Lohana Berkins: A Latin American *Travesti* Theory of the Body

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Abstract

This article articulates Lohana Berkins' *Latin American travesti theory*. Centered on the body and her feminist-influenced lived experience, Berkins' theory is deeply concerned with intersectionality as a corporeal experience. Drawing from oral presentations, media coverage, published interviews, and Berkins' writing, we elaborate on a thread of aspects that distinguish this Latin American *travesti* theorizing. From Berkins' contributions, we illustrate the "body-for-others" – a result of, and resistance to, the male gaze – against a broader, internal embodied satisfaction that moves beyond deficit readings of *travestis* lives as "*travesti* body-being". Her situated knowledge production was influenced by her collective experience with other *travestis*, as was her coalitional work and struggles with cisgender women; in particular, we center her identity and corporeality arguments in order to constitute Berkins' *travesti* theorizing of the self as a "we." We conclude with the implications of elevating Berkins' status to that of a feminist theorist.

Keywords: Embodiment, Feminism, Latin America, Lohana Berkins, *Travesti*

Introduction

In 2010, Lohana Berkins spoke at a gathering held at the Harvard Law School entitled "Diverse Sexualities/Disparate Laws: Sexual Minorities, the State, and International Law" (Underwood 2010). When Berkins' turn arrived, she memorably said (our translation): "With all due respect, I am not Rigoberta Menchú, I do not come here to just talk about levels of victimhood for trans people in Argentina. I do not come to this University to give *testimonio*, I come to discuss theory". By situating herself as a subject of knowledge—not an object of study—Berkins insisted in being acknowledged for producing knowledge through her embodied set of experiences with joy, sex work, but also the state/social violence *travesti* women experienced, while talking back to these institutions, resisting the trope of the (often vulnerable and victimized) Latin American *testimonio* assigned to people who are not often considered capable of theorizing (Beverley 2004). Berkins insists on telling her story as a theorization of the body, without translators or intermediate actors, refusing to be filtered, or her speech refined, or her ideas whitewashed through respectability politics (either by class, or normative gendered gay/lesbian, and as we show, even trans identity). Berkins' Harvard visit invokes multiple forms of doing, be it through feminist notions of difference, or through a collective "we". It also signified a larger project she had bet for all of her life: not letting others dictate *travestis*' theorization of the self. At the center of it was a theorization of not just her body, but of *travestis'* embodied *and* collective body. Berkins produces a figure of the *travesti* – that is, as a composite of the living and dead, and of the violence they faced, as well as their resistance.

Travesti is an independent category from transgender; at times, it is oppositional and at others, intertwined with, northern trans studies and transgender identities (Gill-Peterson, 2024). *Travesti* is, like the Fa'afafine (Kanemasu & Liki, 2021; Schmidt, 2017) in Samoa, Hijras (Saria, 2021) in India, and Muxes (Mirandé, 2016) in México, a stand-alone category either in-

between, beyond, or a combination of expectations about what men and women are, allegedly; *travesti* often becomes submerged within the (globalized) trans umbrella category. Although many scholars fuse the two (*travesti*/transgender) in a harmonious balance, in this article, we work through the notion of *travesti* by itself to crystallize Berkins' theorization. *Travesti*, like transgender, has specific meanings in any given geographic and political context; in Argentina, transgender is often seen as a new, modern subject, juxtaposed against *travesti* as a racialized and classed category that did not necessarily seek to affirm a binary identity (Di Pietro, 2016; Silva Santana, 2019; Simonetto, 2024). It is precisely for this specificity of *travestis*' experiences that Berkins' theory counterbalances the "universalizing" impulse of a singular trans theory (Yarfitz and Butierrez, 2024; Simonetto, 2024).

Through a case study (Reinharz, 1992) supplemented with first person accounts, oral histories, written and media interviews, public speeches, published works, and media interviews, this article takes on the task of showing the impact of Lohana Berkins' *Latin American travesti theory*, because we believe in the case's theoretical potentiality (Passavant, 2015). In this article, we show how Berkins' commitment to theorizing from the body as a site of knowledge production (articulated through individual and collective lived experiences) challenged who, where and how theory is produced. Theorizing from the *travesti* body isn't the same as theorizing from Berkins' singular one; it was collective. This represented her politics: she always worked in coalition, forging alliances with feminist, cisgender (non-trans) women, and LGBTIQ communities, while centering her efforts on *travesti* women. As Rizki (2025:3-5) argues, Berkins's conceptualization of *travesti* identity was a collective experience shaped by marginalization, a starting point for building broader transfeminist, intersectional coalitions. Berkins' life contributions show that the body (as a collective experience) is the site from which to build coalitional politics from the differential experience of *travestis*; we propose that placing her body of work as a key theoretical contribution helps build coalitional feminist

and trans theorizing – starting from the body. We argue that Berkins' contribution to build coalitions from a collective embodied experience of exclusion contributes to reimagine feminist, queer and trans theories and politics. Berkins set things up during her lifetime, so that, ahead of time, some level of infrastructure would be created for a better, future life – even if she would never get to experience it.

