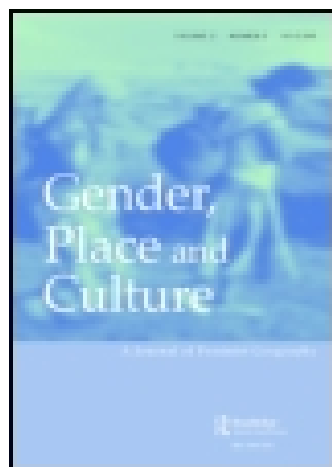


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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London, SW1P 1WG



Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cgpc20>

Decolonizing travesti space in Buenos Aires: race, sexuality, and sideways relationality

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Published online: 24 Jul 2015.



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To cite this article: Pedro José Javier Di Pietro (2015): Decolonizing travesti space in Buenos Aires: race, sexuality, and sideways relationality, *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1058756>

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Decolonizing *travesti* space in Buenos Aires: race, sexuality, and sideways relationality

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Scholars of space usually neglect the history of *travesti* populations in Latin America. It is misrepresented not only by disciplinary blind spots but also by global narratives concerned with rehabilitating queer subjects within homonormative projects. Analyzing neoliberal narratives that delink conflicts about racialization and sexuality in Argentina, this article makes room to decolonize the study of travesti experience and embodiment in Buenos Aires's *red zone*. It examines a network of racialized travestis and their spatial practices, including their migration from the Andean northwest to the sex-work circuits of Buenos Aires. Finally, this article introduces the notion of sideways relationality to account for the cultural and spatial labor that racialized travestis perform at the oppositional margins of homonormative reflexivity.

Keywords: decoloniality; travesti; homonationalism; homonormativity; Latin American sexualities

Introduction

With Buenos Aires passing a civil union bill in December 2002, the capital city of Argentina began to be portrayed as one of the leading destinations for the global gay traveler. Meanwhile, Jujuy and Salta, the country's northernmost provinces, are advertised as getaways to an untouched and indigenous past. Worldwide gay and lesbian marketing strategies deploy this narrative to juxtapose *gayness* and *indigeneity*. This article examines this mapping operation, unveiling its homonormative delinking of racial and gender conflicts. It illustrates the role that space plays in solidifying but also contesting the neocolonial logic of dominant LGBT culture as it interlocks race, gender, and sexuality.¹

In this research, I engage weaves of ethnographic, autoethnographic, and philosophical reflexivity. My situation is defined by being a member of networks of queer belonging where I study our reflexive engagement with self-making and collective fashioning. I inhabit this situation trying to remain critically aware of its contradictions, troubling the insider/outsider binary within fieldwork environments, and exposing its relation to Cartesian distance and neutrality (Pathak 2010; Reed-Danahay 2009). Most importantly, I underscore that ethnographic boundaries between *them* and *us* are embedded in wider cultural practices which define the possibilities of reciprocal recognition.

Although theorized within a more comprehensive framework about pan-Latinidad and queer space, this article focuses on networks of belonging produced by travestis from the provinces of Jujuy and Salta, the Andean northwest of Argentina. Most in these networks identify as travestis but they include others like me who do not claim travesti to signify our

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own subjectivity. Yet many of us cultivate subjectivities that available signifiers of modern sexual identity cannot capture (i.e., gay, lesbiana, transgénero, transexual, and intersex in their original Spanish). Having learned about my place in these networks since early in my life, this writing draws mainly from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2002 and 2004 and an additional six visits between 2006 and 2012.²

Three discussions contribute to this analysis. The first section takes on sexual identity and the transnational reflexivity through which it is shaped, pinpointing linkages between eugenicist encodings of sexuality and homonormativity. The second delves into the lives and reflexivity of racialized travestis from the Argentinean Andes. Lastly, this piece introduces the notion of ‘sideways relationality’ to analyze *travesti transversality* and its decolonizing of spatial practice, reflexivity, and theory.

Mapping Others: homonormative counterpublics and oppositional space

In June 2008, I arrived in the city of Buenos Aires to continue my research with travestis from Jujuy. At Ezeiza International Airport, I took a taxi-cab to Barrio Norte. Once we turned into Avenida 9 de Julio, of world-notoriety for its width, I was surprised to find four gigantic vinyl panels promoting my native Jujuy. Each panel represented one of four circuits of tourism to be found in that province becoming major visual referents for both domestic and international visitors. The panels were sponsored by state agencies that, since the turn of the millennium, promote Jujuy as ecological sanctuary for its combination of altiplane, valleys, mountains, and jungle. The monumentality of the display made me think about its contradictions and question the distance that this reflexivity delineates between **cosmopolitan areas Buenos Aires, a cosmopolitan area, and the Andean northwest**. While the former had been heavily marketed as ‘gay friendly’ since passing a civil union bill in 2002, the latter was, by then, being portrayed as haven for biodiversity and ancestral indigeneity.

Coming of age in Jujuy during the 90s, I was part of a *whitened* network of lesbians and *gays* with middle-class aspirations. The regional status of gay identification made our sense of belonging fairly fragile. The modernizing boundary between flatlands, where Buenos Aires is located, and the Andean northwest has historically been linked to the legacy of colonialism under the civilization/barbarism divide.³ In Jujuy, lesbians and gays that I interviewed throughout the years look up to Buenos Aires seeking future liberation from homophobia, a land of freedom to aspire to but not quite ever reach. My proximity to networks of travestis from the northwest, however, have taught me that the transition from the indigenous and ‘primitive’ Andes to Buenos Aires is quite perilous in as much as the metropolitan future remains undermined by the shadow of a eugenicist project of nation-building. While tourism marketing sharpens the provincial lure of the Andean northwest and the *worldly* flavor of Buenos Aires, this reflexivity also illustrates representations of space at play in broader neoliberal configurations of difference worldwide. Thus, exploring these contradictions surveys spatiotemporal domains of homonormative citizenship and its ties to sexuality and racialization.

