

# **The Time for Revolution Is Now!**

*A Social History of Trans and  
Travesti Argentina*

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**Marce Joan Butierrez**



# Contents

List of Illustrations .....	9
Acknowledgments .....	11
Introduction .....	13
Historicizing Trans and Travesti Activism .....	23
A Travesti Odyssey: Traveling Across the Universe of Lohana Berkins .....	25
A Brief History of Travesti Fury .....	35
History of Travesti Trans Activism in Argentina: Political Itineraries in Tension.....	50
Peace, Land, and Bread: Travesti Memories for Thinking and Working the Streets .....	63
Trans Travesti Activism and Human Rights .....	81
Justice from a Social Struggle Perspective: Travestis, Gays, and Lesbians in the Trial on Banfield and Quilmes Clandestine Detention Centers .....	83
A Century of Violence Against Trans Bodies: A New Chronology for Reparation Policies.....	95
A Kiss to the Sky for Those Who Are No Longer with Us.	107
Never Going Back to Jail: A Travesti Trans Perspective on the Last Military Dictatorship in Argentina .....	118

Transcestors: Genealogies and Biographies.....	147
One is born a woman: Karina Urbina and transsexual activism in the 1990s .....	149
Jailbirds: The Activism of Pelusa Liendro and Rosario Sansone Against the Police in Salta .....	164
Pelusa, Vanesa, and Marcela: Counter-Memories of Sex Work from a Travesti Perspective .....	178
A Transsexual Voice on Sexual Politics: Adventures Following Karina Urbina's Documentary Trail .....	192
Newspapers Articles and Op-Eds .....	213
Open Letter to the Females of the Human Species .....	215
Crossroads and Challenges for "Recognizing Ourselves" in the Trans Population Statistics of the 2022 Census .....	222
No More Jail Time: Preliminary Approval for the Trans Employment Quota Law .....	238
Where There Is a Right, a Need Arises: Challenges Regarding the Enactment of the Trans Employment Quota 243	
X Is the Answer: Argentina Moves Forward in Recognizing Non-Binary Identities .....	252
Bodies with the Capacity to Desire .....	259
Kill Joy, Kill Pride: Keys to Disarming the Glitter Bomb	267
Bibliography and Primary Sources.....	275

## List of Illustrations

Deborah Singer during a show in 1988 .....	135
Argentine Travestis Association in a demonstration against the Police, 1995 .....	136
Karina Urbina in a demonstration, 1992 .....	137
Monica Ramos and Perica Burrometo during a funeral, 1987 ...	138
Travesti in Panamerican Highway .....	140
Gina, travesti injured in Panamerican Highway, 1987 .....	141
Travesti Funeral, 1987 .....	142
Travesti detained during a party, 1988 .....	144
Travesti detained and portrayed by the police, 1988.....	145
Karina Urbina protesting outside the Supreme Court, 1991	202
Karina Urbina and Yanina Moreno, 1995 .....	204
Karina Urbina protesting in the National Congress, 1993 ...	204
Karina Urbina and Patricia Gauna, 1993 .....	205
A travesti flees from the police while taking off her clothes in protest, 1996.....	206
Cover page of an collection about "males vedettes", 1983.....	207
Travesti's Front in a demonstration, 1986 .....	208

Mariela Muñoz detained by the police, 1993..... 210  
A group of young travestis in detention, 1989..... 211  
Mariela Muñoz and her partner in a patrol car, 1993 ..... 211

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## Introduction

Over the past decade, I have researched diverse travesti experiences in Argentina, primarily from a historical perspective. I have also documented mobility practices and political initiatives. Much of my work has been published in academic papers, some of which have been published in English. Since 2019, however, I have worked as a journalist for some of the most prominent feminist and LGBTQ+ magazines, digital outlets, and newspapers in Argentina. I began writing weekly articles and op-eds for media outlets because I felt a social responsibility to share my research beyond the often strict limits of academia. I gradually became acquainted with the English-speaking world dedicated to trans studies and noticed the lack of representation of travesti experiences outside of South America. In fact, even among Latin American specialists, the main focus is Mexico and the Caribbean, with Brazil receiving little attention. This is why I started participating in conferences, meetings, journals, and workshops in the United States and Europe with friends and colleagues. A few years ago, I moved to Michigan, which transformed my personal life and professional goals. Today, I work as a journalist in the United States, and I will soon start my Ph.D. program at the University of Minnesota, which is one of my biggest dreams.

