



Writing Queer Across the Borders of Geography, Desire, and Power

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Abstract: In this essay, I position myself as a queer writer in the confines of language, nationality and sexuality with the intention of opening a venue for a non essentialist *I* to dialogue with anybody situated within the highly politicized arena of queer politics. I refer to my politics differently throughout this essay: I call them politics of the real, or politics from a transitional space, or politics of the radical alterity, or simply queer politics. Political representation is a continuously sliding terrain connecting the personal and the political, a terrain with no security, opened up for dialogue and gestures that attempt to capture something of the infinite difference at the heart of humanity that, paradoxically, can never be completely codified. I wish to experiment here with a writing that encompasses the political, the personal, and the symbolic. In locating myself within my study, I am most concerned with the question of agency through experimental writing. I agree with Norman Denzin that this perspective “is not for everyone. It is based on a research philosophy that is counter to much of the traditional scientific research tradition in the social sciences” (p. 1). My aim is to perform involving minimal theory, show rather than tell, and engage rather than explain. As Denzin argues, researchers should use the interpretive approach “only when they want to examine the relationships between personal troubles and the public policies and public institutions that have been created to address those troubles. Interpretive interactionism speaks to this interrelationship between private lives and public responses to personal troubles. It works outward from the biography of the person” (Denzin, 2001, p. 2).

In October 16, 2005, Italians had the opportunity to vote for a candidate from the center-left coalition that might represent them as President of the Council after the next national elections. For weeks, the press and news shows were concentrated on nothing but the coverage of this original political happening. Central to the media coverage of the elections was a project for Civil Unions (PACS) presented in Parlia-

ment, and the enforcement of the 1989 and 1994 resolutions of the European Parliament on the equal treatment of sexual minorities. In November 26, 2005, dozens of hundreds of queer Italians came out into Piazza Farnese, in Rome, to support the PACS project. The square was the site to contest material and symbolic forms of hostility towards the Italian gay community. Hundreds of queers, including female to male/

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male to female transsexuals, leathers, bears and bisexuals, butch and fem lesbians, fag hags, non-heterosexist straights, drag queens and kings, made visible one of the most vibrant acts of political and communal action in years, shaking old stereotypes and myths about the *Mediterranean uomo* (man) and the *Donna Romana* (Roman woman). The assortment of groups, political affiliations, voices and colors presented a vision of a diversified yet united queer community that marched from an obscurantist past toward an assertive present. Among the groups, a number of gay and lesbian parents marched together with their children, representing associations of gay parents who struggled for the right of queer couples to adopt. Right beside them, it was usual to see posters exhorting Parliament to pass a law of domestic partnership and legal parity at work.

Interestingly, 75% of all the candidates from the left responded to these demonstrations in open agreement to the rights of GLBTQs. Some of them, including Romano Prodi (the main candidate for the left), answered publicly with a letter of support to the queer community of Italy. This fascinating political and social conjuncture happens after a national coalition of GLBTQ movements issued to Parliament the final Project for PACS—the fourth project defending the rights of queers in Italy, but the *first one* in the history of the country to be discussed in Parliament.

PACS

At the time I was writing, never before had gay unions been so thoroughly mediated, talked about, publicized, advocated and repudiated in Italy. Interestingly enough, the terms of the public debate have boundaries that leave important questions unconsidered. Although the meaning, benefits and political consequences of PACS are widely commented on television, issues

like gay parenting, the status of partners that are foreigners, multiracial queer families, and even AIDS are not a subject of inquiry, either for the press or for the spokespersons of gay organizations. Defenders of PACS argue that the document will provide individuals with *choice*, but they overlook the power the document accepts from the state, as a mediator that enforces certain behaviors while dismissing others. Defining gay unions as a simple exercise of freedom of choice conceals the potential consequences of such legalization for those queers that ‘choose’ not to marry. For example, it would extend social benefits only to married or united couples, strengthening the links between benefits and marriage/civil unions, hence justifying that the state leaves other individuals unprotected. Gay unions might also substantiate the bigotry that non united/married queers are deviant or pathological pervers.

In Italy, debates about gay marriage had not been as preponderant in the public sphere and in the media as in the United States or North Western European countries until today, in part because GLBTQ groups did not pursue the legalization of marriage per se, but followed the French PACS. In fact, to appreciate the advantages and disadvantages of PACS, it is important to bear in mind that narratives about the family in Italy encompass religious, moral and historical values, as well as representations that are different from those of protestant countries, including values like honor, faithfulness, sanctity, cohesion, natural motherhood, and so forth.¹

One of the main advantages of PACS, however, is that, in conjunction with other proposals presented to Parliament regarding discrimination and parity of opportunities, it strengthens the urgency to provide a minimum of legal protection for gays, lesbi-

¹ Think, for instance, of Article 29 of the Italian Constitution, which states “The Republic recognizes the rights of the family as a natural society founded on marriage.”

ans and queers in Italy. Narratives about the family, gender relations and intimacies are so long and deep rooted that their transformation requires investing enormous, time-consuming economic, human, and political resources. Efforts of this magnitude do not always guarantee immediate success. Unfortunately, the status of the human rights of queers in Italy is so fragile that there is no time to waste.²

On the other hand, saving time and resources and making use of opportunities opened by a changing international context does not mean avoiding confrontation with the social institutions that perpetuate oppression. The language of PACS does not preclude the continuity of the 1970s liberationist struggles, but guarantees that 'options' are opened for those who seek the protection of the law.

It is worth pointing out, nevertheless, certain passages where the proposal reinforces the ideology of the family. For example, the text refers to homosexuality as a natural condition and it stresses sameness over difference: "The Italian homosexuals, who *as any other human beings* have not chosen their sexual orientation ..." (PACS proposal, p. 1, my translation, my emphasis). In addition, by forcing human sexuality to adapt to a preexistent dichotomist homosexual/heterosexual map, this document reifies a two-gender system, excluding transgender or people who do not identify with the 'either/or' gender schism. Moreover, it also suggests that a stable relationship between two individuals guarantees human fulfillment or happiness: "The present law guarantees the inviolable right of man and woman to find their full realization within a couple..." (PACS proposal,

Article # 1, my translation). Article #2 establishes that the pact is the union between two people, hence casting away non-mogamous unions. Although it does entail patrimonial benefits, it fails to discuss parenthood, children tutelage, or adoption. Finally, Article #21 does grant citizenship to a foreign partner, but only after five years of residing in Italy. This is an extraordinary long period of time for any immigrant, but particularly discriminative of lower class, immigrant queers who are therefore forced to either live as dependants of their partners (hence reinforcing gender asymmetric divides) or working illegally (hence being potentially subject to deportation). Finally, the Italian PACS is equally timid concerning parenthood, a subject on which is totally silent. At this level it is far behind the legislation of countries like Holland, Sweden, Denmark, Island, and Great Britain, all of which have passed laws for legal adoption by same-sex couples (Fisher, 2003).