While Lohana Berkins has become a key reference for *travesti*/trans issues in Latin America (Rizki 2019; Wayar 2021; Saxe 2022), and for queer/cuir ones (Laferal 2021), her scholarly work (Berkins and Fernández, 2005; Berkins, 2007) is seldom translated to English; moreover, we argue –as did she– for the recognition of her life narrative as a body of theory, considering her experience in her own terms while simultaneously centering *travesti* narratives. Berkins' critical intervention on who, how and from where knowledge is produced contrasts our authorship: we are two Latin American cisgender gay men (one Argentinian, one Puerto Rican) based in North Atlantic institutions with funded time to read, write and think. During the writing process, we debated how our own (privileged) socially embodied experiences shaped our engagement with Berkins' theory. Our interest may be a sign of Berkins' far-reaching impact beyond *travesti* communities into broader LGTBIQ communities and scholars in Latin America. Our analysis contributes to center the radical force of *travesti* theory, to forge new knowledge production geographies. We both witnessed her public interventions, but it is not us who seek authority to speak to her theorizing; she did it herself. She showed a politics of feminist engagement that was unapologetic, and that always thought of the we as she spoke of the "I." As we translate and engage with her ideas, we want to stress the transgressive nature of her theoretical thinking, which challenged traditional frontiers of the subject and place of knowledge production and politics by recognizing *travestis* (and other marginalized peoples) as thinkers and political action makers.

We begin the article with a theorization of the *travesti* body, in order to engage with relevant frameworks that help us situate *travesti* theorizing. What follows that is a brief biography of Berkins' life and accomplishments. The main section is our corpus, which centers a Latin American *travesti* theorizing as delivered by Berkins. The article concludes with the implications of this theorizing for body and embodiment studies.

Theorizing the Travesti body

Sociologists and feminist scholars distinguish having a body (as embodiment) from being a body (as corporeality) in order to think of the gendered body in more precise ways (Blackman, 2021: 15-16; Witz 2000; Brace-Govan and Ferguson 2019; Falk, 1999). Corporeality includes those bodily aspects that are negotiated relationally in reading the body in gendered ways (Fournier, 2002) – within or outside a gendered binary, as is the case for many *travestis*. We situate our argument in corporeality, in order to think through Berkins' own theorizing, which we see as rooted in a corporeality based on her/the *travesti* body-being co-constituted as an embodiment-for-others or as a product co-constructed with others. This is a conception in dialogue with feminists' conception of transcorporeality to make visible the processes of co-constitution, entanglements, and indeterminacy that makes any apparently individualized embodied lived experience, collective (Blackman, 2021:70). A shared embodied lived experience for cisgender women and trans and *travesti* people is the discursive imposition of bodies that self-discipline to mold the male gaze; through feminist engagements, a collective "we" chips away at that power. Furthermore, this "body-for-others" (e.g., the *travesti* body for consumption through sex work/prostitution) is still agentic: the embodied response to femininity and voluptuousness while having a penis keeps many *travesti* women not only employed, but content with their bodies – all while being desired as *travestis*. We call the result of this external gaze imposition (the body-for-others just defined), combined with that internal

embodied satisfaction and desire, the "*travesti* body-being". This notion challenges definitions of normativity through a *travesti* body, while also countering the deficit lens through which *travestis'* lives are often heavily framed, and yet still accounting for structural forces.

Argentine *travesti* women's life experience is usually shaped by family disregard, school bullying, expulsion from their place of origin, internal migrations, survival prostitution, and a range of interpersonal and institutional violence that shortens their life expectancy: through these processes, their experience embodying a sense of self that materializes that *travesti* body-being is in constant negotiation (Martínez & Vidal-Ortiz, 2018). Berkins understood identity as a primary field of political struggle, grasping the complexities of experience on identity and vice versa (Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2023). Her notion of identity was built over her own embodiment, and that of countless others. If identity materialized in the body, it could not be defined as a limit. She understood that others "are not trying to invalidate other subjective and relational experiences, other alternative ways of living and understanding what it means to be *travesti*" (Berkins 2008: 44). *Travestis* were indeed connecting their bodily experiences to those of cisgender women, and non-binary/gender non-conforming people who faced systemic forms of sexism and everyday harassment, and who were given, until the recent decision to make abortion legal in Argentina (2021), no authority to decide over their bodies.

