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Trans Studies en las Américas

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Latin/x American Trans Studies

Toward a Travesti-Trans Analytic

COLE RIZKI

Travesti activist Lohana Berkins stands in the foreground, her fist raised in struggle and solidarity (fig. 1). Behind a wave of blood red fabric, a swell of protestors chant, lifting pink and blue signs high above their heads demanding justicia for Diana Sacayán. The hand-painted word compañera peeks out from the fabric's folds, curling across the collective's banner in bold, black cursive outlined in soft baby blue. Compañera—a word thick with complicity, friendship, solidarity, and struggle—manifests the crowd's affective commitments. The banner enfolds the march in a loose, sensuous weave as protestors flood the streets of Buenos Aires denouncing Diana's murder.

One sign in the upper right-hand corner stands out from the rest: painted in black, Diana Sacayán's portrait overlays the pan-indigenous *wiphala* flag's checkered pattern, framed by the words *trava sudaca originaria*. Diana's singular self-identification defies easy translation, and yet the phrase condenses many of the central concerns of "Trans Studies en las Américas": the geopolitics of *travesti* and trans representation practices, political alliances, and demands for bodily sovereignty inflected by legal forms, human rights discourses, racial formations, and indigenous territorial claims. These concerns, which exceed sexed and gendered identification, are variously contoured by the lived material precarity that often structures life possibilities in the Global South for trans and travesti subjects.

Many of this special issue's contributions speak to uneven proximities to state violence and precarity by centering intimate exchanges among social agents, tactics of care, and resistance that defy state logics. As these articles make clear, multiple forms and practices of *compañerismx* generate unexpected solidarities and energize struggles against increased state austerity measures, heightened militarization, and expanded social and economic abandonment. Lohana Berkins's and Diana Sacayán's powerful travesti politics, grounded in material reparations and intersectional coalition, mobilize friendship as one such potent and sustained political response.



Figure 1. Resistencia Trava. Travesti activist Lohana Berkins at her last pride march demands justice for travesti activist Diana Sacayán, November 2015, Buenos Aires. Photograph by travesti activist Florencia Guimaraes García.

This special issue emerged from a series of four conference panels organized by a de la maza pérez tamayo, Claudia Sofía Garriga-López, Alba Pons Rabasa, and Cole Rizki for the conference Trans Studies*: An International, Transdisciplinary Conference on Gender, Embodiment, and Sexuality held at the University of Arizona in Tucson in September 2016. The panels brought over twenty scholars from the Global South and Global North into conversation across disciplines and methods. From the energy generated at that conference, Garriga-López and I proposed a special issue of TSQ and sought out senior scholars Juana María Rodríguez and Denilson Lopes to help bring this project to fruition. "Trans Studies en las Américas" received seventy-nine submissions written in English, Spanish, or Portuguese, a record number for the journal. Submissions arrived from countries across the hemisphere and addressed a broad range of topics in contemporary cultural production, public policy, education, and religion, through disciplines including anthropology, visual culture studies, literary criticism, performance studies, and sociology. The wide-ranging topical coverage, innovative methodological contributions, and geopolitical distribution of the seventy-nine submissions evince the pressing need for publication opportunities that feature Latin/x American and Caribbean studies scholarship—most especially by scholars situated in the Global South.

In this issue, we use the term Latin/x America to mark both Latinx and Latin American contributions and to insist on the entanglements of "US" and "Latin America" as geopolitical categories, underscoring their inherent instabilities. Indeed, many of our authors' institutional locations and geographic movements reflect such incoherence. Some of our authors are currently located in the United States yet were born or grew up in Latin America and are embedded within circular migration patterns or diasporic dispersals that further unsettle area and identity configurations. These complex, often unpredictable, and at times forced border crossings similarly trouble the fixity of geopolitical categories such as "Global North" and "Global South." Neither can be collapsed along topographic lines, and both should be understood as shifting and imbricated geopolitical formations that speak to the many circuits through which the majority of our authors move (or cannot). We simultaneously recognize the material and academic privilege that institutional location in the Global North affords even as our contributors' irreducible "translocations" call for nuanced readings of geopolitics and local class formations (Alvarez et al. 2014).