Among others (Duggan 2003; Muñoz 1999; Sabsay 2011), Jasbir Puar studies the collusion of homonormativity – its depoliticizing of non-normative sexual culture through domesticity and consumption – and a nationalist and imperial project of racial othering (2007, 38 and 39). She documents ‘the process of discerning’ perverse figures of racial and sexual others and their power to rehabilitate conforming gays and queer subjects (38). Her framework is compatible with an analysis of the polycentric nature of globalizing homonationalism. My research locates dominant reflexivities about ethnic and sexual differences across histories of eugenicist nation-state building practices in Argentina and their contemporary global articulation. This is consistent with foregrounding

heteronormativity as part of translocal processes in which whiteness regulates bodies, desires, and citizenship (Collins 2004; Ferguson 2004; Ward and Schneider 2009). Contesting the pitfalls of sexuality studies criticized for their colonial underpinning by women of color feminisms, queer of color critique, and multicultural feminisms in Latin America (Curiel 2007; Driskill et al. 2011; Lugones 2007; Hames-Garcia and Martinez 2011; Johnson and Henderson 2005), the inquiry pursued here considers the plurality of travesti reflexivity and its opposition to homonormative inclusion within the Argentine nation.

Reflexivity entails circulation of social asymmetries through discursive practices. Michael Warner describes this circulation through which publics are called into existence in terms of 'infinite axes of citation and characterization' (2005, 91). Publics involve communicative competence not only in acknowledging the almost anonymous characteristic of any given public but also in anticipating the capacity of any public to be aware of its existence. Social subjects acquire this competence by partaking in cross-citation, decoding, identifying with, anticipating, and altering meaning. The circular-like relation between reflexivity and subjectivity is mediated by ongoing contestation intrinsic to contemporary processes of self and collective examination (Domingues 1995; Giddens 1991). Practitioners of this reflexive competence become constituents of the public sphere and its antagonisms. Reflexivity is thereby revealed for its role in both domination and resistance to domination.

Public reflexivity takes place within the domain of the ruling gaze. Counterpublics, instead, are shaped within parallel arenas wherein subordinated groups access oppositional interpretations of their identities and aspirations (Fraser 1997). Like the LGBT movements that have strategically utilized these arenas to circulate counterdiscourse, counterpublics contest the conditions under which non-dominant reflexivity is denied standing and circulating channels available to the mainstream (Felski 1989). As theorists of resistance have shown, however, counterpublic force may be curtailed by its appeal to dominant reflexivity (Kelley 1992; Lugones 2000; Scott 1990). That is, in approaching mainstream publics, counterpublics are bound to negotiate 'on stage' the ways or 'transcripts' in which ruling publics deliver performances of mastery for the impression they seek to make on subordinates (Scott 1990, 49). Tourism campaigns targeting global gay markets operate 'on stage' and may offer channels through which LGBT counterpublics contest pathologizing reflexivity advanced by mainstream publics such as the conservative medical establishment. There are forms of subordinate discourse that, nevertheless, remain offstage within 'sequestered social sites' (Scott 1990, 20), providing 'hidden transcripts' to oppose both onstage reflexivity and other areas of consent where publics and counterpublics meet. Below the public competence displayed onstage, hidden transcripts mobilize dissent.

Racialized travestis and their practices – bodily transformation, street-walking, collective housing arrangements, political organizing, etc. – materialize such sites of opposition. I analyze the spatial form of their offstage reflexivity as defined above. Considering that distance and proximity between mainstream and subaltern counterpublics are mediated by public transcripts, hidden transcripts can be interpreted as not merely pointing to the margins of the mainstream but rather to the outer edge of marginality. In other words, the study of travesti reflexivity takes us to its critical spatial alterity.

Originally introduced by Henri Lefebvre (1991), a three-pronged notion of space as conceived, perceived, and lived may reveal its social genesis. My half-hour drive from Ezeiza to Barrio Norte (perceived space; the flow of labor and money in a global city)

while torn between dominant representations of the northwest and Buenos Aires (conceived; the knowledge of *experts*) speaks to the many articulations (lived; the social practice) in which social relations are spatially produced both in narrative and experience (Brady 2002). It also underscores, as Doreen Massey argues (1994), the articulation of social relations and their inherent spatial form. Travestis and their practices foreground articulations of offstage reflexivity about the intersection of racialization, gender, and sexuality. This type of research on the specificity of racialized travesti experience emphatically steers the field toward trans geographies that do not rely on binaries such as hetero-homo, gay-queer, sex-gender (Browne, Nash, and Hines 2010) but rather on contingent configurations whose major site of inquiry is found among relational embodiments (Nash 2010). Deciphering the configurations produced by a network of racialized travestis in Argentina conveys their opposition to homonormative geography.⁴

Commodifying racial-others/cleansing sexual-others

Argentina has undergone gentrification and tourism-oriented commodification for the past two decades. Recently, however, it has showcased sexual identity as salient marker of argentine mainstream ‘otherness.’⁵ It also became the first Latin American country with federal same-sex marriage legislation in the first decade of this millennium. Simultaneously, it has seen increased visibility for TV celebrities who identify as gay, travesti, and gender-queer.⁶ The street-panels advertising Jujuy to visitors arriving in Buenos Aires are significant for their reflexivity about minority-difference; so are tango schools vying for a segment of the LGB tourism market (Linthicum ‘In Buenos Aires’). They represent the opportunity for foreigners and not to be recuperated into the narrative of national icons – biodiversity and tango – while simultaneously normalizing gay and queer subjects. This grammar between international and local publics stems from two mutually inclusive strategies: *cleansing* the history of racialization in the major gayscape of Argentina, its capital district, goes hand in hand with *stressing* racial/ethnic diversity at the northwestern border of the country.

