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Cruising queerness in Alejandro Modarelli's "El amargo retiro de la Betty Boop"

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Argentine writer and journalist Alejandro Modarelli's collection of stories, published under the title *Rosa prepucio: crónicas de sodomía, amor y bigudí* (2011), focuses on characters that do not sit within a neat, binary understanding of gender and sexuality. In her blurb on the back of the book, the writer and journalist, María Moreno notes that "las 'locas' de Modarelli no son mujeres encerradas en un cuerpo de hombre, son activistas escapadas de la política de la identidad que claman con fervor una especie de 'Manifiesto contra el puto occidental globalizado'". This note prepares the reader for the stories they will encounter, stories that do not support a neoliberal model of gay liberation that reduces queer people to a socially sanctioned model of some palatable form of identity. Modarelli's characters offer a glimpse of queer life, critique normative structures, and reject a linear narrative of progress tied to social changes and legal rights and recognitions. These same themes and ideas appear in Modarelli's journalism, notably in his contributions to SOY, the queer supplement of the newspaper *Página 12*, as well as in an academic work on queer life that he co-authored with Flavio Rapisardi. The stories contained within *Rosa prepucio* allow him to frame his critical ideas through a fictional world, giving them a human voice, showing the effects on specific characters of what might otherwise seem like abstract thoughts.

"El amargo retiro de la Betty Boop" opens Modarelli's collection and encompasses many of the themes of the book as a whole. The word "retiro" in the title signals that this is not the story of a beginning or a victory and the adjective "amargo" hints at the tone of the recollections included within it. The subtitle—"O un tango de los viejos baños"—focuses on the location and infuses the piece with the air of nostalgia and sex that characterizes tango.

The sense of wistfulness is further reinforced by the simple epigraph—“Qué remedio, amigos, qué remedio.”—taken from a poem by Luis Cernuda, although not credited to him at this point in the text. The epigraph contains the sense of resignation and loss expressed by both of the characters in very different ways. The suggestive information contained within these short phrases prepares the reader for the broad scope of the piece, which explores the homogenization of queerness within the neoliberal order, a social critique of this, as well as a meditation upon the life experiences of older effeminate queer men.¹ The story becomes a politicized critique of homonormativity and is a reminder of how capacious and challenging concepts of queerness need to be.

The short text allows the reader to relate to it in multiple ways as it falls somewhere between essay and story. The whole collection is described as being made up of *crónicas* and the possibility of thinking about this piece as both a report and historical chronicle creates a more dynamic space through which its multiple voices can be heard. The story operates in three parts: the first is narrated as a study of the history of sex in public toilets in Buenos Aires, the second an oral history (pun intended) recalled by the eponymous Betty Boop, and the third is a letter from her friend, La Diosa Arrodillada.² This polyphony of voices allows the texts to span the personal and the political, giving multiple perspectives on both. The format is likely indebted to the first chapter of the book on queer culture in Buenos Aires that Modarelli co-authored. That study opens with a chapter on sex in public toilets, which is introduced through the graffiti left on the walls of toilets in a train station (Rapisardi and Modarelli 21) in much the same way as “El amargo retiro de la Betty Boop” references that same phenomenon in the second paragraph.³ In the same vein as this story, the co-authored research notes that sex in public toilets “va declinando con la privatización del circuito del sexo” (Rapisardi and Modarelli 22). It also cites recollections from men who used these toilets and in one of those quotations, which focuses on the idea of a hierarchy within the

space, the interviewee recalls “la Betty Boop (que tenía la costumbre de pegar grititos de “uuuppp”, y de ahí le quedó el nombre)” (Rapisardi and Modarelli 52).⁴ The conclusion of the chapter focuses upon the changes wrought upon queer life in Buenos Aires, noting that “el libre mercado (y no tanto el SIDA)” managed to do something that neither police repression nor dictatorship achieved, which was “hacer de ellos nuevos ciudadanos. Consumidores, como todos, respetables” (Rapisardi and Modarelli 72).⁵ In many ways, the short text that opens *Rosa prepuccio* condenses the arguments made in the longer chapter co-authored with Rapisardi and fictionalizes the voices of two characters that Modarelli heard about in his research.

The critique of neoliberalism that Modarelli offers overlaps with the type of warning that Argentine writer Nestor Perlongher issued in an article from 1984 regarding the emergence of a seemingly homogenous gay identity, which he cautions “arroja a los bordes a los nuevos marginados, los excluidos de la fiesta: travestis, locas, chongos, gronchos—que en general son pobres—sobrellevan los prototipos de sexualidad más populares” (33). The voice of the *loca* is what is heard most clearly in this *crónica*, with both Betty Boop and La Diosa Arrodillada identifying with the term, and their feelings of no longer quite fitting in can be linked to the emergence of a narrower form of homonormative identity. This aspect of the criticism contained within the *crónica* also overlaps closely with queer feminist Lisa Duggan’s work on neoliberalism, which she labels a “nonpolitics” (177) in which the rhetoric around gay rights is marked by a centrist conservatism. Duggan’s critique of the neoliberal erasure of queer identities relates to the US, but certain parallels with Menem’s Argentina, which was influenced by such thinking, can be found in the ways she describes the move to “a dramatically shrunken public sphere and a narrow zone of ‘responsible’ domestic privacy” (182).⁶ Whilst Modarelli’s text identifies the effect of the privatization of what were once public spaces as one of the contributing factors in the limitations placed around queerness, its

critique of homonormativity avoids “performatively (re)constituting those tendencies as particularly one-dimensional and hegemonic” (Brown “Thinking Beyond” 1497) by exploring the issue through multiple voices, creating more rounded characters whose lives are changing because of their age as well as the disappearance of spaces in which they once had sex. Moreover, the text shows that the characters find “other practices that exist that foster alternative ways of relating” (Brown “Homonormativity” 1066), such as frequenting the café, whilst acknowledging that these new spaces fail to replicate the dynamics of the public toilet.

