

# SOMOS MÁS WE ARE MORE



some south american lessons in contemporary lgbt+ activism

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with translation and research assistance by pedro feijó

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We are pictured here marching for LGBT+ rights in Paraguay's capital Asunción in October 2016 during a break from the fieldwork for the research published here. Image my own.

Cover image: Crisalida ("Chrysalis") by Carlos Sales (photographer). It depicts drag queen and DJ Alma Negrot whom I interviewed at a street market in Rio. The idea of a chrysalis perfectly captures the theme of this report: the possibility of being more. Image taken from Instagram (@almanegrot) and used with permission.

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# TL;DR: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is one outcome of a research project into the workings of the LGBT+ movements in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina that I conducted in 2016. The central question it asks is: what can we in the UK learn from the movements in these countries? This text is intended for a broad audience but particularly includes British LGBT+ people, their advocates, and organisations working within the UK movement.

There are four key learning themes which I draw out of the fieldwork for this project: (1) what and who the South American movements prioritise, (2) how these movements represent themselves and LGBT+ people, (3) how they particularly represent themselves in relation to ‘hygiene’, and (4) their various efforts towards conducting ‘intersectional’ politics. I will additionally note the cultural difference between LGBT+ political events in Brazil and the UK.

Within these themes, I submit the things I learned as recommendations for the conduct of LGBT+ politics in the UK. The headlines are:

(1 - on priority)

- ❖ Prioritise by precarity.
- ❖ Consider at all times who is being excluded.
- ❖ Prioritise the base.

(2 - on representation)

- ❖ Put your queers to the front.
- ❖ Invest in open-ends.

(3 - on hygiene)

- ❖ Stand with the ‘dirty’, ‘freakish’, and ‘low’.
- ❖ Distinguish professionalism from efficacy.

(4 - on intersectionality)

- ❖ Don’t forget who people really are.
- ❖ Campaign for justice as comprehensively as possible.
- ❖ Raise others’ flags so they will raise yours.

(5 - on culture in politics)

- ❖ Put on a goddamn show.

The meaning of these headlines is fleshed out in the conclusion. Their full genealogy is contained in the longer country sections.

# INTRODUCTION



Map showing the three key cities. CIA's World Factbook (public domain).

Late in 2016 I spent a series of weeks in South America investigating LGBT+ political organisations and spaces in São Paulo, Montevideo and Buenos Aires. This publication is a collection of reflections from that journey for consumption and discussion by LGBT+ people and activists in the UK.

This is the best way to think about this text. As will become clear upon reading, it is in no way a definitive text on current LGBT+ politics in South America. Nor is it a social scientific study. It fits comfortably neither in the category of “academic research” nor “journalism”, though it shares traits with both. Least of all is it a travel log. What it is supposed to be is an invitation to conversation. Particularly, it is intended to present enough pieces of interesting but digestible material to people in certain kinds of political spaces and organisations in the UK and to those with certain kinds of identities — those that are **LGBT+** or **queer**.

**LGBT+:** Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender *and more*. The addition sign is an imperfect way of acknowledging that these four groups are only the tip of the iceberg of those marginalised by sex or gender. Here I only use “LGBT” where it appears in proper nouns or in quotes from interviewees.

**Queer:** this text uses “queer” as a respectful umbrella for anyone who is non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender. Unlike “LGBT+” it is not a composite term. Queerness is not built out of what is already “lesbian”, “bisexual” etc. Instead it deliberately avoids being more strictly definable and is impossible to properly articulate in a brief definition. Queerness is especially associated with identities and behaviours which transgress binaries like “man/woman”, “straight/gay”.



I am aiming to tell some stories about individuals I met, spaces I visited and organisations I studied. I am aiming to tell these stories in as much detail as to be beyond any accusation of vacuity but to be well within the range of what can be stomachd with a cup of coffee and a spare hour. This report therefore brings together matter-of-fact accounts of recent political history from the three ‘target’ countries with insider stories of how these histories were brought about, from the perspective of some of those responsible. It is a record of what I learned about the possibilities of activism, in style and in substance, and it is supplemented with some ideas from political theory to create topics of conversation which I hope are both accessible and important.

My expectation is that LGBT+ people and their advocates in the UK will be heartened by and interested in accounts of some their South American counterparts. My hope is that conversations about such abstract matters as intersectionality, hygienisation, and essentialism (definitions to follow) will be prompted and profitably influenced by the examples recounted here.

## Research

What did the work presented here actually entail? Primarily, hours and hours of interviews. The range of people I spoke to went well beyond what I had initially intended: activists and community organisers, of course, but also healthcare professionals, lawyers, candidates for political office, performers, artists, and film directors. Regrettably, far more people were interviewed than are explicitly named. In addition to their time, those interviewed invariably donated large piles of physical materials, leaflets, posters and the like, which have proved exceptionally useful as memory aids, illustrations and sources for answers to the questions I forgot to ask.

The research also entailed immersing myself in activities, participating in spaces and shadowing those whom I had interviewed. Again, this entailed rich diversity. Among these events and spaces were opening ceremonies, political rallies, protests, fundraisers, workshops, film screenings, a cultural festival, and a walkabout, distributing condoms to sex workers in Buenos Aires. This aspect of the work is inseparable from the travel itself, since in the vast majority of cases I also stayed with, ate with and socialised with South American queers, often friends of activists from previous countries.

The upshot of all this comes in the form of “lessons”. These are, firstly, the things that I learned from this project. They are, secondly, offered up to others in the UK for consideration and discussion. The executive summary has given an indication of the key themes and the country sections will now tell the stories. These sections are structured very differently from one another: Brazil is a scrapbook, Uruguay an attempt to answer a specific question, and Argentina an exploration of the relation between activists masses and activists elites. This variation was demanded by the nature of the most interesting material I gathered in each country. Because of this, it is unnecessary to read this report cover to cover or in any particular sequence. The conclusion gathers the various lessons together explicitly and systematically and can also be read separately, perhaps as an indicator of where in the text to direct your attention.

## The rule of law

It will be useful to have some initial information about LGBT+ politics in Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay and to indicate why these three places are of interest. And because of our legislation-centred conception of ‘politics’ it makes good sense for me to begin with a matter-of-fact summary of the recent LGBT+ legal advances — and lacks thereof — in Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina, for throat-clearing, mostly, and to give us a sense that we are firmly within a realm that we recognise as ‘political’.

Legislatively speaking, for better or for worse, the LGBT+ rights struggle in a number of countries, including the UK, Brazil, Argentina and Uruguay, over the last twenty years can be thought of as revolving around four major aims. They are:

1. The protection of LGBT+ people via anti-discrimination law.
2. The legalisation of the adoption of children by same-sex couples.
3. The legalisation of same-sex marriage (with the legalisation of same-sex unions being an intermediate stage of this).
4. The legal provision of a means of changing one’s birth-assigned legal gender.<sup>1</sup>

To address the first aim, “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” were both added to Uruguay’s existing hate crime and speech law in 2003. Discrimination in the provision of goods and services to LGBT+ people as well as in employment was banned a year later.

Contrastingly, anti-discrimination law remains a patchwork of varying local regulations in Brazil with a federal law as yet unable to pass the evangelical caucus in the senate. Discrimination in the provision of goods and services also remains notably legal in Argentina, though “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” were added to hate law in 2012.

All three countries have achieved the second and third aims. Uruguay became the first country in South America to allow gay couples to adopt children in 2009 and had become the first country in Latin America with a nationwide law recognising same-sex unions in 2008. It went on to legalise same-sex marriage in 2013. A court ruling in 2010 confirmed gay adoption as legal in Brazil and its marriage legislation became national in 2013. Argentina legislated on adoption and marriage together in 2010.

Lastly, on gender identity, Uruguay again led from the front with what was in 2009 a cutting edge law. This was also the year Brazil’s judiciary forced a change by ruling that a person can alter their legal gender. Uruguay’s law was subsequently improved upon as the international gold standard for gender identity laws in 2012 by Argentina.

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<sup>1</sup> Absent from this list is the primary legal demand of gay and lesbian politics, the legalisation of same-sex sexual activity. Though this is an important part of the LGBT+ struggle in many places around the world, it has no relevance for me here since same-sex sexual relationships have been legal in Uruguay since 1934 and in both Brazil and Argentina since the nineteenth century. The UK eventually caught up with an *unequal* age of consent in 1967, 1980 and 1982 for England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland respectively.



Goal	Argentina	Brazil	Uruguay	UK
Anti-discrimination	No.	No. A patchwork of state laws.	2003/4	2010
Adoption	2010	2010 (by judicial ruling)	2009	2005 (England and Wales), 2009 (Scotland), 2013 (Northern Ireland)
Marriage	2010	2013	2013	No. 2013 (England and Wales), 2014 (Scotland) but still illegal in Northern Ireland.
Legal Gender Change	2012. Now considered the gold standard for gender identity laws internationally.	2009 (by judicial ruling)	2009	2005

Summary table: legislative status of key LGBT+ rights with UK for comparison.