On the one hand, we have the commodification of the northwest. Jujuy is not only the northernmost state in Argentina, sharing borders with Bolivia and Chile, but also the one with the largest Kolla indigenous population, mostly linked to its Quebrada [the gorge] and Puna regions.⁷ With the designation of The Quebrada as UNESCO’s World Heritage protected site in 2003, Jujuy receives about 300,000 visitors per year creating precarious conditions for the native community which, in turn, are worsened by eco-tourism (Guyot 2011). While the tourism industry finds legal loopholes to transform the real estate market against the interest of the gorge’s original inhabitants (Guyot 2011), indigenous communities continue to raise claims against corporate development. In so doing, Kolla communities engage in ‘ethnicization’ or the process of indigenous empowerment in the context of local environmental conflicts (Guyot 2011; Mollett 2006).

On the other hand, we find the portrayal of Buenos Aires as gay-friendly which includes outlets with impressive worldwide readerships such as *The New York Times* (NYT), *The Advocate*, and *Out Magazine*. The latter two promote themselves as the ‘leading’ sources for gay news in the world. The city unfolds as a ‘new bastion of gay-friendliness’ for all of them but, especially, for *The Advocate* (Nguyen 2007). For instance, under the title ‘In Macho Argentina, a New Beacon for Gay Tourists’ (Barrionuevo 2007), the NYT narrates the gradual assimilation of gender diversity into that city in part due to social mores loosening up during post-dictatorship (after 1983).⁸ Not without difficulty, the newspaper holds together the patchwork of ‘sexy tango,’ antique flea markets, shopping

and dining, and selected bites of political activism side by side with ‘strapping meat-eater [machol]’ men, and gay-only sports, clubs, and entertainment.

Out Traveler, the travel branch of *Out Magazine*, gave Buenos Aires an ‘excellent’ rating in four out of six markers of desirability for gay destinations in 2004. It describes the ‘sophistication’ of the city’s gay life in terms of its ability to compete with Parisian esthetic (Luongo 2004, ‘What’s New, Buenos Aires?’). Moreover, also by citing its links to European culture, Nguyen’s (2007) Journal entry on the *NYT* yields a Buenos Aires ‘[where] the buildings lining the corridors are a mixture of old-world Spanish and Italian architecture with a little bit of New Jersey sprinkled here and there’. Bryan Van Gorder (2014) also on *Out Traveler* connects the turn of the millennium to its next decade. He showcases the journey of a multinational gay and lesbian group of four to the northwestern states of Jujuy and Salta prior to the group’s failed attempt to participate in Buenos Aires’s Pride Parade [‘*La Marcha*’]. The homonormative narrative continues its expansion, rehabilitating the northwest and its ecological beauty for lesbian and gay consumption. Foreign travelers driven by the familiar cloud of gay-businesses across Argentinean territory confirms the reach of normalizing queer behavior.

In sum, if within the reflexivity of the *NYT*, *The Advocate*, and *Out Magazine*, Buenos Aires is defined by its ability to anchor global gayness in European sophistication, Jujuy and Salta are attached in contrast to indigeneity, highlighting their ‘primitive’ biodiversity. The recent inclusion of this sanctuary in lesbian and gay travelogues validates the homonational management expressed through both the commodification of indigeneity in the northwest and the cleansing of race in the metropolitan gayscape. Indeed, normalizing public transcripts map cartographies for differences of race and sexuality.

The travesti population whose history I examine hails precisely from this geopolitical landscape. Their displacement into metropolitan sex-work circuits like Buenos Aires unveils a map regulating both sexuality and racialization. This map retrofits long-standing eugenicist strategies of *criollaje* or racial mixing.⁹ This time around *global gay unity* opens its arms to first-world Euro-American *civilization*. Homonational reflexivity at a global scale pulls the Euro-American element in Argentina’s *crisol de razas* to cleanse the country’s domestic history, resembling the old but always current assertion that the country has de-hispanicized and that Europeanization has been successful under the dressing of the melting-pot. Either the northwest remains the flagging post of racial otherness or it is *integrated* by homonormative consumption. As the sexual politics described next demonstrates, eugenic texts are the backbone of this cartography.

Melting race in the eugenic pot

Eugenic tropes date back to nation-state building in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Its narrative of positivist development within Latin America gave the indigenous populations a particular treatment. In Argentina, they were first covered with the costume of *criollo* subjectivity only to be later redressed as native (Guano 2003; Salessi 1995; Schneider 2004). Modernization advocates considered that the mixing of Spanish, Indio, and Zambo racial strains would result in a homogeneous pack whose only viable future was to be uplifted by European civilization (Bunge 1932; Sarmiento 2004).¹¹ Since then, the whitening effect expected from melting-pot rules has become state racial politics.

The colonial distinction between civilized humans (Europeans) and childlike quasi-humans (the colonized) laid down the foundation for the *modernizing* neutralization of racial difference through mixing and the disciplining of the national citizen through unity in *criollaje* (Wagley 1965). Toward the end of the nineteenth century, state technocrats

understood the uneasy position of Argentine national identity within Darwinian global dynamics (McClintock 1995). With the hegemony of Hispanic Europe fading out, de-hispanization became a requisite of the Enlightenment and its eugenicist civilizing project (Quijano 2000; Sarmiento 2004).