The overview of life in contemporary Buenos Aires given by the story offers a different perspective, namely one in which the queer characters do not engage with a linear narrative of progress. The two main characters are shown to disidentify with what José Esteban Muñoz describes as “a phobic majoritarian public sphere” (*Disidentifications* 4), hence their need to find alternative ways and spaces in which to relate with other queer people. What is important to note in the text is that the characters disidentify with a changing public sphere in different ways over time. Initially the characters appear to have almost unlimited sexual freedoms within the toilets, but they do not conform to the dominant image of masculinity set out by the Argentine dictatorship of the late 1970s and early 1980s, which Diana Taylor notes (93-94) saw men as strong, authoritarian figures inhabiting the public realm. Then, as time moves on, the characters do not see themselves encoded within democratic society where the gaining of rights is predicated upon homonormative lifestyles. Modarelli’s characters experience the shifting attitudes to homosexuality that sociologist Ernesto Meccia traces in his two related studies of “los últimos homosexuales.” In *Los últimos homosexuales*, Meccia breaks the queer experience in Argentina into three broad categories—homosexual, post-homosexual and “la gaycidad”—in order to allow us to “apreciar los efectos de un proceso de cambio social en el plano de las subjetividades y de las relaciones sociales” (53). His categories are certainly not fixed and he is very careful to

acknowledge just how blurred the boundaries between them are, particularly through his analysis of the interviews he conducted with queer men (*El tiempo no para* 32-33). Within Meccia's framework, Modarelli's two characters can be most strongly identified with the homosexual period, which is particularly linked back to 19th century ideas of illness and contagion and characterized by "la participación casi ineludible de los homosexuales en una misma colectividad de destino" (*Los últimos homosexuales* 104). The sense of a collective, but one marked by difference, is precisely what emerges within the descriptions of the train station toilets in the *crónica*.

The evocation of the past in the text does involve a nostalgic look backwards, but parallels are drawn with a present in which queerness still inevitably remains outside the dominant norms, thus underscoring a sense of political immediacy. Solana explains that in this collection nostalgia functions as a means to stimulate "la evocación de un pasado mejor y el cuestionamiento a un presente hostil" ("El tiempo" 239).⁷ In another piece on the collection, she reads the first chronicles "as a way of *queering time*" ("Nostalgia" 276) and explains the way they "help us rethink how the history of sexuality has been told in Argentina" ("Nostalgia" 285). She seeks to go beyond the idea of nostalgia as a wholly negative emotion and underscores "su aspecto productivo, poniendo énfasis en sus posibles contribuciones como crítica a una versión progresista de la historia que no reconoce la presencia de los fantasmas del pasado" ("El tiempo" 235). Approaching "El amargo retiro de la Betty Boop" in this way is reminiscent of the way in which Muñoz reads Douglas Crimp's work. Muñoz states that Crimp's "vision of utopia across generational divides still fuels and propels our political and erotic lives: it still nourishes the possibility of our current, actually existing gay lifeworld" (*Cruising Utopia* 34), and I want to show that the same holds true for the characters in Modarelli's work. Their vision of the past is used to invoke a utopian future in which the inclusivity of the toilet space is replicated more broadly. The nostalgia in the

story is used to resist the homonormative by underscoring what has been lost and excluded in the gaining of recognition and rights in the here and now. I will explore Modarelli's critiques within the Argentine context, but, as he signals in the *crónica* through the parallels he draws with Spain, these criticisms are not specific to one time or place and should stand instead as a reminder of the need to resist assimilation into normative structures and to read narratives of disidentification against such ideas.

The gendering of the voices contained within the text is one of the key ways in which normative structures are resisted. After the narrator introduces sex in public toilets, the reader first encounters "las antiguas *habitué* de los baños" in "bar El Olmo, en Santa Fe y Pueyrredón" (8). The gendering of the group in the feminine plural is significant as both Betty Boop and La Diosa Arrodillada later use a mix of genders to talk about themselves, but generally use feminine forms, especially when talking about each other.⁸ The play with the grammatical gender is a means of giving voice to individuals who do not fit within a neatly defined "mercado gay" (8), so it should be no surprise that their gender is not narrowly delimited. It appears as if the people being referred to in the text mostly present as femme men (*locas*) who are attracted to "los hombres-hombres que te hablan desde los huevos" (9). Through this non-normative presentation the two main characters are shown to "constantly disidentify" as their "meaning does not properly "line up"" (Muñoz *Disidentifications* 78).⁹ The shifting and inconsistent use of gendered linguistic markers to refer to two characters with male bodies points towards the fluidity within the text around gender identification and gendered behaviors, which vary depending upon location, referent and speaker.

Betty Boop and La Diosa Arrodillada embody the figure of the *loca* and are clearly referred to as such (9 & 11), marking them as part of a Latin American queer literary iconography. As Roberto Echavarren points out in his afterword (133), this type of characterization recalls Manuel Puig's characters, who he notes are linked to a sense of

theatricality and that, like glam rock stars, “estos personajes no recreaba la mujer” (133).¹⁰ He goes on to define them as camp characters (135), attracted to what they could never have, a “verdadero hombre” (136), and therefore “nunca logrababa su felicidad” (136), which in many ways clarifies Betty Boop’s somewhat defeated tone when it comes to her sex life. Yet, *locas* are not to be dismissed as minor figures, because, as Horacio Federico Sívori notes, they, “como autoras de textos homosexuales, establecen su autoridad en el campo de las conductas sexuales y de género” (86). Betty Boop and La Diosa are voices to be listened to, inheritors of the legacy of Puig’s *locas*, and, as such, are “paradigmatic figures of same-sex relationships during the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America.” (Solana “Nostalgia” 275). Ben Bollig notes that Puig’s use of stereotypes to aid the characterization of his *locas* grant him “entry into a system of order and hierarchy that he then proceeds to question, destabilize and set radically in motion.” (255). However, Jonathan Allan rejects the label of stereotypes and argues instead that in Puig’s use of the feminine “there is, on the one hand, a humorous potential at play in this feminization, and, on the other hand, there is a very real belief that the gender dyad is not suitable, not sufficient to the complexity of the human experience.” (73). He states that “Puig openly critiques and questions the possibility of a single, unified stereotype of the homosexual.” (75). Modarelli’s use of the feminine and his focus on the *loca* deliberately play upon and question unifying stereotypes through these characters. He rejects the heteronormative order, within which he includes the turn towards a specific and narrowly defined sense of a gay identity that is in itself a homonormative stereotype.