It might come as a surprise that the level of legislative progress in these countries is as advanced as it is. If so, this is no bad thing since it prompts a question for which this text will explore some answers: how have they done that then? Further, this text will have already started to achieve one of its more implicit aims, which is to unsettle any ideas that it is ‘we’ (whomever that might be) who know about LGBT+ activism and it is ‘the rest’ (wherever they might be) who have something to learn.

Such a view holds no water here. Uruguay has achieved all four of the key aims and is by any possible standard a global leader in terms of LGBT+ rights. What makes Uruguay, not an especially dominant power on the international stage, nor even a regional economic power, an innovative defender of its LGBT+ citizens? Or rather, *who* makes this the case? And how?

Argentina too is doing well on this simple model: three out of four, the same as the UK. It is of interest because its LGBT+ movement has accumulated these achievements while being structured on a very different model to the movement in the UK. What can we learn from this alternative structure?

Brazil has made much of the legal progress it has by the action of the judiciary rather than through its congress. Its progress remains more delicate in virtue of this. Investigating the shape of LGBT+ activism and its notable, localised successes under often extremely homophobic conditions, is the source of my interest in Brazil and in fact was the seed that led to this more comprehensive project. What can we learn from those succeeding at activism under such adverse conditions? We begin by considering an answer to this question.

# BRAZIL

*Content note: please be aware that this section discusses queerphobic violence.*



Viviany Beleboni protests evangelised anti-queer violence as Jesus Christ, São Paulo Pride, 2015.

Image courtesy of Jeso Carneiro on Flickr, licensed under Creative Commons.

## Journey to the centre of the earth

The world's eyes are watching Brazil. The world's eyes are watching, Brazil.

Last year, in the **global Northwest**, we heard endlessly about various Brazilian spectacles and sensations. Most prominent of these were the Zika virus outbreak, the Olympic and Paralympic Games, the Columbian plane crash, the collapsing economy and the impeachment of, and political coup against, President Dilma Rousseff. News media, both old and social, were very clear: interesting things were happening in Brazil and all the world was watching.

**Global Northwest/ Northwestern:** Northern and Western Europe and North America collectively. This construction is geographically accurate (unlike, e.g., “the West”) and contains no intrinsic suggestion of superiority (unlike, e.g., “the first world”). Though it excludes Australia and New Zealand, commonly taken to be included by other terms, it will be useful here, where the central task is to compare South American movements with the UK.

The same thing can be said for niche LGBT+ media in 2016 and for LGBT-focussed majority media. Interesting, violent things were afoot in Brazil and the world was watching, aghast. Almost one LGBT+ person is killed every day in Brazil, said the New York Times (Jul 5), said The Advocate (Jul 12), said The Daily Beast (Nov 15). One every twenty-eight hours, said HuffPo (Jul 11). Every twenty seven hours, said

Planet Transgender (Jan 31). Every twenty five, Pink News was still saying at the beginning of this present year (Jan 28). How upsetting and surprising this was. What about carnival spirit? What about the world's largest Pride in São Paulo? What happened to the early successes on adoption and marriage? Well, the "pink reputation is misleading" and it turns out that, actually, "there is no deadlier place in the world to be an LGBT person" (CBC News, 2016).

These media mostly drew their information from the same Human Rights Campaign report, which begins, inevitably: "[i]nternational attention is focussed on Brazil..." (Jul 2016). The report is neat and grim and gives no particular reason to doubt its claims, even if the various articles which draw on it are messy in their adaption of the figures. And there is little doubt about the horror of the personalised violence these figures describe. Viviany Beleboni's face was slashed with a knife in response to her Pride performance pictured above (CBC, 2016). André Felipe Colares had toothpicks pushed into his eyes before he was killed (The Huffington Post, 2016). A Rio police officer admitted to Ellen Page that he has murdered gays and will continue to do so (*Gaycation*, "Brazil" episode, 2016).

Well then, where in the world could the successes of LGBT+ activism be more interesting and important than in its very capital of anti-queer violence (as some would have it) and a place that is, for now, the object of everybody's attention?

## Diversity, precarity

As the biggest city in South America, São Paulo serves as a magnet for misfits: those who have been marginalized or attacked or outcast by their families and hometown communities. This is the case for queers, among others, and particularly for trans people. The dynamic is well-known in South American queer milieus and is perfectly familiar from the queer histories of population centres closer to home.

Paulista trans women, who turned out to be central to most of the LGBT+ activism I encountered in the city, thus come from every imaginable geographical origin. Most, however, live lives embedded in extreme material and social **precarity**. Most also work as prostitutes.<sup>1</sup> These individuals thus face challenging demographic odds in relation to educational opportunities, job security, and poverty. What's more, I did not meet a single trans woman in Brazil without a story of street violence and struggle. It is simply a fact of these lives that survival depends on learning to defend oneself. Activist Indianara Siqueira (discussed below) shared her strategy: "I try to talk with them first. But in case things don't go right I always have a broken bottle in my purse." A large proportion of this population are also black or of indigenous descent with some identifying as *mestiças*, a colonial term reclaimed as a positive referent for mixed race women.

**Precarity:** living under conditions of insecurity or unpredictability with respect to one's employment, living, and financial arrangements, particularly in the context of leftist analyses of neoliberal labour markets. The 'precariat' is the social class of people living in precarity.

<sup>1</sup> The statistic I heard repeatedly in Brazil is that 90% of transgender women there are sex workers, a figure which seems to originate with *Rede Trans Brasil*, the national network of Brazilian trans people. Whether this is accurate or not, the general point stands — *lots* of trans Brazilians are prostitutes.

Of course, to some extent all LGBT+ people are vulnerable to violence, whether in Brazil or the UK, and be it due to the presence of our ‘abnormal’ bodies, to our unusual forms of dress and body adornment, or to our public demonstrations of affection. Middle class, white, gay couples in São Paulo, for example, of whom I also befriended a good number, expressed a keen awareness of the spaces in which they felt safe to publicly hold hands and of the spaces in which they must be more careful or indeed avoid completely. It was these queers, or rather, gays, who were full of warnings about the dangers of certain streets and full of concern if I had already ventured down them. It is bitterly ironic, however, that those who seemed to worry most vocally are those in the city who are safely barricaded behind gated apartment buildings, which are on a scale in São Paulo that I have seen nowhere else in the world. It is these gays who travel exclusively by taxi, avoiding the streets at all costs. The precariat classes of street queers, needless to say, cannot afford such luxuries and so remain far more vulnerable.

### Single issue deaths

Given this “double vulnerability” of those who are queer *and* low class, queer *and* of colour, queer *and* sex workers, it is encouraging that significant parts of the city’s LGBT+ politics operates on the basis that gender identity and sexuality are not the only keys to understanding and improving LGBT+ lives. Rather, one of the most striking features of this politics is the degree to which questions of race, class, and institutionalisation are actively folded into the struggle. This is to say that activism in São Paulo is, to a large extent, of a self-consciously **intersectional** nature.

**Intersectionality:** the idea that oppressions are interconnected and cannot be successfully examined or fought independently. The term originated in Kimberlè Williams Crenshaw’s work and is increasingly important within twenty-first century political movements, including popular articulations of these movements.

In the course of my time in São Paulo, no episode spoke more clearly of this than the inauguration of the Luana Barbosa dos Reis Centre for LGBT Citizenship. As part of its broad programme of LGBT+ policies, the prefecture of São Paulo has created “LGBT Citizenship Centres” in four different regions of the city. Their aim is to help LGBT+ Paulistas access the rights they already legally have in education, health, and employment by distributing information and offering one-on-one support. They also provide care services for victims of violence and discrimination as well as legal and psychological support and some limited sexual health services.

Each fixed centre is aided in their work by a small mobile unit, which drives around the city providing a smaller range of services and bringing more people into the network. Many people are tested for STDs by these units and they are equipped to provide referrals to other services. Furthermore, the units are mobile cultural centres. With a small stage and good speakers, they present drag shows or exhibit the work of LGBT+ artists. Overall, the system functions to provide ‘integrated centres for citizenship’, combining tools to promote diversity and fight against queerphobia with social and health care assistance and efforts to make LGBT+ cultures more visible in the city.

I visited two of the centres and a mobile unit while in São Paulo and was invited to the opening of a new centre in the north zone of the city. To see inside a key part of the city's formal LGBT+ public policy would have been important to this project anyway. As it turned out, however, even more impressive than the centre itself — a large, clean building with many private meeting rooms, a classroom space, and a kitchen — was the particular political approach that defined it and which was evident in the opening ceremony itself.