One of the main questions this book attempts to answer is why translating South American travesti experiences into English is important. My best friend and colleague, Mir Yarfitz, and I published a challenging article in the Oxford

Research Encyclopedia of Latin American History about trans and travesti identities in twentieth-century South America (Butierrez and Yarfitz 2024). In the article, Mir and I compile a significant amount of information about trans and travesti identities across the region. We attempt to connect certain experiences while highlighting the unique characteristics of others. Despite the significant effort in the article, it remains challenging to disseminate travesti experiences beyond academic circles. Even among trans scholars, the few mentions of travesti identity are inaccurate, as they consider it only as a recent political statement under the decolonizing practice of trans activism in the region. Others only pay attention to travesti identity as a theatrical practice, translating it as 'transvestite' or 'cross-dresser.' However, travesti is not the same as transvestite. Although it is sometimes considered a theatrical practice in some Latin American countries, it is not comparable to drag queen or cross-dressing experiences. Travesti identity has particularities that I discuss in depth in the articles included in this book. Mainly, it is an experience linked with eroticism, sex work, the marginalized condition of the working class in the region, and a strong political rhetoric embodied in the flesh and silicone of travesti people.

In Argentina, the term "travesti" originated in theatrical performances featuring men dressed as women. It gained popularity following the visit of a Brazilian travesti troupe in 1971. Was the term "travesti" used in Argentina before that date? Yes, of course. The social practice of living dressed as women has existed for many years, but it has taken different forms throughout history. In Brazil, the term used for this practice was "travesti," which literally means "transvestite"

in Portuguese and other Romance languages, such as French (Kulick 1998). Brazil is the origin of the word, but all South American countries had a social practice related to wearing clothes of the opposite sex. In Peru, documents and drawings from colonial times testify to the existence of "travestis" (Henderson 2012). In Bolivia, men wearing women's clothing participated in carnival celebrations as part of a ritual and theatrical parade (Aruquipa Pérez 2016). Perhaps some of them also identified with the opposite sex. Similar examples exist in each country. Despite the lack of documentation on these practices, it is possible to find documentation against the travesti practice. Throughout the continent, each national government created laws and ordinances to ban, persecute, and incarcerate people who wore clothes contrary to the sex assigned at birth.

Although its origins are linked with the theatrical practice, travesti became a word used by the popular press and the society to name any experience related with men who wear feminine clothes. After its most prolific time in the 1970s when many travesti groups traveled across South America performing their shows, during the large wave of military dictatorships in the region the travestis sought refuge in brothels and cabarets in the outskirts of the main cities. These places were a mix of show and sex work. Travestis often started out working as sex workers rather than as theatre performers. In the 1980s, with the diffusion of silicone injections travestis achieved a kind of corporality, curvy and sexy, that captured the attention of the press and media. Travestis used the media outlet to spread their discontent with the social violence, discrimination, and police repression. They constituted the first assemblies and political organizations and developed a complex narrative

articulating the debates about sex, gender, and social class. Today, travesti identity is more than a label to describe a social and sexual practice, it is also a political statement against the binarism and rules that regulate gender.

Although for many authors the travesti experience is considered untranslatable I find many connections between the South America travesti experience and some documented activism in the United States that could enable a translation. The influence is pretty obvious. The United States received a large number of Latin American immigrants during the last century, therefore it is not hard to find expression of Latin experiences in this country. Among them, the most important from my perspective was the activism of Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, leaders of S.T.A.R Street Transvestites Action Revolutionaries (Rivera and Johnson 2013). Marsha P. Johnson, but more strongly Sylvia Rivera, embodied a kind of activism in defense of street transvestites that mixed the awareness about gender with a narrative about the class inequalities and social justice that I could compare with the political structure of travesti activism in South America. For the moment, I will use the term travesti in Spanish following the current tendency in the field, but in the future the next generation of trans scholars should connect the travesti and street transvestite experiences in a broader perspective about class and gender. I hope this book promotes this perspective still unexplored in trans studies, and especially important in this time of growing fascism and degradation of social marginalized communities around the globe.

The articles compiled in this book were originally published

in Spanish between 2020 and 2024. During this 4-years period I collaborated with the most important blogs, newspapers and magazines about LGBT and feminism issues in Argentina. Most of these articles were published in LatFem, a digital media outlet founded in 2016 during the first feminist demonstrations against feminicides in Argentina. “*Ni una menos*” [Not one less] was the name of a big demonstration organized by feminist journalists in 2016, similar to the global experience of Me Too. LatFem emerged during that event as a criticism against the lack of feminist voices in the media. As a journalist I found in LatFem an incredible group of colleagues and friends that always supported my ideas and encouraged me to write from my often pessimistic perspective about the trans and travesti experiences in Argentina. As part of my job in LatFem I reported about the conquest of the Trans Employment Quota Law, the first national census with non-binary categories, and the decree that established the non-binary ID’s cards in Argentina.

In this book I also included articles originally published in Moleculas Malucas, a blog about queer archives and history coordinated by Mabel Belluci, Marcelo Ferreyra, and Juan Queiroz. Moleculas was an amazing adventure, led by three of the most incredible archivists and historians on trans and queer issues in Argentina. The mission of the blog was to highlight the history of trans and queer communities with the particular style of trans and queer historians that work with archives. I published my three most important research articles in Moleculas, and all of them are included in this book, this time translated into English. In addition I included in the book some essays, conference presentations, and articles never published before or distributed only as a

draft among colleagues and friends. These articles cover a large diversity of topics, events and stories of trans and travesti people in Argentina and the region that I organize under four topic sections.

