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Ch 6 - Queer Tools and Archival Research.

Methodological Notes on Trans and Queer Exploration in Argentinean Archives

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There is a widespread belief that queer history is a work against invisibility. As researchers, we usually start with the illusion that our work consists of going to the archive to illuminate secret stories of people that have transgressed gender and sexual rules. We usually start our research projects convinced that we will shed light on the lives erased by the heterosexual gaze. However, while visiting archives, many researchers find with surprise that more than silence, at least since the nineteenth-century modern societies have been obsessively talking and producing knowledge about the shifting human sexual experience in general and with particular emphasis on those lives considered “deviated” by doctors, bureaucrats, and policymakers. Historians then discover that rather than a treasure chest full of secrets, archives are challenging spaces to find the traces of changing sexual practices and imaginaries. The archival documents present pieces of complicated puzzles with which they attempt to formulate histories of sexuality.

Finding documents is usually easier than analysing them from a queer perspective. Researchers usually feel first a quick excitement when they find hundreds of pages of, for example, doctors writing about sexual lives that they considered abnormal or police reports about men looking for sexual encounters with other men in the cities. Nevertheless, after some time reading the material, historians usually feel frustrated about the challenges of working with fragmented material that usually speaks more about how the elites imagined sexuality than of the experiences of those people transgressing the rules. Queer and trans lives - I use this concept to define the lives of those crossing what were considered the gender and/or sexual rules of their time - are usually described by others in fragmented documents such as newspaper articles, police reports or court records. We cannot access queer lives directly. We go to the archive to fish for events that can illuminate their life: an unfortunate encounter with a police officer or the morbid interest of a tabloid journalist (Farge, 2013). Therefore, it is almost impossible to find any trace of their life experiences on their own terms, which forces us to

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deal with categories produced in unequal power conditions. While moving from one document to another, the illusion of the alleged transparency of the documents' fades: How can a perspective focused on fluidity and the distrust of fixed categories help us build a stable historical narrative? How can queer historiography approach these experiences that we usually know through the words of powerful others? How can we ethically work with these materials?

This chapter explores some notes about queer and trans methodology and archival research based on my experience working on the Latin American history of sexuality. This chapter doesn't propose a monolithic understanding of how to do archival research. Instead, it explores the potential of a paradoxical perspective that usually offers more challenges than solutions. The text explores how queer historians have contributed to developing a sensibility that helps us know the risks of the demand for stability in historical writing (Amin, 2017). In recent years, the so-called archival turn expanded the interdisciplinary definition of the notion of the archive to explore the practices and theories of recollection and curation - and their social and political impact (Marshall and Tortorici, 2022). The theorisation of expansive and sometimes uncontrollable archives, usually referred to with capitals – The Archive, needs to be explored to understand their logic of knowledge production and preservation rather than assuming an always universal machinery of archival practices.

The main contribution of this chapter is to bring forward the queer sensibility in the archives, the uncomfortable feeling that boosts the formulation of questions to distrust stable and teleological narratives. Here I ask some questions that any historian of sexuality faces while navigating archives: How should we approach archives? How can we build historical narratives with fragmentary documents? What are the limits and potentialities of working with documents produced in frameworks of intense social hierarchies? What can we know about those subjects who left no traces of their own experiences? What is our link as researchers to the archive? More concretely, in this chapter, I think these questions relate to documents that I found while researching the history of male homosexuality, trans embodiment, and the purchase of sexual services in Argentina. In this sense, I will not be able to give a deeper understanding of the context of these documents or stories (as some of them deserve); I will prioritise some methodological questions and try to land them by using concrete documentary sources.

Archival research allows us to rethink violence and conflict from a queer historical perspective. As the editors of this volume call in the introduction, this chapter expands the notion of political violence beyond their classical circumscription to classic scenes of political

conflict (between States or social groups). Instead, I want to call our attention to how the documented encounters of sex workers, male homosexuals, and trans people with state agents usually destabilise the mainstream heteronormative periodisation of conflict and violence. Here, I mean that the prolonged practices of state and community violence against gender and sexual transgressions redefine the margins of what is violence and what is conflict, and instead, an open question about which violence and with which intensity was accepted and against whom in specific contexts. For example, the histories of violence against people who we would now define as the LGTBIQ+ community in Latin America problematise the mainstream circumscription of political violence to periods of military dictatorships, raising questions about the heteronormativity of our accepted periodisations. Luckily, archives have much more than histories of violence to offer. As the editors of this volume point out, there is a challenge to forge new narratives that also forge instances of reparative identification beyond violence. This chapter reflects on the challenges of building conjectural stories based on fragments to bring back the joy and resistance of those who, between doctors' examinations and police officers' harassment, forged joyful lives beyond sexual and gender norms.

This chapter explores three main issues while navigating archives with a queer sensibility. First, it explores archives as spaces of power and how historians negotiate with the conditions of production of the documents. Second, it explores the challenges of studying gender and sexual experiences beyond our modern language and labels to understand sexuality. Finally, it emphasises the power of disidentification in historical heterosexual practices.

Dealing with Ruthless Archives

There are many types of archives: private collections, public reservoirs, family albums, or those held by grassroots organisations. Some of them are accessible, and others are restricted by law. But beyond the substantial differences, archives are dynamic spaces in which researchers negotiate with the institutional history, regulations and archivists regarding the conditions of accessing the material. Archives are not passive and transparent reservoirs. They are institutional projects through which multiple social groups and usually the state have built their authority over the past (Stoler, 2010).

In the last decade, historians and literary critics have challenged the alleged neutrality of archives. There has been an increasing theorisation on the challenges of working with "traditional archives" - where documents are stored and organised (Arondekar et. al., 2015;

Caimari, 2020). Scholars such as Elena Martinez and Diana Taylor emphasised the strong relation between institutional archives and state projects and the power dynamics involved in producing a collection - for example, in reproducing the dominance of certain voices over others (e.g., doctors over patients, policemen over prisoners, etc.) These scholars called our attention to how the predominance of written documents constructed memory at the expense of oral knowledge (Taylor, 2003; Martinez, 2014). Traditional archives usually preserve more documents about the physicians' point of view of those considered "sexually deviated" than the words with which people that nowadays we would define as LGBTQ+ people identified themselves through time.

