. The pedestrian-only street was packed with moviegoers, couples on an evening stroll, parents watching their children gallivant around. Once there, the members of the Generation of '87 would set up on the steps of a shopping center with their posters and engage the large crowds in debates about patriarchal violence. Adriana Carrasco remembers that men contested and rebuked their arguments while (the women were watching quietly).[38] During the winter months, when people were more likely to stay inside on a Saturday night, the women would spray paint anti-patriarchal and pro-feminist messages—such as "sin igualidad no hay justice" (without equality there is no justice)—on the walls of medical and religious institutions. And they marched with thousands of other Argentinian women on March 8, 1987, selling their zine. They did not sell many copies on that first day. In fact, a general sense of isolation and the smallness of their group seems to have informed the kind of content they produced, as well as the ways that they engaged with other feminists and other lesbians.

For example, the Generation of '87 was particularly critical of lesbians who remained in the closet. As Ilse Fuskova recalled, the reason that they only sold a few copies of *Cuarderno* at the Women's March in 1987 was not because there were so few lesbians, but, rather, because many women were afraid, shy, or ashamed to buy it. She wrote that those who did purchase a copy claimed they were buying it for a "cousin" who might find it interesting.[39] Adriana Carrasco has interpreted this kind of self-consciousness or shyness as internalized homophobia, or lesbian lesbophobia, as she called it. Cristina, another member of the Generation of '87,

[37] Original: "las lesbianas no existíamos en la sociedad argentina." Adriana Carrasco, "Una historia de Cuadernos," *Cuadernos de existencia lesbiana*, edición 30 aniversario, No. 1 (October 10, 2015): 3–4.
[38] Original: "las mujeres se quedaban mirando calladas."" Adriana Carrasco, "Una historia de Cuadernos," *Cuadernos de existencia lesbiana*, edición 30 aniversario, No. 1 (October 10, 2015): 3–4.
[39] Ilse Fuskova, "Mi reflexión hoy," *Cuadernos de existencia lesbiana*, edición 30 aniversario, no. 1 (October 10, 2015): 1.

referred to closeted lesbians as cockroaches because they were hiding even though everyone knew they were there. She proudly proclaimed, "Yo no soy cucaracha, ni lo quiero ser. Soy lesbiana" (I am not a cockroach, nor do I want to be. I am a lesbian).[40] Cristina's dehumanizing metaphor of closeted lesbians as cockroaches is surprising given the context of the human rights discourse in Argentina and given that lesbian activists were also refuting the contagion narrative, which also relied on dehumanizing metaphors. Perhaps, however, Cristina was following the literary lead established by early feminists like Salvadora Medina Onrubia (1894–1971) and Alcira Olivé (1889–1975), who appropriated the rhetoric of early twentieth-century hygienists to "depict patriarchal culture as a dangerous pandemic that threatens the stability of the home and makes women sick."[41] Certainly, Cristina's language mirrored that used by men like José López Rega, who in 1975 wrote that the nation needed to "eradicate" the "creatures" who "spread vice and corruption."[42] Whatever her motivation for choosing such language, the image of cockroaches—an animal known for living in large, if hidden, communities—shows how prolific the use of the closet was during the period. It also shows that Cristina believed that lesbians who remained closeted or isolated from a larger lesbian community were a threat to the survival of lesbianism in Argentina.

That this lesbo-feminist activist group was so small and so critical of those who refused to publicly out themselves shows that most queer women in Buenos Aires in the 1980s remained closeted. Because women in the closet did not leave many records of their lives, we can only reconstruct the utility of the closet through other factors, such as the material needs of women. Severe inflation meant that such material conditions were harder for those who did not have

[40] Cristina, "Muchas Vueltas a la Tortilla," *Codo a Codo* 1.1 (November 1988): 2.
[41] May Summer Farnsworth, "Sex Work, Sickness, and Suicide: Argentine Feminist Theatre in the 1910s and 1920s," https://hemisphericinstitute.org/en/e-misferica-61/farnsworth.
[42] "Acabar con los Homosexuales," *El Caudillo* (February 12, 1975).

access to economic independence.[43] At that time, such was the case for most women living in Argentina. Remaining in the closet, then, allowed some women to continue living with families and to keep jobs. Without reinforcing the critiques of women who chose to remain in the closet—such critiques were informed, at least in part, by their experiences and interactions with those women on a personal level—, they are useful for understanding how prolific the use of the closet was for lesbians in Buenos Aires throughout the 1980s.

