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# Silicone agency and the making of female trans bodies in Argentina

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## ABSTRACT

Silicone injection has been a key feature of trans' gender affirmation practices in Argentina and Latin America, an experience shaped by the criminalization of this community. Despite the growing scholarship on gender affirmation practices, silicone injection remains overlooked. This article aims to identify how silicone shaped the experiences of travestis in Argentina. This study proposes 'following' silicone as a method: contextualizing its meanings and actions through archival research on media, cultural and medical primary sources, legislation, photographs, secondary data produced by community organizations and government offices, and autobiographical texts. The findings are that silicone should be understood as a non-human agent that co-constituted travestis' identity and bodily experience, that while being a global practice, enabled particularly precarious embodied experiences in a community socially excluded. This encourages new trans histories of embodiment that challenge the medical monopoly and explore the circuits of community knowledge and DIY medical practices. This research advocates for recognizing the argentine elderly trans community advocacy for social reparation and inclusive healthcare practices.

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## 1. Introduction

In September 2023, the tragic death of the celebrity Silvina Luna caused a public commotion in Argentina. According to an article by the LGTBQI+ media *Presentes*, Luna died as a result of conditions caused by the injection of methacrylate in her body: 'the actress and host who was fighting for her life in the face of the consequences of a type of acrylic called methacrylate. This caused hypercalcaemia and kidney failure' (Ceballos, 2023). Methacrylate is a well-known substance among travestis and trans women communities in Argentina, who for decades used it along with other industrial and pharmaceutical oleaginous substances such as vaseline, vegetable oil and silicone—usually named 'silicone' or 'jet oil'—to feminize their bodies (by augmenting breasts and buttocks) and feminize their faces. This practice grew in the shadow of a State policy that banned gender affirmation practices from 1967 to 2012 and that criminalized trans lives since the 1930s (Alvarez, 2024; Farji Neer, 2017).<sup>1</sup>

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This wasn't the first time silicone became a major issue in the media; silicone injections got attention from journalists multiple times during the 1980s and 1990s. In 1989, the tabloid *Esto* dedicated an issue titled 'The plague of silicones' to the side effects of these injections on trans and cisgender bodies, which they defined as 'lethal bombs' (*Esto*, 15/09/1989). While doing fieldwork, I encountered several online posts of trans activists about silicone, referred to as an explosive bomb encapsulated in trans bodies and boosting their risks of death. Leaflets of recommendations distributed by public agencies to healthcare providers and trans patients also conveyed similar information (Ministerio de Salud, 2020, pp. 99–100; Ministerio de Salud y Desarrollo Social, 2016, p. 26). However, something was different this time: the action of silicone on the body of a cisgender celebrity caused a social commotion about the effects of an extended and persistent practice. Trans movements such as *Las Históricas*—an elderly trans and travesti organization requesting social reparation to the state for decades of violence and social exclusion—publicly expressed their solidarity with Luna's case but asked, 'What about all the older *travestis* who carry the poison inside their bodies?' (@las.historicasargentinas, Instagram Post 31 August 2021). This is a question that worked on a long genealogy of how travestis and trans movements in Argentina have requested to be socially acknowledged as subjects of political and social violence. Movements for social and economic reparation open questions about who is acknowledged as a victim of the national history of violence. By doing so, trans movements for reparation claim an expansion of a figure previously restricted to the victims of the last dictatorship, proposing a radical transformation of how citizenship and democracy have been conceived in Argentina (Rizki, 2020).

Inspired by the question formulated by *Las Históricas*, this article analyses the role of silicone (and its injection) as a co-constitutive agent of travestis and trans embodied and identity experiences. It explores the action of silicone on bodies historically portrayed as artificial to understand its extended legacies in the histories of the body in Argentina. I argue that even if silicone injection was a global practice extended in Latin America, it should be understood as a non-human agent playing an active role in pushing trans lives to precarious conditions of living in Argentina.

As described in the following section, this article follows silicone across archival material of the media, legislation, secondary data produced by community organizations and governmental offices, publicly available oral history testimonies and autobiographical texts curated by the Archivo de la Memoria Trans (Trans Memory Archive, AMT), and fieldwork notes from my previous project on the histories of trans embodiment in Argentina (conducted between 2020 and 2023.) When using materials written by trans people and published by them, I use their names, respecting their decision to make their personal history public. Previous interviews collected during the fieldwork of my previous project informed the selection of archival documents and the sample of autobiographical texts. I rely on the methodological proposal of Emilia Sanabria (2016) and Lubinsky (2023) of reaching/following hormones to follow this material's discursive and material movement of silicone across identities, documents and cultural artefacts.

Trans histories of embodiment have analysed the model of transsexuality as an identity that emerged in the mid-twentieth century in which physicians conserved a privileged control over gender affirmation practices (Gill-Peterson, 2018; Meyerowitz, 2009; Najmabadi, 2014; Prosser, 1998). Concepts such as 'trans practices' have been used to identify a wide range of embodiment interventions (medical or not); with which both

cisgender and trans people have affirmed their bodies, guiding and transforming what it means to be male or female (Plemons, 2017). Scholars expanded the paradigm of trans practices to make legible the multiple practices usually labelled as ‘natural’ with which people affirm their gendered embodiment and identity, from fitness, prosthetics or virtual spaces (Farber, 2017; West, 2024). This article contributes to the study of trans DIY practices emerging in the shadow of social and medical exclusion (Alvarez, 2019; Fernández, 2004; Gill-Peterson, 2022; Kulick, 1998). While ethnographic and community-based research explored the reasons and conditions of trans embodiment in Argentina identifying sex-work as a decisive factor shaping trans body ideals (Berkins & Fernández, 2005; Fernández, 2004), this article doesn’t aim to unveil reasons behind community decisions but analyse the complex cultural contexts shaping the ways in which silicone (inter)acted with this community.