Researchers became aware of the historical making of institutions and the documents that they preserved. Inspired by the foundational works of Michael Foucault and Jaques Derrida, the historical perspective interrogated the archives as spaces of power: Which documents are preserved? Which ones have been discarded and why? What does the condition of production of those documents tell us about that time? How can we deal with it? Inspired by this turn, queer historians of colonisation, such as Zeb Tortorici (2018), called our attention to how traditional historiography usually takes for granted the veracity of documents and has a lack of perspective on the historical making of those documents. While approaching the contrast between colonial sodomy with modern homosexuality in New Spain, this means the difference between a condition defined by a sexual practice and an identity; he questions how this "sin against nature" was materially recollected. He shows the role of the production of these documents in this society, on the languages with which the colonial authorities made sense of sexual practices, and in the afterlives of these cases, how they were preserved and survived through the archive. The question about how "silences" have been produced in the archive calls our attention to how certain perspectives are preserved and materialise in the archives over others. Rather than reducing these silences to the expression of practices of power, we can also explore them as a result of multiple practices with which people avoided the agencies of power that produced documents such as, for example, queer people attempting to avoid police imprisonment or medical examination.

In this text, I use the concept of "ruthless archives" to define the process with which traditional archives have tended to reproduce the unequal power conditions of making documents and how historians deal with them (Simonetto, 2021). Even if researchers usually project human rationality to the archive in informal conversation and talk about it as if it were

a living being, understanding them as ruthless institutions can help us make sense of its complex dynamic. Archives organise the material prioritising the language contained in documents or produced by archivists characterised by hierarchical and unequal power conditions. A language through which the words of doctors, police officers and bureaucrats persist over sex workers, trans people or homosexuals' voices. Archiving queer and trans lives is done by reproducing a logic that usually doesn't consider how those people would want to be remembered. Even more problematic, it preserves people in ways that they maybe would not want to be publicly remembered. An excellent example of this is the thousands of police records of men having sex with other men that did not always define themselves publicly as homosexuals or the records of trans people in which police officers usually misgendered them.

The archive is ruthless because it works without questioning intimate personal desires. To rescue them from the classifications, historians need to work on their relationship with those lives. Luckily, the awareness of the ruthless dynamic of the archive can be a potential starting point: understanding how the archive is organised provides us with the language to navigate it and understanding the historical conditions of production of our documents provides us with the tools to track the slight traces of those subaltern lives apparently silenced in the archive.

A good example of archival production is the library of the Medicine College of the University of Buenos Aires. The archive is organised by a system of cards which reproduce the categories with which the doctors defined "sexual abnormalities" (e.g., 'homosexuality' or 'sexual inversion'). The cards make it possible to find all the publications on the topic, some of which, beyond the doctors' intentions, resulted in rich chronicles recording brief statements or photographs of their subjects.

Since the late nineteenth century, Argentine physicians have played a crucial role in defining the gendered, sexual, and racial limits of citizenship. Members of powerful families and the local elites, first hygienists and eugenist doctors, colonised state agencies and shaped normalised standards of sex that they understood vital for national development (Rodriguez, 2006). While reading their collections of chronicles, studies, and photographs of alleged homosexuals and prostitutes - a very vague category in which they aggregated all those they understood as sexually deviated - I found the case of Marina, whose own story reveals the complex challenges of writing queer and trans history.

In 1944, Doctor José Belbey published Marina's photograph in multiple medical journals (Belbey, 1944; 1955). Marina was a twenty-year-old person defined as a man after birth who identified herself as female and was imprisoned for "dressing as the opposite sex". Belbey's articles were foundational to the modern medical category of *travestismo* in Argentina (Belbey, 1944). Belbey had taken the concept from the influential German psychiatrist Richard Von Krafft-Ebing.² A few years later, mainstream handbooks used by psychiatric institutions deployed the concept of *travestismo* as a regular and defined type of sexual deviation. *Trasvestismo* was a word for doctors to label one kind of sexual dissidence of what they understood as the homosexual spectrum that went beyond (or *traversed*) their "sexual orientation" that lived with clothing of the "opposite sex". It is impossible to know if *travestismo* meant anything to Marina. The concept was not used as a community identity until the late 1960s. However, the word allowed me to understand how doctors were imagining Marina, and even more important, the words preserved by the archive helped me to identify other cases of people crossing the frontier of what was understood as gender in their time.

Marina was born in Buenos Aires City in 1924. She was an orphan abandoned by her parents at an early age. Like other children of poor working-class families, she worked in the domestic service of a wealthy house. Since 1919, the state fostered charity and public organisations to look for jobs for children considered in need. A practice promoted by social reformers to produce what they considered productive citizens (Guy, 2009). Marina ran away from many workhouses, a regular occurrence among worker-children who often tried to escape from an extreme hierarchical relationship with adults that sometimes included physical abuse. At 14, Marina claimed legal independence from her tutor and looked for a domestic service job. She explained to Belbey that it was better to be considered a woman to get a good position as a housemaid. However, she felt her transformation progressively took control over her whole life. Nonetheless, maybe her claim of autonomy was more than just looking for a proper job. It could be a desperate search for freedom. Marina explained that living with other female workers allowed her to learn about female expressions, clothing and makeup. She described the attention she paid to good tips that her colleagues gave her. She told doctors how she

² Richard Von Krafft-Ebing (1840-1902) is considered one of the founders of "sexual science". His book *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886) was one of the first compendiums of alleged sexual perversions. His concept of *travestiment* as a "metamorphosis sexualis paranoia". Sometimes he describes it as similar to what is later called the theory of the "wrong body", this is to say, people that understood that they were trapped in the wrong gendered body. (Bullough, 1975).

discovered all the details that composed her femininity until "she did not need to lie anymore", which shows the sociability role in producing embodiment knowledge and technologies (Belbey, 1944).

In 1941, Marina abandoned her work in the domestic service and moved to a home with her friends. She started working in the street and brothels, offering sexual services to men. Marina worked in a dancing, working-class pub where men drank and purchased sexual services. During the 1940s and 1950s, some homosexuals, usually referred to as *transformistas*, offered sexual favours in brothels or private parties (Malva, 2011). She was a *copera*, a lady that offered company and alcoholic drinks to their clients to get commissions. Marina used to practise oral sex with the clients in exchange for money. When asked to have penetrative sexual encounters, she refused, saying that she had her "period" to protect her identity (Belbey, 1944).