Whereas the closet provided lesbians in the 1960s and 1970s with a certain amount of protection—as it certainly continued to do in the 1980s—, the Generation of '87 was over it. Cristina wrote that the identities of lesbians were known to other lesbians, so clearly these women were utilizing the closet in certain situations or with certain people, a survival tool that lesbians and other queer people had long utilized. However, the Generation of '87 argued that this kind of hiding, or partial hiding, was a form of internalized lesbophobia. While they did not argue that the closet was the cause of internalized lesbophobia—traditional gender roles, family pressure, the Church's denunciation of homosexuality, the contagion narrative, and psychological diagnoses had all contributed to an individual's internalization of homophobia—, they argued that the remedy for this self-hatred was coming out of the closet. If closeted lesbians were responding to questionnaires, even anonymously, and detailing romantic and sexual relationships with other women, then their closeting may not have been a reflection of self-hatred but of self-preservation. Nonetheless, the preoccupation that the members of the Generation of '87, especially Ilse Fuskova, Adriana Carrasco, and Cristina, all showed regarding other women's choices to remain (partially) closeted is more indicative of their own sense of isolation from a larger community than it is of the lived experiences of those who remained in the closet.

[43] See Romero, 267–73.

In fact, a desire to overcome isolation appeared in almost everything the Generation of ’87 produced. A common feeling of loneliness and seclusion during adolescence was expressed in lesbian writings throughout the 1980s, such as when Cristina wrote, “When I was 16 I thought I was the only lesbian, meaning one in ten million or so.”[44] Sandra Mihonavich, one half of the singing duet, Sandra y Celeste—who famously sang the line, “somos mucha más que dos” (we are much more than two) in 1988—, wrote that in her teens she was “alone, alone with myself, unable to talk to anyone about making love, sex and everything else.”[45] The Generation of ’87 directly confronted these feelings of isolation, knowing all too well the psychic trauma that such experiences caused.

One of their publications, *Codo a Codo*—developed out of meetings that took place at the Lugar de Mujeres between 1986 and 1989—, is illustrative of their attempts at building community. Produced by many of the same women who created *Cuadernos*, the first (and perhaps only) issue of *Codo a Codo* appears hopeful, but ultimately reveals how unsatisfied this group of women was with the smallness of their collective. The title, which translates to “arm in arm,” evoked a vision of people marching in solidarity with each other, linked at the elbows. The image on the cover shows two women in a dance where they are linked at the elbows and spinning, while several jubilant women clap and smile around them [Image 4.2]. The image, like the title, suggests camaraderie, unity, and harmony. However, these notions of fellowship are more anticipative than representative of the lived experiences of the Generation of ’87. The introduction to *Codo a Codo* is clear about the group’s desire to discover a broad lesbian community:

[44] Original: “Cuando tenía 16 años pensaba que era la única lesbiana, esto significaba una en diez millones más o menos.” Cristina, “Muchas Vueltas a la Tortilla,” *Codo a Codo* 1 (November 1988): 2.
[45] Original: “sola, sola conmigo, sin poder hablar con nadie de hacer el amor, del sexo y todo lo demás.” Sandra Mihanovich, “lo que soy,” aquí estamos (April–June 1995): 26.

> One of the objectives of this publication is to connect with lesbians, knowing that there are groups both in the capital and in the interior of the country … we believe that one way or another it is essential that we locate each other, communicate with each other, overcome the distances (obviously not only geographical) imposed on us.[46]

By all accounts, they had not found this community by the end of the 1980s. This kind of isolation differentiated experiences of being lesbian from those of being a gay man in Buenos Aires. Gay men had a much broader network that recognized their existence, including media attention, scholarship, local leadership, social spaces, and cultural productions. While not all these spaces recognized male homosexuality as positive, they still provided gay men with a plethora of sites to call upon for evidence of community, or merely for the knowledge that they were not the only ones like them. By working to overcome lesbian isolation, the Generation of '87 was building off of early conversations about lesbian existence within the gay liberation movement, like when Napolitano challenged Zelmar Acevedo and Héctor Casariego to recognize that lesbians do not even exist in the general imagination of what is possible. Several years after the return to democracy, these women were pointing out that the violence of isolation and invisibility continued during democratic times. This was evidenced by the minuscule number of women who felt it possible to publicly claim visibility and existence. While these tiny numbers do not delegitimize the idea of a "lesbian public" in this era, they do illustrate the extreme bravery of the Generation of '87. Moreover, the tiny number—seven!—underscores the scale of the struggle for lesbians to claim existence.