This article has four sections. The first one addresses the method of following a material/thing through archival and autobiographical documents. The second provides a short cultural biography of silicone. The third analyses the silicone injection practices and how they transformed the travesti identity in Argentina in the 1980s and 1990s. The final section engages with the politicization of silicone in the 21st century and how this impacted the transformations of notions of healthcare.

## 2. On following silicone

The travesti activist Sacayán (2008) showed that the first traces of oils and silicone injections among the travesti community can be traced back to the late 1950s, with the injection of pharmaceutical serum, vaseline or vegetable oil. While prosthetics made of rubber and cotton were an extended practice for maricas and travestis seeking feminization, hormones in the 1960s and silicone in the 1980s/1990s radically redefined what it meant to be travesti.<sup>2</sup> The interaction with silicone produced a progressive embodied identitarian distinction among those exploring gender non-conformity. In her ethnography of travestis in Argentina during the late 1990s, Fernández (2004, p. 171) highlights silicone injection as part of a process that travestis defined a ‘travestización’—an irreversible path of becoming travesti that along with the experience with sex work and imprisonment defined identitarian boundaries; separating them from maricas. Silicone was understood here as a passive material manipulated by the community, leaving questions about the agency of this substance as a factor shaping this identitarian transformation. As described by organizations of elderly trans women such as the AMT—a community archival project led by María Belen Correa, co-founder with Claudia Pía Baudracco (1970–2012) of one of the first travesti organizations in the country (Association of Travestis of Argentina, today called Association of Travestis, Transsexuales and Transgender people of Argentina) (M. B. Correa et al., 2019) and Las Históricas; living with silicone in the body became a unique experience to those who survived decades of police violence and extreme social exclusion.<sup>3</sup>

Silicone injection remains an extended practice among the trans community during the first decades of the 21st century, as evidenced by governmental and community studies and documents oriented to trans-health care provision. A 2016 report highlights that ‘With regard to silicone injection, a high percentage of silicone injections are still performed at home, although there was a significant decrease compared to 2005. It went

from 97.6% to 83.2%. Only 16.8% reported having gone to a private clinic' (Ministerio Público de la Defensa, 2016, p. 78). Similarly, results were obtained by a survey conducted by the Province of Buenos Aires (the biggest province in the country) in which 55.56% of the participants practised DIY procedures such as silicone injections (Secretaría de Derechos Humanos de PBA, 2019).

Encouraged by Sanabria (2016, p. 5) and Lubinsky (2023) studies about hormones, this article follows material through archival research, which took me across personal photographs, autobiographical memories, legislation, reports produced by organizations, documents provided to healthcare services and my own fieldwork notes to understand the role of silicone as a co-constitutive agent of travestis' identity and bodily experience.

This article pays particular attention to autobiographical texts and oral history testimonies published by AMT, as a trace of silicone action still present in the travesti and trans public memory. The AMT is an archive advocated for the 'protection, construction and vindication of trans memory' (Archivo de la Memoria Trans, 2024, p. 1). They work supports elderly trans communities' advocacy for a social and governmental acknowledgement of the extreme violence and exclusion trans people have been submitted in Argentina, but also a place to celebrate community memory and shared joy. I am aware that the documents and testimonies preserved and displayed by the AMT are partial (as those preserved by any institutional or community archive). The autobiographical texts selected have been contrasted with oral history interviews and extensive archival work conducted between 2020 and 2023 to ground this testimonies in a broader understanding of the interaction with silicone.

Autobiographical writing (and other ways of self-presentation) have been pivotal objects of trans cultural studies. Pioneers in the field, such as Prosser (1998), analysed transsexual autobiographies as narratives of embodiment that offer the illusion of an organized progression. Rondot (2016) focuses on trans autobiographies as a terrain that resituates them as active subjects rather than consumable objects, and other scholars show these genres usually evoke extended cultural values about self-made lives (Carter et al., 2014). Autobiographies have a long history in Argentina; since the early 20th century, some gender-non-conforming people offered short autobiographical narrations to doctors or journalists and autobiographical books (Peralta & Jiménez, 2015). I am interested in how material re-curated by a community archive acts as a counter-archive against the mainstream cultural archive of transness, usually dominated by the discourses of medicine and journalism, and how this material can inform an analysis informed by mainstream primary sources. A counter-archive that could be seen as an alternative reading of what Marlene Wayar (2021, p. 32) has conceptualized as an *identidad cloacalizada* (an identity transformed into sewage): the public association of travestis lives with negative social connotations and travesti bodies becoming deposits of social hatred, an animosity usually expressed with violence.

I follow silicone by considering historical subjects' bodies as 'living archives and laboratories' (Simonetto, 2024)<sup>4</sup> This concept is metaphorically inspired by Marx's figure of 'living machines', with which he narrated how capitalism transformed working-class bodies. Scholars have used this metaphor to understand the ways in which Indigenous and Black bodies have been forcibly used as sites for the production and embodiment of racial and colonialist categorization. For example, Snorton (2017, p. 18) references the experimentation with Black bodies as a site of production of racialized categories, and

Magubane (2003, pp. 99–100) addresses how the metaphor of laboratories helps to understand how colonialist racial assumptions were turned into unchallengeable facts. Laboratories refer to how spectacularising trans people's bodies became a scenario for the formation of categories of social hierarchisation, but also how the trans community experimented with their own bodies and built community knowledge to affirm their gender. Other scholars have used these figures to unpack the conceptualization of technology as an embodied experience and to investigate how things act in the world (Kirsch & Mitchell, 2004). The concept of living laboratories enables an exploration of the porous margins between archived documents, the object (silicone) and trans-lived experiences in the present to understand how, as Lubinsky (2023, p. 258) argues, the cultural biography of synthetic objects such as silicone is 'inscribed within the body as well'. This means interrogating how an allegedly 'mute thing' such as silicone enables and materializes bodies through its interaction with the travesti and trans community by contextualizing it through archival research (Hoskins, 2006, pp. 76–80).