The setting of the café where the characters are first encountered is also significant as El Olmo is one of those iconic meeting points for queer men in Buenos Aires, and thus acts as another marker of queerness. It is located in the upper-class Recoleta district and this group of older men are characterized as “señoras de sociedad en su *after office*” (8). The café becomes one of those alternative spaces in which these men can meet and the few words of

description conjure up multiple images of them. While the invocation of a camp spectacle with each member of the group trying to outdo the other like an upper-class lady is comedic, the idea of their labor that is invoked by the mention of the office is then linked to the foundational role they played by asserting their identity: “Porque a fin de cuentas, habían sido ellas las adelantadas, las que con el sudor de su culo habían cavado ahí la primera trinchera” (8). The physicality of the imagery in the second part of this sentence switches the reference from an office job towards something more physical and hints at the dangers they faced by simply existing under the dictatorship. The word “culo” recalls their sexual practices and is a reminder of the importance of sex within the text. It also alludes to the social threat that is carried within any type of anal eroticism because of the contribution it makes to the “weakening of the great phallic signifier” (Hocquenghem, 89).¹¹ The feminine adjective agreements in the sentence are mixed with images of physical work and military metaphors that are traditionally associated with masculinity, all of which points towards the critical role that anyone who does not sit within a binary understanding of gender presentation plays in signaling the instability of gender roles in society more broadly.

The spaces available to men who have sex with men are central within the *crónica*. The initial focus on “los viejos baños” is clear from the subtitle of the text and the first four paragraphs chart the use and demise of public toilets as a site for sex. This is not an abstract theory of sex in public spaces, but centers on the toilets in the Tres de Febrero train station, which form a type of case study. Berlant and Warner have noted that “the spillage of eroticism into everyday social life seems transgressive in a way that provokes normal aversion, a hygienic recoil” (560), meaning that the unashamed focus on the pleasure of sex in public toilets breaks with normative expectations of sexual and erotic life being conducted in private spaces.¹² Yet, in many ways the public toilet already troubles a neat divide between public and private space as it is by its very nature a “semi-public” (Cavanagh 32) place. The

public toilet “involves doing the private in public and under conditions only loosely under the control of the actors involved” (Molotch 1) and Barcan reminds us that they “are fundamentally quite ambiguous” (33) spaces. The toilets where men go for sex become what Berlant and Warner term a “queer counter-public” space that is “world-making” (558), a place where sexuality can be explored and queer sexual encounters can happen. In Muñoz’s terms, the toilets themselves might be said to function as something of a “subcultural circuit” within which there emerges “the blueprint for minoritarian counterpublic spheres”, and like the performances that he studies, the “new social relations” (*Disidentifications* 5) that happen within the toilets sit somewhere between the public and the private and are only tacitly tolerated by the state.

Whilst there is an air of fond nostalgia in the tone of this text, the space of the toilet is not romanticized and the very first sentence plays around with the idea of natural bodily functions (“los restos de orines y de mierda”) as the backdrop to sex acts that are “contra natura” (7). The marking out of the toilets as a space apart continues in the discussion of “el intenso olor”, which allows the men who enter to “separarse del mundo cotidiano” (7).¹³ In this way the public toilet becomes somewhere that men can go to explore their desires for other men, a space in the “group annular mode” (Hocquenghem, 97), which threatens the social imaginary, a space in which they can seek sexual release without having to define themselves through or because of the acts they engage in there. This apparent separation from the world beyond and in particular the marking of queer sex acts as different to those of heterosexual couples is further underscored by the playful use of flower imagery: “Así como los novios o esposos corrientes perfuman sus bendecidos placeres de rosas y jazmines que agonizan en floreros, los aventureros sarasas del baño de la estación cultivaban sobre la roña los capullos de su deseo clandestino” (7). The traditional links between flowers and virginity usually associated with women, and invoked in the first part of the sentence, is gently

mocked in the word “capullos”, which denotes flower buds, but can also be used for the head of the penis.¹⁴ This imagery recalls the title of the collection, which links the flower with the male sex organ, notably the foreskin. The flowers themselves seem to stand in for the penis in a model in which the foreskin almost becomes the petals of the flowers, queerly replicating the ways in which flowers have traditionally been used as a symbol of the vagina. The playful reminder of the ways in which heterosexual sex acts are traditionally alluded to in a more circumspect fashion serves to underscore the differences around the way sex is being discussed here. The lexicon related to marriage, invoked through words like “novios” and “bendecidos”, conjures up images of unions that are socially sanctioned, thus calling attention to the ways in which norms are created and reified by social, cultural, and legal structures.