Throughout the editorial process, a number of issues symptomatic of trans studies' institutional precarity emerged. Academics situated in Latin America, for example, do not currently have access to trans studies faculty or research positions within university settings. Scholarship produced from the Global South on trans and travesti embodiment, subjectivity, cultural production, or activisms has largely been produced by nontrans academics from both the Global North and Global South—a condition that trans and intersex activists such as Mauro Cabral have vocally critiqued. In the north, trans studies positions are only recently starting to emerge. Rarely do these positions emphasize the Global South, and they remain vulnerable to institutional proclivities within an increasingly volatile neoliberal landscape. Scholars migrating to the north to access these increased opportunities are confronted with new challenges, including shifting racial hierarchies, anti-immigrant sentiment, and discrimination based on accent, and are obligated to produce scholarship in English. Academics across the hemisphere and elsewhere are impacted by the global demands of the academic market and its valuation of English-language publication.

Discrimination—both institutional and otherwise—has left many trans and non-binary-identified people outside of higher education and formal education more broadly, particularly in the Global South (Andrade 2012; Berkins 2005, 2015; Martínez and Vidal-Ortiz 2018). These conditions of discrimination and exclusion for trans, travesti, and non-binary-identified scholars, compounded by issues of race, immigration, and language, generate significant barriers to both institutional access and publication opportunities (see Cabral in Boellstorff et al. 2014: 423–24). The paucity of trans-identifying Latinx trans studies scholars and

the overburdened conditions under which they labor create cumulative layered effects that impact submissions, the availability of peer reviewers, and our own editorial board composition. Our special issue, dominated by graduate students and junior faculty, thus underscores the tenacity of scholars working in a field that remains underresourced and undervalued throughout the hemisphere. Despite these challenges, "Trans Studies en las Américas" offers an exceptional and timely collection of Latin American and Latinx trans and travesti theoretical, (auto) ethnographic, political, and artistic production that speaks to the field's vibrancy.

Throughout *las Américas*, trans studies take multiple forms: scholarly work on identitarian and anti-identitarian analytics, interventions into state practices, aesthetic eruptions of creative energies, and strategic activist mobilizations. These modes of inquiry and critical approaches are regionally inflected by the flows of people, ideas, technologies, and resources that shape contemporary trans studies, opening space to explore the productive contradictions and expansive possibilities within this body of work. "Trans Studies en las Américas" highlights the analytic tensions that occur in highly localized sites. Such a move underscores the inherent problems with framing Latin America as a singular geopolitical formation, pointing instead to the ways in which embodied political practices unfold within geographic and temporal particularities. Once situated side by side, however, these articles work to curate critical conversations among trans studies scholars exploring how shifts in cultural epistemologies, aesthetics, geographies, and languages enliven regional theorizations of politics, subjectivity, and embodiment.

"Trans Studies en las Américas" brings existing Latin/x American subjectivities, activist strategies, and theories such as travesti into conversation with US-oriented trans studies to ask what sorts of political coalitions and embodied forms of resistance might be possible. While in English, *transgender* often needs to be modified in order to respond to local hierarchies of race, class, ability, and other forms of difference, *travesti* underscores instead the impossibility of such disarticulation in the first place. Nonetheless, *travesti* is not meant as a corrective to trans, and our authors do not expand the notion of trans to include *travesti*. Instead, many of the essays in this issue center *travesti* as an identification, a critical analytic, and an embodied mode of politics.

