

Undisciplined Objects: Queer Women's Archives

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Queer things cannot have straight histories.
—*Daniel Marshall et al., Queering Archives*

Discipline and field, as regulators of geographical boundaries and methodologies, have profoundly impacted my trajectory as a researcher, beginning with my undergraduate degree at Chile's Universidad Católica in the post-dictatorship 1990s and continuing into my work as a professor of Spanish and Latin American literature and women's, gender, and sexuality studies in the United States. When I was an undergraduate in *letras*, fiction and poetry were the dominant objects of study, with great emphasis placed on the literary canon. The literary theory we studied rarely went beyond the late 1970s, and feminist thought and Latin American literary theory received little attention. Courses and thesis seminars, which reflected the faculty's areas of expertise, mostly restricted our research to those two genres and to national and regional boundaries. At the time, I wondered if I should switch to a history concentration so that I could research women's participation in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century journalism, a topic out of bounds in my strictly defined discipline. Various circumstances in Latin America in the 1990s limited access to international journals, made doctoral studies abroad difficult, drove up the cost of books and translations, and affected disciplinary trends, but mostly, in the Chilean case, this canonical and rigid approach was the result (and not the most tragic one) of decades of Chilean universities controlled by the military dictatorship, lost academic freedom, the expulsion of numerous faculty members, and a series of measures against public universities that, among other disastrous consequences, did not support research or participation in transnational academic conversations.¹

¹After the coup of 1973, the military took over public universities in Chile: some faculty and students were detained, disappeared, or forced into exile; a considerable number of faculty were terminated; and programs and degrees, especially in the social sciences and humanities, were suspended or their curricula were controlled and censored. During the dictatorship, faculty and students continued to be indicted and/or expelled, and there was no academic freedom (Garretón 105). For a recent study on the *intervención* of the University of Chile

I came into contact with feminist theory as a doctoral student at Rutgers through a certificate program in the Department of Women and Gender Studies (WGS). My excitement over “new” ideas came with the realization that thinkers in Latin America and the Global South were, with few exceptions, not part of the curriculum. Feminist theory and the curriculum was then dominated by US and European voices. This, however, was being increasingly challenged by scholars from the Global South: “We must take the languages of the Southern Hemisphere as active cultural media rather than as objects of cultural study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant” (Spivak 9). Still, the lack of English translations of feminist texts from Latin America and the Global South was a considerable barrier to their inclusion in the North American curriculum. In 2005, I and another Spanish speaker in the WGS certificate program asked Professor Mary Gossy, who was then affiliated with both Spanish and WGS, to lead a seminar that we called *Untranslated Feminisms*, where students translated texts from their native languages into English. I translated essays by Alfonsina Storni, Victoria Ocampo, and Teresa de la Parra that theorized gender. Since then, in my own research I struggle to challenge the power of Northern epistemologies, the dominance of English-language feminist and queer theory, and the impact of our citational practices and sources of knowledge.

Twenty years later, as a Latin American scholar trained and based in the United States, while still engaged with colleagues, activists, and students in Chile and Latin America, I want to respond from my own positionality to the Hispanic Institute’s invitation to discuss the impact of the geopolitics of knowledge in my intellectual work through a brief reflection on my current book project. *Queer Networks: Writers, Artists and Patrons in the First Half of the Twentieth Century* is a research project that maps—employing unpublished archival documents, photographs, and published materials—a network of queer Latin American (and a few Spanish) women artists, writers, and patrons who lived away from their countries, traveled, and challenged heterosexual norms of family, sexuality, reproduction, and economic dependency. From the vantage point of this project—its epistemological challenges as well as its defiance of national, regional, and linguistic boundaries—this article reflects on the seeming impossibility of area studies (Latin American or Iberian studies) in its intersection with gender/queer studies geographically and epistemologically based in the North. It suggests that the process of gathering and theorizing an unstable, transnational, largely Latin American queer archive that resists full legibility becomes an opportunity to think about the geopolitics of knowledge, methodologies, disciplines, and activism.

The theoretical starting point of this project was the concept of queerness as developed by Jack Halberstam, defined as “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” (1). Drawing on this definition of queerness, as well as Latin American gender and feminist theory and sociological theory on social networks, I reconstruct the networks of queer women who influenced cultural life in Latin America and Spain between

during the dictatorship and its human and intellectual effects, see Póo *La dictadura de los sumarios (1974–1985): Universidad de Chile intervenida*.