The legal context and the role of doctors are useful for understanding the material conditions that produced Marina's photograph and testimony—mediated by Belbey's words. They provide the map of inequalities to be aware of how the power of policemen and doctors forced Marina to talk about her life, and in that sense, how historical narratives can reconstruct them to create a counternarrative centred on Marina's actions to deal with the state and medical violence in her everyday life (Sears, 2015). Marina – like many other people selling sex – was submitted to the constant policing of policemen and doctors.

The history of criminalisation and policing of sexual practices is also a history of the documentary production of queer, trans, and sex workers' lives. For example, the global abolition of the regulated systems of prostitution displaced the documents from the local records to the trial courts and police offices. Something similar happened with the criminalisation of homosexual practices: the law forced the state to collect details of these lives. In Argentina - like other Latin American countries - the impact of liberalism led to the decriminalisation of all private sexual practices between consenting adults (Ben, 2010). Although liberal laws failed to stop the policing of sexuality, the lack of a legal ground for the persecution of men who had sex with men granted them a higher degree of freedom than what had been experienced by men previously. Since the 1930s, the convergence between the cultural, economic and political liberal crisis and the local elites' growing fears about urban modernity's effects led to a more active State intervention to construct a "public morality" (Simonetto, 2016). The global debate about "public morality" boosted the creation of

legislation that likened sexuality and politics as complementary components of social order (Fuechtner, Haynes, and Jones, 2017). Local and regional governments passed legal mechanisms that repressed young people, the urban poor, prostitutes, and sexual dissidents. Military and civil governments passed morality laws to police public life. In 1933, the city of Buenos Aires penalised those who "appear on the public streets dressed or disguised in clothes of the opposite sex", "incite or publicly offer a carnal act, without distinction of sex", and present " subjects recognized as perverts in the company of minors under 18 years" (Gentili, 1995). The Province of Buenos Aires took similar restrictions in 1955 condemning sex offers in public spaces, and since 1966 punished those who "in everyday life dress and pass themselves as a person of the opposite sex". In this same direction, Argentina abolished the system of regulated brothels in 1936. Even if someone was legally capable of selling sex independently, police officers practised a punitive interpretation of the law in which they imprisoned prostitutes for short but repeated times (Guy, 1991; Simonetto, 2019).

Through Belbey's chronicle, we know that Marina and other folks, whom today we would recognize as trans, were aware of the power of documents for the State. Marina did not have any documents as a man or woman; being invisible before the state was her way of building a shield to protect herself, and by doing so, she was able to only leave traces as a female individual on state records. The lack of legal documents may have been a strategy to avoid classification. When Marina was imprisoned in 1939, they sent her to the San Miguel Asylum, a prison for girls administered by a nun religious order. Marina was able to negotiate the way the state recorded her life: policemen did not distrust Marina's female embodiment, so she was imprisoned in a women's jail seven times, where she was educated in house chores by religious women to recover her femininity (Belbey, 1944). When the police detained her for a short period, they decided that she was lying about her female performance and sent her to the Institute of Legal Medicine to study how someone that physicians considered a man was living as a woman. Belbey found this case surprising and unique to his group. The *Archivos de Criminología, Medicina Legal y Psiquiatría* had acted as a platform for sexual normalisation since the beginning of the century (Belbey 1944; 1955). A medical committee claimed that she avoided doing mandatory military service, required for any man to access Argentinian citizenship. Nevertheless, the committee suggested not to send her to the barracks: "This person should not be considered for conscription that all citizens must attend for moral reasons, because of his true sex [...]. A good job, a good example, and the strict vigilance of his impressions will lead to a better result [than military service] because they are the source values

of dignity" (Belbey, 1944). During these years, the army's hierarchies were concerned about the potential extension of sexual deviations among soldiers since the government abolished regulated prostitution (Simonetto, 2019).

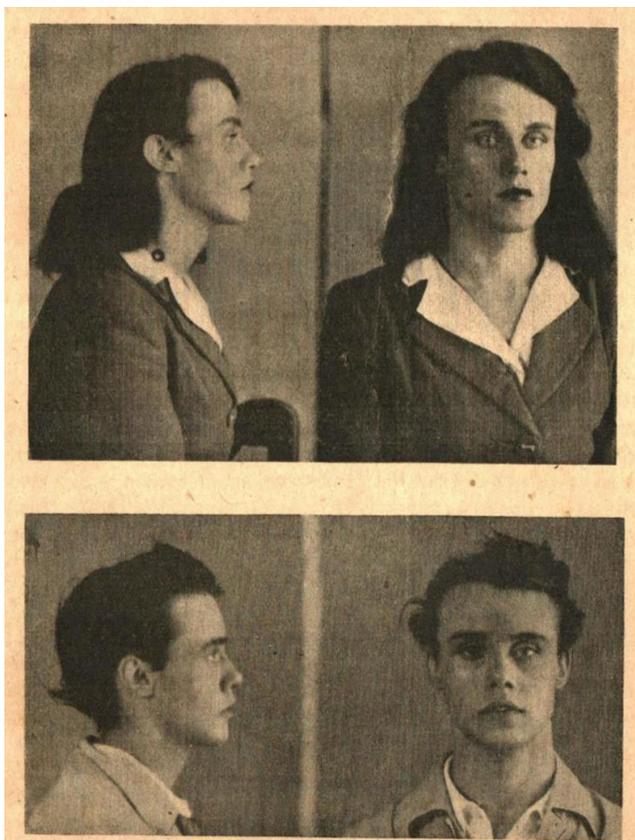
Finally, the medical team produced photographs that gave testimony to Marina's female performance. The photographs help us to understand the violent condition in which the testimony was produced, a text whose main goal was to publicly portray Marina as an example of the alleged fake gender performance of what doctors defined as *invertidos sexuales* or *travestis*. According to the scientific photographic genre, Belbey compiled examples of how sex could be "falsified". He edited cases defined as *invertidos* in previous journals' issues and reinterpreted them under the new lens of *transvestism* (Belbey 1944; 1955).



