

The last Argentinean dictatorship from a queer perspective: an inquiry into the feminine-masculine dichotomy

Mariela ZEITLER VARELA
UBA-CONICET

I. Introduction

During the last Argentinean civic-military dictatorship (1976-1983), kidnapping and clandestine detention, followed by torture and disappearance, was the systematic methodology used by the military to eliminate what they called "subversion" (*subversión*). Nevertheless, mostly because of a "rehabilitation" or "recovery" plan, conceived by Admiral Emilio Massera in the *Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada* (ESMA, the biggest concentration camp in the country), not all detainees were killed. A few managed to survive and thus, afterwards, told others about the humiliation and torments suffered. In those accounts, gender matters were revealed, that also affected those dark years in Argentina.

The purpose of this paper is to review how certain stereotypical visions of women provoked fundamental consequences not only during the repressive period, but also in later discourses and representations. With this aim, we will take some survivors' testimonies from documentaries as a starting point.¹ We will also analyze the Argentinean novel *El fin de la historia* (*The end of history*), by Liliana Heker (1996), which narrates the love story between an important female leader from the organization *Montoneros* -the author's best friend in real life- and her oppressor. Female survivors have often remained imprisoned and stigmatized within those accounts; a clear example is the way in which the emotional bonds between female prisoners and male torturers are treated, with women being qualified not only as traitors, but also as *sluts*.

The significance of breaking with these statements reasserts the importance of queer theory, which allows us to rethink the role of the feminine, its alleged naturalness and its contraposition with the masculine. We will remark some of Judith Butler's ideas in order to deconstruct these moulds and thus enfranchise new discourses about the events that took place during the last dictatorship in Argentina.

II. Women in times of violent political struggle

¹ We are referring to *Montoneros, una historia -Montoneros, one history-*, by Andrés Di Tella (1994) y *Cazadores de utopías -Utopias' hunters-*, by David Blaustein (1995).

Before analyzing some particular and controversial representations of relationships between female prisoners and male repressors, we will inquire into certain stereotypical visions of women that played a role not only for the military but also for the revolutionary activists. The objective is to notice how these perspectives, as reactionary or old fashioned as they could seem, are still working in some postdictatorial representations that are going to be examined in the next section. We must note that this study and its conclusions are preliminary, since this is only the beginning of our research into these matters. It is necessary to deepen the investigation in order to continue forging the connection between gender, activism and militarism in the seventies in Argentina and its consequences throughout time.

As you may already know, at that time in Argentina violence and politics were close friends, and dictatorships and democracies took turns in the government. Several movements followed the model of Latin American guerrillas which used armed action to obtain the necessary conditions to achieve revolution; *Montoneros* was one of them. This Argentinean political organization made its public entrance in June 1970 with Aramburu's kidnapping and murder -after a so-called "popular trial"-; this General was considered the main responsible of the coup d'état that had overthrown Perón's second constitutional presidency in 1955.

Many things happened after that and until March 24th 1976, when the last Argentinean civic-military dictatorship began (several coups d'état, the return of Perón to Argentina, his split with *Montoneros*, his death, severe state violence against activists, students, workers, and so on), but we must be aware that when the military took power, *Montoneros'* activists were, together with activists from *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* -People's Revolutionary Army-, their main opponents. Illegal kidnapping, torture, clandestine detention and disappearance was the methodology used to wipe out what military named *subversives*.

But despite all obvious and profound political differences between *Montoneros* and military men, if we examine specific aspects tied with the idea of women, we can appreciate that both maintained, specially the latter, an essentialized vision, dependent on a patriarchal structure. The case of *Montoneros* is probably more complex, because inside the organization women could actually accomplish important positions, reaching leadership and making relevant decisions just like men. However, at the same time, listen what Dinora Gebennini, a female *Montoneros* activist, said afterwards in an Argentinean documentary: "There was a multitudinous, permanent women presence in political practice, in neighborhoods,

pretty attached to social action.”² In this sense female activists were still connected with social work, the assistance in *villas*, teaching the excluded, all the work that traditionally has been carried out by women and not by men.

There is another example of this gender difference when we check the “Código de Justicia Montonera” (“*Montonera* Justice Code”), the group's domestic justice code. One could find an article that punished marital infidelity, but the most interesting part is that consequences were dissimilar if you were a woman or a man: an affair is known of a female activist who was removed from her high position in the organization hierarchy after recognizing she had been unfaithful, but the other person -male- involved didn't suffer the same punishment (Longoni 2007: 149). Quite ironically, women could be armed or be political leaders, but they also had to stay as faithful wives or selfless mothers. In that level, the one related to sexuality, the traditional view of women had not improved inside *Montoneros*. Men still had some “benefits”.