1920 and 1950.² Intensive archival research is integral to this reconstruction, which has presented numerous challenges. Several of these women had no heirs to preserve their documents, or else their materials were censored and the traces of their sexual dissidence erased. I have looked beyond institutional archives and worked in less-known collections, in addition to tracking down and interviewing descendants willing to share stories and documents.

Halberstam's concept of queerness is particularly productive for approaching these women. Influenced by Foucault's idea that "homosexuality threatens people as a 'way of life' rather than a way of having sex" (qtd. in Halberstam 1), it detaches queerness from sexual identity. The majority of these women did not self-identify as lesbian, bisexual, or *garzona*,³ even as they reflected and produced knowledge about their difference. It is sometimes difficult and ultimately unnecessary to "prove" whether these women had sex with other women; however, all of them lived their creative and intellectual lives outside normative parameters of marriage, reproduction, family, patriarchal bodily control, and economic dependence. Foucault suggests that the disturbing element in homosexuality is "affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie and companionship, things that our rather sanitized society can't allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force" (136). These women's "way of life" and their creation of "new alliances" and queer forms of kinship—rarely discussed publicly at the time—were either illegible, misread, or perceived as threats to Latin American republican, reproductive, emancipated yet caregiving, heterosexual, ideal womanhood. In 1928, Cuban feminists Mariablanca Sabas Alomá and Flora Díaz Parrado exchanged ideas around lesbianism that reveal that, for them, it had little to do with private sexual practices. Sabas Alomá denounced the oppression of women and demanded rights to education and political participation with the hope that enfranchised women would be *compañeras* of men in marriage and life, but she found the *garzonas* to be degenerate types who "*desconocen la plenitud creadora, la santidad de la fecundidad*" and therefore needed to be publicly scorned and separated from any association with feminism (103; italics in original). Díaz Parrado directly responded by saying that she did not fear *garzonas*, and actually considered them a fair reaction against men's injustice that represented "una revolución íntima" and "un afán de reivindicación sexual" (113–14). Even though Díaz Parrado agreed with Sabas Alomá that there had always been "mujeres de individualidades poderosas que han mascullado (*sic*) el freno que les ponían" (114), the anxiety comes from what appeared in the 1920s as a collective phenomenon—a product of new social conditions that prefigured radical structural transformations that Sabas Alomá saw as disastrous to

²This study includes recognized visual artists, writers, intellectuals, and patrons such as Teresa de la Parra, Lydia Cabrera, Gabriela Mistral, Victoria Kent, and Amelia Peláez, along with figures who have been forgotten or minimized by the official cultural history, including the Chileans Consuelo Lemetayer and Laura Rodig, the Brazilian Bertha Lutz, and the Spanish Ana María Martínez Sagi, among others.

³The word *garzona* is not included in the dictionary of the Real Academia Española. Its use in Cuba as a synonym for lesbian is taken from the French novel *La Garçonne* by Victor Marguerite (Valladares Ruiz 22).

revolutionary feminism and society.⁴ The queer archive reveals that sexually and gender-dissident independent women not only challenged heteronormativity but destabilized economic and reproductive practices indispensable to progressive ideas of modernity and bourgeois (even revolutionary) feminism of the first half of the twentieth century, and so their sexual dissidence was subject to violence, denial, and erasure.⁵

Since the 1990s, a boom in literary and cultural studies dedicated to recovering the work and lives of Latin American and Spanish women writers and artists has radically revised the cultural history of the region. The work of feminist scholars (Masiello; Meyer; Bergmann et al.; and Unruh, among many others) has opened critical conversations about the patriarchal and heteronormative conditions under which these women produced their work, as well as the strategies they developed to gain entrance into artistic and intellectual circles. Only recently have studies focused on a more comparative approach, looking at these authors from a networked perspective (Fernández; Alzate and Doll; Cuesta et al.). As I began participating in these conversations, it seemed to me that, concerning queer women writers and artists specifically, there were no studies on this period that looked beyond a few individual cases. Critical attention has been centered on feminist thought and activism in the decades leading to voting rights in Latin America, women's travel and participation in the press, and the contributions of women to the arts and literature. However, the period between 1920 and 1950 is essential for understanding the history of dissident ideas about gender and sexuality beyond the history of women's struggle for civil and political rights—a struggle that did not openly challenge compulsory heterosexuality and reproduction.