Inspired by the archival turn and memory studies, scholars have addressed different ways in which queer and trans pasts live in our present (Marshall & Tortorici, 2022). Conceptualising the body as an archive became useful to understand the material subsistence of the past in marginalized bodies (Lee, 2020). While doing interviews with elderly trans participants and reading testimonies of the AMT, it became clear that this archiving couldn't be simply conceptualized as a metanarrative of the past articulated onto the present. Elderly members of the travesti community usually complained of the side effects of what doctors define as 'migration'—described in a document of the Ministry of Health stating 'It is possible that the injected material may migrate through soft tissues (e.g. gravitationally to more declined areas) and/or via lymphatic and/or haematogenous routes (the latter in case of extracorporeal circulation or people on dialysis)' (Ministerio de Salud, 2020, p. 100).

In this text, I use cohabitation as a frame to make legible (inter)action between substances and bodies that is not either external or internal but rather an experience of living together. The travesti theorist Marlene Wayar (2021, p. 83) describes travestis experience of cohabitation with silicone as one in which this substance acts over their bodies: "You suffer more from the cold because that foreign body that is the silicone or the prosthesis has a temperature that is not the body's temperature; then, in winter, they get cold and it is very difficult to warm them up again (...) it even changes the way you walk'. In the collection of interviews and writings of trans women *Material descartable*, one anonymous testimony describes her bodily interactions with silicone in a painful journey that almost pushed her to death. Silicone injections are experienced as an external agent 'invading my body (...) I was rotting inside'—and transforming their body 'it was very close to my skin; the particles got attached and made the skin on my buttocks and legs darken' (Carrozzo, 2018, p. 25).

With this metaphorical reference to the body as an archive, I am not suggesting the prevalence of humans over a passive object. On the contrary, even if this material has been activated by travesti communities, I want to highlight its potential as a non-human agent by following silicone across cultural production. Silicone wasn't a passive object on the backdrop of travestis' histories; as shown in the testimonies curated by the AMT or in the political statement of *Las históricas*, silicone has shaped ways of being seen and moving, had temperatures, and migrated through the body, among many other

interactions. We could conceptualize silicone as an actant with the capacity to enable, influence, or/and restrict human action (Latour, 1999). Appadurai (2015) coined the term *mediants* to make legible entities that mediate relationships and interaction, not just passively but actively shaping the outcomes of human assemblies.<sup>5</sup> The injection, rituals and legacies of silicone crafted social networks, bringing together travestis, physicians, state regulations, and police officers; and drastically transforming travesti body culture. In concrete, through its traces in different documents, silicone could be read as an agent that has shaped travestis' (precarious) life experience.

Silicone action has been a lived experience that becomes clear in oral history testimonies and autobiographical texts curated by the AMT, in which many trans women repeatedly insisted on how it shaped their experiences. The AMT published these testimonies to make visible the complexities of travesti/trans experience and their activation of testimonies to legitimate trans elderly women' claim for a socio-economical reparation. Even if these testimonies were made public in AMT's books, I am aware the reproducing fragments always risks to re-enact historical violence. The analysis of these autobiographical fragments aims to contribute to AMT's work to centre trans experiences in historical narrative, and even if painful, aims to avoid any risk of sanitizing trans histories by erasing complex experiences. In her testimonial text, Cintia Aguilar narrates, 'To all young trans girls, I want to tell them not to wear silicone; it's the worst thing I could have done in my life' (Archivo de la Memoria Trans, 2024, p. 15). Carolina Alejandra Figuereo describes in her testimony the pain caused by silicone in her body 'The whole silicone area was already hurting me until my body was practically disfigured because it started to run all over my body' (...) 'I've been having problems with my legs lately. Maybe I'm resting, and I wake up from the pain. . . And it hurts, not only physically, because of the appearance, but also psychologically because it inhibits me from doing so many other things' (Archivo de la Memoria Trans, 2024, pp. 94–95). Speaking from a scientific language, State guidance attest the same from healthcare perspective, 'injecting industrial silicone or paraffin oils into subcutaneous cellular tissue can have serious consequences, such as ulcers, cellulitis, migration of products, scarring, abscesses and infections, pulmonary embolism, granulomatous hepatitis and acute renal failure, some of which are irreversible or life-threatening' (Ministerio de Salud y Desarrollo Social, 2016, p. 14).

Travestis weren't the only ones who interacted with silicone. As in the Luna's case, silicone is a substance that networks with different humans: doctors, patients, journalists, trans and cisgender people, and even police officers. Carolina Alejandra Figuereo describes how police officers applied extreme violence in their aim to break travestis' silicone breasts, potentially leading to the migration of material and causing long-term health issues: 'The police stations were a very fucked up part because the police beat you, even when they knew you had your silicones done. They beat you on purpose. A lot of girls were unlucky enough to have their silicone broken, and that's where it started' (Archivo de la Memoria Trans, 2024, p. 95).

