


Familiar grammars of loss and belonging: curating trans kinship in post-dictatorship Argentina

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Abstract. On 24 March 1976, the Argentine military staged a coup d'état and established dictatorship. To eliminate radical left activists, the armed forces perpetrated mass civilian murder until democratic transition in 1983. The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo emerged, protesting their children's disappearance by mobilizing portraiture to make visible familial rupture and indict the state. This article examines the archival exhibit, *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* (2017), which displayed trans women's vernacular photographs and family albums from the 1970s–1980s, the same years as dictatorship. Analyzing the exhibit's curatorial choices and the photographs' material and haptic qualities, this article reads the exhibit alongside the Mothers' iconic activist visual culture and national narratives of family loss. In doing so, the author suggests the exhibit renders trans sociality familial and familiar to a national viewing public, thereby reinterpreting Argentine history by installing trans subjects as proper subjects of national mourning.

Keywords. family albums • haptic • Mothers of Plaza de Mayo • portraiture • transgender

Trans activist Ivana Bordei grabs my hand and whisks me through the Cultural Center of Memory gallery. Ivana's fingers move across prints, tracing a thick genealogy of loss and belonging as she touches each photograph on the wall: 'she died . . . I don't know where she is now . . . she was killed . . . I'm not sure what happened to her . . .' Her voice trails off as she remembers, moving about the room. She ushers me closer, we listen to audio clips, and her laughter fills the space as she recalls acts of care and complicity, building trans memory through touch, laughter, and tears. Between 2012–2017, trans women donated dusty boxes, worn bags, and cracked family albums brimming with photographs to amass the Trans Memory Archive, a collection of over 6,000 personal photographs and objects. In December

2017, the archive's members curated an exhibition from these photographs titled *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió*.¹ The installation displayed a selection of the archive's materials spanning the same years as Argentine dictatorship (1976–1983) during which 30,000 people were killed because of state-sponsored terrorism. As I claim throughout, this curatorial decision was not a coincidence.

Turning toward the senses, this article explores how trans women's practices of curating vernacular photographs and their tactile and affective encounters with these images ignite political claims and forge trans social formations in the wake of Argentine dictatorship. To do so, I track how the exhibit employs visual grammars of the family album as well as other formal devices that make obvious the haptic qualities of the image. I suggest that, in framing trans community representation through everyday grammars of kinship, the exhibit further puts pressure on existing national visual narratives of death and family loss during dictatorship (1976–1983) that elide trans subjects. As I claim, this framing underscores how dominant representations of the disappeared must shift in meaning as, unlike the disappeared, trans subjects who suffered state violence during this period were illegible to the state. In doing so, I argue that the exhibit renders trans sociality familial *and* familiar to a national viewing public by braiding seemingly discrete activist projects and archives across multiple senses. *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* installs trans subjects as proper subjects of collective memory and national mourning to reinterpret Argentine history.

National grammar lessons

Rushing along Avenida Libertador, I head towards the Ex-ESMA's entrance for the opening of *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió*, the Trans Memory Archive's first large-scale exhibition (see Figure 1). As a former concentration camp turned memory museum, the Ex-ESMA is one of Argentina's most highly visible sites of memory due to the magnitude of atrocities committed – of 5,000 *desaparecidos* who passed through the ESMA, only 200 survived ('Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos', nd). Here *desaparecidos* – citizens targeted for their left-leaning politics – were illegally detained, were tortured, gave birth, and were executed or loaded into airplanes for death flights in which they were drugged and dropped alive into the Río de La Plata and Atlantic Ocean. The ESMA was only recently transferred out of military control, and some of its spaces were turned into memorial sites such as the Haroldo Conti Cultural Center of Memory. Installing the Trans Memory Archive exhibition in the Conti is thus a highly politicized and even polemic choice given the site's charged history, suggesting a provocative relationship between national collective memory projects and the Trans Memory Archive exhibit.