As I became more engaged with feminist and queer scholarship and teaching in the United States, I decided to write this book in English in an attempt to dialogue with scholars beyond my area of study and contribute to the expansion of the history of lesbian, queer, and dissident women in the Spanish-speaking world and their transatlantic connections.⁶ As I made progress with the analysis, how-

⁴Díaz Parrado offered a less anxious response. She distinguished this type of political lesbian from the "garzona biológica" (114) that she pathologized and compared to a form of madness. But even as she said this, she opened the door to a future when this might not be seen as pathological: "¡quién sabe si estos ascos nuestros de ahora no sufran en el mañana en anatema burlesco!" (114).

⁵There are countless examples of the ways women's dissidence was "managed" by public discourse through exaggerated display of images and stories about these women's lost (heterosexual) loves, asexual or quasi-mystical nature, extreme femininity, and devotion to great causes such as education, literature, and art (framed as service to their nations), among others. One example is an extensive article on Gabriela Mistral, published in 1945 right after she was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, in a Chilean magazine of national circulation that includes a series of staged photographs of Mistral shopping for clothes under the title of "La Mistral se viste a la moda." One image caption reads: "Una mañana cualquiera salió de compras con el mismo entusiasmo de una buena señora de casa. Es que Gabriela Mistral, poetisa excelsa, es, ante todo mujer. En ella se conjugan todas las virtudes de la feminidad" (qtd. in Cabello Hutt 181).

⁶Scholars have explored extensively the lives of American lesbian women living in Paris during the interwar period, such as Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, and Sylvia Beach (see,

ever, the brilliant and provocative ideas of a growing number of Latin American decolonial, anti-capitalist, anti-pragmatic, anti-racist feminists and queer scholars challenged my project's geopolitics of knowledge, specifically the power dynamics in the intersection between Euro-American queer/feminist theory and area studies in the Global South. I am thinking here of the work of María Lugones, Valeria Flores, Ochy Curiel, Diego Falconí, and Sayak Valencia, to name a few, along with arguments and questions put forward by Anjali Arondekar and Geeta Patel in their introduction to *Area Impossible* and by Boaventura de Sousa Santos in *Epistemologies of the South*. Arondekar and Patel, in particular, recognize the ways that the geopolitical is often flattened in queer studies and insist that individual fields, instead of serving as "sites of alterity to reach a whole," should be "about resistance to any form of totalizing knowledge" (155). In a similar vein, De Sousa Santos, with his claim that "there is no global social justice without global cognitive justice" (viii), pushes a decolonial critique that dismantles the procedures of Western thought and the coloniality of power, along with exposing the violence, destruction, and silencing that stem from their imposition. The intersection between gender and coloniality of power in Latin America is central to Lugones's analysis and critical not only to decolonial feminist theory but to decolonial queer/*cuir* histories and knowledges, after all; "Hermaphrodites, sodomites, viragos, and the colonized were all understood to be aberrations of male perfection" (Lugones 743). Lugones examines the bodies, communities, and practices that resist the "categorical, dichotomous, hierarchical logic" that is "central to modern, colonial, capitalist thinking about race, gender, and sexuality" (742). The relation of coloniality (racism/capitalism) and queerness is central to contemporary conversations: "el uso del término queer y su derivación en *cuir* no obedece a un entusiasmo ingenuo . . . , sino que su intención es tender puentes transnacionales de identificación y afinidad que reconozcan y visibilicen la vulnerabilidad históricamente compartida; entre los procesos de minorización —que emergieron como protesta crítica en *el tercer mundo estadounidense*— a través de las multitudes *queer* con los procesos de subalternización histórica que se implantaron en nuestros territorios a partir de la colonización y nuestros propios *devenires minoritarios* —y que se actualizan constantemente a través de los aparatos de producción y verificación de la razón blanca heteropatriarcal." (Valencia 31).

My initial engagement with gender and queer theory from the Global North as a point of entry for configuring and approaching a wildly fluid and heterogeneous archive—in terms that also offered intelligibility and academic dialogue across the Global South and the North/South axis—now appeared unsustainable. What are the implications and risks of *lo queer/cuir* as subjectivity and theory in Latin America?⁷ Can queer feminist theories in the Global South resist the potential homogenization, disavowal of localities, and specific embodiments under a seemingly universal category of queer? Can these transnational, opaque,

Benstock; Elliot and Wallace); however, there is virtually no research on Latin American and Spanish queer women at that time.

⁷The use of *Cuir* or *Cuy(r)*, as well as other forms, signals processes of negotiations, interpretations and decolonial transfigurations of "lo queer" in Latin American localities and contexts. See Viteri; Falconí, "Resentir lo queer/*cuir*/*cuy(r)* en Ecuador."

slippery queer archives of the first half of the twentieth century become a source that contributes to local genealogies of resistance, a site of epistemic and methodological emancipatory power deploying decolonial/*cuir*/queer feminist strategies?