Silicone is a substance that co-habits both cisgender and trans bodies, but that has historically been introduced in more harmful ways into trans bodies via DIY injections. Doing so opens us to think about considering how it has acted in bodies with differential access to healthcare, and its long-standing effects that this has had in both subjects. This underscores the social effects of these labels and how the concern of access and legitimacy to certain gender affirmations had a decisive role in what Marlene Wayar



(2021, p. 186) has defined as an *identicidio* (a systematic erasure of trans people driven by the hate toward their identity.)

My analysis is illegible without considering that, as a researcher, my body hasn't interacted with silicone. Rather than presenting a positionality statement as a declaration of labels—always at risk of justifying my authority on producing knowledge over bodies historically spoken by others (Gani & Khan, 2024)—I would prefer to highlight the material implications. This paper becomes impossible to understand without having the funded time to conduct this research and at the same time being biased by my distance as a subject who doesn't cohabit with silicone.

In summary, I propose to follow silicone—historically contextualizing its meaning and interactions with humans—across multiple textual and visual documents. Collecting its traces exercises a conceptualization of silicone as a co-constitutive agent of travesti and trans experience.

### 3. A short biography of silicone

In 1824, the Swiss chemist Jöns Jacob Berzelius isolated silicon (the raw element used to produce silicone) from sand. In 1863, Americans Charles Friedel and James Crafts were the first to create a substance similar to what we now know as silicone. In the early 20th century, British scientist Frederic Stanley Kipping combined silicon with organic materials to produce silicone (Chasan, 2007, 2034). Initially, it was used as a water-resistant serum and wax, which Kipping believed would be useful during wartime. The industrial production of silicone expanded in the 1930s. Before silicone became widely used for medical implants, many cisgender women sought alternative methods to enhance their breast size. After experimenting with goat's milk and paraffin injections, Japanese sex workers began self-injecting silicone to emulate the Western model of female beauty, catering to American soldiers (Chasan, 2007, 2035). Perry and Frame (2020) note that before the introduction of silicone implants by Thomas Cronin and Frank Gerow in 1962, women attempted breast augmentation through various methods, including injections of glycerine, autologous fat, ox cartilage, silicone oil, and even snake venom, all of which carried significant risks and morbidity. In 1962, Americans Thomas Cronin and Frank Gerow developed the first silicone breast implants and tested them on women. The use of breast implants in the US led to numerous debates about their safety. In 1982, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) classified breast implants in the more rigorous Class III category due to 'reports of adverse events in the medical literature'. In 1991, Silicone injection was banned in the US as a medical treatment. In 1992, the FDA called for a voluntary moratorium on the use of silicone-gel breast implants until their safety could be reviewed. Since 1992, several European countries and the FDA have restricted the use of silicone implants, with these limits being lifted after 2006 (Perry & Frame, 2020).

It took some decades for silicone injection to be introduced into the Latin American context. However, as described in the story that opens this article, silicone circulated between cis and trans bodies. It would be the specific policies of marginalization that will create a niche market for travestis, exposing them to a precarious experience that has deeply reduced their life expectancy. The activist Diana Sacayán (2008) used to define silicone injection as the 'second leading cause of mortality in our population'.—a definition that could be read under the light of Christoph Hanssmann's (2023,



pp. 112–113) ethnography of trans healthcare activism in Argentina, particularly the notion of epidemiological biographies and the use of statistics and community research to articulate change in the healthcare system.

#### 4. Silicone action and travestis' experience

In September of 1989, the popular tabloid *Esto!* published a story about silicone injections conducted by a famous *travesti doctora* (travesti physician) (*Esto!*, 15/09/1989), whose picture has been covered to avoid the potential reproduction of punitive journalism (Figure 1). The chronicle describes the DIY procedure in detail, the use of industrial and pharmaceutical silicone from head to hips, and the potential risks of a material that can migrate through the body. As a large survey about trans access to public health (led by activists) shows, this practice has been widely extended among travestis and trans women in Argentina: 'A common practice among transgender women in Argentina has been the injection of industrial oil. Far more than half of the interviewees have carried out this practice (61.2%), and of these, the vast majority (92.8%) did so with the help of another transgender person' (Fundación Huesped, & ATTA, 2014, p. 23). Activists and academic research highlighted the role that sex work had in defining the beauty and body ideals shaping experience with silicone injection for how it was 'valued by clients' (Berkins & Fernández, 2005, p. 81). However, there is still room to expanding our understanding of the legal and social exclusion framing the action of silicone and its meaning in travesti bodily experience.

Silicone flooded the media regularly; it was usually portrayed as a poisonous material of which cisgender women should be particularly aware. A practice that, according to the journalist, 'even travestis' should also be aware of. Media representation of public anxieties around how materials associated with travestis were allegedly putting cisgender bodies at risk, and particularly the references to its migratory action, could be read as part of larger efforts to legitimate State regulatory intervention over trans bodies. Beauchamp (2013, pp. 58–60) showed the legitimating power of these public discourses and policies when analysing the media and legal portrayal of synthesized hormones. He argues that these hormones were presented as border-crossing entities acting on gendered transgressive bodies that catalysed broader anxieties around geographical and body boundaries. The stigmatizing association of silicone with travestis, was usually built through the media focus on travestis labelled as *siliconeras* (a person who applies silicone) or *doctoras* (physicians) by their community—travestis specialized in this procedure. Notable characters in the popular imagination about silicone injections, *siliconeras* were framed as criminals murdering their patients. For example, the story of a *doctora siliconera* who injected more than 'six litres of poisoned silicone', possibly referring to the fatal dangers associated with this practice (Flash, 31/10/1981).