Although the Italian PACS presents advantages over compulsory heterosexuality, it does not resolve the intrusion of the state into the regulation and surveillance of sexuality. Furthermore, it does not contest the normative construction of the couple as the elemental social unit. In doing so, PACS are subject to many of the same criticisms with which queer theorists have castigated marriage. In fact, given its poor defense of rights that continue to be exclusive of heterosexuals, civil partnership enables governments to control same-sex relationships while keeping the advantaged status of marriage for heterosexuals only (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2004).

QUEUING FOR FREEDOM

I first knew about the Italian PACS while queuing at the Italian Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina, the most Southern country of America. As part of an epiphany that dislocated my sense of in-

² Consider, for example, that two hundred gay men are killed per year in Italy in homophobic hate crimes (Nardi, 1998). The latest demonstration of homophobic violence took place on April 23, 2005, when two gay men who were holding hands in a populated street of Rome were killed with a rain of stones thrown by extreme right activists.

ner/outer geographies, while lining up, I was reading the news about PACS in a French GLBT newsletter but listening to Canadian singer Alanis Morisset, who, from the extreme opposite of the continent sang for me: *And isn't it ironic, don't you think... a little too ironic, yeah I really do think.* It was ironic that although my whole family (including my partner) is Italian, the embassy refused to grant new citizenships to any Argentine after the 2001 economic crisis that boosted emigration of Argentines to Italy. It was ironic that the Italian PACS that no others but GLBTQ representatives designed obstructs the union of an immigrant with an Italian person.

Facing the uncertainties of migrating to Italy and in the hope that a legal document would make my foreign status less subject to policial scrutiny, at my return to the United States my Italian partner and I—both foreign students in the United States at that time—got our domestic partnership license in an undersize office in Urbana, Illinois. Our plan to move to Turin, Italy in June 2006 has meant a profound challenge to my identity and has affected every area of my life. I am living in a transitional space where the past and future confound, where two or more languages create a dialogic new self and where non heterosexual migrant desire confronts the mechanics of heterosexist norms. This transitional space encompasses many of the contradictions of living queerly in a very dehumanizing unified world. As a queer, I feel shame that a sector of my community has compromised with the State, assimilating queer love to many of the rituals of heterosexual marriage. Contradictory as it might seem, as a gay lover I support the PACS. I hope that one day I can stroll down the street holding hand with my partner without being gazed as chimpanzees in a zoo; or kiss in a supermarket aisle without feeling the surveillance camera zooming behind our backs. As a descendant of Italians, I feel pity that the Italian State, with its legacy of Fascist

colonization and domestic racial cleansing is considering now passing a document that implies the exclusion of the racially 'impure'. As a South American, I am overwhelmed by the anxiety of the colonized. I'm traveling to the center of the Empire to fight the centennial war of the *desposeído*.

TRANSNATIONAL AND QUEER

Becoming a migrant queer, I confronted the limitations of looking at the world from the window of essentialism and permanence. Anything I had taken as a solid piece of my self fractured as if made by the finest crystal. Exhausted of speaking a foreign language, I would turn to Spanish to translate my *desolación*, only to discover my *native* language had become as foreign as Italian or English.

Many of my academic credentials were not recognized outside Argentina: I could not have patients, or teach English, or have my own class at school. My housing was always temporary, subject to the fluctuations of my scholarship and fellowship. My financial acrobatics to make ends meet with the university salary included buying at *Save a Lot*, having my teeth cleaned at Parkland College and home-cooking *Dulce the Leche*. Ironically, the money saved in health care and food had to be spent in conferences or buying the latest cultural studies book where Iek psychoanalyzed the Marxist notion of class.

New friends came and went as fast as seasons started and ended, never sure of commitments bounded by transitory visas. Many times, my sexuality and love life conflicted with my Fulbright scholarship, and I prefer to remain ignorant as to what extent the United States' Department of Education has put my activities under surveillance once I made public my relation with an Italian man.

It was in the United States, however, that my partner Daniele and I constructed

our first home, and therefore, together with the harshness of migrant life came some privileges inherent to living within the margins. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987/1999) described them beautifully:

Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an "alien" element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being "worked" on. I have the sense that certain "faculties"—not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored—and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened. Strange, huh? (p. 3)

Perhaps, the changes in my identity experienced during my stay in the United States are best reflected in my writing. Indeed, this essay is one of my first interpretive pieces. I wish to experiment here with a writing that encompasses the political, the personal, and the symbolic. In locating myself within my study, I am most concerned with the question of agency through experimental writing. I agree with Norman Denzin (2001) that this perspective "is not for everyone. It is based on a research philosophy that is counter to much of the traditional scientific research tradition in the social sciences" (p. 1). My aim is to perform involving minimal theory, show rather than tell, and engage rather than explain. As Denzin (2001) argues, researchers should use the interpretive approach "only when they want to examine the relationships between personal troubles and the public policies and public institutions that have been created to address those troubles. Interpretive interactionism speaks to this interrelationship between private lives and public responses to personal troubles.

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WRITING IN THE CONFINES

A common question that I have been asked in the United States about my writing has been how can I possibly benefit from it. Considering my personal situation as a person who plans to move into Italy, this was not a naïve question. Sometimes, it was genuinely asked out of sympathy, and sometimes it was uttered with malice, but it was never a superficial question. Unlike other PhD students, I am not interested in getting a job within the United States. In contrast to many other foreign students at a North American university, I neither want to remain in the United States nor do I plan to continue my work in Argentina, the country where I was born. Unlike most of my Argentine colleagues in Urbana-Champaign, my research will probably be considered useless—not because it is not relevant for Argentina, but for the exact opposite reason: Argentina is still deeply imbued with homophobic laws, attitudes, and social institutions, including the University.

