

# ***A Body of One's Own: A Trans History of Argentina***

**Patricio Simonetto**

reseñada por

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**Patricio Simonetto. *A Body of One's Own: A Trans History of Argentina*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2024. 288 pp. ISBN 978-1-4773-2860-6.**

To this day, historical accounts of the trans (an umbrella term used to refer to 'transsexual' and 'transgender' identities) and *travesti* experience in Argentina remain hard to find for those of us who study LGBTTTIQ+ contemporary cultural production in this country. Materials and testimonies are scattered in books published by small self-funded editorials (such as *Muchas Nueces*), which is why Simonetto's *A Body of One's Own* is one of the most important recent publications on this subject. Building on the methodological approaches of Jorge Salessi's *Médicos, maleantes y maricas* (1995) and Josefina Fernández's *La Berkins* (2022), Simonetto's book combines historical and archival work with interviews and other materials obtained through his collaboration with grassroots movements and collectives, such as the Archivo de la Memoria Trans Argentina.

*A Body of One's Own* addresses an urgent gap in the contemporary history of transsexual, transgender and *travesti* studies by inscribing the materiality of trans/*travesti* bodies at the center of the Argentinian nation-state project: "(T)his book offers a reading of national history through those bodies, from the limits of gender belonging to the ongoing corporeal experience of citizenship and nation formation" (6). The author achieves this by inserting specific stories found in the medical, criminal and cultural archives, or taken from interviews he conducted, into the larger scope of legal history, global debates on healthcare and the overall press coverage. In other words, Simonetto holds macro-history accountable against the micro-history produced by trans and *travesti* individuals in Argentina.

Focusing on the period from the 1900s to 2021, Simonetto explores how trans and *travesti* people used different gendering techniques to assert agency over their own bodies and examines how an archive of knowledge on these techniques was accumulated and circulated among the members of this community, which transcended national frontiers. The first chapter illuminates the connections between gender and racial hierarchies in

the early 20th century and the modernization of Argentina, which allows Simonetto to reveal examples of cross-dressing and marriages as gendering techniques located in medical and police records. The second chapter introduces the influx of European histories of transsexuality, like those of Christine Jorgensen and Coccinelle, and how they spread through the Argentinian press. Along with these texts, scientific discussions on sex and gender and medical research on sex change operations contributed to the desessentialization of the concept of 'sex'. However, these discussions did not result in the acceptance of trans and *travesti* peoples. In many of the cases analyzed, laws and policies were designed to reinforce cis-heteropatriarchal norms in deciding who was allowed to be a "citizen." Simonetto includes examples of assimilation in trans and *travesti* subjects, through marriage or motherhood, in the case of Liliana Vega, or gender violence in the case of Horacio Reyes Hernández. The third chapter offers a balanced analysis of the possibilities and problematic effects produced by the spectacle of *travestismo* in terms of experimentation with sexuality and gender expression. The author emphasizes how Carnival and international and national migration (mostly to Brazil, but also to some European countries, and from the provinces to Buenos Aires) allowed trans and *travesti* people to build careers and identities. At the same time, Simonetto acknowledges the exoticization of racialized trans bodies (in Argentina, *la morocha* is a prevalent stereotype), and the hierarchization that took place regarding who could obtain "natural" gender-affirming operations, like the injection of silicone.

The last three sections introduce the political fronts that trans and *travesti* people opened when they began to organize. Chapter four considers the embodiment technologies enabled by hormones and silicones in the 1980s, and their irregular circulation in clandestine practices that risked trans lives and made of their bodies a "living laboratory," paraphrasing the title of this section. These biotechnologies didn't replace the homemade ones, but came to indicate a deviant temporality for trans people. The medical risks that some invasive procedures entailed (especially those performed clandestinely) and their unaffordability further fed a political awakening that sought other ways of asserting a transgender identity. The fifth chapter, although repetitive in its review of police violence and state regulation of trans bodies, explores the many ruptures and discussions that different social movements experienced from the 1990s onward, as the language of human rights was established in the aftermath of Videla's dictatorship. Simonetto does an outstanding job in confronting the effect that the politics of respectability and moralism had on the working class, lesbian, gay and feminist movements, and how trans people adopted these registers to oppose *travesti* demands, which adopted more provocative performances in rejection of Argentina's prevalent moralism. Finally, the epilogue summarizes the aims of Simonetto's book, contemplates the open horizons for the LGBTTTQI+ movements, and pays homage to two of the most important activists that made possible the passing of a law for a minimum employment quota for trans and *travesti* peoples in the public sector and the 2012 Gender Identity Law: Diana Sacayán and Lohana Berkins.

Simonetto offers an outstanding overview of the forms of empowerment that trans and *travesti* subjects enacted to negotiate and assert their belonging in public spaces, throughout periods of extreme repression that are not limited to the dictatorships of the twentieth century in Argentina. As the author highlights, trans temporalities defy notions

of linearity: different trans technologies of embodiment coexist at any given time, as do their experiences of marginalization, regardless of institutional or cultural acceptance. Apart from these many achievements, Simonetto's book could have benefited from engagement with the notion of "*furia travesti*" and other important currents in Argentina's *travesti* sphere, as well as a more sustained dialogue with feminism, which produced many instances of allyship—as well as opposition and rejection—with the trans and *travesti* communities. Additionally, a more nuanced discussion of the tensions between trans/*travesti* identities and a Gender Law that still only recognizes the male-female binary would have been welcome. Nonetheless, these opportunities for further engagement do not detract from this otherwise very complex historical account. *A Body of One's Own* will surely inspire many works to come on the contemporary history of trans and *travesti* life in the Southern Cone.