The case of the military is more linear, at least if we pay attention to some testimonies of ESMA survivors. As we mentioned briefly in the introduction, Admiral Emilio Massera conceived a “rehabilitation” or “recovery” plan in the biggest concentration camp in the country, trying to set up his political platform using the forced labour of illegal detainees. He formed what is commonly known as the *staff*, where former activists, now imprisoned, made reports of political analysis, classified important material, and so on.³ Of course this placed them in a privileged position, having decent meals and clothes, access to significant information and an occupation that made their day more bearable. Most of ESMA survivors were part of the *staff*.

But when it came to women, there were distinctive symptoms that were described as symptoms of rehabilitation, all of them related with a traditional vision of femininity: the main idea was that women should act like every woman was supposed to act, recovering their temporarily lost “female essence”. For example, in the documentary *Montoneros, una historia* -to which we shall return later-, Graciela Daleo, an ex detained-disappeared, asserts: “For women, which them [the military] supposed that were activists because we were ugly and guys didn't like us, because we were useless for housework, a recovery sign, a sign that you were recovering,

² Dinora Gebennini, en *Cazadores de utopías*, minute 23'30”: “Se hace presencia multitudinaria, permanente de la mujer en la práctica política, en los barrios, muy ligada a la acción social.”

³ Different was the case of the *ministaff*, formed by a few activists who gave relevant information to capture old companions, participated in clandestine military operations and, using a religious term, were considered by the other detainees as *converts* (Calveiro 2008: 118-119).

was that you looked after your physical appearance.”⁴ So, women should care about their looks, should have female manners, should be passive and of course should sleep with the right person.⁵

It was a common practice that repressors took female prisoners to dinner or even dancing at night. They were forced to dress nicely and to do whatever the military in question asked. Female gender and male gender functioned in a patriarchal sense: men were the ones giving orders and women must passively obey. But not only in the obvious sense that every oppressed has to obey their oppressor to survive, also in the sense -more revealing for this work- that every woman has to obey men; time after time, masculine domination is reinforced again.

III. Love in times of horror

In this section we intend to go through some postdictatorial representations about relationships between female detainees and their repressors, in order to observe how some aspects of this traditional vision of femininity -as opposed to masculinity- are still at work in these discourses and to discern which their implications are. Even though we might think this perspective is outdated, it can be perceived in the way women are usually depicted. And the problem is the linear analysis that these characterizations provoke, closing new possible questions and focusing on the victim’s behavior instead of focusing -also- on the extreme circumstances or on other lines of research.

“She had to negotiate something in order to save herself and well, she negotiated that part.”⁶ This is Ana talking, the main character of the mentioned Argentinean documentary *Montoneros, una historia*. This documentary is based on Ana’s account of her life, being an activist in *Montoneros* during the seventies; her story is mixed with other testimonies -her mother, political leaders of the organization, other activists- and with images and photos of the events discussed. During her clandestine detention in ESMA, she met Mercedes Carazo, alias “Lucy”,

⁴ Graciela Daleo, en *Montoneros, una historia*, minute 71: “Para las mujeres, de las cuales ellos [los militares] suponían que militaban porque éramos feas y los tipos no nos daban bola, porque éramos incapaces para las tareas domésticas, por ejemplo una señal de recuperación, de que vos te estabas recuperando, era que te cuidabas tu aspecto físico.”

⁵ This is not completely ironic: there are some testimonies that declare that having sex with a military man was also seen as a symptom of rehabilitation (Longoni 2007: 137).

⁶ Ana, en *Montoneros, una historia*, minute 70: “Algo tenía que negociar para poder salvarse y bueno, ella negoció esa parte.”

an important *Montoneros* leader who was also staying there as a detainee.⁷ Ana is reflecting on her in the quotation above.

In order to understand what she meant by saying “she negotiated that part” it is necessary to explain Lucy’s story, quite well-known because of the controversy, together with the morbid fascination, it still generates. As we just pointed out, Lucy was a significant *Montoneros* leader, such like her husband, Marcelo Kurlat, also known as “Ramón” or “el Monra”; in 1966 they had a daughter called Mariana. As every *Montoneros* activist, they went underground in 1974. Lucy was kidnapped a few months after de coup, in October 1976, and was taken to ESMA. According to the testimonies of other survivors, at first she put up with all kind of tortures without giving any information that could be useful for the military to find other fellows and hence dismantle the organization. But at the same time, she was apparently starting to relate with one of her torturers, Antonio Pernías, the same one that later (December 9th 1976) ran the illegal raid where her husband was killed. In that operation Kurlat was with their daughter, so Pernías told him that Lucy was still alive and that he could bring Mariana back to her. Therefore, they decided to stop the shooting while the child went out to the military. Of course Kurlat was killed anyway but Pernías transformed himself into the man that reunited Lucy with her daughter.