José Belbey, "Sobre travestiment", Archivo de medicina legal, IV, 1944, 120.

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Doctors used photographs of these people to produce the idea of the "real nature". This visual genre acted as a counter-gender technology in which physicians tried to re-inscribe their patients' bodies in what they considered their true gender (Scheiwiller, 2016). Belbey's published four photographs to define Marina. The two images at the top showed Marina's everyday self-presentation. The two at the bottom show her without any makeup and with a short haircut. If photography is a space of encounter between expectations and desires, these images underscore the struggles between two points of view in Marina's gender embodiment (Edwards, 2009). Marina's expression between sadness and motionlessness seems to perturb the celebratory narrative of the doctors about their discoveries and how they expected to force Marina to embrace her alleged masculinity (Cho, 2014).



José Belbey, "Sobre travestiment", Archivo de medicina legal, IV, 1944, 124.

These photographs look like a photo for an identity card or legal document, a place where the state neglected her self-presentation to affirm the reading of her alleged male body. The production of the picture resulted from state and medical policing, including detention by police officers, doctors' interrogation, and newspapers discussing her personal life. It was also a material dispossession of the goods that gave sense to her self-perception: her makeup and long hair. The doctors submitted Marina's body to a violent gender re-inscription. The haircut or hairstyle they forcibly gave her to make her look like a 'male' is part of a long tradition of physical violence. Hair, in particular, was conceived as a distinctive element of gender. Furthermore, it was personal property that state forces usually cut to humiliate or mark their sovereignty over the imprisoned body. For example, in 1923, the ultra-right-wing nationalist group, the Patriotic League, conducted street arrests of men considered disorderly, removing their moustaches. It was a popular tactic among soldiers and police officers when targeting beggars, bandits, and indigenous people. Decades later, during the 1960s and 1970s, the police morality department would utilize forced shaving to condemn young hippies, homosexuals, and *travestis*. Likewise, police officers banned travestis from shaving their body hair and forced them to grow a beard as a practice of humiliation. Perhaps, for this reason, we can highlight a long genealogy of violent state embodiment practices.

The emotional overflowing of her image as a male subject could be read as lateral agency that perturbs the medical narrative. While elites portrayed men as rational citizens lacking emotions, her sadness looks like an emotional performance usually expected of women. This lack of ability to accept the process of dematerialisation of her gender presented by doctors as a liberation seemed to reaffirm how Marina disagreed with their celebratory narrative (Brown and Phu, 2014).

Queer historians - as many historians of subaltern groups - debated on what would be the responsible use of these photographs. Elena Martínez questions how "all historical representations carry the responsibility of thinking not just about how they are coloured by present categories, memories, and political concerns but about how they can avoid enacting or re-re-enacting forms of historical violence" (Martínez, 2014). It is somehow impossible to deal with the reality that many of the documents we work with are the product of medical or police

violence and that we have the challenge of producing a narrative that neutralises the primary intentions of their authors. Even if there is no formula, I think that analysing these images is useful at least on two levels. First, as Kevin Coleman (2015) shows in his analysis of the photographic archives of the United Fruit Company in Central America, sometimes these photographs allow us to think about all the images the archives do not want us to see. Along with the pictures in which Belbey tried to destroy Marina's female embodiment, he published a personal portrait which allows us to imagine the multiple pictures that have not been preserved, the moments of joy in which Marina could build the image of how she wanted to be seen by others. Second, the photograph allows us to reconstruct the power relationship that shaped that image. We must remember that photography is always a space of conflict between what the producer wants to show and what the portrayed can negotiate. Additionally, at present, and with neoliberal research practices, the right to see (to uncover, or make visible) has become a mandate beyond individual rights (sometimes at the expense of individual agency) (Coleman (b), 2015). Exploring these aspects of contention and conflict, Ariella Azoulay (2015) argues that if we imagine citizenship as a shield that protects certain subjects, there are moments in which photographers can expose bodies without protection, portraying them in an abusive and violent situation.

In his study of trans-visual archives during the Franco era in Spain, Javier Galeano (2022) explored how historical writing could work with materials usually produced for medical pathologisation or social control. While the “ethics of turning away” from police and forensic documents on trans experiences could help us avoid enacting the violent institutional portrayal of trans bodies as sexual monstrosities, avoiding them could also erase trans people from the historical narrative. Fernández Galeano engages with trans activists and scholars’ statement that “visibility means existence” to explore how historical writing can produce a narrative focused on the trans agency of self-representation through medical or criminal photography. In his own words, he proposes “that visual materials created by trans women, even when archived as part of their prosecution, provide a means to reach beyond a forensic analysis and toward transhermeneutics, namely, trans women’s reading of their own self.”

While it is valid to formulate a question about whether we should use these images, I propose here to invert the question to ask how we can use it to avoid re-enacting the medical violence against Marina's body. In this sense, the question is not only if we should show or not this image, but instead, if we can formulate a historical narrative that inverts the intentions of

this picture. In contrast with Belbey's intention of seeing this picture as proof of Marina's portrayal as a male citizen, the role of queer historians is to distrust doctor's categorisation and to formulate a narrative focused on the ways in which Marina was undeniably a woman, how she used this photo to reaffirm their femininity beyond medical power.

Marina's story connects multiple violent practices that together build these archives. Police imprisonment, doctors' knowledge building, media exposure, and forced photographs. The police violence promoted by the Argentine State and other cases in which civil society attacked people transgressing gender norms were the basis of archival production: doctors' pictures, police reports, and news articles. Registers were then classified in state archives using the language of doctors, in Marina's case, in the Medicine College of the University of Buenos Aires library under the label "Homosexual". However, these documentary sources were not testimonies of passive subjects' violent victimisation by state authorities. Marina's picture and story survive in these polyphonic documents. Even if her voice is weaker than Belbey's writing, it is a clue with which, after identifying the conditions of violence, we can recognise traces of her life: how she survived and embodied her fabulous femininity.