Positivist racial anxieties transferred into Argentinean technocracy in the face of migratory waves received between 1884 and 1915. In turn, the state classified sexual-Others with the purpose of both civilizing the insides of the nation and cleansing its territory of ethno/racialized-Others. Jorge Salessi's (1995) work examines this milestone period, uncovering the discursive production of the Argentinean national along the emergence of positivist medico-legal categories such as *uranist*, *pederast*, *invert*, and *third-sex*. Its objective was to safeguard hygiene by disseminating homosexual panic and modeling behavior after the values of the patrician family which included heterosexist reproduction, an ethics of capitalist relations, and an economy of colonial obedience toward *latifundia*-based powers.

Sexual panic figures sprouted during this time, providing a route of assimilation for some of the *alien* population (Bergero 2008, 341–343).¹² They warned against the dangerous 'fluids' of African, indigenous, and mestizo populations for being typically considered an aberration by the *criollo* bourgeoisie. The *lunfardo* underworld of *milongas* was deemed the natural environment for this threatening and unruly ethos of tango: petit-thief schemes, cabarets, brothels, single entrepreneurial women, and flamboyant pimps.¹³ Not unlike the cleansing of Buenos Aires's gayscape today, the nation declared the *lunfardo* world incompetent for eugenicist projects.

The cartographic gap: between racial and sexual others

In spite of the global obsession with racialized sexuality, the GLB international media do not mention travestis who populate *la zona roja* [the red/vice zone] located in the Palermo district of Buenos Aires.¹⁴ Media reports downplay their visibility even when travestis have actually fought to take back the street from the hands of decency-oriented projects.¹⁵

This interlocking of race and sexuality creates a cartographic gap, a 'black hole' in the representation of space (Hammonds 1994) wherein the discursive fields of racialization and gayness appear as separate and yet bound by the obliterated reflexivity of travestis. This mainstream tendency to avoid the racializing histories of sexuality is also found among scholarly efforts.¹⁶ Women of color feminisms and queer of color theory in the USA (Anzaldúa 1987; Crenshaw 1991; Johnson and Henderson 2005; Lorde 1984; Lugones [1994] 2003; Muñoz 1999) and more recently multicultural feminisms in Latin America (Carneiro 2005; Espinosa Miñoso 2009) have advanced the project of *intersectional* work. Most importantly, they lead us to rethink gender, sexuality, and embodiment decolonially (Lugones 2007), questioning the ways in which historical contingences may be overlooked when intersectional research takes for granted the hegemonic transcript of gender, racial, and class identities. They work with intersectionality not as the mere addition of axes of power to represent the 'ethnographic subject' of research (Smith 2011), in this case travestis, but rather as the contingent refraction of social ties among and through these axes (see also Silva and Ornat 2014).

The analysis of travesti reflexivity performs this type of intersectional work. It reveals that the cartographic gap described thus far may be associated with three interrelated conditions that shape travesti social formation: their *framing of travesti identity* which underscores a multiplicity of markers in contrast to mainstream approaches that privilege sexuality as stand-alone kind; *not fitting into neoliberal and homonational projects* of

conflict regulation; and *their racial background and geographical origin* which by the year 2000 was said to be represented, up to a whopping 65%, by self-identified or perceived indigenous folks or by those hailing from states with the largest racialized population.¹⁷ Each condition deserves a detailed review to illustrate the ways in which the cartographic gap is countered by travesti spatiality.

An intersectional framing of travesti identity

Reflexivity about their own condition allows travestis to build upon a sense of collective agency. This process is conflictive and negotiated within histories of displacement and sex-work. It also documents travestis' visibility post-dictatorship and their resilience in finding community against a background of transphobia and competition as sex-workers. Their reflexivity interweaves multiple identifications and positionings in which class and gender gain great salience. Due to the legacy of melting-pot politics, racialization and ethnicity are signified unevenly by what cannot be named in those terms (Occhipinti 2003, 171). For its contested nature, what I call travesti reflexivity is one among many other weaves of collective reexamination that is socially stretched out through practice and behavior. Even when I have been part of dialogs with many travestis – activists, acquaintances, and friends – my interpretations ensue from the plurality of their views, marked predominantly by marginalization, and from recognizing the epistemic privilege that they claim as marginal to homonormative inclusion. While what follows only offers an initial account of travesti reflexivity, it takes an unprecedented turn by engaging the mutual embeddedness, the inseparable articulation, of racialization and sexuality at this locale.

Lohana Berkins partakes in this collective reflexivity with a broad understanding of intersectionality. A native of the Argentinean northwest, she is a well-known activist and 2003 Felipa de Souza Awardee. In *La Gesta del Nombre Propio* (2006), she presents research conducted by transgender and travesti organizations in the state of Buenos Aires. The study focused on the disenfranchisement faced by the population they serve. Berkins claims an epistemic place of collective marginality by stating that 'knowledge is constructed based on dialogs among people who are situated quite differently across the social fabric and the richness of this collective production comes from the contributions of different perspectives about social relations and their consequences' (7). In one of our conversations, Lohana reminds us that *identidad travesti* is a space to be carved with other marginalized minorities, delivering a pivotal critique of the interlocking spatiality described so far:

[...] in the construction of self-affirmation sometimes what gets lost is something that is very important to me; that is, the *transversalidad* [transversality]¹⁸ of what I am. Today, to tell you that I can stand in front of people and say 'I am travesti' and well, maybe, at best, they will clap for me. Because being a travesti is no longer shocking to anyone. You know? Now, if I take that, if I begin to talk about the transversality of being travesti. Then, travestis, we are poor. [...] We don't have access to education, [...] healthcare, [or] housing, [or] dignified work; we are murdered. What I am saying, I take that transversality and I put it out for discussion, for contestation, with picketers. [...] Or also, I stand by human rights activists, with the human rights flag in the name of thirty thousand of the disappeared [in the last dictatorship, 1976-1983] among them many lesbians, *maricones*, and travestis. You get what I'm saying? [*translation is mine*]. (Interview, Buenos Aires, 28 May 2008)