Afterwards, Lucy and Pernías were involved in a love relationship, while she was still a detainee and he a repressor. How could that be? Did she only do it to stay alive? Or did she really fall in love with him? Following Ana’s words, “that part” -she meant her body? Was it truly only that?- was the one she negotiated to survive, but maybe it wasn’t that, maybe it wasn’t a strategy, maybe it was just what she could do in a situation like the one described. But we cannot answer that questions and it is not actually relevant to try to do so; what it is interesting is to analyze how these cases of love bonds were sometimes represented when the dictatorship was finally over and to observe how gender matters still, in fact, matter. Female prisoners were not only traitors (as well as male activists who supposedly collaborated with their oppressors), but also *sluts* for having slept with them.

Ana Longoni, an Argentinean PhD in Arts, considers this last issue in her book *Traiciones. La figura del traidor en los relatos acerca de los sobrevivientes de la represión* (*Betrayals. The traitor figure in the accounts about survivors of repression*). Throughout her work, she studies the way in which three different

⁷ Actually, the military employ the strategy of *converted* women talking to new female prisoners with the mission of trying to *convert* them too, mostly telling them how they used to be wrong and which were all the benefits of being now on the *right* side.

books about the last Argentinean dictatorship -novels that mix testimony and fiction-⁸ reinforce or deny the traitor stigmatization. There is one special chapter dedicated to women survivors, called "Las traidoras como putas" ("Traitors as sluts"), and there we can distinguish how the ideal stereotype of femininity continues functioning because of the way in which these women are qualified and their stories are told.

One of the analyzed novels is *El fin de la historia -The end of history-*, by Liliana Heker. Diana Glass, narrator and alter ego of Heker in the book, seeks to tell the story of her best friend, Leonora Ordaz, who in real life is actually the Lucy we have been talking about. They were really close friends since their childhood, however, Leonora's political affiliation started to separate them, until she was finally kidnapped in 1976. At that moment Diana felt the need to narrate her friend's life, a heroine story, the story of a woman who fought for revolutionary ideals until the last consequences, or the worst one: disappearance. But if we remember what happened during her kidnapping, we understand that in the end the account was quite different.⁹

And the problem was that Diana, as she wanted at first a heroine, now, after finding out the outcome, she needed her opposite: a traitor. So she constructed one, from the very beginning: all along the novel she seemed to be summing up Leonora's life trying to find the origins of her terrible behavior and she apparently achieved the goal when she mentioned how her dearest friend, before being kidnapped, also cheated on her husband with another handsome *Montoneros* leader. It was as if Diana was looking in Leonora's past in order to find the essence that has always been there, the female essence of a seducer and a manipulator.

Let me quote a few phrases of the novel to show this last idea: while Diana is describing their teenage years together, she affirms: "I liked those words: transformation, life, bodies, I loved words because they were capable of preserving each thing in their perfection. Leonora needed them less than me because Leonora was her brown-skinned body, and she specially was her hair, long and copper-colored, heavily waving in time to that body." (Heker 2010: 22)¹⁰; or after narrating the first torture that Leonora suffered, she asserts: "Her father isn't

⁸ The books involve are: Bonasso, M 1993, *Recuerdo de la muerte*, Puntosur, Buenos Aires; Diez, R. 2000, *Los compañeros*, Editorial de la Campana, La Plata, y Heker, L 1996, *El fin de la historia*, Alfaguara, Buenos Aires.

⁹ If we pay attention to the use of words during the book, once she was imprisoned she wasn't Leonora any more, she was "the prisoner", she had no more name; and that was because in fact, for Diana, it wasn't *her* Leonora any more, it wasn't the one she needed to tell the story she intended to.