The question of *queer* as concept and theory has been well debated for over a decade now in the context of Latin American studies. The discussion has ranged from the extent to which *queer* could convey its complex origin of violence and subsequent reclaiming of counter-hegemonic power when deployed in the Global South (Córdoba; Epps; Mogrovejo) to the unsettling effect of queer studies in Hispanism's boundaries in the 1990s (Molloy and McKee Irwin [1]). There has also been some recent exceptional work in Spanish that traces the transformations, limits and possibilities of queer theory in Latin American and Iberian contexts (Balderston et al.; Córdoba et al.; Falconí Trávez et al; Falconí Travéz; Flores; Valencia, among others). These conversations do not deny but often engage the epistemologies and praxis of scholars, community organizers, and individuals who reject queer as theory and category of identity in the Latin American context. At the same time, there are researchers and activists who imagine and implement ways to move towards hemispheric dialogues that recognize the economic, racial, and epistemic discriminatory structures that tend to marginalize knowledges from Latin America, both in and outside academia, and limit the circulation of ideas across the North and South.⁸ Interrogating the consequences of *queer* as an epistemological and political category seems now even more timely as it gains traction beyond academic and LGBTQ+ communities in what sometimes look like watered-down, depoliticized, and co-optable ways. In that context, the question about the struggles and people effaced and further marginalized by the popularity and recognition of *queer* in Latin America and in Latin American studies needs to remain open.

At the same time, queer methodologies are, for some Latin American scholars and activists, one way to challenge boundaries from decolonial, anti-capitalist, and feminist positionalities. For Sayak Valencia, queer/*cuir* methodologies allow for “reconocimiento de una complejidad invisibilizada en el discurso y el imaginario cultural. La visibilización de una interseccionalidad muchas veces desubjetivante.” Its destabilizing, anti-normative, and disturbing potentiality is put in dialogue with various dissident projects of reading and imagining. Valeria Flores draws on queer theory more as a commitment than as an affirmation, “ya que sus principios ponen en duda las regulaciones y los efectos de los condicionamientos categóricos binarios” (32). This position presents an alternative to epistemologies organized around binarisms, and hetero or homonormativities that do not undermine modernity, coloniality of power, or capitalism.

Tracing the histories and imaginations emerging from Latin America in their own specific contexts—while allowing space for their densities and contradictions—and examining conditions of privilege and vulnerability offer ways to resist the

⁸An example of an important space for dialogue and translation of knowledges is the Queer Hemisphere Project, which has engaged academic and non-academic voices from across the hemisphere through conferences, publications, and collaborations among queer scholars (Viteri).

potential homogenization and universalization under the category of *queer*. The study of these women's queer networks, lives, and ideas centers their knowledges and experiences of sexual and gender dissidence. These knowledges are fundamental to the work of "intercultural translation," in De Sousa Santos's terms.⁹ By recognizing their value and sharing them, it is possible to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue across the Global South that disrupts power relations in the field of feminist and queer theory and Latin American studies. But even before these voices can be heard, the violence revealed by the archive has to be acknowledged: researchers must recognize the near absence of dissident, poor, rural, indigenous, and vulnerable women. The voices we hear in institutional and family archives are overwhelmingly educated, economically independent, urban women who—even as they paid a price for their queerness—had access to resources and opportunities through their networks and educational, economic, or social capital. Queerness, in profoundly racist, unequal, colonial Latin American societies, means wildly different things in each individual case and, depending on other identities and conditions, determines how desires, bodies, and their representations were and still are either tolerated, rejected, pathologized, criminalized, or eliminated.¹⁰

Queer archives provide insights into dissident lives as much as they reveal the violence and shortcomings of heteronormative and patriarchal practices. As traces and representations of sexuality and gender marked by fluidity, same-sex desire, and temporalities outside marriage and reproduction, queer women's archives of the first half of the twentieth century have until recently been suppressed and silenced through misreading and illegibility. Misreading of queer archives is the failure of normative, dichotomic imagination. It functions as a form of denial, as, for example, when scholars studying Gabriela Mistral insisted for over 50 years on identifying Doris Dana, Mistral's partner and literary executor, as her secretary. Illegibility, on the other hand, comes into play when the transgression against normativity is seen, recognized as such, but cannot be named, understood, or allowed to exist. Illegibility generates frustration, anxiety, and occasionally violence at the possibility of ways of life that threaten the dominance of heteronormative and cis-male centered ways of reading and living. An example of this is the censorship of Teresa de la Parra's journal and letters concerning her romantic relationship with Lydia Cabrera.¹¹ Both the misreading