Berkins puts forth a fierce critique of homonationalism and its pull toward the privatization of non-normative embodiment. In her wisdom, the politics of eroticism does not lie with unsettling normative sexual-object choice. Instead, it involves traversing the social fabric

by summoning a critical consciousness that ‘transversality’ deploys. Being travesti, as she puts it, performs an offstage and complex cultural labor against the insulating politics of GLBT rights.¹⁹ Coming out is not the only site of public dispute for Berkins since she is not after the applause given to sexual identity within the confessional standards governing discourse on modern sexuality (Decena 2011). Intersectionality for Berkins, and many travestis participating in this reflexivity, is more than the intermeshing of multiple axes of power as they mold social formation [‘... poor... we don’t have access to education... healthcare...’]. To intersect also means to traverse the public and private distinction, exposing its regulatory fiction while enabling different agents of social struggles (human right activists, picketers, etc.) to recognize their mutual implication across histories of dissidence.²⁰

Unfriendly to neoliberal and homonational integration

Not fitting into patterns of *gay commodification* turns travestis into a troubling element for neoliberal integration. They denounce that privatization of state policy has pushed them to the underground labor market.²¹ Their appropriation of the public escapes for-profit sanitization: they usually take care of business in the street, in places where anyone can find them either walking or driving a car, and they live in overcrowded run-down motel rooms or abandoned houses which they have taken over. They unsettle linkages among decency, residential neighborhoods, and the real estate industry. Berkins, for instance, has been vocal against the middle-class aspirations of gay rights advocacy, underscoring the ascendance of worldwide homonormativity and its sanitizing of the public domain.²²

In spite of the same-sex marriage and gender identity bills passed in 2010 and 2012 respectively, travesti reflexivity still decries police harassment and criminalization under the city code (art. 81).²³ Leticia Sabsay (2011) reviews the debate that redefined the boundaries of public decency in the City of Buenos Aires in the late 90s. Through a supposedly open debate to modify its Code of Urban Public Behavior, the city legalized and shortly after recriminalized sex-work mostly linked with the presence of travestis in Palermo neighborhood. Sabsay’s (2011) study argues that travestis like many of the sex-workers that I interviewed find their life-stories signified by the public/private divide. Her analysis demonstrates that figures of ‘scandal’ used to mainstream support for the prohibitionist view – banning street sex-work – are actual ontologizing mechanisms conflating the visibility of sex-work with the presence of travestis in the street. I extend her argument to interpret the homonormative projects foregrounding whitening tolerance for the city’s gayscape since they sediment a frontier between queer subjects fitting of decency vis-à-vis travestis-qua-travestis rather than as partakers of *indecent* behavior.

Travesti reflexivity reformulates this frontier, showcasing ‘transversal’ journeys wherein *indecent deviants* model collective agency away from usual avenues of consciousness raising – from factory to union, from the domestic to the public sphere. In so doing, they denounce eugenicist regulations over urban space. Not only do travestis fight for their solicitation turf, but they also mobilize against the privatization of the streets. The threshold of decency expected in public discourse is challenged when Berkins prompts the unemployed to take to the streets in coalition with other subversive elements of the city. Theirs is a transgression of the public/private fiction, instantiating spatial competence against neoliberal integration. Due to long-standing fears of abuse, travestis usually go out together even during the day. Their street-walking stretches overnight and most do not go to sleep until six or eight in the morning. Maneuvering cross-generational networks as they try to find a place to live, they develop housing strategies that do not

follow an individualizing model. These practices weave our understanding of travesti heterogeneity by stressing their competence within and outside the ontologizing frontier that Sabsay (2011) describes.

Racialization and travesti corporeality

In her personal presentation, Berkins also performs a ‘brothel-like’ [*prostibular*] stylization of the self (Fernandez 2004). This domain of travesti esthetic in the sex-trade expresses material culture at its most intimate scale, corporeality, and it points to the continuity of an archive of dissident racialized ways. It actualizes an imaginary of hypersexualization among the lower and racialized classes. Describing the eugenicist foundation of Argentina’s civilizing project, we mentioned the casting of the *lunfardo* world as polluting underground. Not unlike gauchos from the interior arriving in the city at the end of the nineteenth century, travestis from the northwest settle in Palermo’s *zona roja*. The Afro, Indigenous, and criollo roots of *milongas*, *bordellos*, and cabarets, reflect back on travesti esthetic, maintaining an oppositional consciousness critical of bourgeois femininity. Silicone-injected buttocks, padded hips, fishnet stockings, and 6-inch stilettos are but a few of the markers fashioning the esthetic of ‘*traviesa*’ and ‘*minón*.’ Both slang words invoke the embodiment that travestis aspire to shape and are pushed to achieve.

The term ‘*minón*’ in Spanish represents the superlative of the *lunfardo* word *mina* which, over a century after its inception, still refers to the ambiguity of femininity among the lower class in Argentina. *Tanguerías* at the turn of the century valued working class women who were known as prostitutes, cabaret performers, and entrepreneurs (Pellarolo *Queering Tango*). Their counterparts, *compadres* and *malevos*, supported the marginality of these women and their undoing of docility. In a world where income did not always derive from wages, women who entered the *low life* secured resources through their talents as waitresses, entertainers, and tricksters. This amount of relative autonomy slipped into *lunfardo* lexicon by way of *mina* [precious metal mine], giving birth to a new subjective form. Pellarolo collects tango lyrics recording tales of women moving from self-abnegation in rural areas to sexual-autonomy in the outskirts of Buenos Aires. To fuel an affair with one of them might have offered *compadres* an opportunity to strike ‘gold’ [minas]. These gender and racial codes are meshed into the brothel-like esthetic that contemporary slang transfers into the noun *traviesa* [naughty] to name travesti identity. This neologism plays on the shared sound ‘trav’ at the beginning of both words.