The focus of the event was the woman to whom the centre was dedicated, Luana Barbosa dos Reis. In April 2016, Luana was walking her fourteen-year-old son to class when she was approached by Military Police a short distance from her house.<sup>2</sup> For a black lesbian activist such as Luana this inconvenience was not exactly unheard of. When she refused to be searched by a male officer, however, the situation quickly escalated. A witness insists she was beaten by at least six officers (Globo, 2016). She died in hospital five days later as a result of a severe trauma to the head (Huffington Post Brazil, 2016).

Because of its brutality and disproportion, as well as Luana's previously pugnacious approach to equal rights, the case was widely discussed in Brazilian media. It became an exemplar of the way seemingly disparate forms of discrimination, against women, against people of colour, and against LGBT+ people, can conspire to create cases of particular vulnerability. The killing also resonated with international human rights groups: two separate UN bodies called for an impartial investigation (see UN Women Brazil, 2016). But despite the spotlight and international pressure the case was archived by the São Paulo State Military Court. The officers suffered no consequences. Seven months later, the Luana Barbosa dos Reis Centre for LGBT Citizenship was opened.



Luana's mother remembering her daughter. Image licensed under Creative Commons, courtesy of mododevolar.wordpress.com.

<sup>2</sup> Brazil is a relatively militarized state in which the Military Police are responsible for street-level law enforcement and the Civil Police for investigations and prosecutions. The arrangement is roughly comparable to the French *gendarmérie*.

It would be hard to overstate just how much this grand opening — administered, it is important to remember, by LGBT+ representatives of the prefecture — departed from the professionalist culture familiar from equivalent events in the UK: non-controversial, depoliticised, buttoned up. This is the first and very abstract sense in which we can think of this event as “intersectional”. It was not willing to separate out lived political reality from institutionalised political events.

Most obviously, it was an occasion unafraid to eponymize the contradictory Brazilian position on queers: I personally made no mental effort to harmonise the state brutality against Luana with the state memorialisation of her. It makes no sense. And yet, somehow the two run in parallel.<sup>3</sup> If I had expected some level of euphemism or understatement for the sake of consistency of public policy or even for institutional face-saving, I was to be confounded. In the proudest tradition of queer fringes, the event was entirely uncompromising in what it had to declare, government-funding and institutional context be damned. The savagery was called out for what it was in front of the assembled crowd: a gang murder for which the means, opportunity, legitimacy and absence of retributory justice were provided by the state and funded by the taxpayer.

There was and remains something unsettlingly comforting about this matter-of-fact acceptance of the often contradictory nature of the social world as it is experienced by those confined to its margins. Paulista LGBT+ people can legitimately fear violence from the state and, at a citizenship centre, expect trauma counselling from it afterwards. Credit here is due to the individuals of the Paulista LGBT+ community who in their choice of name for the centre and of tone for the naming ceremony insist on publically and institutionally resisting the everyday reality of queer struggle. Further credit is due to whomever is still maintaining on the São Paulo prefecture website that it *was* the Military Police who beat Luana to death, no matter what they themselves might say (Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2016a).

In addition to refusing to gloss over the state’s role in anti-queer violence, the opening of the new centre also succeeded by the more common standard of what it is to be “intersectional”. This would be, roughly speaking, that successful empowerment politics refuses to separate one group’s struggle for its political dignity, rights and status from the parallel struggles of other groups. To do otherwise is to pretend that individuals have unidimensional identities and the consequence of this is exclusionary: thinking, for example, of black women’s critique of the racist aspects of white feminism as “inimical to the sisterhood”, rather than as an expression of the divided loyalties produced by some white women’s assumption that all women experience sisterhood in the same way. Those already familiar with this kind of politics and its history will forgive the inevitable temptation to quote Audre Lorde: “[t]here is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” (Lorde, 2007 [1982]).

Contrary to LGBT+ politics as we are accustomed to it in the global Northwest, much LGBT+ politics in São Paulo does not imagine or treat “LGBT+” as a somehow self-contained quality that can be abstracted from real lives. Rather, it is conducted in line with the idea that “LGBT+” lives are sexual and gendered but are also economic, racial, institutional, and so on. The opening of the LGBT+ centre honoured the multifaceted identity of the person being memorialised and, in so doing, the multifaceted identities of those

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<sup>3</sup> To ape that most overused of travel writing clichés and to quote the HRC report referred to above, Brazil is “an extremely contradictory country” on LGBT+ rights (Luiz Mott, cited in HRC, 2016).



whose lives would soon bring them through the centre's open doors. The myriad horrors of the killing were all deplored. The temptation to reduce it to a gay-bashing was resisted, though surely this would have made a simpler fit between the remembered event and the LGBT+ space seeking to co-opt this event for its own identity.

Instead, Luana's death was presented accurately, which is to say complexly. For it was a homophobic killing, of course it was, and it was militarized and institutionalised, which was admirably pointed out, but it was also misogynistic and racist. It was also the bullying of an impoverished person and the exploitation of the vulnerability of a mother supervising her child. None of these factors, all of which contribute to a person's overall susceptibility to violence, were overlooked for the sake of a simple narrative about anti-lesbian crime.

The racist and economic structures that helped kill Luana and then deny her justice were referred to openly by the speakers at the event but were also implicitly acknowledged in the assembly of speakers themselves. As such, and in addition to representatives of the prefecture and Luana's sister, we heard from black MC Luana Hansen, who rapped angrily about racist patriarchy, and from LGBT+ members of the youth wing of the Communist Party of Brazil, who led more hopeful leftist chants. The event was hosted by drag queen Tchaka.

The inclusion of a thing means locking it into every constituent cell of what you are doing.<sup>4</sup> This was what the opening ceremony for the Luana Barbosa dos Reis Centre for LGBT Citizenship did for the intersecting identities of its namesake. Thus the event, marking an important addition to LGBT+ services in the city, was attended by an array of people. Perhaps because in that room there were no racial or economic elephants.



The opening of the LGBT centre including: Luana Hansen (in yellow), Alessandro Melchior (see below, third from left), Luana Barbosa dos Reis' sister (second from right) and Tchaka (far left).  
Used with permission from the prefecture.

To those in the UK frustrated by criticism that their movements are not sufficiently diverse, or who genuinely struggle to attract the desired heterogeneity of faces and voices, there are simple lessons to be learned here. Was the person you are speaking about a lesbian? Well then, be sure to say so. Was she poor? Say so, chant it even. Was she black? They rapped that she was. Murdered by police? Covered by the state? Scream it, put her name on your government LGBT+ centre. Then see who attends the opening ceremony.<sup>5</sup>

Prior to the christening of the new centre, the three existing ones were fully booked with five hundred appointments per month (Prefeitura de São Paulo, 2016b). This is partly symptomatic of the scale of the problems faced by Paulista LGBT+ people. But it is surely also demonstrative of the accessibility of the services the centres are providing: they are places where people *feel their needs will be addressed* — not insofar as

<sup>4</sup> Include (v.), from Latin *includere*, “to shut in, enclose, imprison”.

<sup>5</sup> I don't mean to imply that problems of racial diversity in LGBT+ activism can be solved by luring in people of colour with rap music. I just present this as an example of how at one particular event the background of one particular person was honoured by those who knew her.



these needs are LGBT+, not insofar as these needs are understood by rich white gay men, but simply as they are. Framing these needs as those of individuals with compound identities has made it a popular, inclusive, and effective system.

## **The Sexual Politics of TransCidadania**

That LGBT Citizenship Centre was the last established during the mayoral mandate of Fernando Haddad. A member of the Workers' Party, he is, and is perceived to be, an important explanans of the present state of LGBT+ life in São Paulo. The LGBT+ division of the Department for Human Rights and Citizenship explicitly bet on improving the LGBT+ support infrastructures in the city during his sympathetic term as mayor. The central achievements of this effort were the establishment of the Citizenship Centres and, perhaps even more so, TransCidadania (TransCitizenship), which it is now important to mention since it too addresses the needs of some of the most vulnerable LGBT+ Brazilians as well as raising new issues for us to think about in the UK.

TransCidadania is a two-year programme of education and professional training aimed at trans women living in São Paulo. It is unique in the world. All participants take six months of classes on Human Rights and Citizenship and two semesters dedicated to professional skills, including classes on technology and computing, cooking, cooperative economy, and success in the job market. The final semester comprises an internship. For those who have not finished the equivalent of secondary school, access to the government's Education of Youth and Adults programme is provided, which can be extended beyond the two years until participants achieve this basic level of education. For thirty hours of commitment per week participants receive a monthly subsidy of R\$924 (equivalent to Brazil's minimum wage).