Travesti activism in the Southern Cone often emerges from racialized (Black, indigenous, migrants, or marked as racialized) *travesti* women who develop, in the words of Wayar (2024), a 'prostitutive epistemology' – a lens of a *travesti* body-being that does not stay at the level of what Berkins called, almost two decades before, the "prostibular body", but one that moves beyond that male gaze that desires *travestis* in a particular embodiment. Berkins assumed this body as both the male desired one, and her own. Similarly to our centering Berkins' political theory of the body, Silva Santana (2019) described the shared embodied knowledge of Black and trans politics in Brazil through the term *mais viva* (more alive, alert,

savvy), which is a term that makes legible, and centers, a marginalized embodied theorizing in the region. The *written* path to produce theory grounded in *travestis'* experience in Latin America has been developed by one of Lohana Berkins' best friends, and a comrade, Marlene Wayar (2021, 2024); her multiple books have approached similar topics, and some of the tropes present in Berkins' (oral and written) theory. Cole Rizki (2019; 2025) has called attention to how *travestis*' intervention in theoretical and political debates challenges the geopolitical project of hemispheric trans theory in the Americas, connecting *travestis'* struggle for body sovereignty with their alliances with other social movements in Latin America – from indigenous to antiimperialist protests.

We are far from arguing that the *travesti* experience is inherently feminist, yet it is important to contest the opposite: that it isn't, or it can't be. Importantly, feminism has been truly intersectional in Latin America: in Argentina, Ecuador, México, and other countries, *travestis* have been present in other social justice causes – for instance, marching in solidarity for workers' rights; Lohana Berkins was one such activist. Yet, *travestis*' activist presence often goes undocumented (in Argentinian women's movements, see Sutton, 2010); in general, social movement studies commonly omit the contributions of LGBTQ activists in Latin America (Santos Barreto 2023). While this kind of trans visibility in women's rights activism is perhaps not as evident in anglophone countries, their activism responds to the sustained pressure and backlash to discussions of gender in Latin America (Biroli and Caminotti 2020), which *travestis* see as an attack on them too. Thus, the embodied theorizing *travestis* engage with every day in surviving through multiple axes of power and discrimination results in experiencing a *travesti*-body-being. This term will become central to the main section of corpus, to which we turn after this brief political biography of Berkins.

Lohana Berkins: A biography

Berkins was born in 1965 in Pocitos, Salta - an Argentinian corner surrounded by Bolivia, Paraguay, and Chile. Mostly due to her father's rejection, and like many other *travestis*, she was 13 when she was forced out of home. She moved to Salta, the capital of the province; there, she met who would become her mother, nicknamed "La Pocha", and became part of her first *travesti* family. Despite northern Argentina's catholic conservative cultural context, Berkins became involved in celebrations such as a local carnival; she also developed common care networks among her *travesti* friends.

After years of engaging in survival sex work in Salta, she migrated to Buenos Aires – like other *travestis*. Having witnessed and experienced police violence onto her and her friends, Berkins initiated her life-long career of political organizing: in the early 1990s, she organized AMMAR (in English, *Association of Women Sex Workers of Argentina)*, the first Argentinian prostitutes' union, later becoming involved with the *Argentine Travesti Association* (ATA), and in 1994 starting her own organization, the *Association for the Struggle for Travesti and Transsexual Identity* (ALITT). Her organizing and advocacy work did not end there. Given the persistent police persecution of *travestis* based on some unfounded legal codes, she led, in 1998, a riot against Buenos Aires' police, fighting to change the aforementioned codes. She also registered to become a teacher in 2002, insisting she be recognized by the State as *travesti*. Convinced of the importance of producing one's own knowledge, she sought alliances with scholars in order to be able to enrich her formal background in community groups/organizing. When she became advisor to city councilor Patricio Etchegaray, she became the first *travesti* to work as a government official. They were both affiliated to the Communist Party; Berkins remained an active member until her passing. In 2008, Berkins founded and served as President of a textile cooperative called *Nadia Echazú,* serving as a workshop/training space to generate *travesti* employment; as shown in the documentary film *Furia Travesti: Una Historia de Tra-Vajo* (González Aguilar, 2010). In 2010, she created the *National Front for the Gender Identity*

Law that achieved, in 2012, the approval of law 26.743 – positioning Argentina as the first country to recognize, without any surgical or medical intervention, a person's sense of self based on their gender identity. As a result, government agencies and private medical systems must guarantee access to gender confirming surgeries and other medical services, when/if desired. Berkins was soon after named Director of the Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation Office within the *Observatory of Gender Justice* in the City of Buenos Aires.

Berkins' leadership and efforts to found the textile cooperative *Nadia Echazú* generated further collaborative efforts; her desire for the pursuit of education for *travestis* in the region was tied to getting options in formal economy jobs to refuse to only engage in survival prostitution. Berkins was instrumental in the mobilization of efforts that secured the space of the *Bachillerato Popular Travesti Mocha Celis*, a community-based/community-driven school training older *travesti* adults (in their 30s, 40s, and 50s) to achieve their technical degree – an equivalency to a General Educational Development (GED) or High School degree (Martínez & Vidal-Ortiz, 2018, 2021; Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2023).