Bodies & Archives: Photographies, Language and Historical Narrative

As I explained in the previous section, doing archival research demands patience to navigate the ruthless dynamics of traditional archives. Beyond the bundle of institutional regulations, every archive has a language that organises it, and researchers must learn this vocabulary to find the material. With this, I mean that usually, researchers formulate questions with a language that does not match the archive. Questions about the trans experience - in the words of Susan Stryker (2008) - of those people who crossover the boundaries of what was gender practices at the time, and who do not match the delineations of state agents or physicians, that produced homogeneous categories to define all those considered sexually abnormal. Learning the archive's language takes time, but it is worth it because it helps the researcher ask the right questions when engaging with the archivist or when reading archive catalogues as maps to trace the sexual nomads crossing gender and sexual frontiers. Queer history provides us with some tools to produce narratives that provide a context to understand these categories in their time, while also expanding historical imagination to avoid reproducing the power relationships that dominate traditional archival production.

Amin Ghaziani and Matt Brim (2019) pointed out the difficulties of defining what queer methodology is because it is a theory that emphasises the fluid nature of social reality. Researchers must also consider that as sexuality changes over time, so has the language used to describe and construct our experiences. Researchers must be careful regarding how to navigate archives in which some concepts can seem transparent, but hide complex historical dynamics. For example, the changing meanings of what it means to be a homosexual during the twentieth century. When it comes to working on archives, I propose to think of it as a sensibility to distrust the categories with which individuals in positions of power (e.g., doctors, lawyers or police officers) try to make sense of complex shifting realities. Here I want to address the need to understand how language evident in the archive worked in its time. David Halperin (2002) points out that historians of sexuality need a “strategy for accommodating the aspects of sexual life that seem to persist through time and the dramatic differences between historically documented forms of sexual experience”. This starts with a methodological suspension of current categories of identity. Moreover, to create a distance between those categories and rationalities from the present and those from the past.

On her ground-breaking study on the case of the “hermaphrodite” Juana la Larga in New Spain, Elena Martinez (2014) emphasises the need to explore the links between classification and power in both past and the present embedded in archival documents and the possible implications they have in our understandings of sexuality and subjectivities. She formulates a question on whether trans and queer history can help us to abandon the idea that categories such as “man”, “woman”, or “homosexual” are transparent and transhistorical. In this same direction, the field of Trans history has developed a rich agenda to think about how the previous history of sexuality usually reproduced the power contained in specific categories reducing different trans subjects in the figures of gay and lesbian history (2008).

One of the main challenges of archival research is how historical narratives deal with the opacity of the documents' language. How to reconstruct the multiplicity of gendered and erotic experiences usually reduced to the limited medical or state-bureaucratic vocabulary? Queer and trans history emphasis on fluidity can help us jump the trap of a teleological narrative structured in fixed sexual identities. This historiography considers the history of concepts such as “homosexuality” and “sexual inversion” to understand how it worked differently for physicians than common people, as well as, to explore how the intersections of race, gender and class shaped diverse historical experiences.

One of the main challenges of researchers working with archives is distrust of both the language of the archive and their own vocabulary. Queer history emerged as a political project to legitimate the existence of modern sexual identities and to find a historical narrative to fit in a narrative dominated by straight people. In this effort, sometimes researchers fail by expanding a modern understanding of organised sexual identities over the past; the challenge is how can we take the necessary distance to read those documents in dialogue with their time. Even if tempting, there is not necessarily a straightforward connection between the contemporaneous ways of being gay and sex between men in the mid-twentieth century, the same can be said about modern trans identities and people crossing the rules of what was considered gender in their time.

That is the reason why this historical tradition works to highlight the distance between the contemporaneous understanding of sexuality and the past. Since the 1990s, Latin American gay historians have worked to understand how local sexual dissident categories discussed the distance between our modern understanding of sexuality and the early twentieth-century reality. In their studies of *maricas* - usually related to effeminate men looking for sex with manly men - historians found an incommensurable experience for the late twentieth-century notion of gender and sexuality structured over the division between homosexuality/heterosexuality. Gay history showed that *maricas* participated in hierarchical sexual relationships with male partners that understood themselves as heterosexuals following the social belief among the popular classes that sexual deviation was related to being penetrated (Salessi, 1995; Ben, 2010; Peralta, 2017). This literature was inspired by George Chauncey's book *Gay New York* (Chauncey, 2019), which helped to understand the role of the binary-gendered working-class culture before the emergence of the binary homo/heterosexuality. While this reading was useful to understand queer visibility in pre-war New York and how, for example, the intersections of race and social class diversified an alleged homogeneous queer experience, the Latin American readings of this book tend to build a teleological narrative that focused on sexual experiences over bodily ones and that, by doing so, transformed the heterogeneous field of sexual deviation in the prelude of the history of modern male homosexuality.

Nonetheless, the main problem of this approach was that it expanded the logic of *maricas* to other experiences of sexual dissidence such as *invertidos sexuales*, a concept used by doctors to define those people dressing occasionally or permanently with "clothes of the opposite sex" (Bao, 1993; Ben, 2009; Salessi 1995; Inausti, 2011). In recent years, trans history challenged this understanding. In his study on famous cases of *invertidos sexuales*, Mir Yarfitz (2023) uses the concept of "anal overdetermination" to point out the need to expand historical

imagination and language to understand gender embodiment experience beyond erotic-oriented practices. This means expanding historical imagination to avoid restricting our understanding of these subjects only through their sexual encounters and to produce narratives that for example focus on their gender embodiment. In fact, Chauncey's (2019) recent revision of his study inspired by trans history about fairies in New York offers a good starting point to refresh our reading about "sexual inversion". He points out that even if he explored fairies' femininity to understand the gender topographies of working-class culture, he still assumed this in the spectrum of homosexuality. He didn't consider what it could mean that some people defined themselves as "women in the wrong bodies". While this does not mean that we should reduce these early experiences to other modern categories such as transgenderism, he points out how exploring the sexual inversion embodiment and its complex dialogue with sexual desire could open new paths for queer history.