Given limited resources, the programme was launched small and only for the most vulnerable. As Alessandro Melchior, the Coordinator of LGBT+ policy for the prefecture of São Paulo and prime mover of TransCidadania, explained:

If we had opened applications [from the beginning] it would've reached a thousand applicants and we would only have had the capacity to take on a hundred, which would've been frustrating. So what did we do? We took the car and some really amateur materials, some black and white Xerox leaflets, and we went to where we would find who we were looking for, those who needed to prostitute [...]

As the programme continued and grew, selection criteria were developed to give total priority to the precariat groups the founders at first drove out into the city to meet. First, a nixing of any candidate who has worked more than three months under contract in the last three years. This highly restrictive rule ensures that participants in TransCidadania only come from the most vulnerable of economic circumstances and specifically embraces sex workers. It leaves no shortage of prospective candidates in the city. Further priority is given to those who are homeless or in otherwise unstable living arrangements, those who have less formal education, those who live with chronic health conditions, or who have had silicone injected into their bodies since, according to Alessandro, this can pose a serious health risk in combination with sex work and exposure to violence.

The insistence on working with and for prostitutes is one of the programme's most important aspects since sex workers constitute such a large proportion of Brazil's trans women and are a vulnerable population. What is even more impressive than the prioritisation itself is that there is no expectation that participants will give up sex work during or after the programme. No judgment or prohibition whatsoever is made by the programme towards prostitution.<sup>6</sup>

We have become accustomed, in Northwestern LGBT+ politics, to considering the question of sexual diversity as a separate one from sex workers' rights. In fact, it may not even occur to most, or many, LGBT+ Northwesterners, that the politics of sex work is *sexual politics*. This oversight is surely inseparable from the transformation in this region, over the last decades, of the messier, queerer, angry politics of, for example, the Gay Liberation Front and separatist lesbian feminism into the more mainstream and palatable "gay rights" of the Human Rights Campaign and Stonewall. Increasing public tolerance of gays — self-evidently a good thing — has cost Northwestern activist communities the price of a good 'scrubbing up'. Thus we speak of "gays and lesbians" not "queers", thus activists sport suits and ties not left-wing haircuts, thus our cultural figurehead is Ellen Degeneres and not the Dykes on Bikes.

But Brazilian activists, even within the sober institutions of São Paulo's municipal government, attack this process of 'hygienisation' — a term one hears frequently in these spheres. And, just as in the case of the new Citizenship Centre, the anti-hygienist approach is all the more impressive for characterising a *state* programme: it is a public policy for something as normative as "citizenship" that successfully embraces sex workers and refuses the opportunity stigmatise their work.

**Hygienisation:** the process whereby marginalised populations are made (or make themselves) more acceptable to dominant populations by behaving and presenting in sanctioned ways, especially with respect to issues of purity, decency, bodily normality, and etiquette.

The critique offered by these activists, manifest in the TransCidadania programme's approach to sex work but also readily forthcoming in conversations with them, has two central objections:

1. *A practical objection:* we at the margins cannot achieve our aims with respect to sex and gender if we simply imitate those at the centre. Doing this gets us tolerance qua 'normal' (which is surely tolerance that already largely exists anyway), not tolerance for the different.
2. *A principled objection:* why should we at the margins have to pay the further price of normalization just in order to remedy the significant burdens we have already incurred, through no fault of our own, due to our sexual orientations or gender identities?

TransCidadania puts this critique into practice. There is no point, the activists realise, encouraging some trans women out of sex work and thereby into more acceptable social territory. This might (or might not) improve these individuals' lives. But it is counterproductive to the broader queer political project of

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<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, Alessandro shared that following the program 100% of TransCidadania participants reduced the amount of sex work they were doing; 20% abandoned it completely.

improving lives en masse by seeking tolerant attitudes towards those who are different sexually and/or with respect to gender. This instantiates the practical objection.

Moreover, why *should* TransCidadania dictate to trans women working as prostitutes that they must sever themselves from their income source simply because for some it is taboo? This would be to place the onus for relieving the burden of marginalisation onto the marginalised themselves. It would oblige those working as prostitutes to incur the financial burden of not working as prostitutes — as well as the dignitarian burden of having their income source demonized — just in order to access a programme aiming to remedy the very marginalisation which in many cases forced prostitution onto them in the first place. This instantiates the principled objection.

Lastly, it is worth noting that in addition to being anti-hygienist, TransCidadania's acceptance of prostitution is another instantiation of the intersectional approach described above. In fact, the border between “anti-hygienism” and “intersectionality” is porous because scrubbing out sex workers from the image of the “LGBT community” is also a failure to recognise the intersection between the two struggles. So, we might offer intersectionality as a third reason to endorse anti-hygienism:

3. *An objection from intersectionality:* in practice, the hygienisation of the image and politics of the queer community means a failure to acknowledge the intersectionality of our identities. Some queers are sex workers, some are poor, uneducated, low caste or unemployed. But they are no less queer for being so and queer politics should reflect these queers' “unhygienic” interests and existences.

### ***Put a Trava***

One personality from Brazil particularly sticks out in relation to this issue. Indianara Siqueira, one of the most notable figures in trans and sex work activism in Brazil, pushes the anti-hygienist critique much further. Indianara is transgender and is a sex worker. As she would put it, she's a “tranny whore” (*puta trava*). After initially gaining her peers respect by fighting the extortion of prostitutes by police officers in São Paulo, she made Brazilian newspapers by refusing to cover her breasts during a demonstration and intentionally pushing the police to take her to court. She was attempting to create new jurisprudence under which a person's social gender would take precedence over formal documentation. To prosecute her for publicly exposing her breasts, the state would have been forced to recognise her social identity as a woman, which it does not. Indianara would have her gender identity properly dignified, or she would have her right to public nudity, but she would not be denied both. The case was dropped.

No one could deny Indianara's credentials as a serious activist making a real difference. In Lapa, the heart of Rio de Janeiro's nightlife district, I visited Casa Nem, a project by and for trans women, mostly women of colour and mostly sex workers, at which Indianara is the central figure. It is a combination of refuge house for girls who have been abused or thrown out, school to prepare them for exams, and headquarters of various activist projects. In contrast to TransCidadania, the house receives no institutional help, economic or otherwise, and is sustained solely by donations and the money collected at weekly parties.

The substance of Indianara's activism never abandons her total refusal of a "hygienic" image. This is perfectly captured by her unsuccessful run, last year, for a position as a Rio city councillor, supported by the left-wing party PSOL (her campaign HQ: Casa Nem). Uncompromising as ever, she ran the campaign under the slogan "A Whore Councilwoman" and won 6,166 votes. Brazil's complex voting system means that this number was both more than the number of votes received by a rival councillor who *was* elected and also just 846 votes less than another PSOL candidate, also elected (eleicoes2016.com.br, 2016). This galling but amazing result was the consequence of the successful mobilization of several communities, many of which intersect in Casa Nem, around an unapologetically "unsanitary" politics: LGBT+ people, sex workers, people of colour, vegans, the PSOL left-wing, and some anarchist groups.



Some of Indianara's campaign materials, recalling adverts for sex workers with their full-sized pictures of body parts and eye-catching phone numbers. "Uma Puta Vereadora" means "A Whore Councilwoman", though "puta" is also used as an intensifier much like the f-word in English. So, Indianara's campaign slogan is nothing short of (and is punningly translated as) "A Fucking Councilwoman". Used with permission.

Indianara, like the prefecture of São Paulo's embrace of sex workers, is engaged in open battle with squeamishness. In fact, rather obviously, she is at a radical forefront of this battle, outdoing TransCidadania's municipal confines. She embodies a challenge to everyone involved in LGBT+ activism: if you're serious about empowering those at the margins of sex and of gender, just how prepared are you to get your hands dirty?

### A rallying cry

My time in Brazil raised some of the main issues I would encounter across South America: matters of priority (via the opening ceremony and TransCidadania), intersectionality (the same) and hygiene

(TransCidadania and Indianara). It also raised a completely surprising issue, that of the role of culture within activism, which did not show itself so prominently as I moved on to Uruguay and Argentina and which I have not drawn out so explicitly.

As possible points of emphasis for this text, these topics were first forthcoming to me during a political rally I attended in São Paulo for the re-election of Fernando Haddad and so it is with this rally that I shall end. It was an event specifically designed to corral LGBT+ support for Haddad in the city and highlight his administration's contributions to the community. The profile of the attendees was impressive: Haddad himself and his running mate; Laerte Coutinho, a trans political cartoonist and visible public figure; Renan Quinalha, a prominent lawyer, human right activist and author; Carlos Magno, president of Brazil's largest LGBT+ advocacy group; and virtually every other interviewee from São Paulo. But the event's success was really constituted by the staggering attendance of 'rank-and-file' trans women, easily numbering in the hundreds, and in their overwhelming outpouring of support and admiration for Haddad. It was very clear what the Haddad mayoral term has meant to Paulista trans women from their reaction to his entrance. Frankly, in the commotion, I lost track of what was happening. There was wild hollering and chanting and not a few tearful interjections when we went on to hear testimonies from those whose lives have been changed by the TransCidadania programme.