Throughout her life, she nurtured herself from a varied social movement repertoire – from cooperativism to feminism– and channeled her passion and rage in making *travesti* issues part of a national agenda. Her work has been taught in courses at the Universidad de Buenos Aires (Saxe 2022), a world-wide renowned institution. Berkins died in 2016, but even in her deathbed, summoned her friends to challenge themselves and face love as the engine for change (Vidal-Ortiz & Martínez, 2023).

A (Corporeal) Latin-American *Travesti* Theory

Lohana Berkins aimed to build a "Latin-American *travesti* memory (. . .) [based on] first-person experiences to counterpose the discourses that talk about us" (Berkins 2008, 43). Berkins believed that it was *travestis'* duty to create a narrative –with roots in their daily

experience– to co-opt medicine's authority, which historically tried to govern their sexuality and corporeality. In developing a theory rooted in *travestis'* marginalized knowledge and experiences, Berkins became a "theorist-activist." She did not seek to represent *travesti* memory; rather, her constant exposure, through media and political/academic settings, propelled not only visibility, but a popular perception that *travestis* were not only not going to remain silent; they would also engage in creating discourse about their bodies from their own social location – in a shameless way. (An example of this is the role of half-naked *travesti* women in "Pride" events which usually challenge mainstream gay and lesbian middle-class conceptions of protests; those acts counter respectability politics while embracing and centering their flesh, and the work they've produced on, and through, their bodies.) Berkins' work shows how she was open to developing and reconsidering her ideas; she constantly reinforced this at meetings with other *travesti* women, in activists or academic events. Her theoretical corpus, like that of those who die too soon, is a corpus-in-formation, based on a feminist lens that, instead of erasing difference, embraces it. We understand Berkins' theorization as a feminist project that, incomplete as it may be, ties together arguments against what she saw as interpersonal and systemic discrimination – from peers, families, employers, up to the State – as well as endemic to the sexual and erotic fantasies imposed on *travestis*. One such fantasy is what Berkins called, as noted before, "the 'prostibular' body:" the fantastic, voluptuous and at times exaggerated view of cisgender women that heteronormative men projected onto *travestis*, and/or which many *travestis* sought to develop, at least early on in their transition (while engaged in sex work), in order to feel desirable, and to earn money. This is one of the tenets of what we see as her contribution to feminism: being interpellated by the discursive notion of the body-for-others. Berkins herself rethought this quest for a 'prostibular' body, as we will illustrate; at the same time, she crafted an idea about *travesti* identity and desire in and through her reckoning with multiple, gendered and sexualized messages that

imposed a particular bodily form. She connected with cisgender feminist activists, and gay and lesbian activists and academics, but focused her energies on *travesti*-centered activism and community-care.

Berkins' theoretical project pressed to go beyond the literal material boundaries of *travesti* life: community-based research (including those Berkins supported/co-wrote) have shown how, in the 1990s-2000s, young adult *travestis* faced systemic exclusion, which drastically reduced their life expectancy ranging from 35.5 to 41.25 years old - about half the overall population's life expectancy (Berkins, 2007). Moreover, the massive loss of *travesti* life is a monumental barrier to forming community, frustrating any feasibility of a *travesti* futurity (Berkins 2008). A political identity based on the diverse corporeal experiences and constant bodily transformations of those excluded helped Berkins construct a common narrative against this wave of systemic violence. She thus propelled the notion of a collective "we," similar to Wayar's later notion of, in Spanish, 'nostredad,' as a collective political subjectivity (Rizki, 2025; Wayar, 2021).

Berkins was astute about how and where knowledge production took shape. She noticed both the privileging of the written form over other forms of knowledge dissemination, particularly oral speeches and interviews, but also the impermeability of classed spaces that monopolized knowledge-making – such as academia. She saw the power of feminist activism that questioned but used academic settings, and pushed for transformation in how to rethink academia (and education) as a site that needed to recognize structural marginalization – even more importantly, how academic settings reproduced *travesti* experience as deficit, always linked to death. Berkins constantly shattered knowledge that subjugated *travestis* to objects of study: as early as the 2000s, she sustained written research and collaborations with academics, while cementing her oral narrative at conferences and through media outlets, in order to keep records of *travesti* issues through oral discussions. She knew that *travesti* sex workers did not

have equal access to the written word, and modeled her interventions in a balanced act between communication modalities. Berkins necessarily challenged the preference for the written with the recounting of violence and corporeal realities they faced. To theorize a bodily politics for Berkins was to ingeniously activate the rejection in educational spaces –where the written was privileged as a tool– to then occupy policy spaces where orality served her well in a politics of embracing *travesti* ontology. The corporeality she experienced, and often reflected on, was the basis for an engagement in feminist projects of self-determination along sexual and reproductive rights.