Notice that in the last paragraph, I emphasize what I am *not*, although I could have highlighted what I *am*: I am a queer who practices psychoanalysis and teaches communications and human rights. I am working-class, I am a leftist, I am an activist, so on and so forth. Undoubtedly, had I chosen to start this essay by accentuating what I am, I would have been stressing communalities with others who share similar identity concerns, or position themselves similarly in enunciation. By highlighting what I am *not*, however, I align myself with a number of writers who question the stability, or unity of the self. Further, by evading describing what/who I am, I avoid giving the self a positive, coherent substance or essence.

With the current crisis of the Modern

subject has come a criticism of its Enlightened coherence, as criticized from a number of perspectives, including Lacanian psychoanalysis, Chicano, postcolonial and transnational feminisms, and queer studies. For some queer authors, debasing the self risks negating preceding readings of identity that had created a common ground for political change based on what 'we are' (Kirsch, 2000). Indeed, definitions of what or who 'I am' / 'I am not' are at the base of political views that frame one's relations with the body, the other and the world. By highlighting what I am *not*, however, I would like to perform a critique of the conditions under which a whole population has been annihilated: Italian/migrant queers, for the most part of history, have *not* been allowed to be. Becoming a *non* Italian writing about Italy, I want to set in motion a project that traverses the space of complete negativity made up of social alienation, group ostracism, familial secrecy, historical erasure, Catholic cursing, communist rejection, military execution, university segregation, parliamentary refusal, media censorship, political misrepresentation, and even one's own internalized queer panic.

The decision to situate myself as a *non* Italian in these passages has been the result of long discussions with colleagues and activists. Allegedly, my identity could have been situated as Italian or South American or both at the same time, and indeed, in other parts of the essay I claim this multi ethnic identity as a site for political struggle. In this passage, however, I wanted to use my writing to assess critically the tension between sexual identity and national identity. My claim is that while sexual identity has become a commonly codified, even advertised, site of fluidity and enjoyment, nationality continues to be represented, even among queers, as a solid terrain, and the herald of racial purity. Events like the French and Belgian protests of November 2006, the expulsion of African immigrants

from Madrid, the virtual cordoning off of London's *Paki* 'hoods, or the Italian's increasing exploitation of South East and Balkan's immigrants as domestic/sexual cheap labor, suggest that race and sexuality are being remade as the site of annihilation. Anybody's body moving/growing up/working across national boundaries is distressed by the virtual impenetrability of nationality, the classing of sex, the muteness of Law. And we are counted in millions.

I stress *negativity* as a form of marginal or third-space becoming and doing. To a positivistic mind, this stress on negativity might be strange. I have been asked how this negativity is a better option for oppressed queers in Italy. Why would not a person be able to own different nationalities, sexualities, spaces or identities? In fact, there are political and sexual domains that can be reclaimed or owned individually. There are other spaces, however, where such reclaiming is policed and secured. I prefer terms like negativity, not, third space, confines and even transitional space as a way of questioning social progress or imaginary victories based on the equally imaginary values of freedom and individual agency. All these images imply transitions, incompleteness, and lack of guarantees; they situate queer politics as a reflective, personal and critical activity.

The current struggle of many queer Italians to achieve the legal recognition of their unions is a paradigmatic case, in this sense. On the one hand, it is clearly high time the Italian government granted queers equal social, legal and civic rights. On the other hand, queers need to remain critical and observant of what representations, values and norms their claims and struggles imply and reify. Otherwise, queers might assimilate to the language, symbols and institutions that define the basic tenets of heterosexuality.

In this essay, I position myself as a queer writing in the confines of language, nationality and sexuality with the intention

of opening a venue for a non essentialist *I* to dialogue with anybody situated within the highly politicized arena of queer politics. I refer to my politics differently throughout this essay: I call them politics of the real, or politics from a transitional space, or politics of the radical alterity, or simply queer politics. Political representation is a continuously sliding terrain connecting the personal and the political, a terrain with no security, opened up for dialogue and gestures that attempts to capture something of the infinite difference at the heart of humanity that, paradoxically, can never be completely codified.

TURIN, ITALY

“Let’s stay in *our* home in Turin,” my partner Daniele suggests while revising our plans for our first trip to Italy together. “This way, we can save on lodging.” “What home are you talking about?” I reply. “Sorry, I meant, my parents’ home.” It is infuriating when possessive adjectives have the power to elucidate the transitory nature of human experiences. I still refer to my parents’ home in similar ways; I call it *our*; or *my* home. *Our* home is also the home Daniele and I made, or our future home in Turin. It is usually the intonation and context that clarify, so that we create varieties of emotional languages to traverse different spaces of cultural belonging, bordering between Argentina, the United States and Italy.

Our speech reflects and articulates intimacy, respect and care. Daniele speaks to me in his beautiful *Torinese* and I reply with my strong *Ys* (like in the words *Yerba*, *Yo* or *Lluvia*) and my fainting *Ss*, so typical of the working class’ Rioplatense Spanish. This is our middle ground, a language that expresses affection and commitment to our respective communities. Similar to the new tongue that emerged out of Chicano communities (Anzaldúa, 1999), the linguistic

middle ground that Daniele and I invented includes verbs conjugated in Spanish directly derived from Italian, like *guardare* (to see, instead of the Spanish ‘ver’ or ‘mirar’): *Te estoy guardando, amore* (I am looking at you, my love; instead of *Te estoy mirando, mi amor*). Words like ‘cartas’ (letters) have been transformed in neologisms like *letras*, a mix of the Italian *lettera* and the plural form of the Spanish word *carta*. Most interestingly, we dialogue merging sometimes several languages and alleged ‘incorrect’ grammars that remind me of Jorgue Luis Borges’ and Xul Solar’s linguistic inventions. I remember playing scrabble in café Pekara a sunny Saturday last Fall. We would start each round picking a letter-tile from the bag of tiles. The letter determined the language we had to use in making the next word on the board: English, Spanish, Italian, French, or the *mix* of all of them. At the same time, it determined the language we were to speak during the round. It is however when we mix some of these languages together that we feel more empowered: *parlando* becomes ‘talkando’; *looking* becomes ‘luchin’ and *deseo* becomes ‘desero’. In creating a conversation combining phonemes and words from different languages we are defying law, for there is no utter law than the law of language.