The demise of the availability of the public toilet as a space for sex between men is linked to “el huracanado curso de los años noventa, cuando las redes de trenes del Estado cayeron en el saco de la codicia privatizadora” (7). Economic policies, rather than social or moral imperatives, are what lead to the closure of these spaces and neoliberalism is identified as the force behind these policies. Bell and Binnie have pointed out that the “interweaving of urban governance and sexual citizenship agendas produces particular kinds of sexual spaces, at the exclusion of other kinds” (1807).¹⁵ The toilets in train stations in Buenos Aires become one of these excluded spaces, which is further underlined by the description of any toilets where cruising still take place as “tajeada por la nueva economía eugenésica” (9). Moreover, the men who go to these few remaining facilities are threatened “más que nunca por la violencia de los desposeídos” (9). As the narrator observes, these assaults are part of a structure of inequality in which it is possible to interpret “el machismo homofóbico como recurso compensatorio de su indefensión de clase” (9). The violence, then, is not only an attack against queerness, but emerges from tensions between classes and is a means through which such men can seek “su venganza social contra el puto, puto destino” (10). The

repetition and playful exploitation of the multiple meanings of the word “puto” allows for the simultaneous criticism of the neoliberal system and homophobia. In other words, the same economic imperatives that led to the closure of the public toilets atomize sectors of society that were once more sympathetic to each other’s plights. This particular section of the text contains a note from the editor that points to the annual report of the *Comunidad Homosexual Argentina* from 2006, which records that the police list the murders of gay men and *travestis* as crimes of passion and that in doing so “se libera al crimen de su verdadero origen político” (15).¹⁶ This note rejects a simplistic categorization of crimes or people to suit politically expedient ends and lends the text a sharp political edge. It also serves to strengthen the critique of homophobia seen in the first use of “puto” in the sentence above.

Whilst the first few pages focus on the changes wrought upon public toilets in the city’s train stations, Betty’s memories, marked in the text by inverted commas, very clearly situate the time of her recollections as “entre los últimos [años] de la dictadura y los primeros del gobierno de Alfonsín” (10). This timeframe refers to a somewhat liminal period in the history of gay rights within the country. Homosexuality was illegal and punished under the military; however, homophobia did not simply disappear with the election of the democratic president Alfonsín and even during the *destape*, homophobia existed in the media, which either overlooked homosexuality or engaged in negative reporting around it.¹⁷ This means that the reference to the 1990s in the story as the time in which public toilets disappeared coincided with a more widely permissive attitude to homosexuality within the country.¹⁸ The *crónica* underscores this overlap and is very much in tune with scholars like Natalie Oswin, who engages with a number of studies that “productively call attention to the emergence of troubling alignments of liberal queer political strategies with urban modes of governance that are often inseparable from neoliberal, racist, nationalist, and militarist logics.” (560). Rather than ushering in a great opening up of society to a broader range of citizens, the newly

democratic response to queer identities was at first characterized by homophobia, and then by an embrace of homonormative identities through a rights-based agenda.

The loss of space is not the only aspect of queer life that is lamented here, so too is the negation of the thrill of the sex that happened within public toilets. It is easy for people to say “con que la tetera era para nosotros la consecuencia sórdida de nuestro aislamiento social, la guarida de nuestro triste divagar fuera de las fronteras de la comunidad organizada” (8), but such attitudes negate the sexual activities that could happen and ignore the pleasure of the experience that is captured in the nostalgic descriptions of the toilet.¹⁹ In addition to enjoyment, Modarelli shows the strong social connections that emerges in that space, mirroring Tim Dean’s argument that “the ethics of cruising is an ethics of the stranger in modernity.” (*Unlimited Intimacies* 177). These ethics specifically speak to “how one treats the other and, more specifically, how one treats his or her own otherness” (*Unlimited Intimacies* 177), which further explains the descriptions of the way people treat each other within the toilet space and also help explain the demand for respect for all that emerges throughout the story. This sense of a respectful community shines through in different ways in the story, from the fact that the people who used to frequent the train station toilets are now found chatting in a café (8) to the depiction of the space as a site where nervous men could experience their first sexual encounter with another man (7-8). The warning against aligning the desire to have sex in a public toilet with some sense of rejection by society is also found in the work of Juan José Sebreli, who, like Modarelli, underlines the advantages of such spaces: “La tetera tiene sus atractivos particulares, es una oportunidad más rápida que la calle de encontrar un partenaire sexual, brinda una variedad infinita de posibilidades que permite la satisfacción simultánea de distintos deseos, el exhibicionismo, el voyerismo, la relación por pareja, trío o grupo. Para algunos el peligro llega a ser un estímulo erótico más” (348-49). What has been lost is not some sordid practice made necessary by the lack of commercial

queer spaces or the lack of legal recognition. The capacious sense of community and the thrill of sex in public toilets described by Modarelli calls for a re-assessment of both the purpose and potential that existed within these now lost queer spaces.

The link between queer identities, dictatorships and democracy is explored in a direct analogy that is drawn between the public toilets of Buenos Aires and the Carretas cinema in Madrid. Like the *teteras*, the cinema was a space that “el régimen lo toleraba como válvula de escape. Vigilado, pero más o menos permitido” (11). A sense of the “decadencia” (11) of the cinema is linked to the democratic era that sees the space, much like the remaining public conveniences in Buenos Aires, taken over by “los putos calvos y panzones y los pendejos drogatas, los yonquis cómo dicen allá” (11). As was the case in the description of the toilets, the narrator underlines the mix of people that could be found in the cinema, recalling in particular “un tullido en silla de ruedas que se agarró del respaldo de una butaca de última fila, quedó colgando con el pantalón bajo y el culo apuntando a lo que viniera” (11). The language used is direct and is certainly not the most politically correct, but the focus is on the inclusivity and capaciousness of such spaces. Unlike the *teteras*, the closure of the cinema was marked by gay activists who “le rindieron homenaje como a una abuela piola” (11) and it was even reported in the papers (12), yet, as the narrator notes “nadie quiere defender el sexo en las teteras” (12).²⁰ This parallel with the cinema in Madrid further reinforces the political point being made around the effects of a move to neoliberal economic models on queer spaces. The story does not simply leave the denial of the importance of the *teteras* without explanation, but goes on to note that “son para muchos la marca del homosexual marginal, con el que no quieren mezclarse. Molesta el puto viejo, el puto feo, el puto pobre” (12). They are a space that contain the abject, not just the urine and “el jugo del deseo” (8), but also the bodies that emit those very fluids. The toilets do not discriminate based on looks or age as more commercial spaces might, meaning that spaces like the *tetera* and cinema function as a

way of hiding the heterogeneous queer identities that society does not want to see. The fact that the dictatorships in Argentina and Spain are used as examples of the ways in which such control over what is seen is exercised only raises questions about which queer identities are legislated for and given rights under democratic governments.