"Travesti," writes Malú Machuca Rose in their contribution to this issue, "is the refusal to be trans, the refusal to be woman, the refusal to be intelligible." Travesti theory and identification is a Latin/x American body of work and a body politics with an extensive transregional history (Campuzano 2008; Campuzano et al. 2013; Berkins 2003; Rodríguez 2015; Wayar 2018). The work of this issue's authors, including Machuca Rose, Dora Silva Santana, and Martín De Mauro

Rucovsky, demonstrates how travesti identification operates as a politics, a critical mode, and an epistemology. To quote Machuca Rose:

Travesti is classed and raced: it means you do not present femininely all of the time because you cannot afford to. It means the use of body technologies to transform one's body does not come from a doctor's office but from resourcefulness in the face of *precarización*, the act by which the matrix of domination makes our bodies and our lives precarious. ¿Más clarito? It means you get creative, you use your pens for eyeliner, get your hormones and silicones from your friends underground, or use *tinta* instead of *testosterona* to transform your body.

As a politics of refusal, travesti disavows coherence and is an always already racialized and classed geopolitical identification that gestures toward the inseparability of indigeneity, blackness, material precarity, sex work, HIV status, and uneven relationships to diverse state formations (Guimaraes García 2017). To claim travesti identity is to embrace a form of opacity and fugitivity that resists necropolitical systems that pointedly rely on capture (see Santana's contribution to this issue). Indeed, *travesti*, writes Santana, is "a negation of an imposed dominant expectation of womanhood that centers on people who are cisgender, heteronormative, able-bodied, elitist, and white." Travesti identification thus subverts both normative expectations of femininity and trans politics structured around assimilation and respectability. Claiming "travesti," as our authors make clear, is a way of inhabiting these complex histories of survival and resistance.

Travesti is certainly not a universal identification and some of the articles in this issue—those by Sayak Valencia and Cynthia Citlallin Delgado Huitrón, for example—do not engage the term. Neither is the term *travesti* equally distributed across the southern hemisphere; trans and travesti identifications are constantly shifting and should not be understood as mutually exclusive. The tensions between trans and travesti as identificatory categories are often untranslatable, leading us to ask what sorts of limitations and possibilities are embedded within the terms' distinctions and critical affinities. If trans men, for example, do not identify as travesti—at the time of writing, few would claim this term—what sorts of recourse do trans men have to localized identification if not *trans*? How can we account for the complex negotiations and appropriations that trans men enact in and through language in order to claim trans identification? The use of both *trans* and *travesti* throughout this introduction, and this special issue more broadly, is meant to underscore rather than settle these questions.

A turn to trans studies en las Américas further requires situated attention to experiences of state violence, including contemporary dictatorship and genocide, which necessitate theories that can account for the vulnerability of subjects and the urgency of public address. One way that existing trans studies scholarship has responded to such demands to theorize transnational experiences of state violence is through an expanded articulation of necropolitics. Achille Mbembe's foundational work "Necropolitics" (2003) complicates and reshapes Michel Foucault's articulation of biopower to theorize racialized zones of death. For Mbembe, biopower remains "insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" (39). Necropower and necropolitics instead signal how power generates "forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (39–40). Indeed, "politics," reminds Mbembe, is "the work of death" (16).

Engaging Mbembe's formulation of the necropolitical, C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn's foundational claims in "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife" (2013) offer vital critiques both for and of trans studies. These authors critically examine how activisms simultaneously devalue trans-of-color life while mobilizing trans-ofcolor death to vitalize homonormative and trans-normative activist projects, asking, "How do the biopolitics and necropolitics of trans death and trans vitality play out on the privileged stages of North America and Europe?" (67). Shifting the geopolitics of Snorton and Haritaworn's argument, this special issue moves the primary site of necropolitical inquiry from the United States and Europe to Latin America. In consequence, the circulation of travesti and trans deaths and, indeed, the very concept of an "afterlife" (66) hold alternate valence given shifts in state formation and contemporary experiences of genocide and dictatorship. In the context of truth commissions like CONADEP in Argentina and resulting publications like Nunca más or the Valech and Rettig reports in Chile that respond to genocide, logics of enumeration and descriptions of death and torture form an integral part in both these processes' and documents' reparative premises, claims to veracity, and epistemological authority even as these reports disregard experiences of trans and travesti death during dictatorship.¹