This form of invented communication derives, I suggest, from the peculiar state of being constantly exposed to identity limits, both as queers and as foreigners. Whenever we confront heterosexism and queer panic, or sense we are pushed to invisibility (the *not*), then we recreate alternative ways *to be*. For instance, we usually code-shift when we do not want somebody to know of our relationship because it would be potentially harmful for either of us. In this respect, there is a form of mutual care that we protect, which emerged from the experience of living in foreign countries as well. *Guarda che questa persona _ il mio professore e non sa che sono gay. Ansi, credo che _ homophobic* (Be careful that this person is my

professor and he/she does not know that I am gay. Indeed, I think he/she is homophobic). This care of oneself and the other complicates our sense of what “coming out” really means. Undoubtedly, more than simply identitarian rigidity, *coming out* implies particular ethics. As Larry Gross (1995) explains, *coming out* “is about the codes that bind some people to keep other’s secret, and the conventions that require some people to tell lies about others” (p. ix). When I came to the United States, rights and possibilities that I had taken for granted as being natural became questioned and identified as artificial constructions that privilege only some individuals. Language barriers, censorship, internalized and external homophobia, university or governmental surveillance are some of the processes that limit agency in a foreign country. Sometimes Daniele and I disagree about the extent to which we are affected by cultural homophobia: He invites me to a party held at his college. “Will I be able to hug and kiss you if I want to?” Silence. “Then I won’t even bother.”

Other times, we negotiate and accept the fallibility of language. Ok, let’s stay in *your* home in Turin,” I finally agree. We would first stop in Paris, France, to say hi to his friend Ode during her birthday; immediately afterwards, we would take the TGV train heading to Turin, stay two days, unpack, and start our tour, all the way south from Turin to Messina. Having been a life-long dream of my parents and sister to travel to the land of our ancestors, Italy appeared to me not only as a dream come true, but as a land that was undeserved and forbidden for me as the youngest sibling and least related to Italy. Indeed, before meeting my partner, I had rejected learning Italian or attending the celebrations at the *Club Italiano*; I thought I would never be touched by any sort of nostalgia for *La Terra Madre* (Mother Land); I believed my generation had brought nostalgias to an end.

Four years after leaving Argentina, I

am a fluent Italian speaker, became a devoted cook of Italian food, write on Italian gay culture, and was elected the vice-president of the only Italian association in Champaign, Illinois. Throughout this time, my identity as Argentinean did not dissolve, but became more complex and less solid. It is from this particular identity formed by the intersections of my identity with space, law and desire that I write of *queer* Italy, an Italy that is usually annihilated, even among *Italians*. Indeed, my trips to Italy made me aware of the peculiarity of my cultural identity. To stress negativity again, I am *not* (exclusively) Italian in the same sense that I am *not* (exclusively) Argentine, and this is probably one of the strongest personal experiences that motivated me to keep writing about Italy and Argentina at the same time. This essay is not meant to be read as the regurgitation of data accumulated after years of research, but as a very personal and political inquiry, a soul-searching activity. Being an Italian-Argentine writing in English and looking into Italian culture has exceeded my expectations to find my own academic voice; instead it has given me the opportunity to *produce* a new self altogether.

CADIZ (SPAIN), BUENOS AIRES (ARGENTINA)

Carmen locked the door to her room and never looked back at her small Cadiz [Spain].” Any time my mother told my sister and me a story about great grandmother Carmen, she would start somewhat that way. Little was ever spoken at home about Carmen’s departure to Argentina. Other things were said about her, instead. All I know about her decision to emigrate is that she had been living in an undersized room for two years after my great-grandfather Abraham, a strong Jewish Moor, past away. My great-grandmother was an early feminist not easily intimidated by war or eco-

nomic hardship. However, with two children to feed and no money to pay the rent, she decided to leave Spain and go to Argentina, where her sisters had already emigrated and could help her settle. She spoke the right language as well—Castilian Spanish.

My great-grandmother, Carmen, left a particular mark on my mother. Carmen was a free woman of a cheerful spirit living as immigrant in the land of Tango and *compadritos*.³ At the age of sixty, and blind, my great grandma would ask my mom to guide her lovers to the main room, where they would wait for her while she prepared her skin with honey and perfumes. While my mother believes I have inherited Abraham's eyes, big and profound, I always thought, however, that I had inherited some of my great grandmother's appreciation for the care of the self. The subject of anecdotes and jokes, she is still remembered today in Christmas Eve's family tales as a defiant, sexual woman. In times when sexual pleasure was forbidden for a Catholic widow, she settled in Buenos Aires and never had to work again: lovers, friends and agnostics, many of them affluent land owners, provided for her until her last days. By then, my grandmother, Josefina (or simply, Fina) had already grown into a beautiful young woman: unlike most girls from her native Andalusia, she was fair-haired and had green eyes. In Argentina, Josefina met Andrés, a Southern Italian emigrant, worker in the general markets of Buenos Aires since he was ten. His family had escaped famine and the horrors of war. They married by the Catholic rite, although Carmen disapproved, of course. Grandmother Josefina gave birth at home, cared for by her mother and friends from the house. After married, she left Carmen's big house and moved to a *conventillo*—a big, multi-bedroom household unit inhabited by several families at the same time. In good times, they would all live peacefully

³ Brave, macho men.

as one big family. In time of gossip or quarrel, however, they would be loud and fight with each other to the ire of everybody. There were few private issues. On the bright side, they could rely on each other: they had an organized network of relationships that differed from the Argentinean middle class in the traditions they kept, in the shared economies they arranged, in the language they spoke (a mix of Italian, Castilian Spanish, Jewish and Creole), and in the emotions they shared.⁴

My mother, María, was the second of the three children raised by my grandparents. She was rebellious and nicknamed *marimacho* (mannish girl) because she would fight with her fists to defend her beliefs. She defended my uncles when they played with my grandmother's clothes: apparently, they dressed up not because they were *maricas* (fags) as their friends believed, but because they wanted to rehearse how to behave and what to say on their first date.