Typically subdued, the Conti is a multi-level memory museum featuring contemporary art exhibitions centering Argentina's complex past. Such museums are nationally sanctioned spaces of memory that, as highly curated, pedagogical spaces, shape citizen-subjects, transmitting national history through aesthetics. Installing photographic prints and ephemera from the Trans Memory Archive collection in such a space instills alternative visual narratives of trans memory within civic consciousness that insist on trans national belonging, albeit through death. Death is not what I encounter, however, when I enter the darkened Ex-ESMA compound and hurry up the steps into the Conti. To my surprise, this building's typically hushed museum space is dramatically up-lit and jam-packed with at least 50 trans women and another 100 visitors shouting, laughing, and crying all at once as names bounce off the walls over the excited din of voices: 'María Belén! ¡Veníiiiiii!' 'Cecilia, ¿dónde estás?' '¡Magalíiiii!' Trans woman after trans woman calls out searching for one another across the teeming atrium. Many women enter the Conti for the first time, and their unrivaled fabulousness commands the room – 3-, 4- and 5-inch heels click across the floor while animated gestures and voices ricochet, becoming part of the installation itself. For visitors, it is immediately clear we are not here solely to view photographs – the exhibition has come alive. Yet it is not trans women's bodies on display as has historically been the case – from street corners to Carnaval to tabloid pages – but instead their emotion, and it is contagious. In their corporeal interactions with one another – waving and shouting, touching and kissing in greeting, exchanging gossip and backhanded compliments – these trans women reinvigorate community bonds where these have weakened or fractured due to lived precarity. At times, photographic prints are the only remaining traces of loved ones – many women have disappeared without friends or family knowing whether they are alive or dead, killed and buried in unmarked graves as 'NN' or *sin nombre*. The Trans Memory Archive exhibition's opening has brought hundreds of women together tonight – at least 50 fill the space while hundreds more rest in albums or are supported by gallery walls. The exhibit has decidedly curated a large-scale family reunion, and the wall text bills it as such:

[The Trans Memory Archive] surges from the necessity of embracing one another again, seeing one another again, of finding each other together again after more than 15 years, with the *compañeras* who we thought were dead, with those we lost touch due to differences or exile; and with the memories of those who are effectively gone. (Correa et al., 2017)

This exhibit surges forth with urgency, from the desire for reunion both visual and tactile – the need to embrace, to see, to physically find one another again, where contact has been lost or is now impossible due to exile, asylum, or death.²



Figure 1. Exhibit title and introductory image. © Photograph: Cole Rizki.

As I enter the gallery, a life-sized photograph of trans women smiling and wearing shimmering polyester and sequined dresses steps out of the 1980s to greet me, inviting me to the party. Seven faces smile back at me – some more enthusiastic than others – while two are focused on something else that, *in absentia*, exerts force. Yet the exhibition title contrasts sharply with the image's celebratory iconography: *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* or 'This one left, this one was killed, this one died'. What could have, at first glance, passed as a guest list (*Esta . . . , esta . . . , esta . . .*) becomes an impersonal ledger whose enumerating logic is punctuated by loss. Beyond the exhibition's title, there is little wall text to contextualize, and the contrast between text and image unsettles. Indeed, most images convey joy and are even quite playful, yet the exhibition title highlights the spaces between these images and their now haunting presence. As I stare at the photograph, Ivana's voice echoes in my mind, trailing off: 'she died . . . I don't know where she is now . . . she was killed . . . I'm not sure what happened to her . . .' This reunion is bittersweet.

Vernacular photographs and (trans) family albums

The Trans Memory Archive's photographs are examples of vernacular photography, a photographic genre comprised of family photographs,

snapshots, studio portraits – everyday and even ordinary photographs aiming to capture a moment (Batchen, 2001: 57; Campt, 2012: 8). The exhibit includes 500 such photos hung on gallery walls and pressed into family albums. Snapped on inexpensive point-and-shoot cameras well before the digital age, images and reproductions of photographic prints from the 1970s, '80s, and '90s are on display. Many of the photographs arrive at the archive tucked into albums that trans women lovingly (and with great trust) donate temporarily for images to be scanned.