Understanding silicone as a co-constitutive agent of travesti and trans experiences demands unpacking its role in identitarian transformations. Scholars have shown that in the 1970s/1980s, there was a progressive distinction between the travestis and *marica* communities in Argentina (Cutuli, 2013)—the latter is used to name a gender and sexual non-conforming identity (see footnote 2). Early research identified the extensive experience of sex work across travestis as a distinctive force defining the multiple modifications to feminize the body (Berkins & Fernández, 2005, p. 81; Fernández, 2004, p. 163), which



**Figure 1.** Esto! 15/09/1989. Trans memory archive. The titles say “the silicone plague”. Names and faces have been covered from the original publication.

they identified as the predominant source of income from travestis in this period (Berkins & Fernández, 2005, p. 123). Still, not enough attention has been paid to how non-human materials such as silicone played a vital role in producing a bodily distinction that drastically transformed travestis’ identity boundaries, providing a mostly irreversible new body appearance as a condition of belonging. Returning to the 1990s and 2000s concept of ‘travestización’ worked by Fernández (2004, p. 53), silicone was part of the alleged irreversible turn that separated them from maricas. Many testimonies insist that silicone accelerated a process started by hormones of distinction between homosexual and trans bodies, reshaping the notion of travestismo and thickening community boundaries. In a recent article reflecting on the legacies of elderly travestising cohabiting with silicone, the director of the AMT reflected ‘that magic oil became the pass to belong’ (M. Correa, 2023). As expressed in Carolina Alejandra’s text, ‘There was a sense of belonging that came into play with the body, of how others accepted you once you had your body done’ (Archivo de la Memoria Trans, 2024, p. 94). Similarly, the director of the AMT affirmed in an interview, ‘You had to have silicone and to experience imprisonment to be considered a travesti’ (Canales, 2023). The term *cuerpo hecho* (already made) became a signifier for the youngest generation of the 1980s (Archivo de la Memoria Trans, & Fieiras, 2020). Silicone came to drastically transform how travestis’ embodied their identity. This association also translated to the media. Satiricón (2/9/1987), a magazine

specialized in jokes for a male audience published an issue entitled 'a practical course to become a travesti' which highlighted that to be a travesti 'you need to have them well positioned (the tits)' [referring to silicone]. Something similar happened in Brazil, where since the 1970s travesti was 'publicly associated with siliconed bodies' (Veras, 2020, p. 34).

Silicone injection was an extended practice among the trans community in Latin America—as was identified by studies funded by the Pan American Organisation for Health (Organización Panamericana de la Salud, 2013). In Argentina, this practice was boosted by particularly restrictive policies banning gender affirmation practices. While in other countries, gender affirmation practices were permitted under certain conditions (USA), the Argentine government openly prohibited any intervention leading to 'sterilisation' (Decree No. 6216), and from 1967, prosecuted any medical practice affecting 'reproductive organs' (Law No. 17132), a concept that was widely used to regulate medical practice (Farji Neer, 2017). In trials against physicians during the twentieth century, judges expanded state sovereignty over Argentinian bodies in defence of their nation's rights to reproduction. Jurisprudence and legislation distinguished between those procedures used to 'cure' as natural interventions, in opposition to those conducted to trans bodies seeking what they considered an artificial damaging intervention (Farji Neer, 2017). A good example of this was the analysis that the jurist Terán Lomás provided in the 1970s about trials against doctors providing gender affirmation treatments to trans people. He argues that 'an individual cannot own a good that is of social and public interest'.—due to its reproductive potency—and understood that Argentine Law considered genitalia as a 'protected object that belongs to the society [...] an unavailable good', something protected by the penal code (Terán Lomas, 1970, pp. 713–714). At the core of this legislation was a broader concern usually manifested by doctors and policymakers about the need to restrict practices potentially threatening human reproduction, understood here as a key asset for national development. These policies allegedly protecting Argentine bodies from mutilating practices or restriction of their reproductive capabilities could be read in the light of trans-ability studies. While criticizing the cisgender bias of disability studies and the ableist bias of trans studies, scholars have called attention to the portrayal of gender affirmation practices as disablist practices that could potentially deprive subjects of the ability to contribute to the nation. Following this argument, Puar (2017), pp. 45–46 argues that in the mid-20th century, trans bodies became maps of futurity (and nightmares) for those concerned with producing a healthy-abled future.

Even if this legislation didn't explicitly affect those parts of the body modified by silicone, it created a climate of policing that restricted travestis and trans access to healthcare. It also dialogued with other policies which penalized the public expression of transness. The city of Buenos Aires criminalized anyone 'who displays themselves in public streets dressed or disguised in clothes of the opposite sex' from 1933 (Gentili, 1995), something also applied by different provincial governments such as the province of Buenos Aires which punished those who 'in everyday life dress and pass themselves as a person of the opposite sex'. (Buenos Aires Law 8031/1955.) The activist Lohana Berkins (1965–2016) defined this context in which travestis and trans people were usually subjected to brutal violence as a permanent 'state of siege' (Berkins, 2003, p. 65). An exclusion that multiplies in the testimonies curated by the AMT, and as defined in a text by Perica Burrometo: 'they took you to prison for leaving your house to buy a kilo of bread, you

couldn't leave your house as a travesti to do anything, you had to stay in your house' (Archivo de la Memoria Trans, 2024, p. 71).