Across the neighborhood lived José, my father. He was the twelfth son of a large family of fishermen from Catanzaro, in the South of Italy, who moved to Argentina almost at the same time my grandmother did. José's mother, Concetta, and his father Michelle (or, later on, Miguel⁵) also worked in the general markets of Buenos Aires, where they befriended Andrés, and introduced my parents on their first day of work: they were ten years old.

My parents have known each other for almost sixty years and they have spent almost every day of their lives together. Predictably, throughout so many years of being together, they went through several ups and downs. They never finished primary

⁴ For a feminist account of identity transformations that took place in the *conventillo*, see Brito Pea, A., et al (1995). *Voces femeninas y construcción de identidad*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: CLACSO.

⁵ As tradition indicated, I was named Miguel Andrés after my grandparents.

school but they managed to visit Disneyland once; they changed dozens of jobs, but still do not own a house; they lost money repeatedly in all the memorable Argentinean crises; they once sold their wedding rings to pay the rent; they recovered and started all over by selling home made clothes that they sold in the neighbourhood. They argued, but were never disrespectful to one another. They had two children, my sister Sandra and me. They taught us how to survive during the 1976-1983 dictatorship by keeping it low at school, or covering our books in newspaper so as to not call the attention of the agents in buses and in the streets or giving us the address of friends who could rescue us and send us to Madrid if they were captured. My parents, a couple who got engaged at 18 and got married at 24, saw my sister living with her fiancé before marrying him and welcomed my partner to their home in 2002.

In Argentina, in my parent's generation and class, issues like divorce, cohabitation, and civil unions—let alone same-sex couples—were not part of their language at least until the return of democracy in Argentina. Two of my uncles had divorced via Uruguay, but it was definitely something you did not talk about in family meetings: these were words that simply did not exist in my parent's symbolic domain. When divorce was finally introduced in Argentina in the mid 1980s, it came with a series of rapid cultural changes that accelerated during the next twenty years. Because the last totalitarian government repressed groups and associations, tried to indoctrinate the youth, and instilled panic and an ultra orthodox Catholic sense of obedience to the family, the redefinition of intimacy has been at the center of the cultural transformations undergone by Argentina since the return of democracy. Two comparably crucial events signaled the beginning and continuation of this transformation: on the one hand, the *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayos* now three-decade old struggle for recovering

the identity of illegally abducted children; on the other hand, and more recently, the 2001 law of civil unions (including same-sex unions) that, thanks to the struggle of the *Comunidad Homosexual Argentina* (Homosexual Community of Argentina) was passed in Buenos Aires. The changes in law have been reflected in recent cultural changes. For instance, in 2005, and for the first time in the history of the country, a lesbian couple from the central province of Córdoba together registered their baby that was born as a result of artificial insemination. To use Richard Mohr's (2005) expression, these two events describe a *long arc of justice*, a radical recoding of what constitutes intimate, nourishing family relationships.

CRISES

Before 2001, a decade-long political project had promised a productive revolution in Argentina. Carlos Menem's administration altered the public landscape of the country by dismantling the national state and selling public reserves to transnational corporations and private individuals. These actions resulted in one of the deepest economic disasters ever experienced in Argentina. The next administration pledged democratic renewal and social justice. The new president elected was Fernando De La Rúa, from the Radical party, whereas the new Vice President, Carlos Alvarez, represented a democratic left. De La Rúa's short and inefficient administration was halted shortly after taking power following Alvarez's resignation. In December 2001, a series of interlinked political events led to De La Rúa stepping down. Political unrest, muggings, street chaos, anxiety, and brutal police repression followed. Several international banks closed their doors and froze the money deposited in bank accounts. Companies closed down, leaving thousands of people without jobs. A handful of

provisional presidents, one after another in the course of a week, could not control the crisis. Finally, after a year and a half, on May 18, 2003, a new democratic administration was elected.

The most significant aspect of December 2001 was 'coming out' to my sister, which was coincidental with the coming out of protesters into the streets. Their challenging of social oppression offered me a metaphor for understanding the political implications of my own 'coming out.' As dubious as I am, personally, about the stereotyped 'coming out' act, I want to stress that it seemed I was not the only one for whom coming out into the streets in December 2001 served as a metaphor for discussing with our families the question of sexual identity. In a country like Argentina, marked by a profound and deeply held heterosexual, white, middle-class social imaginary, this coming out is particularly significant. In a certain way, many in Argentina were also *coming out*; they came out, albeit for different reasons, into the streets. As Kath Weston (1991) has shown, what could be understood as being redefined in these circumstances were not so much the biological ties to our families but, rather, our sense of kinship with them. It was a fertile re-positioning or re-defining experience that challenged familiar meanings, values, experiences; and, it was an instance of self-defined truth that broke the imaginary unity of many families for a moment. It may be that the characteristic of these instances—the idea that they constituted a moment of self-defined truth—marks them as crucially important in creating a unified familial front, even in the face of a broken imaginary unity. As Stuart Hall (1996a) has emphasized, just a moment of articulation of difference is enough to produce the potential of a social force capable of self-conscious unity in action.

A COUNTRY IN FLAMES

During the first months of 2002, it was virtually impossible to stroll down some of the most beautiful intersections in Buenos Aires. The corner of Marcelo T. de Alvear St. and 9 de Julio Avenue, for example, looked like a campsite. This is the corner where the Italian embassy is situated. People slept in tents or mattresses in the street, or remained standing for days. The dozen of hundreds of people lining up every day at the front door of the embassy were desperate. I was one of them. We were the children or grandchildren of Italians, who had lost their savings and hope, and wanted to start all over again, abroad, in the land of their ancestors. We wanted to change the Empire. Contradictory as it might seem, we also wanted to be part of it.

Since 2001, all Italian embassies in Argentina have stopped issuing Italian passports to Argentines without commenting on the reasons or extension of this measure. Contrary to their hopes, this has not acted as a deterrent to emigration, but has only augmented the amount of illegal Argentines seeking a new beginning in the land of their grandparents.