[46] Original: "Uno de los objectivos de esta publicación es poder conectarnos entre lesbianas … creemos que de un modo u otro es fundamental que nos ubiquemos, nos comuniquemos, que salvemos las distancias (obviamente no sólo geográfica) que nos imponen." "Editorial," *Codo a Codo* 1 (November 1988): 1.

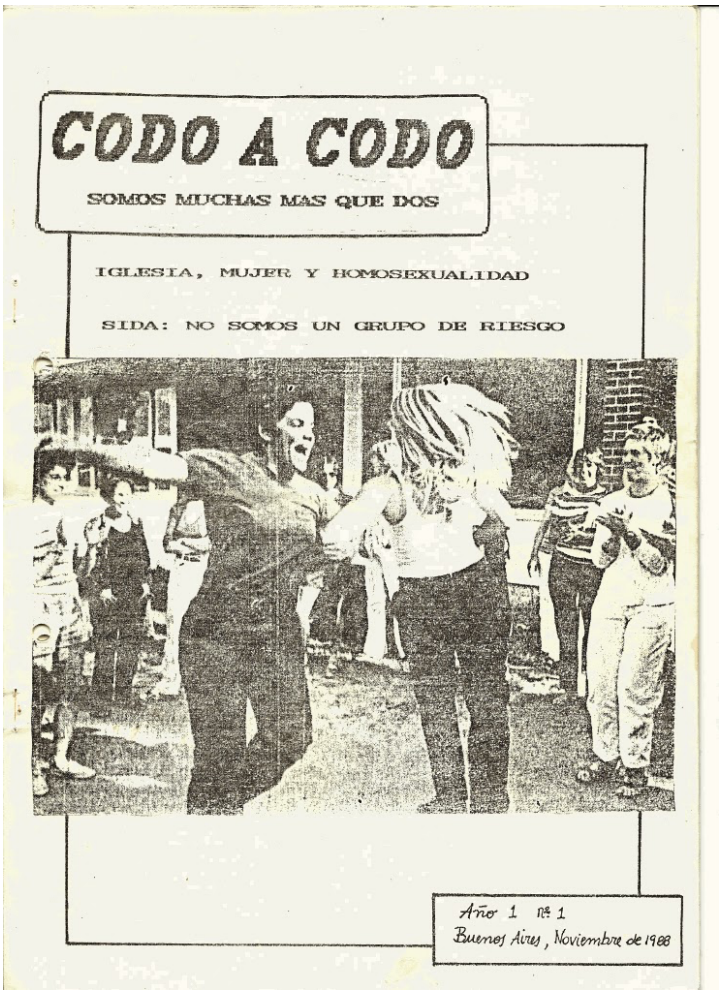

Image 4.2: The cover of *Codo a Codo*. The image and the title both suggest a significant lesbian collective, which did not exist in Buenos Aires in the 1980s.[47]

Perhaps because the work to claim lesbian existence was such a difficult endeavor on a national level, the Generation of '87 primarily concentrated their efforts on achieving meaningful recognition within the feminist movement. Historian Natalia Milanesio has commented, "The problems, rights, and needs of lesbians were notably absent on the feminist agenda after the return to democracy, reproducing the same invisible status they had in the feminist and gay

[47]" Grupo Autogestivo de Lesbianas," Potencia Tortillera, https://potenciatortillera.blogspot.com/2011/07/grupo-autogestivo-de-lesbianas.html (Accessed May 3, 2019).

organizations of the early 1970s."[48] Most of the actions that the Generation of '87 initiated took place within feminist spaces. Their workshops were held in feminist spaces, and their "coming out party," so to speak, took place at the women's march. While earlier conversations by women like Hilda Rais and Ilse Fuskova had considered the ways that lesbians had been negated within Argentine society as a whole, the Generation of '87 steered those discussions to ways that lesbians had been negated within the feminist movement. A column that appeared in *Codo a Codo* specifically claimed that the process of obtaining "a so-called homosexual revolution or freedom" had to take place within feminism. In the column, Valeria wrote, "The work is not only individual, it must be linked to a collective process."[49] The collective process required more than the handful of activist lesbians; the task of achieving sexual freedom was so colossal (Valeria's word) that lesbians needed concrete help by their supposed allies.