¹⁰ "Me gustaban esas palabras: transformación, vida, cuerpos, amaba las palabras porque eran capaces de preservar cada cosa en su perfección. Leonora las necesitaba menos que yo porque Leonora era su cuerpo moreno, y sobre todo era su pelo, largo y cobrizo, ondeando pesadamente al compás de ese cuerpo."

there, Fernando [her husband] isn't there, other men that had loved her remained far away, nor the Party [Montoneros] will come to help her neither *montoneros* leaders will watch over her. ¿To what does she belong now? ¿Who will protect her?"¹¹ (*ibídem*: 62). And finally, when they met again, after Leonora was released from ESMA, she recounted this dialogue: " `Nobody seduced me', she told me proudly; `I had always been the one who seduced'. It must be true. She also tried to seduce myself. And I recognize that sometimes she achieved her purpose. She has a lot of strength. I was going to say passion, but it is only the sham of passion: deep down she is cold and calculating. A dangerous woman. I guess she will enjoy that someone has written that down."¹² (*ibídem*: 230)

Another novel that refers to a relationship between a female detainee and a repressor is *Recuerdo de la muerte -Memory of death-*, by Miguel Bonasso. In this case the bond described is the one between "Pelusa" and the "Tigre" Acosta, and again the origins of betrayal are in her biography, her genes, like a tragic destiny that is indeed in all female gender. In fact, when the narrator talks about betrayal in general, he uses an unfortunate analogy: "Betrayal resembles seduction. It resembles the image of the seduced woman. The one that gives you a kiss, then gives you another and ends up spreading her legs."¹³ (Bonasso 1994: 155) Apparently, men not only have the power to actively seduce women, but also transform them into passive *sluts*. And in these representations of the past, betrayal is *gendered*: women who are qualified as traitors are also *sluts*, but men who are equally qualified are always in an ideological, political or moral sense, never sexual.

IV. Conclusion

After this presentation you may be wondering why this kind of postdictatorial representations are considered so problematic for us: as the explanation relies on female essence, on certain stereotypical vision of women, they reproduce a simplistic analysis, a linear one, not taking into account other relevant aspects of the situation, first and foremost the unbalanced relation that it is established

¹¹ "No está su padre, no está Fernando [su marido], han quedado lejos otros hombres que la han amado, el Partido no acudirá en su ayuda ni velarán por ella los altos jefes montoneros. ¿A qué pertenece ahora? ¿Quién la va a proteger?"

¹² " `A mí no me sedujo nadie', me dijo con orgullo; `siempre seduje yo'. Debe ser cierto. A mí también intentó seducirme. Y reconozco que a veces lo consiguió. Tiene mucha fuerza. Iba a decir pasión, pero no es más que el simulacro de la pasión: en el fondo es fría y calculadora. Una mujer peligrosa. Supongo que le va a gustar que alguien lo haya escrito."

¹³ "La traición se parece a la seducción. A la imagen de la mujer seducida. La que entrega un beso, luego entrega otro y termina abriéndose de gambas."

between an oppressor and their oppressed. One cannot judge a person's actions in clandestine detention and torture with the same values as if that person was free. As Primo Levi described in *The Drowned and the Saved*, if you wanted to survive, you actually had to forget some of the values you brought from the outside world. But to think that women also brought an essence with them is even more problematic because it perpetuates the ancient patriarchal vision of femininity and the alleged dichotomy with masculinity, both proclaimed by the military (and in a particular sense by *Montoneros*). Then, this line of research is from the beginning sterile and fruitless.

As we anticipated in the introduction, traditional feminism did not quite overcome these premises either, whereas queer theory enables us to move away from this female essentialization, still dependant on the notion of static identity. Focusing on Judith Butler's gender deconstruction, largely exposed in *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* -considered one of the foundational books of queer theory-, the femininity-masculinity dichotomy is questioned and the naturalized binary system opens up to other gender possibilities. In the Preface written in 1999, for a new edition, this author asserts that her intention in 1989, when the book was first published, was to criticize a pervasive heteronormative assumption in feminist literary theory, as well as the idealization that this theory did with certain expressions of gender that produced new forms of hierarchy and exclusion (Butler 1999: vii-viii).

In the following chapter, she stresses that idea: "Feminist critique ought to explore the totalizing claims of a masculinist signifying economy, but also remain self-critical with respect to the totalizing gestures of feminism. The effort to identify the enemy as singular in form is a reverse-discourse that uncritically mimics the strategy of the oppressor instead of offering a different set of terms." (*ibidem*: 18-19). In order to stand up for women, some feminist theorists built a naturalized category of women, opposed to the one of men, without paying attention to other relevant factors, like class, race, age, and therefore reproducing the heteronormativity that they were supposedly criticizing.

Butler's theory of performativity allows her to show how there is no previous identity to gender practices and that the problem is that this social construction of gender is afterwards concealed by norms which are presented as only representative, when they actually produce what is intelligible and unintelligible in sex, gender and desire matters. Then, deconstructing these gender moulds is the key to also deconstruct the representations mentioned before. Denaturalization overcomes stigmatization. So, to enfranchise new discourses about some important aspects of the last civic-military dictatorship in Argentina is necessary to refloat

some queer premises that may seem as already established, but still need to be remembered.

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