Although my hope of reclaiming my Italian citizenship vanished at the entrance door of the Embassy, I was, without knowing it, closer to Italy than ever before. At the beginning of 2002, I was granted a Fulbright scholarship to pursue my Ph.D. in the United States, which would eventually materialize my research on Italian culture and my relationship with Daniele. Leaving Argentina was more painful than expected. In one of the pre-departure workshops organized by the Fulbright Commission, I looked around trying to discover anybody else being invaded, like me, by a mixture of competing feelings including social guilt, anxiety, pride and hope. During the crisis, some grantees had lost all the money they had saved for an experience that would

probably save their professional careers. Some others had lost their jobs and did not expect to reconstruct their work careers in the following years. Personally, being granted a Fulbright scholarship meant the beginning of a journey that has recreated every single aspect of my identity.

At times, it was surprising to realize how much my trip meant for others as well. Neighbors in *mi barrio* knew through my father that I was leaving to the United States; he invited them to come to our home. Some day before my departure, they brought *alfajores de maizena*, cartas and dedicated photos for their own daughters and sons, who were living in Chicago. They wanted me to deliver them, because the cost of the post service had tripled in one month. It was just a second, but I looked at them in awe that they would somehow *taint* me: a wind of hate crossed my mind whispering ‘tu no estás para lavar los platos de los Yankees’ (you are not to wash the dirty dishes of the *Yankees*). The look I gave to my neighbors was exactly the same that others had given me and my grandmothers and my parents and my sisters and brothers in the past; it is the gaze of the colonizador stepping in the land of the *desposeído*. The look to my neighbors laments the fact that I am, too, in desperate need. Being the first person in my family to pursue graduate level education meant an opportunity to redeem the past of famine and emigration of my family. At that time, I did not know I was to bring to my family other hungers, other languages, and other foreign landscapes. One must embrace all the pasts to let one present become.

URBANA (UNITED STATES)

The phrase [for the essay] is beautiful. Besides, it is really useful for me the explanation about gay relationships. How silly I might look, right? I am not worried for you two or for you in particular anymore, simple because I feel you

are doing great. I see you open, smiling, alive...and that is the way one wants to see the ones we love. Besides, can you deny that since you are in love with Daniele and since I am in love with Gaby we are more spontaneous, relaxed and open to speaking and listening? Daniele seems a piece of candy for all of us. It is not easy to find a sweetie like him. And we would like you to stay together for ever. But that is your decision, and whatever it is, it will always be accepted and respected.

When I passed my preliminary examinations, I wrote an email to my sister, sharing with her a sentence I wanted to use to open my dissertation. I also explained to her how Daniele and I understood the term family, and how difficult I believed it was for a heterosexist straight person to understand queer epistemology, meaning that the way queers and heterosexist straights *know* or make use of the world is not the same. I suggested that many queers and heterosexist straights that I know do not organize their symbolic resources in similar fashion. My sister replied to me, apologizing for not knowing enough about gay relationships. It is remarkable that she would like Daniele and I to stay together for ever. Of course, I read her ‘stay together’ meaning ‘be a couple’ for ever. She means good, undoubtedly.

Love cannot be measured using discrete time and space units. From the queer framework I write, to ‘stay together’ has nothing to do with the place where one lives or the amount of time spent with a person. Stay together has to do with loyalty and care of the self⁶ and the other, and freedom. Living in the margins of sexuality and

⁶ I use the expression care of the self to indicate the constant cultivation and ethical concern of one’s life that leads to constant improvement. For Michele Foucault “[t]his ‘cultivation of the self’ can be briefly characterized by the fact that one must ‘take care of oneself.’ It is this principle of the care of the self that establishes its necessity, presides over its development, and organizes its practice” (Foucault, 1986, p. 43).

nationality implies confronting each day with very little resources and numerous responsibilities to improve one's life and the life of the ones one loves. This implies a continuous creative yet unsafe state of being. To some heterosexist straights, this epistemology can sound dangerous, for it challenges more stable attachments to the heterosexual self or family. The framework I write about is suspicious of these values cherished by the middle class white heterosexist matrimony; it is critical of morals of faithfulness, unity, or sameness.

BEFORE CROSSING THE BORDERS

In part, this essay emerged as a personal project to situate myself as a future, non-heterosexual immigrant to Italy in a non-heterosexist, same-sex relationship. To me, my life project demands that I consider what sort of reality I will have in a land that, although belonging to my family of origin and my partner, continues to be foreign territory to me. Will I ever regret the path I could have taken by staying somewhere else? Will I be chased by childhood memories about my barrio? How will it feel to inhabit a geography where buildings and streets are anonymous at first? Will I be able to make this geography speak to me? What verses will this space and my body interchange and how phenomenal an identity will this new one be for me? Whenever I am, I am an immigrant. This thought consoles me: I will make another being in another place. Sometimes, I cannot avoid passing a judgment that my claims on identity are simple wishful thinking; a part of me is trying to assure myself that time and experiences are reversible, that I can go back anytime I want to, that nationality is as fluid as sexuality. The fallacies of a memory crisscrossed by the workings of the unconscious makes us slaves wishing we could go back somewhere and recover a mythical thing, land, self, time...Having al-

ready left one land, I have not arrived yet to a final destination. There is no final destination, or home. This is what it feels to be living on the margins. There is something existential about this realization, for being alive is just a parenthetical moment of life basking around the infinite moment before we are born and the infinite time after we are dead.

I realize that my choice to travel to Italy is the result of childhood experiences, as well as a reflection of my hope to construct a life project with my partner. In our weekly electronic correspondence, my sister and I spend hours remembering childhood experiences, trying to recode their meaning, or smiling today about something that seemed so painful in the past. This meditation about what has been and what could have been is typical of immigrants: in her study with immigrant lesbians, Olivia Espin (1997) stresses that immigrants cross geographical as well as emotional and behavioral boundaries, constantly preoccupied by the status of their being in a new place, ruminating about their pasts, or worrying about a present that could have been different had they not immigrated. We need to construct new cartographies as much as new identities. In this work there is no simplification or shortcut.