Taken by trans women of their loved ones, these snapshots capture seemingly banal moments of being-together. The snapshot's unassuming generic conventions – frontal pose, centered subject, affectionate gestures like arms around shoulders and broad smiles – are universally recognizable to viewers and serve a social function marking familiarity and often kinship.³ As 'a private mode of interaction between individuals', writes art historian Catherine Zuromskis (2009: 60), snapshooting enacts relational moments, image-making negotiations that are 'conscious gestures of intimacy'. Viewing snapshots as traces of such interpersonal intimacies performatively inscribes the viewer within snapshooting's familiar relational circuits, reproducing these same conscious gestures of intimacy that now unfold between viewers and trans women. What is crucial about the vernacular and the snapshot as photographic registers that here register 'trans' as a particular social formation is that both banalize trans life, which has historically been represented and consumed as spectacle. Indeed, these everyday images contrast sharply with images installed in the exhibition's vitrines where trans women appear in sensationalist newspaper clippings and police reports from intelligence archives. In these latter cases, grainy images of trans women's dead bodies strewn on pavement or block print headlines promising scandalous news about *hombres-mujeres* made to look monstrous by unflattering image choices and camera angles turn trans women's lives and suffering into near constant media spectacle. The banal, however, is spectacle's foil and, as such, has an opposite effect: vernacular photography *inscribes* trans women within familiar scenes of everyday life. As Trans Memory Archive founder María Belén Correa recounts:

they were our family photos same as ever, taken by us and in an everyday and familial environment. For the people who attended the exhibit these are photos without any stigma, something to which we [are] not accustomed. (López and Correa, nd)

Familiar genres such as vernacular photography and practices like snapshooting serially reproduce trans women as ordinary subjects with, at times, boring private lives like any other. 'Nothing remarkable to see here, but much to cherish', these images and formal curatorial choices seem to

say. In part an effect of genre, the materiality of these images as *objects* is impossible to ignore: many of these photos exhibit damage from wear, and hold complex histories of circulation and exchange. Historians of photography such as Geoffrey Batchen (1997) and anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards (see Edwards and Hart, 2004: 15) argue persuasively for attention to the materiality of photographs – their dimensionality, material forms, circulation and exchange – as inherently part of photographs’ multiple meanings and import as ‘socially salient objects’. Scholars of materiality center image plasticity (printing paper, chemical processes), presentational forms (family albums, *cartes de visite*), and traces of wear as evincing photographs’ histories and existence as material objects in the world with meaning-effects. In the case of Trans Memory Archive photographs, material degradation hints at the lived conditions trans women experienced during this time period (1970s–1990s) that simultaneously structured photographic exchanges and impacted preservation. Many women, including María Belén Correa, sought political asylum in the US or Europe through the 2000s, fearing for their lives (interview with Correa, 2017). The act of collecting and arranging photographs in albums similarly cultivated kinship networks from afar. When taken in exile, photographs were often inscribed with messages and sent by airmail back to trans women in Argentina, creating a sense of transnational community through photographic exchanges. The physical act of including such photographs in albums performatively made these photos *matter* – and, by extension, trans women’s lives took on value through these moments of curation in which photos were arranged and preserved with care.

Many of these photographs show marks of handling – mold, cracks, puncture wounds – the material scars of precarious life. Photographs were often prized possessions. Homeless and on the run, avoiding arrest and violence on the streets, trans women have consistently lacked stable housing to store personal belongings (Berkins, 2015; Programa de Género y Diversidad Sexual del Ministerio Público de la Defensa de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires and Bachillerato Popular Mocha Celis, 2017). At times, the only possessions that remained constant were those that could be quickly stashed in handbags grabbed amidst the never-ending chaos of police raids and evictions. Under such precarious conditions, only a small number of photographs stood a fighting chance:

There were girls who lived in hotels, and when they were arrested for various days, when they got out, they didn’t have a hotel room anymore because they hadn’t paid. Their things were all gone, and one of the girls always tried to save the others’ photos or a little bag of what had been thrown out, if they had a friend. (La Tinta, 2018)