Crucially, the *teteras* in Buenos Aires and the cinema in Madrid offered a means through which to resist the totalizing grip of dictatorship. The way in which the text locates pleasure within periods usually coded as repressive attests to the lure of breaking taboos more generally, but it is the focus on the erotic nature of these encounters that is most transgressive. Dean brings the work of Bataille and Foucault together to show that “it is eroticism (rather than sexuality or sexual identity) that remains inextricable from transgression” (“The Erotics of Transgression” 69) and Modarelli’s text does not hide the thrill of public sex in these locations. Both cinema and public toilet become freely accessible spaces of pleasure, of erotic encounter in which queerness could be explored, where men could have sex with other men without having to label themselves in any particular way. The narrator depicts the “locas añejadas” (7) as benevolent enablers of these men’s desires. They are “maestras y confidentes de las más jóvenes, a quienes ayudaban a desdramatizar sus primeros encuentros” (7). Clearly the erotic encounter is an important aspect of life in the public toilet for young queer people who did not see role models represented in the media and who were living under a repressive dictatorship up until 1983. These *locas* also had sex with “los curiosos, los tapados, los maridos de trampa” (7), giving these groups “el sentimiento vital de expurgarse de una rutina peor” (8).²¹ What is particularly notable in this language is the way in which the older *locas* are contrasted with the other men in the space, underscoring the fact that they had a leading role within the hierarchy that existed within the public toilet unlike the more nebulous position in which both Betty and La Diosa find themselves now. The train station toilet exists beyond the strictures of society and allows these men to escape,

exploring a dimension of their sexuality that does not, cannot, or is not permitted to exist in the world beyond it. The double function of the space as public convenience and site for sexual encounters allowed a type of permissiveness diametrically opposed to the controlled world outside the toilets.

It is made very clear that the more commercial queer spaces that open up after the return of democracy do not offer the same sense of openness to all queer identities: “Esas pijas no buscan una boca amistosa en los clásicos locales de encuentro gay. No están detrás de la más linda, sino de la que más promete. Seamos claras: la disco y el sauna son entretenimiento erótico útil sólo para las pendejas. Baile, cópula y enamoramiento entre pájaras iguales” (8-9). These sentences chart the move from the potential for an opportunistic encounter in a free, public space to the marketization of a narrower form of gay male subjectivity that is based on the homonormative premise of equality.²² These new spaces construct a specific form of gay male identity that still allows for sexual encounters in a sauna, for example, as part of “la onda modernizadora” that “fue inclinando la balanza, definitivamente, en favor del circuito sexual privado de puertas adentro” (8). In other words, the neoliberal marketplace that privatized the railways and created commercial spaces for a certain subset of men reduced the scope for a wider range of queer people to explore their identities. Paradoxically, these more clearly defined characteristics were hailed as a step towards greater equality, whilst in reality it was simply a move to assimilate, homogenize, and attempt to contain a very diverse group of people.

The narrower sense of identity offered by new spaces is evoked in the text through the focus on older *locas*. Both Betty and La Diosa, whose letter closes the story, show two very different sides to sexuality in older people and, at this point in their lives, they are shown to disidentify both with the dominant norms because of their queerness and with the new types of spaces that opened for gay men because of their age. Betty’s recollections begin to be told

through her looking at a photo of a group of friends that that she met “en la estación de Tres de Febrero” (10). The memories are initially recounted through verbs in the simple past, recalling the feeling that it was “una época feliz” (10), but with some of the precise details perhaps a little hazier: “no me acuerdo bien en qué año” (10). She even traces the origins of her nickname, the self through which the reader hears her voice, back to this moment in her life. It is this evocation of happiness that leads to a more general musing upon the fact that “la juventud es siempre un paraíso” (10). Given the focus of the piece, it is no surprise that the main benefit of youth is related to sexuality and sexual desire in her mind, but that sense of nostalgia and the contrast with her attitude to her sexuality as an older man serves to make a political point rather than idealize youth culture. In response to her own rhetorical question on what happiness means for her, Betty immediately answers: “Tener la misma edad del chonguito con el que querría encamarme, por ejemplo, la complicidad que se siente entre dos cuerpos jóvenes. Compartir experiencias con el pibe vale decir entenderte en el mismo lenguaje de la época, aunque te separe la clase” (10). Her own answer is nostalgic in the invocation of youth and it further adds to her characterization as a *loca* through the identification of her desired partner as a “chonguito”, which is the diminutive of *chongo*. Echavarren notes that the *loca* “iba siempre detrás del ‘otro’, nunca del ‘mismo’” (136), underscoring the complexity of the identity that sees her attracted to difference in her same-sex partner. Sívori defines the *chongo* as the “figura de género opuesta y complementaria a la de loca” (84), but of course the true *chongo* is by his very nature “un ideal” (85), for he is a masculine man who “no debe desear tener relaciones sexuales con otros hombres” (85), but makes an exception only for one specific *loca*. It comes as no surprise, then, that he exists as a figure of nostalgic desire here, yet that does not diminish the term as a possible category through which some of the men who used public toilets for sex could identify. Betty seeks a shared set of referents in her nostalgia, a way to identify, although she does immediately

draw class distinctions that seem to be transcended by the sexual encounter, thus recalling the heterogeneity of partners available in the space of the toilet. Betty also offers the reader an insight into how she feels about her own sexuality in the present as she expresses feeling “una asimetría absoluta” (10) created between herself and “un pibe cualquiera” (10) because of her age, a feeling reinforced by the use of the word “pibe”, which is associated with youth.