Lesbian critiques of the feminist movement tended to focus on the ways that feminists had reproduced heteronormative structures. Adriana Carrasco argued that lesbians in Argentina were oppressed because "heterosexist society marks us all with its repressive guidelines, and women reproduce them in our relationships." When she wrote of women reproducing "repressive guidelines" in our relationships, Carrasco was referring to all interpersonal relationships between women, including romantic and friendly. To be certain, Carrasco reproduced some of the classist and racist middle-class values that predominated the feminist movement of the early 1970s. Her repudiation of "repressive guidelines" included lesbian relationships that mimicked the passive-active, male-female dynamics. She and her fellow lesbo-feminist activists were working toward an understanding of lesbian existence that defined sexuality in terms of equal pleasure, that

[48] Milanesio, 221.
[49] Original: "una supuesta revolución o libertad homosexual;" and "El trabajo no es solamente individual, es necesario vincularlo a un proceso colectivo." Valeria, "Conocerse y Crecer Libres," *Codo a Codo* 1:1 (November 1988), 10.

identified relationships without prescribed gender roles, and that ruptured the "ideology of complementarity."[50] But Carrasco was not just concerned with lesbian romantic relationships in this passage. She was also claiming that women within the feminist movement were guilty of reproducing "repressive guidelines" when they failed to recognize lesbian existence. For the Generation of '87, rejecting patriarchal standards meant that women would need to interact with each other in new ways. Transcending the sex/gender system would, they argued, result in women's liberation. Therefore, a key aspect of their critique of the feminist movement was addressing the negation of lesbian existence in that space.

In switching their focus to the oppression of lesbians within the feminist movement, and specifically using the language of existence to do so, this cohort of women was signaling the influence of Adrienne Rich—whose essay, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," was first published in Argentina in the feminist magazine, *Brujas*, in November 1986—to their way of thinking. Taking up Rich's charge that feminism be more inclusive of lesbians and consider the ways that heterosexuality subordinated women, the Generation of '87 distinguished themselves from their predecessors by focusing on how they related to their friends and comrades in the feminist movement. For example, Adriana Carrasco said:

> We considered ourselves the vanguard of feminism. For years, lesbians were the workforce and we contributed the logistics to feminism. Our existence was not only denied or pathologized/criminalized by society but also resisted by feminism.[51]

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[50] Adriana Carrasco, "Contradicciones de la existencia lesbiana," *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* 4 (August – September 1987): 4–5.

[51] Original: "Nos considerábamos la vanguardia del feminismo. Durante años las lesbianas fuimos la fuerza de trabajo y las que aportábamos la logística al feminismo. Nuestra existencia no solamente era negada o patologizada/criminalizada por la sociedad sino también resistida por el feminism." Adriana Carrasco, "Hemos recorrido un largo camino muchachxs," *Página 12* (March 8, 2019): https://www.pagina12.com.ar/179072-hemos-recorrido-un-largo-camino-muchach-xs.

By the end of the 1980s, Ilse Fuskova, concurred, writing that for her, the feminist fight had never been one for equality between men and women. Instead, she claimed, "it has meant the equality of women with women."[52]

A key part of their confrontation with feminism, then, was to connect to all women's oppression within the heterosexist erotic ethos. This argument relied on the sense of a shared (universal) female sexuality. Here, Ilse Fuskova again serves as a key example. Her early work—which, to be clear, was created before she identified as lesbian— focused on equating women's embodied experiences. In addition to her poem, "Amargo Versito para el Día de la Madre," which addressed the negation of all women in society via the example of motherhood, she also created a series of photographs in 1982 that depicted a woman posing with a bisected pumpkin, often strategically placed to mimic a vulva. These early works equated all women's corporeal existence. By the end of the 1980s, she was also equating all women's eroticism. For example, in 1989, she recalled that she experienced her first sexual attraction to other women during a feminist conference in Bertioga, Brazil in 1985. She wrote that the scene, where 900 women gathered together, "was intensely charged with erotic energy."[53] Fuskova did not single out a sense of lesbian erotic energy; instead, she perceived an erotic energy created by the gathering of women, regardless of their sexuality. Adriana Carrasco maintained a similar sentiment, writing, "lesbians have a sexuality that is common to all women, pleasure centers are the same, so are our sensations. All of us suffer from the collective appropriation that men exercise over our bodies, even though many of us can no longer be affected by individual