Disposable, cast off, scrapped, and dumped, these women and their possessions were summarily tossed out. It was not only the police or hotel staff who represented a problem, as María Belén recounts: ‘if one of us died in a hotel, our photos and memories were . . . discarded by a family that didn’t want to recognize these life choices’ (Máximo and Prieto, 2016). She continues: ‘it’s typical that someone’s family, when she dies, they try to erase every trace that that person was part of the family, because it’s a disgrace’ (La Tinta, 2018). This installation’s photographs have managed to survive it all: ‘the apathy of the family, the State, and the hotels’ and the archive make an opposite gesture to indifference by actively soliciting and preserving these photographs. With *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió*, these trans women move their precious prints from family albums to gallery spaces, displaying their private snapshots in a format that honors the scope of their original intentions: kinship building. Unlike fine art portrayals, this exhibit centers the intimate domestic through the vernacular. As US cultural historian Elspeth H Brown and photographer Sara Davidmann (2015: 190) note, while some attention has been paid to how ‘queer and trans* art photography’ by artists such as Catherine Opie and Zanele Muholi explores queer kinship structures via formal portraiture, less attention has been paid to the ways in which trans folks’ ‘domestic snapshots, so-called family photographs’ also serve to produce ‘trans* family belonging’ and trans kinship networks in ways that deserve more studied consideration. Brown and Davidmann together call for a turn to ‘domestic snapshots’ as critical sites of inquiry that, as image-objects, are ‘central to the affective production of trans* family, however defined’ (p. 190).

Domestic snapshots are particularly powerful haptic sites, as historian Tina Campt (2012, 2017) elaborates, where haptic images trigger multisensorial exchanges between bodies and photographic prints as images and objects. This is apparent to me as I enter the gallery space: phrases like ‘Look at her!’ ‘Divine!’ ‘Here I am!’ and ‘Unforgettable!’ reverberate in refrain while these women touch their family photographs. The women move about, touching photos to locate themselves within the images for other trans women who often gasp, laugh or cry, together recalling anecdotes that animate the images for all within earshot. They reach out for their *compañeras*, asking each other ‘Do you remember her?’

Their behavior is wholly characteristic of photographic viewing rituals that take place between family or friends who, in the privacy of their own home, might pull out a family album to open it across their laps, touching or even holding photographs, removing them from sleeves, turning them over, brushing their glossy surfaces to remember time and place, names and dates that might locate the image; these vernacular photographs now hanging on gallery walls retain their familiar and familial quality, mobilizing touch that elicits intimate stories and amusing anecdotes, laughter and tears that knit

past with present. I am invited into what feels like these trans women's living room as a distant relative (maybe a trans second cousin) where I watch and participate in image encounters unfolding through touch, propelled by affect that directs the flow of bodies through space.

Perhaps this is what, in part, differentiates this exhibition from installations by photographers like Opie, Del LaGrace Volcano, or Muholi whose foundational and pioneering work so beautifully explores queer and trans kinship ties. While these artists elevate queer and trans subjects and their relations through the conventions of formal portraiture, *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* instead elevates through the vernacular. Fine art portraiture further holds very different energetic valence – one pointedly distant from the very energies that animate 'family' as the Trans Memory Archive installation suggests. Such portraiture can even have the sinister effect of erasing the affective and interactive bonds that constitute family even as it might simultaneously activate other affects inspiring awe or admiration from a distance that is, at times, unwelcoming to touch. These photographs, on the other hand, move these trans women to touch and to tears just as these photos touch them back across multiple senses. As haptic objects that register beyond the visual, these photographs compel forms of viewing that trigger bodily reactions (reaching out, grasping, pulling back) and sensations that manifest as emotions: smiles, laughter, sobs, and tired sighs of exhaustion and elation. Indeed, as Camp (2017: 72) reiterates in recent work, photographs are 'deeply affective objects that implicate and leave impressions upon us through multiple forms of contact: visual contact (seeing), physical contact (touching), [and] psychic contact (feeling)' among other forms. Photographs move trans women to simultaneously see, touch, and feel images and each other. These synchronized haptics unfold through interpersonal and embodied image interactions, creating the quality of inhabiting a live family album.