PIAZZA DI SPAGNA, ROME (ITALY)

Though I am writing this paragraph almost two years after I started this essay at a café located at the center of Piazza di Spagna, I can still feel the frantic pace of life that inundates that square at any time during the day. Despite the intoxicating heat, it was crowded: all around me there were European entrepreneurs wearing fine clothes, housekeepers sale-shopping swimsuits made in Pakistan, Paris or Taiwan, international and domestic vacationers coming from the *Mezzogiorno*,⁷ clergymen heading to the Vatican and street vagrants and arti-

sans selling pirate CD copies. Not New York or Paris, but Rome's Piazza di Spagna appeared to me as the ultimate, postmodern model of the public sphere. Designed in 1720s, its old architecture congregates the finest fashion designers, several of all the Italian dialects and a diversified cacophony of class and tourism. Nobody is an invader of this public space; rather everybody is a mere passenger. The public sphere does not belong to the Highest Magistrates, but to the whole community. Everybody brings to this Piazza a share of cultural capital, if you are ready to perceive it. Tourist guides are meaningless in their anodyne descriptions of this Roman epicenter of wealth and tourism. I let myself be captured with the intoxicating coexistence of parallel, alternative and anti-cultures formed by the lower class bargaining in small shops, North African and Latin American immigrants selling imitations of fashion items in the streets, and the working girls streetwalking at daylight. I was at home; oh, yes I was.

I was sipping a hot, dense *espresso doppio* next to Daniele, mimicking a typical tourist pose, and pretending it was perfectly normal to pay 4 € for a tiny cup of coffee. To avoid paying hotel, we had dozed in the night train to Rome, and skipped a restaurant lunch. After walking for hours around the city center, dinner was the only thought that consoled our vagabond souls. The decent meal would not materialize until night, however, when we would meet Fabio—a friend we had met in Urbana during our first year in the United States and who kindly hosted us. It was 2 pm when we finally found a place for me to sketch some notes and for him to relax from a self-imposed role of tour guide. I felt honored to be in Rome guided by my Italian lover. He was sitting at the table, talking to me in the dialect of Rome, a fast paced jumble of expressions he fancies he imitates quite well. While not being an expert to pass a judg-

ment on his linguistic performance, it was unmistakably clear for me that his lazy 's' and his open vowels at the end of each phrase were clear marks of his natal Turin.

When I put the espresso cup down, the sun exposed the wrinkles on the palm of my hand; I could see the thickness of my dry skin stretched across and along and through my fingers like all the roads of a One World, stretched without boundaries—an imaginary Oneness, whether I was ready or not. I was in delay, behind the frantic pace of globalization, and definitely in the periphery of the market.

"Darling: we are all impostors."

A street seller stopped nearby with replicas of Gucci purses and Armani belts. He was from Naples, Daniele said. "How do you know?" I asked. "Neapolitans are the best street sellers in the whole world. *I have to take you* to Naples. The whole South is like this. They enter into the wagon with boom boxes and computers which can be empty inside: they are usually filled with home made clay bricks." "How can you speak of the South in this way?" I asked. "Because my parents are Southerners. I am an infiltrated in the North. I am a Southern myself." I do not really know why I was so surprised about Daniele's comments. I am a Southerner myself, too.

Whenever I took the *Línea B* train in the Victorian style *Retiro* Station in Buenos Aires, the platform was flooded with voices and accents from Córdoba, San Luis, Catamarca, and Capital Federal. A wholesaler of sports goods, my father moved his whole life from North to South. Just as Daniele does now, my dad would *take me with him* in his trips. I was eleven years old, and trips happened during my school vacations. I had to learn to travel on my own, because "that is what you expect from a daring man," he would say. In these male trips, my father and I would travel for hours chatting quite little, enjoying the landscapes of silence. Eating regional foods from *Pastelitos de Membrillo* to *Empanadas Salteneas* or *Pan*

⁷ The South of Italy.

Caliente con Chipá, and buying souvenirs for mother (she likes *Alfajores Santafesinos*) was the perfect excuse to pretend we talked the language of masculinity. Similar to all the languages I could listen to around me in Piazza di Spagna, my father's explanations about sexuality were a perfectly strange dialect for me as well, a chain of words lacking connection with my desire. When he was talking about his trips, his language was dense and his words were silky; even if he never finished primary school, he narrated as a trained folk-tale writer. His descriptions of the female anatomy were hesitant, yet his acquaintance with the country's anatomy was mesmerizing. I remember with emotion his tales of dry cities in the North of Argentina, his fascinating reports of whale watching in Patagonia, and even his portrayal of the South of Italy as a land of fishermen with salty skin.

In my father's imagination there are two languages and two nationalities working at unison. His identity, as my own, is hybrid, *bi*, mixed. His veins are wide open canals for the endless journey of the human race. "All traveling happens in your imagination," my father would say. "The best trip of all is the trip without destination."

DRENCHED WORDS

Dear Sandra: Daniele and I have finally decided that we will take advantage of the domestic partnership in Urbana. This might seem ironic, coming from somebody who criticizes 'marriage', right? Indeed, I feel we are being more faithful to our beliefs than ever before. If we queers don't unite, we are powerless. Certificates like these ones are one of the little things we can do to avoid surveillance, discrimination and border-policing, for the document will allow us to have some rights at work, before our landlord, in public, and with regards the insurance policy. Of course, these are very limited rights, but it is better than nothing. We are also aware that this certificate

can be useful in Italy for immigration reasons: No matter what I claim I am, the powers that be will still regard me as 'alien'. But nowadays, I am more ready to fight back. Above all, this is a symbolic pact. Together with our memory and friends, it testifies of the existence of our relationship in this world. Love, Miguel.

Dear Miguel:...I believe that your words are drenched in pain and fear, but they are realistic in describing how your life would be in Italy, and also sincere in describing how much you two love each other. To me, it seems that the possibility of going to Italy for a while is not bad. I think so because, in case things do not work out there, you would have exhausted all the possibilities. Perhaps you feel that the possibilities for you in Italy are few and difficult, but if you go there, you would not remain with the doubt. Being an immigrant is one of the hardest life experiences, I know. It warms the spirit; it makes you another you.