[52] Original: "ha significada la igualidad de las mujeres con mujeres." Ilse Kornreich, "El Continuum Lesbiano," 14.
[53] Original: "se cargaba intensamente de energía erótica." Ilse Kornreich, "El Continuum Lesbiano," *Revista Brujas* XV (November 1989), 12.

appropriation."[54] Carrasco and her cohort relied on the intimacy of female sexuality as a bridge across the gulf that seemingly separated heterosexual women from lesbians. In claiming that all women had the same sexuality, the same pleasure, the same bodies, they were appealing to an embodied connection. As such, it stands as the primary tactic used by the Generation of '87 to drum up support and solidarity within the feminist movement.

At the same time, however, when they wrote about lesbian intimate relationships, they projected the idea of a complete rejection of heteronormativity. They did not make note of how they imagined straight women could maintain sexual or romantic relationships with men that mirrored the kind of equality and reciprocity that they claimed true lesbian relationships held. On May 12, 1987, at the Lugar de Mujeres, Adriana Carrasco and Ilse Fuskvoa organized the second lesbian workshop to take place in Buenos Aires (the first one had taken place in November 1986 as part of the previous year's ATEM conference). Based on their notes from the workshop, which they published in the third issue of *Cuaderno*, the event included conversations about attraction, sex, fears, and the ideal romantic relationship. While the notes reflect a variety of opinions on these issues, some common themes appeared, notably the designation of lesbian sexuality as creative and free. Here, the respondents referred to ways that lesbianism could exist outside of the patriarchal and heterosexist structures that had, historically, limited women's autonomy. One unnamed participant in the workshop envisioned lesbian sexuality as moving beyond the notion of symbiosis, a paradigm that did not always entail equality between partners.[55] The common themes presented at the workshop illustrate that earlier constructions of lesbian sexuality as liberating and horizontal persisted into the late-1980s. Such a utopian

[54] Adrianna Carrasco, "Contradicciones de la existencia lesbiana," *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* 4 (August – September 1987): 4–5.
[55] Ilse Kornreich (Fuskova) and Adriana Carrasco, "2˚ Taller de Existencia Lesbiana," *Cuaderno de Existencia Lesbiana* 3 (July 1987), 5–10.

concept of lesbian sexuality clearly demarcated it from heteronormative sexuality. Ilse Fuskova concurred when she claimed that lesbianism was potentially revolutionary.[56] Without the possibility for heterosexuality to produce horizontal relationships, then lesbianism, and thusly lesbian sexuality, remained different.

In their efforts to construct lesbian existence within the feminist movement, the Generation of '87 relied on contradictory discourses. The paradox of isolating lesbian sexuality as something idiosyncratic while, at the same time, connecting all female sexuality is akin to what Teresa de Lauretis has written about with regard to the conceptual and representational configurations of sexual difference: "the term, at once, of a sexual difference (women are, or want, something different from men) and of a sexual indifference (women are, or want, the same as men). While the paradox articulated by de Lauretis points to the ways that female sexuality was conceived "within models and laws devised by male subjects," the Generation of '87 was thinking through their sexuality as it related to other women.[57] In Buenos Aires, lesbo-feminist activists did not use male sexuality or male subjectivity as the standard by which they understood the connection between eroticism and citizenship. Instead, the Generation of '87 focused on heterosexual women and the relationship between female sexuality and subjecthood. On the one hand, in their confrontation with heterosexual feminists, they claimed that all women shared the same sexuality. Lesbian writings from this era show an effort to relate all female sexuality and eroticism. The logic of this methodology was to convince the feminist movement in Buenos Aires to accept lesbian activism as necessary for accomplishing human rights for women. On the other hand, lesbians also worked to distance themselves from the constructions of traditional

[56] Ilse Kornreich, "El Continuum Lesbiano," 13.
[57] Teresa de Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation," 155–56.

female sexuality. To speak of a specific lesbian sexuality meant forging a lesbian identity based on a shared history of social experiences and perceived erotic equality.