In the study of transgender prostitutes that Don Kulick (1998) pursued in Salvador do Bahia, the buttocks or *bunda* is the major marker of bodily transformation. Kulick is adamant about the salience of ‘fleshy thighs, expansive hips, and a prominent, teardrop-shaped *bunda*’ (1998, 70) as landmarks of feminine beauty within Brazilian culture. What is strikingly missing from his analysis is a complex engagement with the colonial imaginary that pervades cultures rooted in the Atlantic passage such as Brazil’s (Silva and Ornat 2014, Wekker 2006).²⁴ In Argentina, this imaginary is today’s currency for mainstream culture. The leading newspaper nation-wide, *Clarín*, continues this colonial legacy with Caloi’s (2013) comic vignette *Clemente*. Its main character represents the patriarchal voice of *criollo* popular wisdom in the face of a changing global city.

Clemente safeguards middle-class femininity by placing his infatuation in a perverse cross-racial fantasy. *La Mulatona* has been his pornographic fantasy for almost three decades. As her name suggests, she is an Afro-descendent, from the superlative of *mulata* or hybrid offspring resulting from the crossing of white Europeans and African slaves. She is depicted with exuberant glossy lips, abundant curves, and what it looks like *kinky* hair in

an ‘m’ shape. The vignette underscores Clemente’s counterpart by visually marking the loose motion of her hips and breasts.

Mulatona and travestis share this place of racialized hypersexual esthetic in popular culture. The semantic field of *blackness* and its lust is exemplified with the use of the noun *quilombo*. Borrowed from Portuguese, it originally referred to autonomous communities of run-away slaves (Anderson 1996). The slang *quilombo* in several Latin American countries currently designates the place where prostitution thrives. The ongoing harassment that travestis face in the hands of neighborhood associations such as *Defendamos Buenos Aires* deploys the semantic of *quilombo* to ontologize, in Sabsay’s (2011) terms, travesti embodiment as threatening. Yet, the notorious flow of clients in Palermo speaks of travestis as the present-day *minón* which actualizes the anarchic and racialized sexualities of yesteryears.

Without reducing travesti history to the perils of *minas* from the turn of the century, the affinity between their migration patterns should not go unnoticed. From the interior of Argentina to the margins of Buenos Aires, exile brings about a social metamorphosis for both. If travestis reclaim not only the vernacular – *traviesa* – but also the bodily markers of hypersexuality in the Argentinean colonial memory, they do so to the extent that expansive hips and ‘teardrop-shaped’ buttocks function simultaneously as the materiality of racial otherness and of oppositional consciousness. Travestis inhabit their scandalous embodiment and yet embrace its depth to criticize the sanctity of *criollo* femininity.

Prior to her transitioning while she was still living in our native Jujuy, Ana Paula and I became friends. Against Argentinean standards that used to mark *him* as ‘moreno’ [brown], she describes the process of ‘hacerse [becoming] travesti’ by underscoring the imprint of racialization on embodiment: ‘un negrito como yo, quién me iba a querer?’ [a little *nigger* like me, who was going to want me?]. Such statement signifies the rejection that she once faced as object of same-sex desire [‘negrito’ is gendered *masculine* in Spanish]. Before becoming travesti in her early 20s, racialization made *him* (Ana Paula) undeserving of homonormative appreciation toward gay esthetic. Racialization pushed her to the edge of decency while ontologizing her hypersexuality by way of becoming travesti. Not without contradictions, Ana Paula seized her transitioning into brothel-like esthetic to claim erotic agency within hypersexualizing racism.²⁵

Sideways relationality

Racialized travestis cultivate oppositional spatial practices by defying their erasure within the cartography *for* difference. They draw from esthetic, political, and cultural outsidersness and counter localized injunctions of globally interconnected homonationalisms. Erasure from mainstream heteronationalism and homonormative counterpublics produces a border wherein they rework the limit between public and hidden transcripts by engaging in *transversalidad* as method of spatial production. They illustrate the link between being cognizant of the complexity of travesti formation and asserting spatial autonomy.

Travestis take to the street and seek connections with marginal ‘*okupas*’ [trespassers], street-vendors, organized prostitutes, and picketers. They may petition the state under mechanisms of neoliberal regulation of social conflicts, such as their successful campaign to pass the 2012 Gender Identity bill, but their sexual-minority status in front of the state is only one among other sites for their reflexivity. If counterpublicity is defined by demonstrating competence to address dominant reflexivity (Fraser 1997; Muñoz 1999; Warner 2005), travesti transversality as exemplified by Berkins points sideways and

disengages not only from the dominant public – its privatization of non-normative desire – but also homonormative counterpublics.

In Henri Lefebvre's triad, spatial practice describes the competence that social subjects develop to navigate 'particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation' (33). In my study of travestis' transversality, they magnify *offstage* competence while creating alternatives to homonormative space. They underscore that their embodiment, experience, and space 'simultaneously (re)create one another' (Nash 2010). Travestis like Lohana and Ana Paula incite oppositional reflexivity about Palermo's contradictions. In their journey from the northwest to Buenos Aires, they assert a degree of cognizant agency that does not always translate into political organizing. They acquire, nevertheless, a level of oppositional, sideways, competence to disengage from homonormative gayscapes.