How long would it take you to get the citizenship? While I do not know what's going on nowadays in Europe, I do know that it is very difficult to find "that special Person" with whom everything that is difficult turns a little easier. That person sees your soul. And because of this, it is worth fighting and going through all that it takes to stay together. If then you realize that it cannot go on, you will have matured the decision, and if you decide to separate, it will be done under other conditions than the present ones. I love you, Sandy.

The image of a journey without destination is useful to illustrate the meaning of identity. Identity is a strategic form of social practice (a way of thinking of ourselves and of our relations) in particular contexts that produce particular results. The signifier *identity* carries within two main, yet opposing images: *Id* and *Entity*. While the image of the *Id* suggests discontinuity or flux, impersonality (*it*) and non Aristotelian logics; the image of the *Entity* evokes continuity, solidity, self or individuality. I have situated my own self and identity in this project to emphasize that identity is a form of do-

ing and speaking, not a substance or thing. As I see it, identity concerns both self-identity and social (cultural, political) identity. There is no personal without the social and the political for the reason that human beings are constituted in relation to an Other. This Other is on the one hand the location of intersubjectivity, but also the site of language or the symbolic law *par excellence*, and it is also the Other of radical difference that inhabits fantasy.

All the forms of alterity render identity dialogic, performative and interdependent on the social. It is this interdependence and dialogic status of identity that I accentuate as the political nature of human identity. In my view, queer politics should seek not only sexual rights or civic rights, but above all the realization of *human dignity* through political action that we call democracy. This means that queer politics have an important role in re-manufacturing democracy today, conceiving of it as the making of a public space where citizens can question any norm or decision not originated in their own activity. In other words, politics is not an exclusive matter of the state or social institutions. Rather, it is a question of the political and psychical subjects that make it happen from grassroots levels. Democracy is constantly re-invented from public conflict and debate, from dislocation and struggle—that is why, against a romantic view of democracy as the site of rational interchanges, I stress the need to advocate politics without guarantee or politics of radical alterity. Here, the importance of full speech as political action should be stressed, for democracy is based on the acknowledgement of the Otherness, in the reaffirmation that all human beings are singular and indispensable.

One of the potential consequences of a project like PACS is that it confines queer action to the domestic sphere. Home, the four walls of a man's property, has turned to be the one and only safe place in the entire world for queers, the only one hidden

from the all-looking eyes of the public space: the distance between the private and the public spaces is, consequently, proportional to the distance or difference amid things that should be seen or shown and things that should be kept hidden. In the realm of home, the activity of human beings has the specific effect of gathering or separating things, people or institutions. Only in the public realm the human being is in a human world. When human action becomes political and public, we stand the test of time, whereas to remain anonymous, inside home, means to decrease forever after death. The image of *journey* renders clear the need to come out again, to make the domestic a site of politics and to emerge from the confinement of home into the public or political arena.

Identity—either sexual, political or ethnic—is a way of doing and speaking more than an essential quality of our self. As such, it is constantly determined or traversed by a multiplicity of forces that position the subject as an effect of language and mutable power relations. An essentialist view on sexuality is immobilizing, for it relies on positivistic and/or biological claims that limit political activity. At the same time, homosexual/heterosexual dichotomies cannot account for desire, which is always queer, independently of the sex of the object towards which a person is attracted. Queerness is not a matter of sexual orientation, but a form of strategic positionality that happens in intersection with a diversity of contexts. Queer-doing and speaking concerns both self-identity and social identity, forms of personal, social and political becoming that are wholly cultural; they are positions in language that changes according to intimate relations, geographical spaces and the flux of power.

Understanding identity as fluid has the advantage that it allows to build a strategic common ground that creates commonality and build alliances among people of the most diverse social background and inter-

ests, disregarding of their sexual preferences. The Italian queer movement can only benefit from politics that reach out, seeking others who can organize against xenophobia, whiteness and heterosexism. Furthermore, non essentialist views on sexuality and identity can create the seed for non separatist politics that can, potentially, overcome the current internal divisions within the wide spectrum of Italian queer organizations. A male gay centered movement is not only blind to the all-encompassing strength of a two-gender cultural system currently prevailing in Italy, but reductionist of the complexity inherent to the human condition. All individuals are indeed transgender, insofar as we all cross the lines of what has been consensually defined as masculine or feminine. In addition, a two-gender paradigm ostracizes transgender, intersex and queer individuals who reject being positioned in one or the other extreme of the masculine / feminine divide. As an unfortunate consequence of the current gender divide of the gay movement in Italy, transgender and intersex persons are currently only nominally present within gay politics and have a minuscule share in the national movement's decisions, representation and visibility compared to the huge presence of white, butch-identified gay males.

Because the construction of sexuality is not independent from judgments about class, ethnicity, race and nationality, a queer politics framework demands that activists address these issues within their agendas with the same intensity they are actually addressing the need for civil unions. Indeed, they need to be addressing them as *part* of the plea for civil union, not independently of it. I have illustrated this point by constantly referring to my own condition of migrant queer in Italy. My interpretive analysis of identity has tried to shed light on the multiple determinants that traverse the self. Sexual identity is a flexible construct for queers, issues like sexual orienta-

tion, nationality, religion, class and human, social and civic rights continue to be contesting sites affected by the power of agencies that most times are quite inflexible. As long as language serves these powers' interest in creating political dichotomies, there will always be discipline inflicted upon individuals, tinting their *selves* with shame and fear. The experience of transnational individuals living in Italy or new citizens (legally registered or not), either from inside or outside the European community has to be acknowledged and incorporated in the current Italian movement which has been led, for the most part, by an elite group of wealthy, and mostly male Italians only. Because we have experienced isolation, ghettoization, and language barriers, many migrant queers might have direct experience that can benefit the movement's need to build a community based on difference.

As queer activist Lehr puts it, rethinking the claims that the Italian queer movement is making can place political activism's accent "not on demanding that rights be extended, but rather on demanding that they be redefined, since guaranteeing rights for those previously excluded requires new understandings of the rights constructed around exclusion" (Lehr, 1999, p. 96). In truth, the title of this essay, *Writing Queer*, originated in several conversations with colleagues and friends from different regions of Italy, and in dialogue with my partner and sister. We have envisioned a utopian day when human rights in Italy and elsewhere are all inclusive and respectful of the radical diversity at the heart of humanity.

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