Trans studies scholar Jeanne Vaccaro's (2015: 275) trailblazing work on the relationship between transgender and touch draws our attention to 'the sensory feelings and textures of crafting transgender', centering on the quotidian aesthetics of transgender becoming and belonging. Vaccaro's elegant theorization of touch and other sensory modes productively moves us away from figural representations of trans bodies and socialities.⁴ Performance studies scholar Cynthia Citlallin Delgado Huitrón (2019) artfully extends Vaccaro's work, elaborating 'trans touch' as hyper-tender, suggesting the haptic as tactic to combat Mexican state hyper-violence. Expanding on both Vaccaro and Delgado Huitrón's formulations, I propose that trans touch can also operate as a mode of curation in response to state violence where touch curates trans kinship when it has been formally or previously denied. Touch operates here both ontologically and epistemologically – a way of both



Figure 2. Ivana's family album. © Photograph: Cole Rizki.

being and knowing trans, of inhabiting trans as a particular familiar (banal) and familial social formation. Indeed, trans social formations are both fashioned and arranged with care, curated through tact, cohering in gallery spaces and living rooms alike through multisensorial encounters where bodies touch bodies, fingers touch prints, and photographs touch back. Each time these trans women touch one print and then another while moving about the room

and reaching out for their *compañeras*, they constellate kinship, fashioning embodied networks of relation through acts of curation – touch as a form of arrangement with care – drawing themselves into relation with their *familiares* once more.

While the gallery space had turned into a live family album, the material family albums open on pedestals strategically placed throughout the gallery further invite such analogy. As a particularly charged haptic and affect-laden site (Figure 2), the photographic album cultivates alternate modes of trans belonging in defiance of normative kinship structures that exclude trans subjects. On a basic level, family albums install historical narratives locating subjects within existing and evolving kinship networks through photographs and attendant viewing rituals. As many visual culture scholars have noted, family albums, as pedagogical projects, serve several normative ideological functions, reproducing ‘the family’ as the central heterosexual reproductive unit while installing proper (and disciplinary) modes of familial belonging and aspiration that are both class-motivated and racially-coded (Hirsch, 1997; Spence and Holland, 1991). Consequently, family albums are often sites of violence for trans subjects who do not cohere within such structures. Physical transition, for example, disturbs the visual order of family albums as well as their kinship structures – where there was a subject who (more or less) visually cohered as a daughter for 20 years, a son now emerges or perhaps a genderqueer or non-binary subject whose unruly gender presentation defies normative visual logics of gendered inscription. Similarly, trans subjects have historically been erased from family albums and families alike – their photographs destroyed or otherwise removed if they are exiled from their families of origin (Brown and Davidmann, 2015). Such reflections aim to account for trans subjects’ visual representation or erasure within family albums and kinship structures conditioned by family of origin.

Yet, attention to Argentine national histories shifts the valence of family photography, reorienting the reception of the Trans Memory Archive exhibit’s photographic albums and prints. Indeed, the foundational importance of family photography and family-based activism in the wake of forced disappearance during dictatorship renders these albums part of a broader activist history of deploying visual narratives of kinship to resist state violence.⁵ One need only think of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo who, under threat of disappearance, so courageously mobilized their disappeared children’s National Identity Document photos, successfully challenging and perverting the state’s logic of disappearance by mobilizing the state’s own archival imagery to insist on state responsibility for disappearance and on their children’s presence (Figure 3). *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* is in direct conversation with such visual kinship narratives.



Figure 3. The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo's last march under dictatorship, 8 December 1983. Photograph: Mónica Hasenberg. Courtesy of the Archivo Hasenberg-Quaretti.

This black and white photograph of the Mothers carrying enlarged, grainy black and white ID card photographs of their disappeared children registers their final protest under dictatorship. These photographs of the disappeared, together with the Mothers' familiar white handkerchiefs – the same fabric as cloth diapers – stage these women's roles as mothers, foregrounding ruptured kinship ties. The layered seriality of loss, the repetition of images, the sitters' unsmiling formal poses, and the images' direct relationships to the state (as ID card photos) are quite sinister. Interpellated by the camera's gaze, these sitters have been both literally and figuratively shot by the state – the same state apparatus that disappeared them. Part of what makes the Mothers' demands legible to this day, however, is that these disappeared subjects were *already* considered legitimate subjects by both the state and general public before they disappeared. The Mothers largely mobilize national identity document photographs to stake demands; these national identity documents simultaneously confer state recognition on their subjects. One belongs to the

nation by virtue of identity documents that visually inscribe one as national citizen-subject through, among other identifying information, a headshot. The disappeared were thus subjects previously recognized by the state and therefore worthy of public mourning and intervention on their behalf to secure their return. Trans women, on the other hand, were none of the above until 2012 when the national *Gender Identity Law* passed. Prior, trans women's ID card headshots represented them in drag, forced to present as masculine subjects: it was not possible to change gender markers save on case-by-case basis ('Ley de Identidad de Género', 2012).