Embodied resistance was also a central component of how Berkins would come to see a *Latin American travesti theory.* At one extreme was the transformation to re-shape and change, through home-made technologies, one's body; and at the other was the formulation and uses of the body to resist the police and survive State violence. Theorizing the bodily experience served Berkins as language that gave meaning, that explained, and that resisted their precarious existence, starting with the body. Producing collective ideas by and for *travestis* was a way to transcend the limits of orality:

> What we started to realize was that a whole history of orality was taking place within the *travesti*-transsexual community, but this constituted an individualistic discourse [of experience - it did not translate into community action]. There was no collective story of the entire struggle [faced by *travestis*]. Because there were two types of activism: a public activism –the classic one, the one that is known [the most]– in which we organize, fight and demand [our rights], and [the other activism] is done by *travestis* who have also contributed a lot to a movement who don't appear in the media, nor write or produce anything. So, we thought about how we could begin to build this collective story and to give an account of all the tensions, the ups and downs, the journeys that an entire community took in order to constitute itself as such (Jones, 2008, 4).

Here, a singular *travesti* embodiment experience becomes a multiplicity, almost a reiteration, of both the individual body and a collective one. As a leader, she knew she had to connect the two types of activists she mentioned, and often times, telling the singular stories served as a bridge connecting the bodily experiences between both groups. Berkins sought to articulate a common, political language that placed *travestis* within a human rights framework. She sought political transformation while recognizing that the structural conditions *travestis* faced would not be radically altered by their activism, nor in their own lifespan. Berkins proclaimed to be proud of the movement "from being passive victims to becoming active victims. To the extent that we are changing, society is changing. And this is because we have become dangerous. First, we became subjects of conscience, then subjects of law and claimants [and plaintiffs] of rights" (Papalot 2000: second paragraph). Berkins knew that backlash would follow heightened visibility.

Berkins considered academics to be both allies that would help with advocacy and new rights, while recognizing they could still potentially reproduce a reductive discourse of *travestis* as objects, rather than subjects of knowledge. But she wanted to ensure the resources academics gatekeep could be available to *travestis*:

> A major [almost primal] issue for me was our [educational] training/formation. I insist that we should have the formal training given the marginalization we face, and the fact that we do not have access to universities. But it is not only academia that produces knowledge, right? So that was also a challenge: how could we obtain that knowledge? (Jones 2008, 3).

Generally, *travestis* do not often operate formally –as students, much less teachers– in academic spaces; Berkins signaled this, in order to argue for more inclusive educational spaces.

While she fought for knowledge production from a street (or informal) education, she also understood the need for *travestis'* participation in formal education. She often advocated for *travestis'* right to complete high school, since a large number of *travesti* women in particular were forced out of elementary school; bullying, combined with family rejection, resulted on a very low educational level for *travestis*, often frustrated as early as their pre-teen years. For Berkins, education would become a strategy to achieve long-term institutional transformation, which would spill over onto employment in formal economy venues; indeed, in her appearance in *Furia Travesti: Una Historia de Tra-Vajo* (González Aguilar, 2010), about the *Nadia Echazú* coop, Berkins insisted on appropriating the State's notion of dignified employment as one demand from *travesti* women, a demand they themselves embody (minute 3:30). Institutional barriers – such as the failure of the government to recognize the name and gender with which *travestis* live their everyday lives – continued. Spaces for applied/technical employment such as *Nadia Echazú*, and high-school programs such as the *Mocha Celis* would begin to fill a much-needed gap in this regard.

Berkins pursued a *Latin American travesti theory* that could serve as a counterpoint to theories produced in Europe and the U.S. For her, and many *travestis* of her generation, *travesti* was a term they chose to embrace, and a term that remained centered on the bodily manifestations and changes –their journeys–, as well as the embodied challenges they faced in the very categories they used: their notion of a body that did not respond to globalized categories. While *transgender* became a global notion to describe a wide range of experiences, Berkins pointed out on the need to build a theory grounded in southern *travesti* experiences:

> ...one of the issues we took notice of was that we [felt we] should resist the colonialist tone when it came to these issues. Because, for example, when the term used is 'transgender,' that really reflects a North American construct, in a context that has nothing to do with us. (. . .) That's why we were worried about formal education and

> academia, and later on we started to address this, [almost as an exercise to] see what we could say [what we would say] about ourselves (. . .) Because one thing I learned was that there would be plenty of talk about us, but not with us. It is different to talk *with* us than to talk *about* us. I can legitimize whoever could talk about us because they bothered to interview us, to follow up. (. . .) What do we say about ourselves on all of these issues? What do we have to say? What do we really want to say? (Jones, 2008: 10).

Berkins addresses the imperial significance attached to terms like transgender as a global north category while juxtaposing *travesti* as a local category. She also names the contradiction of being talked about, or maybe even to, but rarely with, while implicitly recognizing allies who take the time (or trouble) to engage with *travesti* issues, noting two interrelated, powerful shortcomings: *travestis* need the forum to speak about themselves, while at the same time exploring, through those very forums, what it is that they want to or must say about themselves. Berkins used every chance for a public forum to make that space the place where a common discourse would emerge – enhancing her politics of a "we". She did not necessarily know what such discourse would bring, but would engage it in the spirit of bringing "we-ness" forth.