The sense of resignation contained within the title of the story is recalled through Betty’s conclusion that “el deseo ya no es para mí” (10). She describes herself as the realist among the group of friends in the photo, the one who is willing to acknowledge the self that she sees before her in the mirror, and she turns to gay poet Luis Cernuda to encapsulate the feeling of isolation, citing the same lines from his poem “Despedida” that served as an epigraph. There is a feeling of inevitability around having lost her younger self, and along with it her sexual life in her echoing of the word “remedio” from the epigraph in the short sentence “No hay remedio” (11). She ties this loss of youth and of her sexual life to the disappearance of these sites: “cuando se terminó el mundo de la tetera, empecé a sentirme realmente fuera de la especie humana” (11). The liminal space of the *tetera*, which allowed an escape from the world outside it, is where Betty was able to engage with her sexual self; without that space she has nowhere else to go. Throughout her memories and the description of the toilets, the sense of inclusion is what is underscored, meanwhile what Betty is left with are feelings of disidentification: “Y digo yo, los que somos viejos, o los que dicen que ya somos viejos, y en las discotecas nos vuelven invisibles, por asco, ¿tenemos que pegarnos un tiro?” (12).²³ Her words speak to how others perceive her as much as to how she perceives herself and point to a bias towards businesses that cater for young gay consumers rather than more inclusive spaces. Her feelings of exclusion are a reminder that market forces will only cater to a particular group and decisions will be driven by money rather than any loyalty to a group, cause or identity. This feeling stands in diametric opposition to the way in which the

older *locas* tended to the needs of other men in the toilet. Her sense of invisibility, of not being seen has had a profound impact upon her sexual life: “Me retiré de la escena. Me imagino teniendo sexo ahora y digo, no es natural a mi edad. Me siento repugnante. Además, tengo miedo a la calle. Mirá vos, también miedo a la calle. Soy como el jorobo de Notre Dame. Feo y escondido” (12). She has internalized that feeling of invisibility, that sense of disidentification and that impression of not being noticed has morphed into her feeling ugly and undesirable. Her words underscore the importance of having a diverse range of inclusive spaces and are an instance of a character speaking from experience about the ways in which having a space allows a person to feel acknowledged, which in turn allows them to explore all aspects of their identity more fully.

Part of Betty’s recollections draw a parallel with the attitude of her friends, including La Diosa Arrodillada, a figure that Betty contrasts with herself: “es una marica de mi edad que se monta, quiero decir que se viste de mujer y va a un boliche sobre la ruta 5” (11). La Diosa is used as a foil to Betty, particularly in their differing attitudes to their sexual lives, yet the use of the word “marica” (11) to describe her here aligns her closely with the *loca* identity in the invocation of femininity that lies within it. Betty’s recollections are followed by a letter from La Diosa herself. The move from what appears to be Betty’s oral testimony to La Diosa’s written words is yet another way in which the differences between them are shown. Nevertheless, what underpins the entire piece is the friendship between them, which is first indicated in the description of their chats in El Olmo (8). La Diosa’s letter offers a very different perspective on the sexual life of an older queer man. She opens it with a direct address to younger people that responds directly to Betty’s ideas: “Pendejo, tesoro, no derrames la ira de tu plenitud veinteañera contra nosotras, las locas del ocaso. Dejános [sic] ser así, maduradas por la erosión de la mirada ajena, sordas al insulto que nos proporciona el espejo, pero hábiles cazadoras todavía para conseguir la presa nutricia” (12). This call for

tolerance, which focuses on being left alone, rather than accepted, also includes a reminder that older people do still have sexual desires; they are not all asexual figures who have withdrawn from that aspect of their life as Betty has. La Diosa is speaking in the present tense and addressing issues that affect her now, she does not reminisce about the lost space of the *tetera*. Her words have a political force; she does not seek recognition or inclusion; she wants to live her queer life without interference. In fact, just after this statement she reminds the reader that she is still able to kneel down—which is how she got her name after all—as a means of reiterating the importance of her sexuality: “Y aunque algunas amigas ya no lo despusen, ese vicio vital sigue siendo la mano que da cuerda a su memoria, la forma de paraíso en que se les presenta la vida pasada, y que en un futuro inmóvil, cuando les vaya costando respirar, mantendrá abiertos sus pulmones” (13). Her language contrasts with Betty’s sense of resignation, of leaving behind her sexual self. La Diosa recognizes her sexual desires as a “vicio vital” and emphasizes just how important they are to a sense of self and to a person’s life. She repeats this same idea, which shows the value she attaches to it, adding her own rather comic perspective on why it is imperative to acknowledge and remember sexuality: “el recuerdo de tanto esperma derramado en el combate de la gaya vida es un antídoto contra el alzheimer y la artrosis” (13). The language used here picks up the verb “derramar” from the first line of her letter, linking it to semen, but also to blood and life, emphasizing the importance of sex. The use of the word “combate”, which is reminiscent of war, marks a turn towards a more militaristic lexis, recalling the imagery of trenches used earlier in the story, and acting as a subtle reminder of the fact that their sexuality put men like La Diosa in danger. With this type of language, she refuses to fall into the same trap as “muchas maricas de mi edad” (13)—including Betty—, who “rinden homenaje al deseo como a un prócer muerto” (13). She extends her use of language associated with the military to make her point; she refuses to be some past hero as she is very much alive in the here and

now. This blend of the military metaphor with a markedly feminine identity recalls Betty's own call for respect for older *locas*, but La Diosa insists that her relationship with her sexuality in the past, present and future is vital to her life and she shows just how politically relevant the text is in the here and now.