The popularity of silicone injection could also be explained by, as an official document states, the 'scarce offer in the healthcare system' (Ministerio de Salud, 2020, p. 99). Even since the Argentine state legislated that access to gender affirmation practices should be available in both public and private healthcare systems in 2012, further reports show that access to healthcare is still restricted. Due to both the stigma and discrimination in healthcare spaces and the lack of specific training on how to work with this community, travestis and trans women were usually excluded from accessing the formal healthcare system (Fundación Huesped, & ATTA, 2014, p. 25). As the research led by Berkins and Fernández (2005, p. 81) previous to this law showed, the few travestis who could accessed medical assisted implants were usually done 'without adequate aseptic conditions, no hospitalisation, no subsequent control of the operation and no receipt for payment'. Marlene Wayar described the medical exclusion 'Surgeons did not receive us (...) the price of the prostheses was in dollars (...) But few had them, especially because we had to buy them and then pay the surgeon's fees, including those of the operating theatre. Those surgeries that conducted the procedure did it in precarious conditions. They did it in the kitchen of their houses!' (Wayar, 2021, p. 77). Moreover, in contrast with professional transplants, silicone injection was cheaper and more accessible for travestis. As explained in a media interview in the 1990s, a travesti affirmed that 'a silicone implant is between 3,000 and 5,000 dollars, silicone liquid injections are just 400'. (Clarín, 12/04/1992).

The origin stories of silicone injections can be traced to Brazil. The AMT catalogue describes that the first *travestis siliconeras* learned from the *bombadeiras* (those who pump in Portuguese), their equivalent in Brazil (Archivo de la Memoria Trans, & Fieiras, 2020, p. 65). Some of the testimonies collected by the AMT, include histories of people learning the technique from bombadeiras in Paris to then import it to the country (Archivo de la Memoria Trans, 2024, p. 120), showing how this technique circulated globally. As portrayed in Don Kulick (1998) ethnography of Brazil in the 1980s and the oral histories conducted by Elias Ferreira Veras (2020), *bombadeiras* have been key characters of Brazilian trans culture. As happened in Argentina, they travelled across the country and internationally, spreading silicone injection.

Even if silicone shouldn't be approached with a teleological narrative, its action drastically transformed how travestis matched a body ideal with their identity. Silicone injection competed and interacted with other prosthetics and other injectables. In the mid-twentieth century, travestis made garments combining spandex and foam rubber called *piu-piu* or mattresses, allowing them to shape legs, buttocks and breasts. As described in the co-developed biography of the activist Lohana Berkins between her and the anthropologist Fernández and Berkins (2020, p. 70), *Piu-piu* were stuffy and uncomfortable, limiting freedom of movement and nudity then provided by silicone. Silicone enabled a new body experience and allowed travestis a different incursion into the universe of sex work and the competition with cisgender women.

Before silicone, there were other popular injectables. In an interview with the tabloid *Flash* in 1981, a travesti described them saying, 'What we can inject without fear is liquid petroleum jelly or serum, but that goes away quickly. We use the serum for the Carnival. But the next day, the body absorbs it all, and it's just like before. Goodbye, breasts'. (Flash, 31/10/1981). The first Latin American travesti newspaper *El Teje: primer periodico travesti*

*latinoamericano* (first Latin American travesti newspaper)—directed by Marlene Wayar, also published recollections of these technologies. In her recollection of her participation in the carnival, an elderly travesti called *La Vieja Vanesa* also wrote about previous injections of oil:

There was a 2-milligram injection that produced an inflammation, and if you used it often, it would eventually cause heart murmurs. [...] After 72 hours, your tits would start to fall, and you would have drooping breasts. To avoid this, after 62 hours, you had to put on a nipple shield, and water would come out, you would have huge nipples, you would grab the nipple shield again, cut the cup from the bra frame, put the nipple through, and let go: you couldn't move because if you moved the elastic, on top of everything else, one tit would stay straight and the other one would shift and go lower or higher, so you had to stay like that, stay still for an hour. At the end of the hour, you touched yourself, and you came out beautiful. (El Teje, No. 7, 2011)

Silicone interacted with an under-market of hormonal treatments that radically transformed travestis' embodiment. As I have described in my previous work (Simonetto, 2024, pp. 152–156), travestis usually called it *cocinarse en hormonas* (to bake oneself in hormones). Since the popularization of chemical contraceptive methods during the 1960s in Argentina, travestis experimented with Soluna and Perlutal—tablets or injectable synthetic forms of progesterone. Even if, since 2012 hormonal treatment has been accessible through public and private healthcare, studies show that less than 20% of trans women do it under medical supervision (Fundación Huesped, & ATTA, 2014, p. 23) [something that has moderately improved, but not totally changed (Secretaría de Derechos Humanos de PBA, 2019)]. Hormones were seen as a way of feminizing the body and sometimes as a method to prepare oneself for silicone injection—as described in an anonymous diary of silicone injections 'That was the first time, I was 19 years old. I had been hormonising myself since I was 15, as we all do so that the body would tolerate silicone' (Carrozzo, 2018, p. 21). Excluded from healthcare services and medical assistance, travestis produced their own knowledge about hormone therapies in community settings. Rather than producing individually, this knowledge was crafted as a group. As described in an interview published in an ethnographic study of crime in Buenos Aires, a travesti activist said, 'We learned about hormones from the livers of our friends' (Montes de Oca, 1995, p. 98). Travestis produced intergenerational knowledge through conversation and observation of their bodies and their friend's bodies.

Hormones were usually seen as a complement to silicone. As described by Marlene Wayar, silicone created a new temporality consolidating a body that needed to be achieved: 'Hormones took a long time, they were complicated, they produced much more feminine tits, but the truth is that it depended a lot on the bodies (...) even though at the beginning everyone started with hormones, the general goal for everyone was to get silicones: to finally have tits and stop depending on hormone treatment' (p.78). To belong was then to inject yourself with silicone to augment the feminized features of your body.