The question behind this debate is how queer and trans history can help us to distrust and take distance from both the language of the archive and our own vocabulary as researchers. This new reading turns problematic past approaches focused on notions that usually overfocused on these people's sexual behaviour and understood their gender performance as a strategic parody (Salessi, 1995). While doctors underlined the alleged artificiality of *invertidos'* gender experience, some studies built a reading against the grain, transforming their performance into a parody that undermined the binary medical notions of gender. Even if this perspective was helpful to show how physicians socially constructed these notions, it also became a double-edged sword that projected an over-rationality to the past and overlooked the material gendered experience of sexual inversion. Queer tools can help us to pursue a reading that maps the genealogy of the archive categories and that engages with the fact that gender encompasses far more than sexual desire and that "sexuality" and sexual desire do not always align in conventional ways with gender identity (Stryker, 2008).

This approach to the archive could be properly expanded by analysing the case of *Mujeres-hombres* (women-men) in Argentina, a concept with which doctors and journalists defined *invertidos sexuales*, defined as women at birth that lived as men. I found this photographic collection by learning the language of the Argentine National Archive (*Archivo General de la Nación*). It was a journalists' collection from *Caras y Caretas*, a popular magazine in Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century. The folder promised to bring together female figures from Buenos Aires. However, the title was sarcastic: it was a collection of personal portraits of *Mujeres-hombres* n. The language of the archive worked by relocating these lives in what the

archivist considers their true nature: one reduced to their genitalia. The recent trans turn of those challenges to gay and lesbian dominance over historical narrative allows us to formulate an understanding of Arturo's life focusing on his joy of embodying masculinity.



Archivo General de la Nación (Argentina). Photography department. Code: AR-AGN-CYC01-sff-405346. Serie: Ladies figures.

A journalist of the popular urban magazine *Caras y Caretas* wrote: "Here are photographs of an interesting subject that in the view of readers will appear as a fresh fifteen-year-old adolescent, but in fact, she is just a young lady, whose neatness, along with one of those resolutions that only women, friends of extremes by temperament, know how to adapt, has led her to conceal herself with such admirable perfection that she has been a man for ten

consecutive years".³ His chosen name was Arturo de Aragón; He seems proud and happy, as shown in the pictures. The portraits were taken in 1905 as part of a series of private photographs of *Mujeres-hombres*.

According to the journalist - Arturo was born in 1882 in Sorbolo (Italy) and named after his mother Dafne Vaccari. Being part of a family with a prominent social position, he travelled around Europe until he settled in South America. He was 24 years old when he was photographed with his friends, using male clothes and deploying a masculine attitude in public spaces. The journalist explained his transformation by saying that when Arturo was 14 years old, a man sexually attacked him. There is no way to fact-check this claim, but it is possible that Arturo decided to report this story to the journalist as a way to validate his gender.

Arturo started moving at a young age. First, he was a comic actor that performed as a man. Quickly he enrolled in political activities as an agitator and moved through French cities such as Paris, Lyon, and Marseille to participate in public conferences. In 1900, he enlisted as a sailor and moved to Argentina. In Buenos Aires, he worked as a longshoreman in the barracks.⁴ Then he moved to London, working on a boat of meat exportation. He decided to come back to Argentina, like other immigrants travelling through the country performing different jobs, first harvesting cornfields and then working as a construction worker. Back in Buenos Aires, Arturo climbed the social ladder. He found employment in retail, but the company fired him after he contracted smallpox. Broke and without a source of income, he decided to work as a policeman, which explains how, like other immigrant *Mujeres-hombres*, he could get his legal documents identifying him as a man. Arturo was well-known as a good lover, he flirted with several women, and then he became the regular lover of an Italian merchant's wife. After their romance was exposed, the Italian merchant took his wife back to Italy. Arturo decided to return to his old life as Dafne, perhaps as a reaction to social sanction or simply because his/her boundaries between masculinity and femininity were flexible.⁵

Arturo's photograph is an excellent example of the archival research of multiple paradoxes. Every document is an archive because it recollects the numerous practices and movements involved in its production: from taking the image to its preservation. Every detail in this picture is a trace of the battle for gender embodiment. On the one hand, Arturo's portrait

³ Caras y Caretas. 21/7/1906, n° 407, p. 63.

⁴ Caras y Caretas. 21/7/1906, n° 407, p. 63.

⁵ Caras y Caretas. 31-5-1930, n.º 1.652, página 76.

underscored his male embodiment, especially when paying attention to the pose and clothing. On the other hand, the fact that the journalist cut the picture in a circle to portray it as a fake construction, and that after that, the archivist classified Arturo as a woman shows the multiple struggles to define his gender legacy, and how he should be remembered. The portrait was a popular genre in Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century (Torricellas, 2009). Recent studies have pointed out how ordinary people's photographs shaped modern ideas of gender, class, and race—a question about how photography can inform knowledge production and practices (Coronado, 2018; Coleman, 2016; Grandin, 2004). These studies analysed self-fashioning practices with which people negotiated how they wanted to be seen by others. The portraits studied in this section contrasted with doctors' practices to disembody gender affirmation practices by dividing them into small pieces to underscore the alleged artificiality of their gender. The photography brought together all the details that affirmed their gender: clothes, posing and space to encode a persistent self-image to negotiate their portrayal over time. These photographs circulated in private circles and then in publications. The images are examples of self-fashioning practices with which people transitioning from one gender to another placed themselves in the male universe and how they interpreted it. The gestures, clothing, and objects were parts of an agential cultural practice to negotiate the conditions of production of those photographs with which they reinforced their male embodiment. They produced a visual culture of belonging that inscribed themselves in the male cultural universe by portraying themselves.

Nonetheless, these pictures circulated in the press and archives opened a struggle to define their gender classification. While in private or in restricted circles, these portraits could work as technologies of embodiment, their public circulation was a tool of journalists and doctors to reaffirm their restrictive notions of sex by destroying the alleged illegitimate gender women's embodiment of what today we would define as trans people. Even under challenging conditions, it is possible that the circulation of these images was also open to interpretation for those looking for how to affirm their gender and stimulated new gendered adventures.

Arturo/Dafne took several portraits: walking in the street with friends, painting or posing as thinking. In every photograph, he embodied what was popularly understood as a male attitude. The circulation of his personal archive moved his body to the newspaper room logic, and with it, the journalists classified him again. The circle cut from the original portrait was

used to design the tabloid article. The cut body was related now to the idea of *Mujeres-hombres*, with which they underscored the alleged artificiality of Arturo's gender embodiment.