The last page and a half of her letter picks up the idea contained in the first line and addresses the negative ways in which younger people view older queer sexualities: “un cuerpo viejo como el mío, cuya sexualidad está intacta, te resulta infame” (14). La Diosa quotes a line from Cernuda's “Depedida”, echoing Betty's use of the same poem, but this time rejecting “el respeto debido a los muertos” (14). Indeed, she does not want “ese epitafio para mi juventud perdida” (14), presumably because she is focusing on the life she is living now and on articulating what she can still offer, instead of reminiscing about a lost past. This is where Solana's point about the nostalgia in the text being productive is most obvious and where the link to Muñoz's idea of the political immediacy to be found in disidentification is expressed most sharply. She is unapologetic about the contribution she can still make to queer life: “somos estrellas que se apagan, pero que derraman en su difuminarse polvo de oro” (15). The choice of “derramar” here picks up on that same verb that has been used to talk about emotion as well as bodily fluids, including semen. In this sentence, she underscores that she is part of an older generation who have contributed to the world in which young people live today and that despite their “repugnancia” (14), she will not deny or diminish her sexuality.

The voices in this text speak together not in harmony but rather in a queer cacophony, contradicting each other at times, whilst sharing specific recollections. The differences between their perspectives are not shown to be antagonistic, just different. It is precisely that sense of difference, of otherness, of queerness that is respected in the way the text is put together. The contextualization of the *tetera* by the narrator at the beginning of the piece

articulates what that space offered. It is a positive overview that underscores the plurality of sexualities that could co-exist within the public toilet. Betty Boop's memories and La Diosa Arrodillada's interventions may appear diametrically opposed, but both ultimately show that the disidentifying subject—whether younger man in a public toilet or older queer man seeking sexual satisfaction—troubles a progressive narrative of an ever increasing sense of acceptance. Their friendship allows for difference and their queerness is capacious enough to allow them to voice their views around a shared table in El Olmo, which recalls the sense of community that existed within the *tetera*. Even if that spirit can be replicated in the café, La Diosa's letter is a reminder of the importance of sex to her identity and the few remaining spaces where these men can access sex are shown to be dangerous and marginal. The text deliberately draws attention to the fact that the queer spaces that offered more freedoms existed under dictatorships and shows the limitations imposed by liberal democracies that embraced neoliberal economic policies. The contrast between memories of cruising the toilets in the Tres de Febrero Station and the way older queer people are viewed shows that “we are not quite queer yet” (Muñoz *Cruising Utopia* 22), that we need to think about just how queer certain spaces are and just how accepting and progressive seemingly democratic laws are. Modarelli's text offers a critique of the current neoliberal ideologies and cautions against equating the carefully delineated freedoms offered with an embrace of queerness in all its forms.

1. The word *loca* lies beneath this gloss in English. Throughout this article, I will do my best to explain the different terms Modarelli uses to describe his characters. However, I want to acknowledge from the outset that this will never be entirely satisfactory as the whole point of this story is to reject a homogenization of queer identities, so the Argentine terms he uses cannot be mapped directly onto equivalents from the Anglophone world. Whilst I have

attempted to gloss terms in places, I broadly follow Lawrence La Fountain-Strokes, who uses many terms in Spanish, including *loca*, to present them “as unstable and dangerous categories of meaning or as optics, epistemologies, or types of praxis that can challenge and hopefully not reinscribe myriad orthodoxies and essentialisms.” (10).

2. It is worth noting that the text that follows “El amargo retiro de la Betty Boop” in the collection is “Cartas de la Vieja Diosa Arrodillada” (16-20). This second text gives more insight into the character introduced here. I will only be referring to the letter from La Diosa Arrodillada that is contained within the first *crónica*, whereas Mariela Solana (“Nostalgia” & “El tiempo”) deals with both of the *crónicas* in her work.

3. Patricio Simonetto has mapped and discussed the *teteras* of Buenos Aires, and, as Modarelli does, states that ‘Los aseos de estaciones de trenes o de confiterías fueron intersecciones entre la hostilidad pública y la soledad del mundo privado’.

4. In correspondence with me (22nd July 2021), Modarelli confirms that he first heard the names Betty Boop and La Diosa Arrodillada as part of his research for his co-authored study, but he has created fictional characters out of them for this piece. The name Betty Boop is taken from the cartoon character that originated in the 1930s and who embodies a sex symbol of the carefree 1920s.

5. This phenomenon is by no means unique to Argentina. Gavin Brown (“Thinking Beyond” 1499) notes that: “As some gay men and women become ‘acceptably visible’ (Richardson, 2005, page 524), others become further marginalised (Puar, 2007)”.

6. This line of thinking very much overlaps with Guy Hocquenghem’s point that “after capitalist decoding has taken place, there is no room for any form of homosexual integration other than that of perverse axiomatisation” (79).

7. Solana makes a similar argument in an earlier article (“Lo que queremos”) about this text and works by Perlongher.

8. Betty Boop does mention that La Diosa Arrodillada sometimes presents as a woman, although no detail beyond this is given (11). I want to acknowledge that La Diosa Arrodillada could be read a trans, gender fluid or non binary character, but I am more interested in exploring the ways she troubles a sense of a normative order rather than focusing on her own sense of her gender identity.

9. This sense of disidentification mirrors the type of feelings Paul B Preciado expresses when confronted with a constricted sense of a binary: “I am not a man and I am not a woman and I am not heterosexual I am not homosexual I am not bisexual. I am a dissident of the sex-gender system. I am the multiplicity of the cosmos trapped in a binary political and epistemological system, shouting in front of you. I am a Uranian confined inside the limits of techno-scientific capitalism.” (18). Crucially, Preciado labels the territory they inhabit as the “horizon” (18) rather than the margin, opening up towards something else in the same ways as Solana sees the nostalgia in the text as productive and as I am drawing on Muñoz’s work on futurity.