*Travestis doctoras* travelled the country providing a similar treatment. As I have previously reconstructed with Butierrez (2021) they worked with industrial and medicinal silicone. As described before, what is popularly referred to as silicone could contain a wide range of materials such as petroleum jelly, vegetable oils, and Bardahl oils. Three different densities of silicone were used depending on the application area: the softer was applied



in the buttocks and breast, while the denser was used to feminize facial details in cheeks, nose tips, and chins. To form the breasts, *doctoras* used *rieles* (rail), as described by Marlene Wayar (p. 84) 'The rails are like a thick and wide elastic skeleton that is like a bra without a cup. The silicone is housed in this empty cup and keeps the silicone from running or sticking together'. Travestis usually described it as an uncomfortable experience; in the words of Wayar, rails caused pain and tiredness 'because it was like having a backpack on your shoulders, on your bones, on your ribs. They also burned your skin because you couldn't take them off for three days'. (p. 85). The activist Diana Sacayán (2008) emphasized the need for good rails, to avoid silicone movement through the body 'is to have a good rail that you can make yourself with an elastic, of good thickness, with a divider in the middle that is also made with the same elastic, so that when the silicone is injected, the elastic can contain the liquid and it does not run'. They also used can-can socks to mould the legs and buttocks.

*Doctoras* used syringes called *trocas* or *chancho* (pig) that were injected around the skin. There were syringes designed for veterinary practices (Fernández, 2004, p. 175; Sacayán, 2008). According to the oral history of *El Negro Miguel La Claudia Gómez* published by the Archivo de la Memoria Trans (2024), the process combined creating small balls and large injections under the skin. They used multiple syringes across the skin, which *siliconeras* inserted in the skin and 'then wrapped them in cling film and a girdle to hold them in place. And on the puncture, the first few days, cotton wool with alcohol. That way, the silicone didn't sprout, and there were no wounds' (p. 121). In their memories, travestis highlighted the action of silicone over their body as painful, in a process in which they usually only relied on analgesics and antibiotics available in the pharmacy without medical permission. As described in an anonymous published testimony, the process was very painful and took 'several hours (...) it is a very dense material: I was held between several people because the pain makes the body move involuntarily' (Carrozzo, 2018, p. 22). After that, travestis needed to remain still in bed for days to avoid the migration of the material. As described by Wayar, the worst mistake was to avoid resting for those who couldn't afford to rest or were anxious about showing their new body, and those who did it experienced a migration of the material across the body (p. 78).

The active role of silicone was also shown in the fact that rather than a private activity, silicone injection was a community ritual. While doing archival research in the AMT, I was surprised by the number of pictures registering the pre- and post-process of silicone injection. Many travestis usually photographed the process, celebrating the results with material that would circulate among an intimate public, which has become more widely public through the curatorial work of the AMT. In AMT catalogue about the activist Claudia Pía Baudracco—founder in 1993 of one of first travesti organizations ATA and one of the inspirations behind the AMT itself—her photograph albums recollect these moments of shared intimacy and celebration of body production. The catalogue, which is shaped in the form of a photography albums collects testimonies from friends, and photographs such as those described before with encryptions. In photographs with inscriptions such as 'With the girls of San Telmo showing the results', in which they show they made breasts, or in a picture in bed resting with swollen breasts with the description 'Resting after the silicone injection. I needed to rest for 15 days to avoid the oil migration'—the photograph album recollects those acts of production (Archivo de la Memoria Trans et al. 2022). As shown in the photographs, silicone shaped more than

a body modification; it articulated a community ritual of passage through which many became travestis.

## 5. Coda: politics of silicone

In 2008, the first travesti newspaper *El Tejé*, published a chronicle written by Sacayán (2008) entitled 'The Condition of Your Boobs Should be a State Issue'. Since her early involvement in travesti activism in the 21st century, Sacayán worked to raise attention to the precarious material conditions threatening trans lives. She was born in Tucumán in 1975, and like many of her generation, moved from northern Argentina to Buenos Aires metropolitan area looking for a better life. She lived in areas plagued by severe inequality and poverty and also spent a portion of her life incarcerated. Motivated by her experiences of social exclusion, she joined the Communist Party at a young age. She organized social programs to support the inclusion of travestis, Indigenous people, and the prison population, founded grassroots organizations and cooperatives, and ran as a Communist candidate in La Matanza (Simonetto, 2024, p. 213). Sacayán was brutally murdered in 2015, a case that in 2018 led to the first court to judge a murderer for the crime of *travesticidio* (travesticide, a crime motivated by the hatred of travesti identity.)<sup>6</sup> Writing about silicone injections, Sacayán lamented that in a context in which the state excluded her community from gender affirmation practices, silicone became one of the only ways to access 'this important and significant step in our lives'. Sacayán imagined gender affirmation as an act that 'should not be an ordeal, which in many cases ends with the death of the partners, but, on the contrary, should deserve safe conditions (...) a harmonious climate full of happiness (...) the State must intervene to ensure public health policies that provide the necessary care and prevention to prevent these deaths' (Sacayán, 2008). Four years later, Argentina passed one of the most integral legislations on trans rights, the gender identity law (2012). This legislation emerged from the coalitional politics of travestis and trans (male and female) movements, articulating the right for gender-self identification with an unprecedented expansion of healthcare recognition, including forcing both private and public healthcare providers to guarantee access to gender affirmation treatments (Theumer, 2020).