Berkins' idea of a *Latin American travesti theory* placed queer theory in tension with *travesti* experience and in doing so, highlighted the incommensurability of *travesti* bodily experience. As she explained: "We adhere queer theory as a knowledge system that questions the binary gendered order. However, as a *travesti* and transsexual community, we also operate in tension with this theory, shaped by difference but fundamentally produced in the central countries" (Berkins 2013, 91). Parallels with lesbian and feminist groups emerge here too, because in Latin America, some of these groups also resisted queer theory – for the potential dismissal, if not dismantling, of the identities they fought so long and hard for. Latin America

became her geopolitical place of enunciation, a strategy to claim how their irreducible corporeal experience could not be dissolved by "universalizing" theories grounded in other contexts:

> We are seduced by the idea of demolishing identities, of living in a decadent world, but it seems to us that saying this in the US or a European context is very different from saying it in our Latin America. The translation from one context to another is a very complex process, so far unachieved. It is not the same to be a *travesti* in Buenos Aires, in Salta, in Bolivia, as to be one in Manhattan or in Amsterdam (. . .) We are often subsumed in a lesbian gay discourse, and even though the "t" was added many years ago, if we take up a critical analysis of GLTT[Y]B [gay, lesbian, *travesti*, transsexual, and bisexual] discourses, our representation is still fragile, our demands are not always incorporated, our conquests are invisible and the "t" ends up being a politically correct response of well-intentioned folks. (Berkins 2013, 91)

The particularities of *travesti* experience are often placed against the globalization of LGBTIQ identities. Moreover, the foregrounding of sexuality and sexual behavior in same-sex desire stands in contradistinction from the *travesti* experience of existing in their gendered bodies, in ways more alike to the misogyny and sexism experienced by (cisgender) women, than to the discrimination based on sexual orientation by (cisgender) gay (and, to a certain extent, lesbian) individuals. Unlike the gay and lesbian studies subject that has the privilege of interrogating their identity categories, *travestis* are less entitled to a functional questioning of themselves, when systemic violence continues to strike their communities. It is for this reason that Berkins did not restrict her intellectual agenda to sexual matters; she understood that any corporeal experience should be read at its intersection with multiple axes of power. Perhaps because Berkins was politically formed in and through anti-*travesti* street violence, later becoming politicized through anti-neoliberal riots lead by feminist (cis-women) movements since the

1990s, she sought to equally address struggles for sexual and reproductive rights while supporting wider fights for rights that included health, housing, and employment.

Berkins based this *travesti* theorizing on shared experiences with marginalization. From such a starting point, *travestis* dialogue with the multiple bodies symbolically and materially expelled from society, which are subjected to various degrees of violence. Berkins challenged traditional actors of mainstream feminism and left-wing politics that usually focused on working-class cis-men and middle-class cis-women by creating a street-based theory that defined *travestis* and other marginalized people as political entities. Her work did not seek to achieve respectability; rather, in doing embodied theory, she fought for the basic humanity denied to most *travestis*. This was unapologetic theorizing. More than being reduced to a simplistic political subject, Berkins considers all those socially excluded as potential allies for political coalitions, even while understanding the limits of these efforts, and the tension between a politics of unity and differences among members with similar political aims. She focused on the experience of social exclusion as a common political articulation that transformed poverty, migration and racial discrimination by uniting otherwise unlikely allies. She said, "we don't want to achieve respectability," instead, as a collective, they sought to:

> …demolish the hierarchies that order identities and subjects of those [like us] who self-recognize as Black, whores, Palestinians, revolutionaries, indigenous, fat, prisoners, drug addicts, exhibitionists, *piqueteros*, *villeros*, lesbians, women and *travestis*, that even if we do not have the capacity to bear a child, we do have the courage to engender another story (Berkins 2008: 50).

Berkins portrayed the street as a symbolic site for building coalitions among those marginalized, to connect the urban poor [*villeros*], unemployed/underemployed protesters [*piqueteros*], sex workers, gays and lesbians, proposing a dialogue and theorizing "from the

streets," as a way to charge against, or demand change from the State. We see this as a construction of a politics of commonality and shared oppression. In this, Berkins strategically connected to other global struggles that are often ignored in political mobilizations, in order to make her struggles paralleled to these other ones.

Berkins' interventions underscored the pride of being *travesti* in spite of how it was, and still is perceived socially. Berkins believed that positively embracing *travesti* body-being was a political response to social hate, and to the readings of their body as abject in a cisheteronormative society. In a context in which a *travesti* identity has historically been mocked in journalistic portrayals, she emphasized the beauty and political potentiality in being *travesti*. This was a reaction of what she defined as a "sewage identity" - since being *travesti* was publicly associated with all negative social connotations, *travesti* bodies became deposits of social hatred, an animosity usually expressed with violence (see Wayar 2021, 32). She frequently stated at public demonstrations or to the media: "If I were to be born again, I would choose to be *travesti*". Choosing to be *travesti*, then, resonates with the celebratory spirit of her sense of being; yet this celebration does not glamourize the discrimination or violence faced by *travesti* women, it insists in their wanting to exist, in spite of those systemic forms of erasure. Her utterance of the term also starts to normalize that there are people who simply aren't male or female, or don't feel like either.