As historian Victoria Langland (2005: 88) asserts, the use of photographs of the disappeared has become 'part of a universal symbolic language'. Latin Americanist Andrea Noble (2009: 65) extends such universality to the 'family snapshot', which has taken on 'emblematic status in the context of human rights activism in Argentina' and is 'instantly recognizable by a broad transnational viewing public'. While Noble (2009) and others, such as performance studies scholar Diana Taylor (2003: 174), have pointed to the ways in which the Mothers' use of photography 'caught on' elsewhere with other mothers from across Latin America to the Middle East to the former Soviet Union, I argue here that these tactics – namely, family photographs as part of the material and visual culture of protest – have traveled across seemingly disparate social movements. Indeed, trans activists utilize visual grammars of the family album that remit to the photography of disappearance to trouble the limits of the category of the disappeared as a supposedly bounded identity category.

Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió thus stakes a trans visual kinship narrative that, when read alongside existing *national* visual narratives of familial rupture, reveals the exhibition's aspirations and material stakes. Such aspirations include the desire for national belonging through symbolic recognition as disappeared subjects with rights to material reparations, like all formerly detained and disappeared persons, for detention during dictatorship.⁶ *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* forged potent and polemic relationships between these multiple kinship narratives, which rendered its visual grammars powerful and simultaneously audacious. Less evidentiary and more aspirational, these photographs and their arrangements hold particular social, cultural, and historical import for the ways in which they suggestively stage trans social formations as familial, which, in the context of Argentina, represents a central mode *par excellence* of national belonging (Jelin, 2008; Sosa, 2014). Such a move reenergizes the past in the present in the service of rights claims by seemingly unrelated collectivities forged through unlikely public intimacies and social bonds.

There is particular visual force to viewing not only a collection of 500 photographic prints of trans women but also cohabiting space with over 50

trans women who come together in a formal gallery to interact with their own photographs which, to them and prior to this evening, were fully vernacular objects. Yet, by virtue of their gallery installation, these photographs have become art objects that display the artfulness of trans life as belonging in national institutional spaces such as this memory museum, and deserving of studied attention, curation, and conservation. Simultaneously (and quite fittingly), these photos also perform a more colloquial and even street definition of art – the purposeful use of skill and creative ingenuity that these women employ every day. These photos display the art of existing, of not only surviving but also flourishing against all odds in a country where trans women's life expectancy continues to hover between 35–40 years of age (Programa de Género y Diversidad Sexual del Ministerio Público de la Defensa de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires and Bachillerato Popular Mocha Celis, 2017).

Unlike both state and institutional narratives of disappearance, the Trans Memory Archive installation recuperates, legitimates, and builds trans familial narratives – both celebratory and mournful. In consequence, the Trans Memory Archive project rewrites history, asserting that dictatorship directly targeted trans subjects, and that trans subjects continue to experience state and extra-state violence in post-dictatorship Argentina. *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* insists on the centrality of trans archival memory and its preservation to a democratic present and future where democracy necessarily remains an aspirational horizon even in the absence of dictatorship.

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Notes

1. Translated as: 'This one left, this one was killed, this one died'.
2. For more on the Trans Memory Archive, see Correa et al. (2019).
3. On snapshot photography, see also Hirsch (1997), Phu and Brown (2015) and Zuromskis (2013).
4. For other excellent trans studies work on visual culture, see Gosset et al. (2017). Prosser (1998) is exemplary of early trans studies work on photography.
5. See, for example, Fortuny (2014), Longoni (2010) and Taylor (2003). For queer contestations of the biological family as Argentina's central paradigm for national belonging in the aftermath of dictatorship, see Sosa (2014).
6. On Argentine trans women's detention during dictatorship, see Rizki (2020).

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