In Berkins's (2008) reflection on self-affirmation, transversality labors at the outer edge of mainstream and counterpublic intelligibility. As she puts it, she turns sideways to face picketers and human right activists. Their encounter is both an undoing of what is supposed to remain private and an acknowledging of intimate proximity among subjects who have been pressed, if only momentarily, to the brink of non-homonationalist intelligibility. She decries the lack of engagement with critical sexual politics displayed by picketers and human right activists. Instead of addressing the mainstream to mediate meaning among subaltern subjects, Berkins underscores the salience of seeing *travesti* in the histories of resistance emerging from human rights and class struggles ['I stand by ... with the human rights flag ...']. She performs what she calls *transversalidad* by inspiring those walking side by side with her ['I put it out for discussion, for contestation'] to affirm affective interdependence. It is not a rhetorical device but rather a praxis of offstage mobilities.

In Ana Paula's remarks about the emotional damage that racism performs ['a little *nigger* like me, who was going to want me?'], I find yet another echo of this transversal direction in reflexivity and spatialization. She sees herself caught between the place of gayness – in which her brown *masculinity* fails to be homonationally included – and the site of *travesti* embodiment – wherein racialization endows her with hypersexualization. Ana Paula acknowledges the intersecting histories cutting across her being and embodiment and, nevertheless, pushes herself over into the terrain of sometimes painful but sustaining possibilities.

Sideways relationality makes connections among travestis redefining space and embodiment in transversal fashion. It magnifies the potential but also the limits of homonormative counterpublicity.²⁶ If over a century ago, racialized *lunfardos* worked to mobilize meaning under subversive encodings, to engage in sideways reflexivity today taps into that esoteric archive of non-normative wisdom among the racialized. The inhabitation of the street, the sense of autonomy earned by participating in the sex-trade, the tight-knit network of close quarters, they all invoke the marginal subjectivities that Buenos Aires expunged from the eugenicist civilizing project. Their marginal sideways subjectivities pollute mainstream and counterpublics by inciting dissident and decolonizing rhythms.

Sideways reflexivity create unprecedented ground for oppositional practices including but not limited to street-walking, cruising, squatting, trespassing, and collective hang-outs. Travesti transversality interweaves doing, pause, reflexivity, subterfuge, masking, and other operations that infuse the social with esoteric potential. It produces what I call *sideways relationality*. This notion is meant to emphasize the discontinuous nearness among social agents as they produce decolonial spatial textures. It affirms that, at the

intersection of racialization and sexuality, lies a corrective to the normalization of both queer motivations and theorizing. Even when this notion begs a more thorough theorization, at this juncture it provides much needed attention to the embodied technologies of spatial reconfiguration, denormalization, and decolonization.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and Lynda Johnston for their thoughtful suggestions. I am also indebted, for their feedback, to María Lugones, Joshua Price, Bill Haver, the members of the Center for Philosophy, Interpretation, and Culture at Binghamton University, and to Laura Elisa Pérez under whose mentorship I completed most of this essay as a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of California, Berkeley. This thinking owes much to networks of travestis, *maricas*, and *jotas/os* whose wisdom and practice sustain radical space-making.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. LGTB is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Travesti, Transgender, Transsexual, and Bisexual. In Latin America, some community organizations add the category Intersex or Queer to this arch. Shifting acronyms (GLT, G&L, etc.) reflect tensions within this constituency. Travesti is the autonym or endonym used by travestis (Sívori 2005). I translated all original statements from Spanish into English trying to respect class and regional variations.
2. Fieldwork was carried out in two major sites for network-building: the local 'gay' bar in San Salvador de Jujuy and the motel Gondolín located in Buenos Aires's Palermo neighborhood. Travestis run the latter as cooperative. I participated in social gatherings with both populations, attending public protests and hanging out with them. In total, 30 of them participated in my research interviews: six travestis ranging 19- to 45-year olds, six members of a travesti network who do not identify as travestis, and 12 representatives of LGBTQ organizations from Argentina and Bolivia.
3. Nicolas Shumway (1991, 134 and 135, 164 and 165) examines this boundary within the discourses of Argentina's intelligentsia in the second half of the nineteenth century. The pampas were considered the reservoir of undisciplined gauchos, their unlabored lands, and ignorance. They were pitted against the man from the interior [indigenous from the mountains] and its 'primitive [barbarie]' condition.
4. For the scholarship centered on queer spatiality in the USA, see Bailey and Shabazz (2014), D'Emilio (1992), Halberstam (2005), Herring (2010), and Mumford (1997). In what concerns the Latin and Latina/o Americas, the scholarship is scarce. Neither Murray (1995) nor Balderston and Guy (1997) fill that void. Perlongher (1999) and Rapisardi and Modarelli (2001) should be noted for their spatial approach. Thanks to Lynda Johnston for recommending the work of Grupo de Estudos Territoriais (GETE) in Brazil.
5. Bayardo and Lacarrieu (1998) study gentrification in the city of Buenos Aires's Palermo, La Boca, and San Telmo quarters.
6. Mariana Viera Cherro (2011, 352) concurs by stating that the presence of travestis in the media – TV shows, theatre, and magazines – does not translate into 'reflexivity about being travesti and much less about the homophobia [sic] found in Argentine society'. I think the passage should refer to 'transphobia.' She has in mind Flor de la V who in the last decade became a pop-culture darling.
7. Jujuy's indigenous population represents 10.8% of the state's total while the city of Buenos Aires's remains comparatively low at 2.2% (INDEC 2012). Kollas are the largest indigenous ethnic group in Jujuy. Roughly 50,000 of the country's Kolla population live in the northwestern states of Jujuy and Salta (Instituto Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas), sharing a broader Andean worldview with Aymara and Quechua peoples of the highlands (Occhipinti 2002).
8. The NYT ignores the rise of the Frente de Liberación Homosexual in the seventies and its ties to socialism (Perlongher 1999; Rapisardi and Modarelli 2011).