The politicization of silicone has been central to travesti activism. Two major pieces of legislation, one trans public employment quota passed in 2021 (Republica Argentina, 2021), the other the project of historical reparation fostered by elderly trans women's activism (that never passed) (Estévez, 2021), employed statistics about the long term health effects of silicone injection to justify the need to pass these bills. Hanssmann (2023) defined the use of these community statistics as a practice of epidemiological biographies with which the travesti and trans community in Argentina articulated consensus to expand their social and legal rights. As described by Hanssmann (2023), trans efforts for de-pathologisation and the gender identity law have opened a new scenario of transformation for trans healthcare. Rather than the legislation drastically transforming the previous experience with silicone, it came in a complex moment in which multiple people continued to (and still do) use this method to affirm their gender. Trans activism challenged medical preconceptions and demanded changes that transformed hospital services. A good example of this is the formation of the *Grupo de Atención a Personas Transgénero* (Transgender Care Group, GAPET) in the public hospital Durand of the City



of Buenos Aires. This group emerged in 2005, led by the pioneering work of Adrian Helién—a leading psychiatrist and sexologist in the area who has organized specialized care for trans people since 2000. The group grew gradually, becoming today one of the leading professional care groups in the field. Over time, the group expanded and affiliated with the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) (Helien, 2021).

The political action of *Las Históricas* referenced at the beginning of this text showcases the role of silicone as a mediant that has historically deteriorated trans life expectancy (Figure 2). Their political question is about why the state and the broader civil society didn't care about how silicone, in its interaction with the state banning and healthcare exclusion, pushed the trans community to risky DIY experiences and the lack of attention on how travestis cohabit with that material in their bodies: 'practices that have been used since the origin of travestismo, with jet oil, Jhonson oil, and industrial silicone, all materials that mix with the tissues and in the long run produce death'. (@las.historicasargentinas. 31 August of 2023).

*Las históricas* intervention could be read in line with the emergence of radical trans beauty politics in the 21st century. By usually enhancing the notion that trans bodies can be seen as beautiful and inviting a new generation to avoid practices, these movements associate silicone injection with the beauty ideals of 'heteronormal society', and they demand a new society in which 'the new generations can accept their bodies (...) let us learn to love who we are and if we need to transform ourselves, seek the safe means to do so. We demand a Gender Identity Law that provides the means for us to be what we dream of without risking our physical and mental health'. Figueroa's (2013) conceptualization of beauty, not for what it is, but for what it does, could help us to understand the emergence of new trans beauty politics from below that challenge the impossible body ideals and state policies historically interacting with silicone injections. These interventions interact with a long tradition of travesti activism that revindicated their beauty and



**Figure 2.** Instagram post of @las.Historicasargentinas. 31 August 2023. The image says, “no more industrial silicone. Our bodies need safe procedures. - the Argentine historical ones”..

life against the public denigration of their identity. Rather than augmenting the denotation to travestis, activists concerns with reimagining travestis experience was built over its vindication as a desirable existence. As usually expressed by Lohana Berkins in public interventions ‘If I were born again I would choose to be a transvesti’. (something similar to what Claudia Pía Baudracco affirmed in her intervention in the parliament before the approval of the Gender Identity Law in 2012).

## 6. Final words

This article argues that queer and trans histories would benefit from historicizing the ways in which things (e.g. substances, materials, etc.) has interacted with bodies across time. To do so, this article proposes employing a methodology of ‘following’ the material, analysing its multiple discursive and material interaction across cultural production and archival documents. I analysed autobiographical testimonies published by the AMT as a counter-archive to interrogate more traditional medical and state sources. The dialogue of these autobiographical collections with a broader project of archival research, fieldwork notes and interviews conducted for a previous research, this article aims to contribute a way of historicizing the assemblages between bodies, things and communities.

By focusing on this DIY practice, this article contextualizes silicone in the complex circuits that shaped travestis’ embodiment experience, knowledge and identity. Even if some types of silicone were used to modify cisgender women’s bodies, a context of medical and social exclusion defined the role of silicone in pushing travestis and trans lives to precarity in Argentina. Moreover, it also shows how silicone became an agent of identitarian transformation—redefining the boundaries of identitarian belonging. In summary, by following silicone through archival documents of a diverse range of agents, from testimonies and photographic catalogues curated by community archives to legislation, documents distributed in healthcare centres and reports produced by both NGOs and public offices—this article proposes contextualizing the meanings and practices of silicone that defined travesti bodily and identitarian experience.

## Notes

1. This article focuses on travestis and female trans experiences in Argentina. Travesti is a shifting female identity extended in Latin America. As highlighted by activists and scholars, originally a usually denigrating term crafted by medicine and theatre, travesti became a key identity to define experiences usually shaped by migration, sex work, and racialization (Berkins, 2003; Martínez & Vidal-Ortiz, 2021). While recognizing the potential of ‘trans’ as an umbrella term, travesti emphasizes a unique Latin American experience [For a history of this identity, see (DiPietro, 2016; Yarfitz & Butierrez, 2024).
2. Marica was a self-identificatory label that defined both men who had relationships with other men and who had a female gender expression, and gender-nonconforming experiences (something comparable with fairies in the U.S.). For decades, the term coexisted and was sometimes used by travestis as an interchangeable term of self-identification. See (Fernández-Galeano, 2024).
3. Travesti activism multiplied in the early 1990s with organizations such as Transexuales por el derecho a la Vida e Identidad (1991), Travestis Unidas (1992), Asociación de Travestis Argentina (1993), following the decade new organizations appeared such a OTTRA

(Organización de Travestis y Transexuales de Argentina) y ALIT (Asociación de Lucha por la Identidad Travesti) (see Fernandez Romero, 2019).

4. This concept is also used by authors such as Gill-Peterson (2018, p. 4).
5. Assemblage is employed to redistribute individuals' capacity for action by taking into account networks involving things, other people, and narratives.
6. More about this concept has been developed in (Maffía & Rueda, 2019).

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