Arturo's general classification as a *mujer-hombre* was the first step of a long process of classification and archival. Like others of his kind, grouped in this photography collection, the photographs in which he embodied his male features were catalogued as a "female figure", a movement with which the state affirmed their violent sovereignty over his gender embodiment. The question we need to formulate is how we can build a historical narrative that avoids reducing Arturo's to modern logic of gender and sexual identity, instead exploring the ways in which experienced embodying masculinity.

Suppose archival practices worked to destroy Arturo's embodiment. In that case, we must also be aware of how even with the best intention, our historical narrative could damage those people's lives. For example, in her work on the trans male general of the Mexican Revolution, Amelio Robles, Gabriela Cano criticises how women history reduced him to his genitalia in order to point out "women participation" in the revolution (Cano, 2009). While working with these photographs and trying to reconstruct their circuits: from the personal production to the public life in magazine pages to the newspaper room archive to a national public collection, I struggle to define: How should we narrate these lives? Every trace of Arturo's life somehow archives under certain logic, an accumulation of time and knowledge to shape the legitimate limits of sexual embodiment. Trans history helps us move beyond previous approaches to modern sexual identities to explore the diverse experiences of crossing gender frontiers.

Even if archives can sometimes be ruthless spaces of knowledge production, they are also scenes of conflict. While revisiting the images of a famous sexual invert called *La Princesa de Borbón* (The Bourbon Princess) allocated to the National Archive of Argentina, I noticed that an archivist wrote ~~puto~~ (~~faggot~~) behind the princess' beautiful portraits. I cannot know how that insult, going beyond the alleged neutral language of the archive, got to the photographs; maybe it was written by the journalists that used the photographs for the multiple chronicles that they published about her in the early twentieth century.⁶ The fact is that someone tried to delete that inscription and replace it with the famous name that made her a noticeable character in many South American cities in the early twentieth century. The act of crossing out that word defining the possible readings leaves a mark on the historical imaginations that

⁶ Archivo General de la Nación, Caras y Caretas, Code: AR_AGN_DF_CC_0084_CC_370345_R.

characterised the reading of these characters but always the open potential of formulating other readings against those demeaning words.

Lost in Translation: Queer (Dis)Identification & Heterosexual History

In the past two sections, I have addressed how queer history helps us study the multiple challenges related to the language reproduced in the archives. While thinking about how to map the categories that organize traditional archives and imagine possible narratives to reinvert the unequal power relationship that produced the documents, historians usually deal with a question themselves: How do researchers' engagement as individuals with archives affect our historical analysis? There are many paths to engage with this debate. Here, I want to think about how the queer sensibility, proposed in this chapter, should help us be aware of the limits and potency of our position as writers of historical narrative.

Previously in this text, I reflected on the need of being careful about the possible re-enactment of historical violence when using photographs of police detention. In the second section, I also show how queer history worked intensely to create a distance between modern categories and those of the past to avoid creating totalitarian and teleological narratives that reproduce past experiences. In this section, I want to focus on the more considerable potency of the feeling of distance with the language of our object of study and what happens when the researcher exercises the queer sensibility to heterosexual experiences. I want to be emphatic with this: It is essential to work on this disidentification with the past. When a gay, lesbian or trans historian is exploring the archive, it is easy to feel tempted to build a monolithic bridge between ourselves and past experiences. Even if many of those experiences and stories speak to our present story, assuming them as a prehistorical dimension of our present can lead to a homogeneous understanding. The most challenging part of the disidentification with the queer past is to be able to understand, for example, that being homosexual in the 1970s responded to a totally different understanding of sexuality than being gay today, as well as that being an *invertido sexual* cannot be reduced to our modern understanding of what being trans is today. We need this difficult detachment to be able to respect and understand our subjects' experiences on their own terms and to avoid projecting the present over the past.⁷

⁷ A brilliant debate about the multiple categories of gender and sex can be read in Chauncey (2019).

Moreover, with reference to the researchers' engagement with the documents, I also refer to the physical feelings that demand navigating the archive. Researchers cannot be surprised if they feel a deep sadness after hours of reading police reports. I was often devastated by hours of reading reports of arbitrary arrests of sex workers who spent their days in prison and were often victims of terrible police punishments. With this, I do not mean that researchers have to abandon these feelings to be able to analyse these histories. Instead, as Ivan Jablonka recently proposed, it is more about being able to be honest with oneself to be able to counterbalance those feelings in our analysis (Jablonka, 2020). But beyond rage and sadness, there is an emotional experience transversal to anyone navigating the archives: decades of challenging the positivist feature of documentary sources could not erase the feeling of finding a "goldmine" in the archive. It is an immediate physical feeling, something that makes you shake with excitement. You feel that you find evidence that will change the total previous understanding of the matter in your field.

I have seen several archival "goldmines." In 2016, I was reading a long box of boring medical reports about venereal disease in the 1920s and 1930s when I found a letter signed by a young general who would become the most famous Argentine president: Juan Domingo Perón. His letter was just the first of a big box of documents in which the military requested the state to provide prostitutes to avoid homosexual deviation among those soldiers conducting missions in Patagonia.⁸ A rebellion against the recent abolition of regulated prostitution eliminated official brothels, with men claiming their political right to consume sex. One of the significant figures of Argentine and Latin American history was writing secretly about "sexual abstinence", masturbation, and homosexuality.

The document proved something I found in many theoretical texts: sexuality had a central role in shaping ideas of social order. Like Perón's military colleagues, he believed that without access to sexual services, homosexuality and masturbation would rise among soldiers. These were not isolated statements or beliefs. Working-class leaders, policymakers, doctors, and military officers imagined male heterosexual desire as ungovernable, especially in the case of workers who, guided by their "physiological desire", could be vulnerable to venereal diseases and sexual deviations. Likewise, these commentators placed male sexuality at the core of

⁸ PERÓN, Juan Domingo. War Department. Min. Secreto; caja 3, n.31 (Archivo General de la Nación, Buenos Aires). 3 mar. 1944.

national development. They insisted on men's role in populating a country, portrayed as empty with workers, soldiers, and consumers.