⁹"Learning from the South is therefore the process of intercultural translation by means of which the anti-imperial South is constructed both in the global North and local South. As I have been emphasizing, the construction of anti-imperial South is part and parcel of counter-hegemonic globalization; thus, the work of translation, far from being an intellectual exercise, is rather a pragmatic instrument for mediation and negotiation. Its purpose is to overcome the fragmentation inherent in the extreme diversity social experience of the world uncovered by the different ecologies" (De Sousa Santos 224).

¹⁰Encountering traces of these economically or geographically marginalized voices calls for alternative sources and methodologies such as criminal and medical records, oral histories, the press, or representations in popular culture. Some of them can be found, for example, in Chilean nineteenth-century *La Lira Popular* that contains a *décima* titled "La niña vestida de hombre i que se casó con otra niña en Illapel" by José Hipólito Cordero (11).

¹¹Sylvia Molloy has contributed significantly to the theorization of the Latin American queer archive by reading voids as sites of resistance: "it is not my desire to read into the gaps,

and illegibility of queerness and its archives push against their anti-normative potential by disavowing and misinterpreting sexual and gender dissidence. Misreading and illegibility attempt to forcefully write normativity or dehumanization over queerness to make it either legible or antisocial. However, a queer, feminist, decolonial methodology of queer historical archives does not seek to achieve the illusion of legibility of queerness by establishing definite truths and identities but instead recognizes the potentiality and beauty of radical queer illegibility.

Doris Dana kept this handwritten text by Gabriela Mistral in a safe box until she passed away in 2006:

Yo sé bien que nadie, ninguna persona en este mundo, puede saber qué cosa es nuestra vida sino (excepto) nosotros mismos.

La bella vida nuestra es tan imperceptible, tan delicada, por llena de imponderables, que casi no es posible verla. Es posible solamente vivirla, gracias a Dios.

Yo vivo en una especie de sueño, acordándome de todas las gracias que me has hecho.

Y lo que vivo es una vida nueva, una vida que siempre yo he buscado y nunca hallé. Es una cosa ella sacra y concentrada. (Mistral 9)

Queer archives offer an encounter with the radical illegibility of queer desire, bodies, ways of living, eroticism, and relationships. An encounter that, in the context of this project, has been possible since the intersection of decolonial, feminist, and queer theories and methodologies opened ways to recognize the violence and potentiality not only within the archives but also in how they have been interpreted. Working with the voids and respecting the illegibility of the queer archive stems from a critique of epistemologies, disciplines, and projects of modern rationality that seek completion, categorization, and definite results, what Sousa de Santos identifies as metonymic reason, a reason “obsessed with the idea of totality in the form of order” (167) that sanctions dichotomies, even as they express symmetry, contain, and conceal hierarchy. The imposition of this form of reason has meant violence, destruction, and silencing (169). The value and power of illegibility and of multiplicity of knowledges (that are not based on illusions of totality) is essential to queer methodologies and theories, and has been key to my questioning of the power of the epistemologies of the North. José Esteban Muñoz proposes a queer futurity that keeps the present of queerness open and humble: “I suggest that holding queerness in a sort of ontologically humble state, under a conceptual grid in which we do not claim to always already know queerness in the world, potentially staves off the ossifying effects of neoliberal ideology and the degradation of politics brought about by representations of queerness in contemporary popular culture” (*Cruising Utopia* 74). This humbleness can also foster

but to read the gaps themselves as spaces of resistance, provocation, or else—when the gaps are the work of Parra’s censors—as spaces of societal shame” (233).

a more dialogical, horizontal, and imaginative epistemological exchange between the Global North and the Global South, as well as within Latin America across historical times and differences of class, race, and locality.

To conclude, the study of women's queer archives in Latin America is not only the act of unearthing, keeping, and recording stories that the power of patriarchy and coloniality has systematically erased, denied, or misread. It is also recognizing those situated intersectional knowledges as sources essential to our feminist and queer genealogies—knowledges that emerge from embodied experiences of transgression, from projects of survival, from queer pleasure, and from dissident relationships and forms of kinship. In turn, these queer archives put into question disciplinary and geopolitical boundaries while challenging epistemological power dynamics. Ultimately, they have stimulated me to reimagine alliances based on emancipatory dialogue between queer feminist scholars and activists from the Global North and South.

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