In this vein, and making an important intervention into studies of state-sponsored terror, in their contribution to this issue Hillary Hiner and Juan Carlos Garrido describe ethnographic interviews they conducted with trans and travesti informants throughout Chile whose testimonies were excluded from official reports of state violence during dictatorship. Through oral histories, these trans and travesti subjects spoke of experiencing extreme forms of torture and mutilation. Even as we recognize the scholarly necessity of explicitly describing torture and violence as a corrective to archival erasure in dominant historical accounts, we remain cautious about the cumulative effects of discursively reproducing that harm. Several questions arose for us as editors: When is the scholarly reproduction of violence necessary, and when might that reproduction become another

instantiation of harm? How might the answer to this question shift in relation to history, geopolitical location, readerly expectations, or subject position? And how are these issues complicated by the transnational circuits of exchange through which representations of violence are mediated? As work by our contributors suggests, the "archive of violence and anti-violence discourse" shifts radically across sites, necessitating sustained and increasingly nuanced discursive analyses that can account for divergent violence and antiviolence discourses in relation to shifting state and racial formations (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013: 67).

This issue further asks how trans death is mourned and remembered by travestis and trans women situated in the Global South. The articles by Valencia, Delgado Huitrón, and Hiner and Garrido all respond to this latter question, opening up important lines of inquiry that underscore social and political agency, as well as political practices that generate alternative forms of mourning and justice where none has been served. This special issue thus provides a supplement to existing necropolitical theorizations by focusing on trans agency and resistance in Latin/x America to technologies of value extraction and toxic political projects that feed off of trans death in the Global South to mobilize trans- and homonormative activist and scholarly agendas.

In response to varying necropolitical conditions, many of the contributors to "Trans Studies en las Américas" explore embodied responses to state violence. These authors develop an ethics of care that teases out the "legacies of already everyday ongoing practices of caring for one another" to ask, "What do you do as a living being? What do you do to heal?" (Santana). Both Delgado Huitrón and Valencia take up this question in relation to the Mexican state. Delgado Huitrón's piece dialogues with the ongoing performance project Proyecto 10Bis by Mexican trans-feminist performance artist and activist Lia García (La Novia Sirena). Delgado Huitrón refigures the Spanish-language verb trastocar—to disrupt, upset, or perturb—as transtocar, literally "transtouch," to ask how Lia's hypertender, translative, and relational touch contests Mexican state hyperviolence. Delgado Huitrón turns to the haptic as tactic to explore how Lia's performance practice "enacts the potentiality of trans-, particularly as a labor of care: as a tender caress." In contrast, Valencia elaborates a "postmortem/transmortem politics" as a critical mode of bodily manifestation after death. Such an intervention politicizes the corpse by "using the presentation of the dead body to dignify it and avoid its erasure." As an example, Valencia's article centers an unlikely response to trans sex worker Paola Sánchez Romero's assassination. En route to the cemetery with Paola's body, her compañeras instead drive her coffin to the corner where she was assassinated, staging an impromptu open casket protest. Such a demand for justice inverts (trans)feminicide's dominant visual logics where the devastated, mutilated (trans) femme body is simultaneously spectacularized and banalized through mediatic reproduction. In a geopolitical context where, as Valencia writes, "every four hours a girl, a young or adult woman, is killed," postmortem/transmortem politics responds to "Mexican social anesthesia around (trans)feminicide," denouncing Mexican state impunity.

Santana's article addresses the critique of necropolitics quite differently, focusing on dynamic forms of trans and travesti living and surviving. In the process, her work provides a compelling counterpoint to Valencia's, cautioning that, "despite the fact that it is fundamental to honor the dead by demanding justice, there is a risk that trans women, especially black trans women, are discussed only as a corpse" where "the deaths of trans and black people mobilize more action than our living, our *vivência*." Santana responds by elaborating *mais viva* (being more alive or more alert) as a form of "embodied knowledge" forged within "the imbrications between experiences of violence and the ways we find joy," to consider how travesti, transsexual, and trans women of color generate forms of everyday intimacy to resist death.