10. Muñoz mentions Manuel Puig’s character Molina from *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) as an example of the way in which a disidentifying subject can “demystify the dominant publicity, exposing it as a “discursively pre-constituted” space that often maintains strict and oppressive hierarchies within the social” (*Disidentifications* 168). Jessica Burke’s article on the use of the feminine by Puig and Donoso concludes that “[w]hether labeled as ‘transgender,’ ‘gay,’ or ‘homosexual,’ biological men who seek relationships with other men are constantly marginalized by societies that do not know how or do not want to find a place for them in the ‘center.’ It is in these marginal spaces, both protected and restrictive, that la

Manuela and Molina are able to configure new definitions of womanhood, to ‘fantasize the feminine’ and thus move closer to being able to find a space of their own.” (299). Both Muñoz and Burke point towards the use of femininity as a means of creating another discursive space for Molina to occupy, and that is what Modarelli does here both through his use of femininity, but also in his detailed descriptions of the train station toilets. Simonetto notes that the use of grammatically feminine terms within queer communities is a way to build a sense of group identity, which is undoubtedly applicable here. I will use she / her pronouns when talking about both Betty Boop and La Diosa Arrodillada as those are the ones used most frequently in the texts.

11. Javier Sáez and Sejo Carrascosa have explored the negativity inherent in the language surrounding anal penetration in chapter 1 of their study.

12. Cavanagh notes that “[s]ex in the lavatory is desire out of normative bounds: it is messy, unproductive, licentious, epicurean, and hedonistic” (171-72), and it is precisely that sense of extravagant pleasure seeking that Modarelli captures.

13. This focus on smell may well be indebted to the first verse of Juan José Sebreli’s poem “Éclair,” which is quoted in Rapisardi and Modarelli, 27. In her work on the toilet, Kamash reminds us that smell “been regularly associated with theories of contagion and has often been used as moral indicator to exclude and stigmatize others” (53), a function of smell that Modarelli is playing upon here.

14. I am grateful to one of the peer reviewers for reminding me of the way in which Proust used imagery relating to flowers, which Hocquenghem notes “are the very *machine* of sexual *desire*” in his work (77, emphasis in original). Bersani also discusses this, particularly mentioning the image of the bee fertilizing the orchid as a parallel to the first meeting

between Charlus and Jupien as way of underscoring our existence within “a vast network of near-sameness” (146).

15. Hubbard’s work explores the ways in which public space prioritizes heterosexuality and divisions act as a means of “restricting certain dissident groups to sequestered spaces (e.g. a sex dungeon, a ‘cottage’, a brothel or a private sex club)” (60). Dean notes the access to cruising spaces such as saunas and gyms is limited by socioeconomic status (*Unlimited Intimacies* 192). In his study of queer sociability in the 1990s in Rosario in Argentina, Sívori also notes the shift from more open public spaces to more intimate hook up spaces and, like Modarelli, dates this to the late 1980s and early 1990s (26). Whilst my focus is on the public toilet, Modarelli’s text briefly mentions the Costanera Sur (12) as a new site where cruising happens, but, like the public toilets where cruising still happens, it is depicted as a more dangerous space.

16. I have not attempted to translate the word *travesti* here because as Joseph Pierce notes it refers to a complex, shifting, subjective identity that “is thus a political, rather than a psychological, or even corporeal identification” (307).

17. Natalia Milanesio offers a clear overview of this period (*Destape* 73-81). She also notes that: “In 1984 [which is after the return to democracy], for example, Minister of the Interior Antonio Tróccoli declared that homosexuality was a disease and justified arrests of gay people and police raids on gay clubs” (221). Rapisardi and Modarelli themselves note the difficulties of trying to articulate an argument around gay rights in the early years of the democracy that included defending men who have sex with men in public toilets (35).

18. Milanesio notes that homosexuality was removed from International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems in 1990 (221). Brown reminds us that in 1991, the Comunidad Homosexual Argentina “was formally recognized by the

government after a long battle, fuelling much public debate over homosexuality and paving the way for the formation of other groups” (122).

19. Modarelli’s focus on the pleasures within the group coming together (borrowing Bersani’s pun) stands in direct opposition to the way in which Bersani characterizes Proust’s suggestion that “coming together, having orgasms together, can only reinforce the disgust of their having come together socially.” (129). Modarelli’s story does not include any sense of shame or disgust within the space of the public toilet, but does give a sense of the solidarity that Bersani identifies within Proust’s characters (131).

20. Pat Califia makes the same argument about sex in public toilets in the USA: “Tearoom cruisers are frequently described as enemies of the gay movement, and public sex is portrayed as a major obstacle to winning some modicum of protection for gay people” (72). The importance of the picture that Modarelli is creating here should not be overlooked just because of the subject as in his discussion of Giorno’s work, Muñoz reminds us that “as Adorno teaches us, the importance of casting a picture is central to a critique of hegemony” (*Cruising Utopia*, 39).

21. The more fluid sense of sexuality within the space of the toilet is noted in the US context by Laud Humphreys: “Tearooms are popular, not because they serve as gathering places for homosexuals but because they attract a variety of men, a minority of whom are active in the homosexual subculture” (11).

22. The distinctions I draw explicitly here between a broader queer identity and a more narrowly defined gay male identity that is acceptable to the neoliberal order permeates the story. Califia (80-81) makes a similar argument about the difference between men who frequent spaces like the tearoom and sauna. Sebrel also states that: “La discoteca, tanto la hétero como la gay, verdadero templo de la juventud de los años ochenta y noventa, pretende

ser un ámbito de libertad y resulta paradójicamente una institución discriminadora de edad, de físico, de clase social, de condición económica y hasta de raza” (358). In the Argentine context, Milanesio notes that the Comunidad Homosexual Argentina emphasized “a model of gay man strongly linked to respectability and embodied in an educated, middle-class, virile, young professional such as Jáuregui, as well as the most visible members of the organization” (230).

23. Even though I am using Muñoz’s work to signal a sense of disidentification, I also want to acknowledge the negativity that is expressed in Betty’s words and am mindful of Lee Edelman and Lauren Berlant’s foregrounding of “negativity’s central role in any antinormative politics” (xii). It should be noted that Betty has switched at this point to the use of the masculine plural to refer to the group of friends she had previously identified as *locas* using the feminine, underscoring the degree to which she feels she has lost part of her identity.

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