The first section is about the history of trans and travesti activism in Argentina. I included four articles in this section, two of them published in non-academic context where I explored the notion of travesti fury, a term invented by Lohana Berkins that symbolizes the key aspects of travesti political experiences. I also included the translation of an academic article published as part of a book collecting the experiences of trans activism in the 20th century and an essay about the links between travesti activism and sex work, during the 80s and 90s, based on interviews and documents. This section aims to analyze the complexity of travesti activism, sometimes reduced to an imitative experience of queer activism in the global north.

The second section is also about trans and travesti activism but more specifically about the connections between these experiences and the activism for human rights in Argentina. Human Rights organizations in Argentina have played a key role in the political narratives of the last two decades, because the memory about the last dictatorship, the struggle for justice, and the seeking of the disappeared people and their children and grandchildren are the core of political life since the return to democracy in 1983. Trans and travesti activism developed a complex relation with the corpus of memories about the last dictatorship, demanded recognition and reparatory policies, and articulated their demands in the same argumentative line of human rights organizations. One of the main results of this link was the

numerous trans and travesti archives that emerged during the last decade, mostly oriented to produce evidence and social impact in favor of trans and travesti people who suffered incarceration and repression by the military junta between 1974 to 1983. This section contains four articles with different perspectives about the topic, two of them are focused on the travesti experience and their testimonies about the last dictatorship. These articles are the result of interviews and reports from a journalistic perspective, where the travesti voices are highlighted in order to recognize their struggle for recognition and reparation. I also included two articles written for journals and conferences with a more critical perspective about the topic, regarding the work of colleagues who, like me, propose a more broadly analysis of the violence against trans and queer people independently of the political violence during the last military dictatorship in Argentina.

The third section includes articles with a more biographical style, focused mainly on the activism of Karina Urbina and Pelusa Liendo, and some other activists. These two leaders were mostly underrepresented, as well as the transsexual and travesti sex work experience in Argentina. These four articles aim to highlight experiences that do not fit in the mainstream narrative against sex work or focused on travesti lives. Karina was one of the main transsexual activists and she embodied the voice of a generation of transsexuals worried about the prohibition of access to sex change surgeries in Argentina. Not necessarily in Karina's discourse, but in most of the transsexual testimonies in the 90s they declared to be born in a 'wrong body,' but this narrative is today mostly rejected in feminist, trans and queer worlds. The first article plays with Beauvoir's notion

of 'no one born women' to discuss how the transsexual rhetoric was articulated around some ideas about femininity today under controversy. I also developed the history of some travesti sex workers that were forbidden because of their controversial misbehavior, their link with the sexual work, and their disobedient voices. Finally, the fourth section is a short collection of articles about the recent events in Argentina trans and queer context. I especially covered some significant events like the enactment of the trans labor quota act, the debates about the first census that registered non-binary identities, the achievement of legal abortion in Argentina, and some debates on the LGBT political horizons. The last article, never published before, is a crude text about my own discomfort with the new LGBT political organizations and the celebration of some 'queer perspectives' that only reinforce the power of capitalism in our own community.

This book is a collection of ideas and reflections on the history of trans people in Argentina and South America. It is also a collection of stories about my close friends who inspired my research and who have experienced violence at the hands of the Argentine government, police, and military forces over the last 100 years. The title of this book reflects the legacy of Lohana Berkins, who wrote in her final letter before her death:

*We have achieved many victories over the years. Now is the time to resist and fight for their continuity. **The time for revolution is now** because we will never return to prison. I am convinced that love is the engine of change.*

As one of the few travesti scholars in Argentina I agree with Lohana 100%: We, the trans and travesti community, have

achieved great things in the last decade. Now is the time to defend all our conquests and imagine a new horizon for our political struggle. This book showcases the experiences, stories, memories, and testimonies of our South American trans ancestors as tools for building a better future for the next generation of trans activists.

One of the main reasons, perhaps the main reason, why I published this book is because I believe in the power of history as a weapon for revolution and social change.

Edward Palmer Thompson (1980) says: *History is a cultural form within which we fight and many have fought before us. Nor are we alone when we fight there for we are historians because we know that the past is not dead, inert, and confining, but is strong with energies which can brought once again to our side.* My deeper desire is that this book brought our community and the generation before us the energy to fight and pursue a better world for everyone. For many years, our history was written by cis people, distorted under the political agenda of cis people, and used for individual interest. My generation grew up under prejudices like 'all the trans women have HIV,' 'the life expectancy of trans people is 35 years,' and 'no man will ever love you.' If I had let these ideas grow on my mind, probably this book would never exist. I used History as a tool for my own revolution. I took the stories of my friends to give hope myself, to keep myself in the battle against fear, to pursue love. Now I can share those stories with readers and teach them about our history, so that everyone who is tired of fighting knows: you're not alone anymore.