Shifting attention to the Southern Cone, Hiner and Garrido draw on oral histories and ethnographic interviews the authors conducted with trans, travesti, and transsexual women throughout Chile to examine how these subjects experienced Chilean state terrorism during Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship (1973–90). Mobilizing trans, travesti, and transsexual women's *testimonios*, the authors expand and reimagine what has remained a largely cissexist and heteronormative testimonial archive to include trans and travesti voices. Martín De Mauro Rucovsky's article similarly engages a pivotal moment in Southern Cone history, crafting a genealogy of Argentina's Ley de Identidad de Género (2012), or Gender Identity Law. De Mauro Rucovsky analyzes the trenchant travesti critique that the law reproduced binary logics by erasing the possibility of the legal category "T" for trans- and travesti-identifying subjects. Engaging in close readings of the law's articles, the author argues that the law is instead a social and political "strategic field of action" that suggests possibilities for radical, popular class political and activist alliances.

Machuca Rose's contribution engages in performative writing to explore transnational trans, nonbinary, and travesti identifications through storytelling, ancestry, and alternate kinship models. Through autoethnographic, performative writing, Machuca Rose writes alongside *ancestras*, or feminine ancestors, to explore "forms of interdependency and care among the living, the living-dead, and the dead." To do so, Machuca Rose engages with Giuseppe Campuzano's life, death, politics, and performance and installation piece *El Museo Travesti del Perú* (*The Travesti Museum of Peru*). Indeed, one of the most powerful interventions that Machuca Rose makes is to center HIV/AIDS infection, insisting on the centrality of sex and the politics of HIV to trans studies. Through performative trans

feminist writing as creative and collaborative praxis, Machuca Rose cultivates a genealogy of ancestrality as "an impure family"—"mi familia infecta: the families we create out of our impure blood, our abject bodies, and undesirable fluids." Through this alternate form of abject kinship where fucking, touch, tenderness, and exchange operate as methodology, ancestrality results from connections forged "through a lifeline of blood and semen, infectious fluids carrying both danger and pleasure, creating our own deadly bloodlines." Machuca Rose ultimately suggests a politics of community rooted in radical interdependency, devotion, and care.

We have also included transcultural production throughout this special issue. The poem "Kiss" by Susy Shock, one of Latin America's best-known trans poets, is a carnal and tender response to abandonment and violence that echoes Lia García's performance practice and Delgado Huitrón's work on the caress. Artist Lino Arruda's cartoon provides a humorous take on transition and transmasculine embodiment—a topic notably absent from most of our seventy-nine submissions yet extremely urgent. Finally, the Trans Memory Archive project recuperated over six thousand photographs taken by trans women and travestis living across Argentina or in exile between the 1930s and early 2000s. A small selection of these powerful images is included here, as well as brief excerpts from interviews with the archive's creators; both images and text likewise serve as testaments to trans vitality.

"Trans Studies en las Américas" does not aim to be exhaustive or fully representative of Latin/x American trans studies. These articles represent a modest selection of the powerful work being done in the field, and this special issue portrays just one iteration among a multitude of forms that Latin/x American trans studies will undoubtedly take in the years to come. Neither does this special issue attempt to resolve the complex dynamics of representation raised by writing with and across forms of difference. While all of this special issue's authors and editors share elements of identification with the lives, research, and activisms represented in this issue, we all contend with the impossibility of fully accounting for alterity—whether our own or others'. Indeed, as this issue makes clear, such differences exceed geopolitical location and gender, extending to HIV status, engagement in sex work, immigration, and proximity to precarity and violence. What this collection of articles offers are models of collaboration and care among artists, activists, and academics committed to more just and livable futures.

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Note

1. CONADEP or Argentina's National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons was a truth commission established in 1983 by then President Raúl Alfonsín to investigate the fate of thirty thousand disappeared citizens. The commission published the report *Nunca Más (Never Again*; 1984). For Chilean National Truth and Reconciliation Commission reports, see the *Rettig Report* (Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación 1996) and the *Valech Report* (Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura 2005).

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