Though aurally the experience was chaotic, I did not fail to *see* the obvious. First, the priority given by the São Paulo prefecture to some of its most isolated and downtrodden has paid dividends both in terms of their well-being and their support for Haddad's political career. The trans and sex worker communities came out loudly and in force. Second, the respectful and intersectional approach to LGBT+ politics present, for example, in the opening of the new citizenship centre, also suggested its success at the rally, which was truly diverse socio-economically and racially, particularly in the numbers of black voices and faces. Third, again recalling the energy, spirit and musicality of the centre opening, it became clear to me that a very powerful way to invigorate LGBT+ political events is through our culture. This rally, promoting a serious bid for re-election to one of the most important mayorships in the world, was led by a parade of drag queens. It included audience participation in a tongue-in-cheek song about how attractive Haddad is. It included comedy ("You're telling me we've three hundred queens here and no-one does witchcraft?") and real-life tellings of tragedy. Even one of the city's mobile citizenship-cum-cultural-centre units had pulled up outside. It had never occurred to me before that the rich aesthetic resources LGBT+ people have can be used to make LGBT+ activism more stimulating — activism made more effective by being, simply, more entertaining.

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*I will particularly draw on this consideration of Brazil in the conclusion section for lessons 1a, 3a, 4a and 5.*

# URUGUAY



La Plaza de la Diversidad Sexual, in central Montevideo. The sign has the city's arms on it, as well as a graffitied reference to asexuality and a Basque independence sticker. Image my own.

## U-R-Gay!<sup>1</sup>

For the last decade, Uruguay, with a population about the same as Wales, has been quietly reforming itself into an international liberal bastion and leading South America by example. The substance of this standard-bearership consists in the following headlines: markedly reducing poverty levels in the last decade; being the first country in the world to legalise the sale of recreational cannabis (2013); being only the second Latin American country to fully legalise abortion (2012; the other is Cuba); meeting 95% of its electricity needs with renewables (the 2015 figure; Fortune, 2015); and often achieving Nordically high scores on the major indices of corruption, democracy and civil liberties.<sup>2</sup>

On LGBT+ issues, Uruguay achieved its last of the major legislative goals from p. 5 with the passage of marriage in 2013, joining what was at the time only a tiny club of nations who had achieved all four,

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<sup>1</sup> Spinning a globe and landing on South America with his finger, Homer Simpson laughs: "Look at this country: [reads] "you-are-gay!" (The Simpsons, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Uruguay's latest near perfect score in the *Freedom in the World* report (Freedom House, 2017); its lower but still comfortably high score in the 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2017); and its ranking in the most recent Press Freedom Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2016).

comprised of Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Norway, Spain, South Africa, and Sweden. Such is the prestigious company kept by Uruguay when it comes to nation-states serious about legislating for their LGBT+ citizens.

It is difficult to overstress just how remarkable this is. To this day, this club of ‘highly LGBT+ progressive’ nations, however crudely constructed, has only sixteen members, including neither the UK (see table on p. 6) nor the USA, where four states prevent people from changing their legal gender (Lambda Legal, 2015).<sup>3</sup> And yet Uruguay, a country that thirty-five years ago was under the rule of an authoritarian military dictatorship where LGBT+ people were regularly persecuted by police, firmly checked all the boxes by 2013 (see Martínez (2003) for one account of the abuse).

In Northwestern media, Uruguay’s liberal victories are being attributed, firstly, to its long-standing tradition of separating church from state and its people’s higher level of secularism, relative to their Catholic and Evangelical neighbours. Secondly, these victories are being even more strongly attributed to the ruling *Frente Amplio* (Broad Front) coalition, which has dominated Uruguayan politics since 2004. Particularly credited is that coalition’s José Mujica, Uruguay’s charismatic president between 2010 and 2015.

A slightly different account of how Uruguay became “the no. 1 place in Latin America for LGBT people” — indeed, how it became amongst the most legally advanced in the world for its LGBT+ citizens — is painted below.<sup>4</sup> Departing from the temptation to present Mujica as the ‘Great Man’ behind Uruguay’s early twenty-first century, I instead emphasize the role of its activists.

### The Long Nineties: 1985-2004

In reporting on my time in Uruguay I will frame what I have to say as a response to the following question: how did Uruguayan LGBT+ politics, part of a wider successful social politics, get so far? And the answer undeniably turns on 2004. This was the year Frente Amplio came to power and marked a huge shift not only in the emphasis of government policy but in the government’s relation with the LGBT+ social movement and this movement’s internal composition. Certain activist networks broke up around this time and newer collectives sprouted and rose to prominence.

Prior to 2004, the LGBT+ movement can be thought of as a continuation of the politics practiced during the Nineties, indeed perhaps since the end of the dictatorship in 1985. This activism was deeply entangled with the question of HIV and hence had a tendency to — and contributed to a climate of — conceptualizing its subjects as **medicalized** objects. The major players in this activism included the *Movimiento de Integración Homosexual* (Movement for Homosexual Integration) between 1992-5; *Somos* (We Are), which only existed in 1986; and the Uruguayan branch of *Las Hermanas de la Perpetua Indulgencia* (Sisters

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<sup>3</sup> By my best reckoning, the sixteen countries are Belgium, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Finland, France, Iceland, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain, Sweden and Uruguay.

<sup>4</sup> On being “no. 1 in Latin America” see, for starters, The Huffington Post (2013), MercoPress (2013), and Washington Blade (2016).



of Perpetual Indulgence), an activist, performance and religious parody organisation, internationally renowned for being comprised of drag queens dressed as nuns.

In addition to the medicalisation of this period, most collectives participated in activism born from strongly **identitarian** thinking. This thinking presents and assumes LGBT+ identities to be:

- (1) distinct (L is not G is not B etc.);
- (2) well-defined (a man is a man and a gay man is a man who likes men);
- (3) and rigid (this is how it is, was, and will be).

**Medicalisation:** the process by which queer people are conceived of as objects simply in need of management by governmental health policy, physicians and psychologists rather than as subjects with multifaceted political needs and desires. Extreme examples are the conception of homosexuality and transgender experience as mental health problems.

**Identitarian(ism)/ Identity politics:** political activity or thinking organised around the interests, experiences, and marginalisation of particular social groups with the definite existence of these particular groups being conceptually central. This text uses the two terms interchangeably.

Under such a regime, the control over and responsibility for the activist “territory” for each group’s political goals are commonly reserved for organisations exclusively established for their own identity-group’s empowerment. Classically, lesbian politics is left for lesbians, gay male politics for gay men, tensions and contest arise between the two, and everyone ignores or is actively hostile to bi, trans and queerer politics. In addition to the Uruguayan organisations just referred to in relation to medicalisation, which were all organisations of and for gay men organised around HIV/AIDS, the *Fundación Escorpio* (Scorpion Foundation) was created in 1984, the first gay rights organisations founded after the end of the dictatorship. At first, it too consisted only of gay men and then later of only gay men and lesbians. Separately, the *Asociación Trans del Uruguay* (ATRU) was founded in 1990 by trans individuals entirely focused on empowerment for their group. One account of the LGBT+ history of Uruguay describes this as a period of the “proliferation of small groups and even single-person organisations” which have now vanished without trace (Ravecca & Sempol, 2013). Herein the atomising, exclusionary impact of such identity politics is demonstrated to an extreme degree.

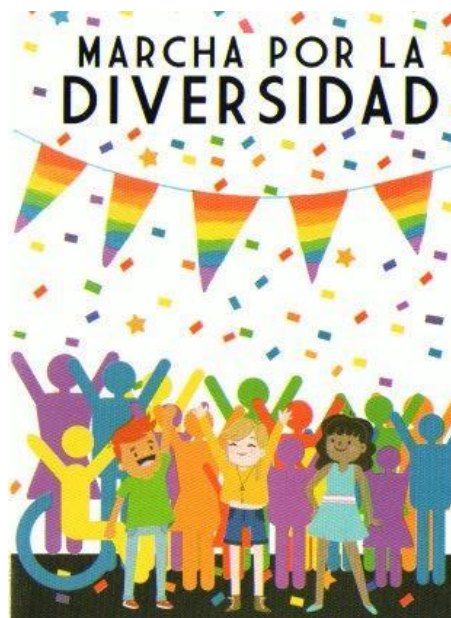
## Black sheep rising

This changed around 2004. The LGBT+ movement’s prominent players no longer presented the “sexual question” as one of mere bodies engaged in sexual behaviour. Nor was it primarily presented in accordance with the identity politics of the past. Instead, social and economic considerations became part of the platform and its terms were loosened.