In contradistinction to the writings by women like Hilda Rais in the years just following a return to democracy, the Generation of ’87 focused their activism on lesbian and feminist spaces, rather than society at large. To be certain, the rhetorical devices and methodologies they employed show an engagement with the broader discourses of human rights and democracy. This is seen, for example, in their critiques of the closet and the psychic trauma it induced. Moreover, the Generation of ’87 certainly thought beyond the limits of their city and country. They were highly influenced by transnational lesbo-feminist thinking. They were working across national borders, meeting Spanish lesbian activists in Brazil and reprinting articles about Chilean lesbian groups. Nonetheless, they were largely shaped by local events. Much of their writing was addressed to other Argentine women, either fellow lesbians or fellow feminists. One of the reasons for this change is, as Rais made clear, lesbians did not exist. Because lesbians did not exist in the public at large, they needed to focus on the area where they did exist, even if marginally. The feminist movement was the space where lesbians could assert their existence. In order to do so, the Generation of ’87 worked to redefine lesbian existence so that feminists would feel a kinship toward and recognition of lesbian experiences. This was an endeavor that employed multiple, sometimes contradictory, methodologies, such as when Cristina used dehumanizing language to argue for a collective emergence from the metaphorical closet, or when they worked to isolate lesbian sexuality while simultaneously constructing a common, universal female sexuality. The Generation of ‘87, therefore, understood lesbianism as a social construct, one they were actively working to redefine in the late 1980s. Their insistence on

lesbian existence within the social context of the feminist movement, then, helped initiate a new era of lesbian activism that emerged in the 1990s.

Conclusion

The few public writings by lesbians during the first two years after the return to democracy show that they were equally as engaged in the processes of national reconciliation and public memory as was the rest of the Argentine public. These writings show that lesbians considered the ways that they were the victims of violence—especially psychological violence—, which paralleled the national trend of thinking about the development and effects of state-sanctioned violence and trauma. Conversations about lesbian rights in Argentina, therefore, were specifically tied to the national debate over human rights abuses, which made these conversations really quite different than the context of North American lesbians during those same years. Whether they were countering the contagion narrative that had been used to pathologize lesbianism, or asserting the rights to bodily autonomy and existence, lesbians worked to redefine Argentine democracy as one based on the virtue of human rights.

These interventions into the national conversation show how lesbian activism remained hinged to the gay liberation and feminist movements. Within these activist spaces, lesbians, gay men, and feminists alike contributed ways of thinking about the intimacy of sexuality in relation to human rights. Collectively, they understood the ways that intimacy intersected with issues of existence, bodily autonomy, violence, and trauma. had become part of the national conversation about human rights. For example, feminists argued that women's liberation required autonomy over one's body. Feminists, including lesbian feminists like Hilda Rais and Ilse Fuskova, understood the right to use one's body as she desired (which may or may not include

breastfeeding, pregnancy, sexual intercourse, and various forms of labor) as a fundamental human right. However, some lesbians also understood that their experiences did not fully overlap with those of gay men or heterosexual women. A new kind of lesbian activism, one created by lesbians, emerged when the Generation of ’87 decided to march as openly public lesbians at the 1987 women’s march. This group relied on their previous ties to gay liberation and, especially, feminist groups. There is obvious tension in their attempts to assert themselves as independent of these groups while, at the same time, sharing some fundamental critiques of society. Nonetheless, this moment, ushered in by the incredibly brave members of the Generation of ’87, should be a considered a turning point in Argentina’s lesbian history.

CONCLUSION

In November 1988, Diana Bellessi, who had spent most of her days of the dictatorship isolated on an island in the Delta, published *Eroica*. The poet and writer, Gabriela De Cicco, described Bellessi's fifth book as follows:

> Conceived as a lesbian-feminist epic, Eroica knew how to give voice to voices that were erased, elided, suppressed, (self) censored, forgotten, alluded to. It created a starting point from which to begin a loving re-vision of personal stories and official stories.[1]

A decade after it was originally published, De Cicco understood Bellessi's epic poem as marking a turning point. For De Cicco, this turning point related to poetry. But if we also consider the history of lesbianism and lesbians in Buenos Aires in the two decades preceding *Eroica*, then we can recognize that the end of the 1980s was also turning point for the broader lesbian community.