As noted in the introduction, Berkins pointed out how *travesti* embodiment challenged binary and essentialist notions of gender. Her resistance to being reduced to a category from among only two choices reinforced her dynamic understanding of the shifting nature of *travesti* identity, in this case, related to diverse carnal experiences:

> I don't want to be a woman –I don't even know what that is, what women are like– I want to be a *travesti*, which is what I am. I don't want to be a man either. I know the place where I don't want to be. I do know the place I'm trying to build, with what I can,

> with what I have and as far as it will go, but that's the biggest certainty I have. (. . .) Even [Doctors] emphasize sexual orientation, because if I go and say "look, I live with a woman", I'd get jailed for life! They are then going to say: "Didn't you want to be a woman?" (Berkins 2017, paragraphs nine and ten).

She often pointed out that *travestis* challenged the naturalized or normatively biologized link between corporeality and identity: trans women may have penises but also inhabit a body with breasts and under hormonal treatment; and living and presenting as female in social spaces. As noted, before, the cis-hetero normative linearity in terms of sex, gender, and desire/sexuality *is* challenged by *travesti* bodies by thinking corporeality in their relationship to sexuality, sexual orientation, and desire. In this excerpt, she shows how this normative linearity makes unintelligible any potential for a lesbian *travesti* in a relationship with a(nother) woman - cis or trans. Moreover, Berkins pushed the boundaries that foreground the individual *travesti* body as a political tool. In addition, she noticed and used the fact that gestures and adornment (voice, clothing, makeup and hair, hand and body gestures) were a battleground for making *travesti* a political identity; for example, she valued her voice as a *travesti* voice –not as a male or female voice– a voice that might not be easily classified if only looking through a gender binary perspective.

Berkins understood feminism as a foundational theory that places the body at the center of political thinking. Feminist critiques to the alleged biological foundations of gender were powerful tools to rebuild the links between identity and corporeality, with bodily autonomy intercepting the limits of body materialization that exceeded gender standards based on birth-given characteristics. Even when feminist groups refused to accept *travestis* as political allies, she insisted on embracing such agenda as a path to build the right to sovereignty over one's own body:

> [For us,] it was a total commitment to feminism. We were saying: we have to build and question corporeality. But what were its limits? What are the fields where these elements are negotiated, and what are the limits we ourselves are willing to push for? And for that, when we would say, "what are the limits we should cross?" we would obviously draw primarily from feminism. So, the first "flag" we held up was that of abortion – as a demand for very concrete rights. There, again, we began to take up an issue that was not our own [not directly impacting us], but we did see the claim for ownership of the body as an absolute right, as Lucy Stone said in 1854: "I do not want the right to own [property] and vote if I cannot keep [control over] my body as an inalienable right." That claim to ownership of the body (in this case, women's rights to opt for their own choice to procreate [or not], when to have children, why to have them, and with whom to have them), was at the juncture of our own agenda. (Jones 2008, 3)

Berkins' interpretation of feminist theory as a critique underpinning the supposedly natural logics of the body-for-others (for example: for the male gaze, for reproduction, or for sustaining a cis binary logic) shaped her view of feminism, and its link to identity; it also helped her underscore how *travestis* replaced the (often exotic read of) the centrality of genitalia as both the legal and cultural definitions of sex. In that, Berkins reflected not on mere shared interests, but more along the lines of political solidarity across differences. To be a *travesti* feminist activist is thus to respond to the levels of systemic mistreatment and exclusion, which for Berkins entailed a collaborative engagement with cisgender women. This collaborative approach would not always be reciprocal, but it nonetheless served as the basis of her politics.

What we also draw from her work as the *travesti*-body-being was her response to an agentic sense of embodiment - one that expands corporeality, particularly the limits of male

and female embodiment. Rooted in *travestis'* experiences of female embodiment that stop short of genital surgery, Berkins addressed the limits of western cultural frameworks that assign gender: for her, "A body with a penis is considered to be followed by a male subjectivity and a body with a vagina will be followed by a female subjectivity. *Travestis* [by their own existence] break down this hegemonic, binary logic in Western societies that oppresses those who resist being subsumed into the categories of 'men' and 'women'." (Berkins 2008, 44)

Berkins addressed body materiality in its multiple intersections of class, race, gender, sexuality, age, and migratory experience. *Travestis'* complex identity experience cannot be reduced to one's sexuality. Berkins sees her role, and that of other *travestis*, as an in-between binarized categories, understanding the feminist claim of body autonomy as a departing point for a *travesti* theory:

> Psychology and law put us all [like we were all the same]: "you're gay!" We are not all the same. We are also divided by class, corporeality, ethnicity, ideology. There are a lot of things that merge into my identity, not just the trite story of: "Oh, when I was a little girl, I played with a doll and then…" Because that story abounds, it captivates, and is touching. That's just one part of our story. Just as there are becomings and sufferings, there is also agency, there is joy and happiness; some of us are activists for the decriminalization of abortion. Because we believe this to be an important issue in this (shared) struggle, which is the ownership of [and control over] one's body. If I asked you to draw a body of a woman or a man, with a little more or little less nuance, you would draw the same body. Now, if I told you to draw a *travesti* body, an intersex body – I don't know… Many years ago, when I became a feminist, the first thing that was explained to me was the most divine rule that feminism has: that biology was not destiny. And yet I was told: But, since you were born a man, you cannot be a feminist.

> Just like that, poor Simone de Beauvoir was erased with a stroke of the pen. (Berkins 2017, paragraph twelve.)

Challenging the idea that "biologizes" her *travesti* body as non-female, Berkins resists gendered socialization essentialisms of sexed female bodies equating feeling or being female (and also being a feminist); when she speaks about drawing *travesti* bodies, she calls into question our imaginary of what those bodies look like. In short, Berkins underlines how we have no cultural understanding of *travesti* bodies. Furthermore, generic narratives that stereotype LGBTIQ peoples have tropes from which, allegedly, such experiences and identities emanate, drawing on causal explanations for anyone not-normative (Katz, 2007); Berkins fights these facile narratives that simplify their lives into traumas and reversal gender roles. And she activates her exclusion as a feminist from feminism because of her body with the very articulations of feminist practice, not because she sought acceptance, but because of her commitment to feminist practice as activism. She also, astutely, reinforces vivid aspects of the term difference –a central feminist practice of theorizing– in thinking about racialized, classed, and other axes of inequality.

Conclusion

Berkins' *travesti* theory is an open form of theorizing. An embodied configuration has historically been required for *travesti* identity –connected to silicone, implants, and sex work as forms of identity confirmation– yet the reading of that embodiment has served as a of violence against them. Instead of sealing the boundaries of identity, it challenges such borders. A Latin American *travesti* theory is a conglomerate of shared experiences forming a *travesti* notion "inhabited" by *travestis* with different corporealities, and an even greater need for housing, socioeconomic and educational resources. For example, given the historical exclusion

of *travestis* from the formal economy, guaranteeing government-based employment is a project that, in part because of the vision Berkins had –of a newer, better world– started to become a reality, although today it is being undermined by the far-right Argentine administration.

Berkins' corporeal transformation (what we refer to as the body-for-others), and her shifting sense of 'the prostibular body' help her rethink her body as a *travesti*-body-being: a body that does not fit either notion of two genders, and a body reimagined, and reinscribed, as more than a mere male gaze for *travesti* desire, and more that a victim of cisheteropatriarchy. In doing this, Berkins complicates the relationship of body to the bodily –so central in the telling of *travesti* experience– adding a gendered reading of their experience. Systemic sexism impacting cisgender women also impacts *travestis*, broadening a sense of femaleness; a collective female body finds ways to resist the misogyny they all experience, even as the differences among women are vast.

Berkins feminist theorizing and practice required that she place her body on the line for cisgender women as much as for *travestis*. Her coalitional politics were inherently about dismantling the patriarchy in a country that struggles with the influence of U.S. stakeholders in her country's economic future. She was thinking through an intersectional lens before those theories and writings were translated to Spanish. And she was feminism to the core: she took the stand to defended other *travestis* at Feminist *Encuentros* (gatherings, meetings, convenings) all the while taking the words of hate, compassion, and love, from her cisgender *compañeras* (female comrades), incorporating their sense of their world while being in solidarity with them. A feminist theorist she was—as we have shown. Part of that feminism was understanding that every human being had a right to body autonomy and to be recognized in their own terms. She also understood that *travestis'* struggles for identity legal recognition relied on creating new futures in which there would be multiple identities and corporealities.

This case study moves beyond traditional academic settings of knowledge production, and traditional theorists. Conceptualizing Berkins as a theorist helps us identify potential paths for exploring theory-making in marginalized communities, allowing for expanding the standard of what is considered sources, corpus, and archive, and what contributions are seen as theoretical work. Berkins' theorizing helps recognize how theories rooted in activism grow in conflictive coalitional spaces of collaboration between activists, social movement leaders, and academics – at times, making collaborations fruitfully evident, while at others, suppressing group members in the service of a mainstream agenda. This case study of a key political Latin American leader shows that analyzing Berkins' theory as an open process rooted in *travestis'* embodied experience of social exclusion requires expanding our understanding of theory beyond a preconceived, impervious, totally coherent corpus. In contrast, we have argued that we need to navigate any and all apparent contradictions as the driving, living force that helps us expand our theoretical imagination, and to craft new vocabularies that counterbalance the predominance of North Atlantic queer and feminist theories.

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