Symbolic of this shift — as well as being a small but key part of its substance — is the transformation undergone by Montevideo’s annual Pride. Formerly a demonstration of only a few thousand people, it was held every year at the end of June. This is consistent with the international commemoration of the Stonewall

riots but fell at the peak of Uruguay's winter. From 2005 Pride was moved to the beginning of spring. The event's self-conception and articulation were also revised, turning from the traditional and rigid celebration of *orgullo gay* ("gay pride") into the more inclusive and open-ended *Marcha por la Diversidad* ("March for Diversity"). Though the organisers admit to a somewhat bumpy transition period of internal disagreement and even one year with several independently organised marches, time has vindicated the changes. The *Diversidad* celebration has been growing ever since and is now the second biggest regular demonstration in Uruguay, behind only the *Marcha del Silencio*, an annual march remembering those who disappeared during the dictatorship. September 2016 saw the biggest LGBT+ march ever and enjoyed full coverage by TV Ciudad, the main public television channel of Montevideo and of Uruguay as a whole.

March for Diversity 2016 flyer by Coordinadora de la Marcha por la Diversidad. Inside describes the event as one in which people "come together to dance, march and claim our right to be [...] express[ing] the movement for diversity together with other social organizations that demand the expansion of rights and struggle for a society where diverse groups are included..."



In terms of the LGBT+ organisations themselves, the political change is embodied by the biggest and strongest LGBT+ organization in Uruguay, *Ovejas Negras* (Black Sheep), established in precisely the crucial year of 2004. They are one of the only Uruguayan organizations to have been composed of people of all sexual identities throughout their history and present a strongly intersectional political narrative partly based on this. *Ovejas Negras* diverge from other groups in having broken from the established, identity-heavy, medically infused discourse proceeding from the 1990s. They refuse, for example, the idea that only trans people have the right or indeed the responsibility to speak about trans rights.

*Ovejas* support their one-for-all style of organising, demoting any divisions between group-identities, with an internal structure which is democratic and 'horizontal'. No formal or hierarchical division of power pertains between *Ovejas* and its individual members, nor between these members. All important political positions and decisions are discussed and voted on in weekly assemblies to which every member is invited and in which ten to fifteen members typically participate. A total of about thirty people are active in the day-

to-day workings of the organisation. This is a radical deviation from Ovejas' equivalent organisations in the global Northwest and in Argentina and Brazil. Of course, there *are* radically democratic organisations in these countries. But it is particularly notable that Ovejas structures itself in this way since it is not some fringe advocacy group. It is *the* LGBT+ advocacy group in Uruguay, “the no. 1 place in Latin America for LGBT people”.

Financially too, Ovejas Negras offer a much more diffuse, grass-roots model to those of dominant organisations back home and in Argentina and Brazil. They do not have fixed, constant, or prolific funding. Members are not asked to pay fees since Ovejas completely reject the “entrepreneurial logic” according to which many NGOs are organized. Members are political activists and are related to each other as such and not, so the argument runs, as customers to a business. The group's funding depends solely on applying for both public and private grants, managed by a dedicated finance committee. Again, if its financial arrangements are surprising it is not intrinsically so but rather in virtue of the organisation being the major LGBT+ body in Uruguay.

Despite maintaining this general anti-corporate and anti-hierarchical philosophy in relation to activism, Ovejas Negras is informally structured into committees resembling the ‘team’ structure of organisations in the UK. The finance committee manages resources; the communication committee handles media and publicity; the culture committee organizes talks and workshops; and so on. Particularly prominent is the international committee which deals with human rights organizations and foreign governments. Ovejas do not shy away from using their nation's now established LGBT+ reputation for international political lobbying. In July 2016 they organized the first global LGBT+ conference in Latin America. The committee secured speakers including the Dutch and Uruguayan Foreign Ministers, the U.S. Special Envoy for the Human Rights of LGBTI People, and the U.S. Ambassador to the UN.<sup>5</sup>

Two of these teams and their remits are particularly telling of the shift in Uruguay's activism circa 2004. Firstly, there is the education committee, which works in schools, organizes teacher training workshops, and campaigns on Uruguayan sexual education, which Ovejas regard as somewhat behind the times. As we heard from a representative:

Everything we have in high school has a very biologicistic focus on reproduction and genitalia — very obviously heterocentric, and making certain sexual identities, such as intersexuality, invisible...<sup>6</sup>

Just as in the UK, Uruguay's sexual curriculum is “biologicistic” and this is now a reason for Ovejas to regard it as antiquated — a function of their own position as an organisation with a sexual politics that has outgrown Nineties' medicalism. The lacunas in the curriculum are all too familiar: LGBT+ sex education, certainly, but also issues of sexual morality, such as consent, and significant socio-cultural matters, like body image and pornography. Furthermore, even insofar as biology is important to sex education, we hear from Ovejas here that the biology taught should be of the right kind: contemporary and non-binary. This is to say that it should be in line with biology both as it is presently conceived of by the science of sexual

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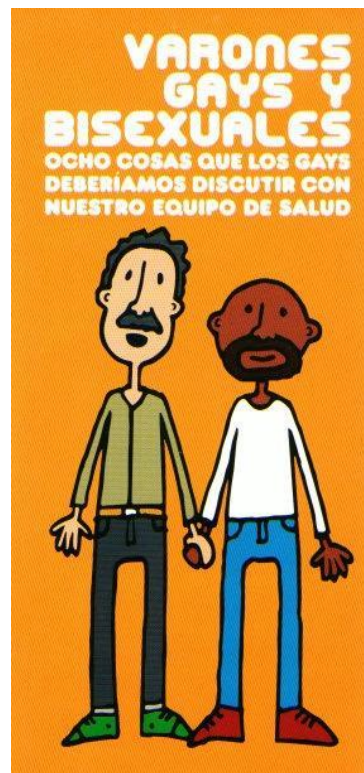
<sup>5</sup> This conference was co-organised with Dutch advocacy group COC Nederland. Samantha Power, then U.S. Ambassador to the UN, ultimately addressed the conference by video.

<sup>6</sup> Labelling “intersexuality” a sexual identity is probably not uncontroversial and I don't know exactly how, or if, this was intended.

differentiation and as it is directly experienced by *all* people including minorities. The ease with which the reference to intersexuality was made is telling of an approach to activism by a broad ‘queer umbrella’ organisation which abstains from over-investment in the key L/G/B/T categories of identity, in favour of remaining fundamentally open-ended.

Ovejas Negras Leaflet: ‘Gay and Bisexual Men: eight things gay men should discuss with our health team’. The eight things are a mixture of traditional medical issues and more expansive socio-medical matters. As such they include:

- Visibility (“Get your health out of the closet”);
- Life Without Violence (concerning domestic abuse);
- Mental Health (vulnerability to illness and to mistreatment by mental health professionals); and
- Adoption.



Secondly, there is the “connections committee”, whose very existence speaks volumes. It is responsible for communicating and coordinating with all of Uruguay’s other social movements and is charged with helping LGBT+ collectives from outside of Montevideo, where Ovejas do not themselves work. This demonstrates a commitment to an intersectional and cooperative political advocacy which contrasts with the commonly insular nature of advocacy structured around group identities. The allies with which the committee works to build partnerships are various: LGBT+ and straight, state bodies and private groups. They include ATRU already mentioned; UTRU, considered below; FUDIS, an LGBT+ federation; *ProDerechos* (ProRights), the association which took the lead in the successful campaign to overhaul Uruguay’s cannabis laws; and GEDUCA, a youth organisation focussed on human rights education. Limitations to this strategic partnership building arise only in relation to groups’ abilities to successfully negotiate a shared platform and not because of any lack of will or suspicion towards outsiders on the part of the most influential LGBT+ group.

One gets an immediate demonstration of this cooperative approach at Ovejas Negras’ headquarters, a short walk from Montevideo’s main square. When I visited there were a number of activists busily engaged in



their work and an enormous volume of materials piled around from marches, campaigns and workshops. The image below shows a room in this building. The authentically non-corporate and non-hierarchically organized activism which this image captures hardly needs spelling out. The various materials it contains additionally nod to Ovejas' well-developed intersectional approach to LGBT+ politics.



*A room in Ovejas Negras HQ. Image my own.*

Crucially, this HQ is shared by a host of organisations, Ovejas just one among them. Others include ProDerechos; *Mujeres en el Horno* (Women in the Oven), a feminist collective which operates a hotline for the denunciation of bad medical practice; *Mizangas*, an association of Afro-descendant women; and RUJAB, the Uruguayan network for HIV positive young people. It is therefore an overlapping and cooperative space: activists rooted in various movements mingling day-to-day, absorbing the ideas of each other's politics, with demonstrable effects on how they each think about and present their own struggles. Nicolás, of Ovejas' communications committee, commented:

This house, this headquarters, is a reflection of what is happening in the Uruguayan social movement, of how people are working together — even more so because it's not just a place for militancy but also a sort of cultural centre where people get together and hang out.