Erased, Elided, Suppressed, (Self) Censored

Over the course of two decades, lesbians in Buenos Aires worked to claim their collective existence, to make lesbianism possible and visible. They did this by participating in national conversations about human rights. This did this by critiquing the patriarchal family. They did this by thinking about lesbianism as the moral authority over traditional institutions. They did this by countering the contagion narrative. They did this by arguing for universal configurations of female sexuality. They did this by asserting that lesbian sexuality was unique and could teach the nation something about equality and democracy. As this research has shown, lesbians had to insert

[1] Original: "Concebido como épica lésbico-feminista, Eroica, supo dar voz a la voces borradas, elididas, suprimidas, (auto)censuradas, olvidadas, aludidas. Creó un punto de partida desde el cual comenzar una re-visión amorosa de las historias personales y de las historias oficiales." Gabriela De Cicco, "Imagen del texto vivo: a 10 años de la publicación de 'Eroica,'" *Los Lanzallamas* (Nov. 1998).

themselves into spaces and conversations where concepts of citizenship were contested and negotiated because no other group of people was going to bring lesbians with them. Feminist and gay liberation groups may have opened up spaces for lesbians to become activists, but their concepts of gender and sexuality remained tied to notions of homophobia and misogyny, respectively. Lesbians, therefore, had to challenge feminists and gay men to only recognize lesbian existence.

Lesbian efforts to give voice to the silenced happened on several different fronts, in a multitude of spaces. Certainly, they used some of the tried-and-true avenues, such as publishing articles, books, and poetry, and presenting at feminist conferences. Other, more creative ventures were also attempted, such as when Martha Ferro put on puppet shows at El Sótano. Certainly, the demonstrative move into the public sphere by the Generation of '87 counts as a new and creative way use to overcome the silencing of lesbian voices. The fact that they marched without masks underscores my reading of this act as movement toward un-silencing. Throughout the politically tumultuous period examined in this research, lesbian voices became louder. This is especially impressive when you consider the fact that state repression, censorship, and terror was a key feature of this period. Moreover, the repression of sexual minorities did not necessarily depend on what kind of government-maintained power in Argentina. Whether democratic or authoritarian, Argentina's homosexuals experienced extreme repression from all levels of society, including, for some, from their own families. For a group of sexual and gender minorities to find their collective voice during this particular moment in time is evidence of the lesbian intimate public. Moreover, it shows how powerful and productive this imagined public was for a group of isolated and atomized women.

Louisa Passerini has asserted that women's "autonomy is never to be understood as absolute liberty, but as a means of asserting individual needs and desires in the context of existing conditions—sometimes very harsh ones—and eventually *against* such conditions. Thus some women have managed to change/innovate/challenge what others were resigned to accept as a given destiny."[2] I think this is especially apt when thinking about the history of lesbians in Buenos Aires between the late 1960s to the late 1980s. This history shows that lesbians rejected the "given destiny" that they were alone, isolated as sexual deviants, unable to obtain collective action, destined to be subordinated, to have their stories erased from the narrative. By the end of the 1980s, lesbians in Argentina were producing content for each other.

Re-vision of personal stories and official stories

By utilizing the lens of intimacy to interrogate this history, this scholarship opens up ways of thinking about lesbian history that bypass traditional spaces where identity is constructed, such as political associations like activist groups or national citizenship. Martha Ferro's secret meeting place for lesbians, El Sótano, serves as an apt example to illustrate the benefit of using intimacy as an analytical lens. Ferro rejected the notion that sexuality functioned as a political identity. Rather, she understood sexuality as a shared experience modulated by class membership, friendships, and social contacts.[3] Surprisingly, El Sótano became a place for lesbian socializing across classes, something that was rare in 1970s Buenos Aires. The women who attended events at El Sótano, included Ferro's puppet shows, participated in one of the few spaces where lesbians from all backgrounds could socialize during the dictatorship. Through these meetings, through the

[2] Louisa Passerini, *Memory and Utopia*, 34.
[3] Valeria Flores, "El sótano de San Telmo.

friendships that developed, through conversations between lovers who met at El Sótano, a new lesbian intimate public emerged, one that rejected isolation and invisibility.

The idea of sexuality as a collective experience requires shared epistemologies and ontologies. In Martha Ferro's puppet shows, we see that lesbians played with the notion of invisibility to critique the society in which they lived and to invert certain structures of gender and sexuality. When women returned home from El Sótano, they were empowered with a new way of thinking about lesbianism as a moral counterbalance to the military's violence. As and invisible group, they were the ones watching the surveillance state. This thread of inversion is carried through when one examines the romantic and sexual intimacy that lesbians experienced, as well. The use of lesbian sex as a metaphor for an egalitarian society, one constructed horizontally rather than hierarchically, appears in the texts produced in the 1980s.

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