9. Guano (2003) offers a reading of contemporary racial relations in Argentina through a class lens.
10. Peaking at the turn of the nineteenth century, 'eugenics' encompasses positivist disciplines invested in explaining sexual difference as Darwinian types of racial development and deviancy.
11. The African population was disappeared from the imaginary of the nation in favor of mixtures, Zambos and Mulatos. Yellow fever decimated the Black population of Buenos Aires in the early 1870s (Salessi 1995, 80 and 81).
12. Sexual panic points to narratives of fear and anxiety delineating boundaries between good and evil as they relate to a sexual community of certain sexual practice(s) (Patton 2005; Rubin 2002).
13. *Lunfardo* is a slang developed by *criminals* in the late nineteenth century. It was created to remain unintelligible before policemen and prison-guards, combining the Italian dialect 'Lombardo,' brought to the port of Buenos Aires by immigrants, with elements from Quechua and African languages and Gaucho speech.
14. Also known as Comuna 14, Palermo was founded in the late sixteenth century but its famous green areas [*los bosques*] were developed after 1852. Being close to the port, it grew with waves of immigration from mainly Spain and Italy but also Armenia, Lebanon, and Poland. The sex district is located in *Los Bosques*.
15. Travestis have worked in coalition with street vendors and an organization of female sexual workers (AMMAR, Asociación de Mujeres Meretrices de Argentina en Acción por Nuestros Derechos).
16. As far as ethnographies are concerned, the more substantive accounts of the interweaving of racialization, indigeneity, and sexuality are Decena (*Tacit Subjects*), Stephen ('Sexualities and Genders') and Prieur (*Mema's House*). Other ethnographies lacking an understanding of the co-production of race and sexuality are Sívori (2005), Fernandez (2004), and Núñez Noriega (1999).
17. A collective of travestis together with members of the Area Queer at the University of Buenos Aires conducted workshops on civil and human rights with the travesti population in the red zone. Their surveys provide an estimate on their ethnic and geographic origins.
18. Philosopher Enrique Dussel (2006) has framed an ethics of transcultural communication under the notion of transversality. Unlike his approach focusing mainly on avant-guard intellectuals, this piece bears witness of *transversalidad* among racialized travestis who excel as intellectuals in their own right.
19. Such as the decade-long quarrel that travestis maintain against a powerful faction of the G&L movement friendly to the idea of turning the pride parade into entertainment (fieldwork notes June 2003).
20. 'Picketers' [piqueteros] refers to a collective identity within Argentina shaped in the second half of the 1990s. They protested the spike of unemployment rates under neoliberal regulations. Their strategy was to block highways for weeks at a time by setting up pickets and demanding employment programs and public services (Dinerstein 2010).
21. In the case of travestis, criminalization is attached to their labor. For a critique of neoliberalism and its sexual politics, see Duggan (2003, XX) and Sabsay (2011, 32).
22. Interviews with Lohana Berkins (ALITT), Mónica León (Hotel Gondolín), and members of the Area Queer de la Universidad de Buenos Aires. See also one of Berkins's published speeches (Fernandez, D'Uva, and Viturro 2002).
23. Section 81 of Buenos Aires's city code sanctions sexual solicitation. Based on an analysis by former city council Diana Maffia, the city filed 7470 cases for alleged violations of Section 81.
24. For another compelling critique of Kulick's findings, see 'Espaço Interdito' (Silva 2013, 148 and 149).
25. Ana Paula's life story is analyzed thoroughly in my book manuscript *Sideways Selves: Passion and Space across the Latina/o and Latin Americas*.
26. See also Carlos Decena's *Tacit Subjects* (2011) for its groundbreaking critique of westernizing gay visibility.

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ABSTRACT TRANSLATIONS

Descolonizando el espacio travesti en Buenos Aires: raza, sexualidad y relacionalidad de costado

Lxs investigadorxs del espacio comúnmente dejan de lado la historia de las poblaciones *travestis* en América Latina. La misma está mal representada no sólo debido a los puntos ciegos propios de la disciplina sino también por las narrativas globales que tienden a rehabilitar a los sujetos *desviados* dentro de los proyectos heteronormativos. Al analizar las narrativas neoliberales que desvinculan los conflictos sobre la racialización y la sexualidad en Argentina, este artículo crea espacio para descolonizar el estudio de la experiencia y la carnalidad travestis en la zona roja de Buenos Aires. Analiza una red de travestis racializadx y sus prácticas espaciales, incluyendo su migración desde el noroeste andino hacia los circuitos del trabajo sexual en Buenos Aires. Finalmente, este artículo introduce la noción de la relacionalidad de costado para dar cuenta del trabajo cultural y espacial que lxs travestis racializadx en los márgenes oposicionales de la reflexividad homonormativa.

Palabras claves: descolonialidad; travesti; homonacionalismo; homonormatividad; sexualidades Latinoamericanas

去殖民化布宜诺斯艾利斯的跨性别空间：种族、性向与侧边相对性

空间专业学者，经常忽略拉丁美洲的跨性别人口的历史。这段历史，不仅被规训的盲点给错误地再现，同时亦受到有关在同性恋常规计画中复兴酷儿主体之全球叙事的错误再现。本文分析在阿根廷中，将种族与性的冲突分离的新自由主义叙事，为布宜诺斯艾利斯的红灯区中的跨性别经验及体现之研究，打开进行去殖民的空间。本文检视种族化的跨性别者的网络，以及他们的空间实践，包含他们从安地斯西北部迁徙至布宜诺斯艾利斯的性工作圈之过程。本文最后引介“侧边相对性”之概念，用来解释将跨性别者的展演，种族化为同性恋常规反身性的反面边缘的文化及空间劳动。

关键词：去殖民性；跨性别；同性恋国族主义；同性恋常规；酷儿种族