The space is, then, both a testament to Ovejas Negras' ability to work with other collectives for maximum political effect and is itself a facilitator of an advanced intersectional politics. Combined with the Ovejas' position as the most important queer association in Uruguay, it is this intersectional **vanguardism** that Nicolás gives as his reason for joining Ovejas five years ago. As a comparatively young activist, he is a member of a generation who take this intersectionality seriously and who are responsible for Uruguay's social movements' shift away from identity politics that began around 2004.

**Vanguardism:** in Marxist theory, the process by which the most politically conscious proletarians organise in order to politically animate their peers. Ovejas have taken the lead on connecting LGBT+ politics to class division, feminist perspectives, and drug laws in order to maximise participation.

### A broader front: the role of government

What is the relationship between the parallel shifts in Uruguay's LGBT+ activism and in its government's politics around 2004? And does this give us an explanation for Uruguay's LGBT+ leap forward?

On the matter of the LGBT+ movement's relation with the government, Nicolás on the one hand leaves no doubt:

There is a synergy between, let's say, the social left and the institutional left. That's why our movement is part of this identitarian block.

Given the legislative results, who could argue that there wasn't a politically productive overlap between the work of the government and that of the movement? Indeed this, as Nico sees it, is the very reason Ovejas participate in the broader block of socially progressive political activism: there are rewards to be reaped while the government is strongly on the left. Interestingly, he describes this block as "identitarian". This is not, I think, to be read as a retreat into identity politics. Rather, it is a mark of how far we now are from it that it is the entire cooperative, intersectional, and expansive politics of the social left, from queers to drugs to abortion, that can be described as an "identity" to get behind. "Identity" here belongs in inverted commas since it isn't really — it's a decision: we shall do this together and go further for it.

For their part, the 'institutional left', as Nico puts it, have clearly made a contribution. This is partly common sense (the government legislates) but it is also an opinion activists are united on. One trans advocate pointed out how different the relationship had been in the past between her community and those in power:

Before there was oppression on behalf of the government. We felt repression both from the police and at an institutional level.

Furthermore, there are clues that the government's role goes beyond simply not being repressive. Indications of its role are present counterfactually where it has been less involved. Ovejas' education

committee, mentioned above, has faced some of the organisation's steepest challenges. This is due to the fact that educational curricula are 'autonomous' in Uruguay, not dictated directly by the Ministry of Education. The weaker influence of the sympathetic leftist central government over this target of Ovejas' activism has created the possibility of stiffer resistance. Ovejas have been forced to cancel several high school workshops due to opposition from some of the more conservative school boards.

But although we know with certainty that the government is an important player in Uruguay's output of liberal social policy, as to whether this contribution has been *actively* positive, we have some reason for doubt. Nicolás, for one, is far more sceptical:

The movement has always had to be much more proactive and much more encouraging in the struggle for diversity [than in some other countries]. It didn't come from organized civil society. It was the opposite of what happened in Argentina, for example, in which the government itself was much more proactive and much more progressive, while here it was on us to put pressure on the government.

According to this view, Uruguay's LGBT+ progress germinated not in government but in a different "broad front", that of the united social left. There are discrepancies between the government's agenda and those of the social movements, which support this. Conflicts, though never fully confrontational, have not been rare. For example, Nicolás referred to mutual criticism over balancing consensus with progress that arose at the time marriage was being legislated. Diana Cariboni, considering a similar point, highlights the divergence between the manifesto Frente Amplio were elected on in 2004 and the string of progressive social policies that followed this election (Guardian, 2014). Nothing in the manifesto seemed to imply the radical shifts in public policy that were coming. If these policies did not originate in the party, where else but in the politically engaged sectors of the demos?

Another reason to emphasize the role of social activists concerns the political nature of Frente Amplio itself. The party is really a coalition of more than thirty political parties of varying sizes and its history, beginning in the suppressed trade union movement of the 1970s, is one of building strategic, leftist partnerships. As such Frente Amplio is no stranger to the mechanics of frontier activism, even if a radical social agenda and lionhearted defence of its LGBT+ citizens did not start out as obvious party policy. In the time since victory in the 2004 presidential election transformed a decades-long project of opposition into a governing party, what Frente Amplio has offered the activist movement seems to have been less a pre-fabricated agenda than it has been a sympathetic ear. Their understanding of the important relationship between social movements and left-wing political parties, necessitated by the fact that they themselves are a composite group of parts, mostly definable in terms of just *how* far left they are, has put real influence into activists' hands.

So then, we don't need to think of the government's apparent lack of initiative as a kind of negligence. Instead, it is a kind of openness, a different way of creating public policy for marginalised groups which properly devolves the first stages of the process to organised social activists. It is a government which gives the distinct impression of having fully grasped the concept of a 'straight ally' — enabling and empowering rather than presumptive or dictatorial — and wears it as a badge of honour.



## Stakes and ladders

So far I have spoken of “Ovejas Negras” as if it were synonymous with “Uruguay’s LGBT+ movement”. Though it is dominant, this is of course not the case and briefly considering one example of a smaller organisation will deepen our understanding of the Uruguayan movement’s apparently unified and intersectional approach.

UTRU, the *Union Trans del Uruguay*, is a relatively small LGBT+ association with only six active members in Montevideo.<sup>7</sup> Its network, however, has branches in the “interior”, i.e. outside of Montevideo, and is one of the organisations Ovejas Negras coordinate with there. Per Ovejas, it does not receive continuous financial support from anywhere and sometimes applies for grants.

UTRU is exclusively organised by, and exists to prioritize and fight for, trans women. The problems UTRU sees as most pressing, and the ones on which they therefore focus in their political activity, are housing, employment and health. As in many places, trans women in Uruguay are often particularly vulnerable because they are homeless or because they are isolated. Further, an activist told us that in the latest government numbers only 1% of trans people report having formal employment. Healthcare is particularly pressing given that the life expectancy of a trans woman in Uruguay is 45 according to its public health care provider the ASSE<sup>8</sup> and that, according to the activist,

There is only one health centre in the whole country, located in Montevideo, where trans women are treated respectfully and do not have to fear discrimination. Some girls come from the most northern parts of the country just to have a medical appointment.

To address these issues, UTRU is focused on public policy and has a recent and growing history of successful collaborations with government bodies, including provincial governments and the national Ministry of Education and Culture. They are currently developing a programme of policy improvements with the ASSE. They are, therefore, small in numbers but influential in their way.

To ascertain the political perspective of the group we talked with Delfina Martínéz, who joined the collective two years ago. When asked about the idea that only trans women should speak for themselves, in contrast with Ovejas Negras’ broader organizational practices, Delfina explained that UTRU felt the need to highlight the particular vulnerability of trans women within Uruguay and “even within the LGBT community”. She illustrated with the history of the organisation, which began as a series of workshops organised in response to a string of trans murders at the time Uruguay was passing its same-sex marriage law in 2013. It is not surprising then that Delfina emphasises “how important it is to highlight trans women’s specific problems, because otherwise they can go unnoticed.”

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<sup>7</sup> There’s a tongue-in-cheek pun here in the Spanish since “UTRU” sounds like “*útero*”, “uterus”.

<sup>8</sup> This figure is cited by the World Bank (2016), which points out that this is 32 years lower than for the general population in Uruguay. However, it is actually a full 36 years less than *female* life expectancy in Uruguay — or nearly half — according to its own data (World Bank, 2015. It is not clear how ‘female’ was defined).



Delfina Martínez. Image from Facebook, used with permission.

UTRU's politics fits well into the category of "identitarian". It is an organisation of "trans women's politics by trans women". If UTRU were instead, say, a gay male organisation exclusively organised to empower gay men, the main problems of identity politics would immediately present themselves and be parroted here by me: by organising around just one sexual or gender identity, don't we make others even more invisible and thus even less legitimate? And aren't those that are made more invisible those who are already the most marginalised by their sexual or gender identities? Isn't this pulling the ladder up? And anyway isn't the stability and distinctiveness of this identity an illusion?

This family of issues can be broadly thought of as "the problem of **essentialism**", terminology which attempts to capture an attitude towards social identities which invests them with the three characteristics I gave above: distinctiveness, definition, and rigidity. That this attitude is 'essential' refers not to its importance but to *essence*: identitarian politics thinks of its identity categories as describing some deep aspect of human reality. On this thinking, examining people's desires and genders should reveal a division between, say, straight and gay, trans and cis, man and woman at a social, psychological, and biological level — 'all the way down'. Gay male identity politics can thus be said to be conceptually essentialist and, on the basis of this, politically exclusionary.