The letter changed my dissertation project, which mostly focused on women offering sexual services, taking me to new questions about the role of men in the sexual market, both as pimps and clients. Queer research always comes with the temptation of focusing on queer or female bodies. Why do we formulate more questions about those alleged deviated sexualities than about those that embodied the norms? Guided by this preoccupation, I returned to my archive of hundreds of trial records in which women accused of sexual exploitation defended themselves, and noticed that police officers usually called clients to be witnesses of the alleged crime.

By this, I mean that there was a dominant language and knowledge reproduced on documents and the archive. A traversal language of male embodiment: a code with which men have been imagining and talking about their sexuality and their bodies through time. There was something about my complicated relationship with the heterosexual model of masculinity that helped me to identify what many heterosexual historians ignored because it has similarities with the terms with which men still imagine their sexuality. Cisgender heterosexual men also deployed technologies, knowledge, and techniques to embody masculinity: performing rituals like going in groups to a brothel, measuring how much their friend spent in a room and drinking. I found myself reading several testimonies of working-class men, mostly from small towns and rural areas where purchasing sex was part of everyday entertainment. However, what caught my attention were the words with which they talked about police officers. Those words resisted being a restricted language of positivist law. They were trying to exalt their masculinity by using lower-class slang.

I found references to men buying sex in trade union documents, doctors reports, trial records, and military letters. For example, In 1917, the Candy Workers Union's magazine asked its readers: "Where are your most sacred interests? In the cafe, in the brothels, in public amusements or the union?".⁹ I couldn't avoid the surprise that if male discourses about buying sex were so transparent for me in documents, past historians fail to recognize it as part of everyday male leisure. Then I understood, if, as a queer researcher, I have to deal with problems of identification with those queer lives in the documents, the total distance with a hetero-

⁹ Unión de Confiteros, 4/1/1917, nº1.

masculine world in the production of the archive helped me see something natural for others: men paid for sex.

Male clients' language usually used metaphors about their body parts, talking openly about their genitals and sexual acts to reaffirm themselves as men. In 1954, Luis, a young rural worker from the northern rural area of the Buenos Aires Province, attended the police station to accuse women of giving him venereal disease. Article 202c of the Argentine Penal Code punished the transmission of infections as a violation of public health, under which police imprisoned women who sold sex. Luis went with his father and other workers on the farm. He stated that he was feeling "severe swelling and pimples on the head of the bug". He explained to the police that they did not use a condom: they did it "a la Criolla" (as creoles, a reference to the bestiality associated with rural culture) and that he "only fucked her once". The oldest friend of the group stated that he used "no lining with the rifle."¹⁰

Hetero-male's use of metaphors to describe their genitals portrayed their appendages as violent and savage instruments. They usually described themselves as beasts without control, imagining their bodies moved by an uncontrollable sexual drive. The reference to the "creole nature" was associated with a closeness to the *natural* world, as seen by the nation. They repeated that they did not use condoms because they understood that care was part of the female nature. Skin-to-skin contact reinforced a violent male imagination and placed it in the core of sexual pleasure. Care was a female duty that men could not control. Talking about their genitals was underscoring an androcentric sexual imaginary.

A vital dimension of archival research is related to establishing a relationship with documentary sources. I could not find myself in those testimonies. I am not entirely part of that working-class male culture. This feeling of being lost in translation, of knowing those words by making an effort to understand what they meant to those people, makes me think about the power of queer disidentification. Suppose identification usually creates problems because of obscure concepts. We try to analyse queers' lives that are somehow similar but different from ourselves because different identities and material experiences mediate them. Facing heterosexual words provides us with an advantage. It is not easy to find a base of shared understanding about sexuality (at least not a total one). As queer researchers, we can see the 'unnatural' that maybe a cisgender heterosexual researcher cannot: what does such talk about

¹⁰ DHJC, CP, L 1470, C516.

their genitals mean? Why did Perón struggle for his soldiers' right to pay for sex? With these questions, I want to highlight how this queer distance from the documents could help us read these testimonies and formulate an interpretation that breaks the order that the police archive created. We can point out that as queer identities, heterosexuality changed through time and space. Heterosexuality is as socially constructed as other sexual experiences, and by doing that, we undermine any distinction between alleged natural and unnatural sexualities.

Final Words

This chapter explores some questions about doing archival research and queer history. It deploys some notes on how I deal with documentary sources while researching sexual commerce, masculinity, homosexuality, and gender embodiment. The chapter is mostly based on my experience navigating traditional archives. In the past two decades, the "archival turn" in feminist and LGTBIQ activism promoted the creation of many grassroots-based archives. In order to create new politics of belonging, they created new collections governed by other logics, that made available more intimate documents that challenge the cisgender-heterosexual logic predominance in traditional public archives. This uprising has recently led traditional archives to rethink their previous catalogues, and in different countries, there is a progressive emergence of collections curated under queer or trans parameters.¹¹

This chapter underscores that the first step of every research process is recognizing the violent conditions that produced these documents—To thus question the internal logics that makes tracing this history possible. This process of recognition requires asking such questions as: How is this testimony produced? Which voices are in dialogue, and which relations of power mediated them? Likewise, the circulation of documents is an essential second dimension to understand their categorical organisation: How do class, race and gender intersect in producing an archival order? How can this order give us a broader context to understanding this document and its multiple contexts?

These texts propose that doing queer archival research is living with conflict. Every document is a space of conflict: Arturo choosing his poses and Marina staying motionless but still showing her emotions. These documents offer guidance and clues of potential readings that

¹¹ Patricio Simonetto y Marce Butierrez, «The Archival Riot: Travesti/Trans* Audiovisual Memory Politics in Twenty-First-Century Argentina», *Memory Studies*, 8 de febrero de 2022, 17506980211073100, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506980211073099>.

go against the grain. Once we recognize the inequalities that produced those documents, we can explore questions that create alternative historical narratives of those lives.

Queer history helps us place ourselves in our documents. How do we feel when we read them? How can we work with these documents by identifying our relationship with them? In this text, I propose that one potency of identifying our link is the possibility of disidentification. When we face words that are challenging to translate, for example, heterosexual working-class men's language from the mid-twentieth century, there is a possibility of decoding meanings that other researchers usually consider natural. There is nothing better than getting lost in the archives. Queer sensibility can help us as a compass to distrust those words of power and create other narratives of the past. By doing so, I am sure we will be able to imagine more habitable futures.

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