We surely want to be more sympathetic in the case of UTRU's politics because it's motivation is not group-level selfishness or conceptual naivety but rather a perceived necessity. As Delfina said, UTRU feels it *must* highlight trans issues as such because otherwise they tend to be overlooked and with the stakes so high for so many trans lives, oversights just cannot be afforded. If this is the reason for UTRU's organising on the

basis of trans identity then the identitarian nature of its politics is not properly or not fully essentialist. That is, it doesn't *really* give the "trans" identity those characteristics of distinctiveness, definition, and rigidity 'all the way down'. Instead, it is only essentialist to the extent that it believes to be **strategically** necessary.

**Essentialism:** generally, the philosophical position that things have sets of characteristics that are responsible for them being as they are. In social philosophy it is the position that kinds of people ("homosexuals") have intrinsically different natures.

**Strategic essentialism:** an idea drawn from theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who first made the basic point: sometimes it is advantageous for marginalised people to present themselves as a united front, to present their identities as more similar and stable than they in fact are, for the sake of achieving urgent political goals (Spivak, 1988).

Of course, just because this strategy is well motivated doesn't free it from the political risks. UTRU are surely just as likely to be contributing to a hierarchy of gender variant individuals, with trans identities at the top and others below, as are exclusively gay male organisations to contribute to a hierarchy of all queers, with themselves at the top and others, including trans people, below or erased entirely. This is the risk UTRU takes. One final detail might leave us with reason for optimism: in her interview Delfina expressed an interest on behalf of UTRU in pre-Colonial identities from indigenous American cultures, specifically citing a speaking invitation extended to a third-gender *muxe* person of the Zapotec culture of southern Mexico. Aside from denoting a focus on the postcolonial aspect of Latin American trans struggles, this is a clear sign that the group is not hung up on "one true trans identity".

UTRU complicates our understanding of Uruguay's LGBT+ movement as 'intersectional' and as determined to address the socio-economic aspect of queer lives in their activism. On the one hand, it is a movement marked by its leader organisation: a committedly non-hierarchical and collaborative band of activists who secured their gender identity law four years before equal marriage because it admirably prioritized those it saw to be most vulnerable. On the other hand, as a whole the movement has still functioned in such a way that the women who joined together to form UTRU felt it necessary to speak out specifically on behalf of these same vulnerable people when the movement did eventually move on to lobby for marriage.

## Drafting ahead

Given what's just been said, it seems of the utmost importance to end this section by reporting what Ovejas are currently working on: a successor to Uruguay's 2009 gender identity law. The draft proposal for the "*ley integral para personas trans*" ("holistic trans law") perfectly draws together the major themes from Uruguay. However, it has not been finalised by Ovejas so some of the details which follow may ultimately prove incorrect.

Firstly, the proposed law is an expression of UTRU's project of centring trans issues as urgent. Predictably, Ovejas have cooperated with multiple trans collectives in the writing of the draft bill and it gives particular emphasis to those areas prioritised by trans women themselves via UTRU: economic security and health.

The bill contains, for example, a regime of reparations for trans people born before 1975 who were targeted and victimised by the dictatorship, to be structured in the form of a pension.<sup>9</sup> It also includes a 2% trans quota for places on the various training programmes managed by the National Institute of Employment and Vocational Training as well as for scholarships managed by the government.

The bill's provisions for the health sector are even more important. Though by international standards Uruguay's existing gender identity statute is impressive, by the standards of its trans citizens' needs, it is still lacking. As Delfina explained, gender reassignment in Uruguay remains

a policed process. We have to present witnesses to testify about our gender expression for the last two uninterrupted years, and the juridical aspect of the process forces us to hire a lawyer... if we have the money.

The draft bill attacks this issue, perhaps the subtlest instantiation of the medicalisation of trans people: that is, within the domain of health care itself, their continued treatment as objects *of* medical control rather than as subjects *in control* of their medical needs. The bill proposes all adults have access to hormonal treatments and to total or partial surgical intervention and would make these accessible independently of each other, per the needs of the individual. No judicial or administrative authorization would be required.

Secondly, the proposed law is a remarkable artifact of non-identitarian politics. Tasked with the somewhat tricky balancing act of constructing legal definitions of the bill's key terms without setting limits on the queerness of its targets' identities, Ovejas' steadfast commitment once again comes through. They offer the following on "trans":

[One] who self-perceives and/or expresses a gender distinct from that which had been assigned to them legally and/or at the moment of birth, or even a gender which is not framed within the distinction between male/female. [...] The trans identity encompasses multiple forms of expression of gender identity; particularly, it includes people who self-identify as transvestite, transgender and transsexual, with variations on gender queerness [...], as well as those who define their own gender as "other", or those without gender, or describe their identity in their own words.

Even when forced by practical necessity to exactly define the identity of a certain group of individuals, a task which grates quite considerably with their commitment to non-identitarian politics, Ovejas remain remarkably expansive and maximally open-ended. The quoted sentence is surely unique in legal history in that it offers a definition of "trans" that stretches beyond not just its common usage but even beyond the scope constructions such as "**trans\***". The definition includes "non-binary", "genderqueer", "genderfucker" and "agender" individuals. It is clearly intended to be just about as inclusive as it is possible to be while still being forced to demarcate an "in-group".

**Trans\*:** the asterisk acknowledges that the trans umbrella extends beyond transgender men and women and includes people of all kinds of gender variance. This follows the symbol's use in search engines: searching "trans\*" would yield, e.g., "transgender", "transvestite", "transsexual" and so on.

<sup>9</sup> Living trans women in Uruguay born in 1975 are turning 42 this year. Recall that the life expectancy of a trans woman in Uruguay is 45.

Thirdly and lastly, the law is the most recent instantiation of the current and recent-historical LGBT+ policy-making process in Uruguay. The reason the text of the law is so good (and I've skipped far more of it here than I've included) is because it has been written by the advocates and not the government. How else could such a definition of "trans" find its way into a serious proposal for legislation? How else could trans needs and trans policy be so closely mapped onto one another? Granted, the government has not yet had the opportunity to scrutinise the proposal. But as we've seen, in Uruguay the government structures the social policy-making process such that legislation as pertinent and progressive as this draft bill *can* become Uruguayan law. I have been led to understand the bill already enjoys the support of the government, still composed of the Frente Amplio alliance, and, given the LGBT+ movement's record of success, we have every reason to think that it will be law before long.

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*The major themes of this consideration of Uruguay have been identitarianism, essentialism, professionalism and the intersection of political movements. I particularly draw on it in the conclusion section for lessons 1b, 2b, 3b and 4b.*

# ARGENTINA

*Content note: please be aware that the first small paragraph of this section contains a graphic description of a fatal sexual assault.*



Ni Una Menos, 19 October 2017, Buenos Aires. Image from Ni Una Menos' Facebook page, used with permission.

## One Woman Less

Sixteen year old Lucía Pérez was abducted in the Argentinian city of Mar del Plata on Saturday 8 October 2016. She was dropped off the following day at a local clinic by her two assailants having been repeatedly raped. She died on Sunday 9 October from internal injuries resulting from having been impaled on a wooden spike.

Six days later, I arrived in Buenos Aires on a boat from Montevideo and the news was waiting, a grim welcome party dominating the media, politics, and conversation. That Wednesday, nine days after the killing, the women of Argentina protested in a national women's strike, walking out of work mid-afternoon. *Ni Una Menos*, which made international headlines, was an expression of rage against **femicide**.<sup>1</sup> It was a declaration that the women of Argentina would not stand for this brutality lightly. When we boarded the metro in the suburbs of Buenos Aires headed for the demo that accompanied the strike, it was already filled with women of all descriptions, unified by a refusal to work productively for a society in which they must endure the fear

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<sup>1</sup> *Ni Una Menos* is both the name of the protest movement and its key slogan. Literally “not one less” in English, it is perhaps more intuitive as “not one more”, though the Spanish makes it clear that the “one” referred to is feminine.



of misogynist violence. The network of feminist, leftist, angry women was visible to all, even on a metro train, even still in the suburbs. Three quarters of the passengers were wearing black in mourning.

**Femicide:** the killing of women and girls because they are women and girls and thus by extension killing them in particularly misogynist ways, for example via sexualised violence. A prominent concept in South American feminism, femicide constitutes a named hate crime in several countries including Argentina.

Following the crowds off the train at Carlos Pellegrini station, we hit a wall of chanting: “*Ni Una Menos! Ni Una Menos!*” Above ground, one hundred thousand people had gathered. It poured with rain for the entire day and still the crowds came out. It proved impossible to find the women we had arranged to meet. As well-meaning but male allies, we had intended to walk along the outside of the protest, spectating from the sidelines in solidarity. This also proved impossible. The sprawling crowd lacked a ‘side’ from which to spectate, the amorphous mass leaked down the parade route all the way to the end before the time it was even supposed to have started. There were just so many of us.

## Demo (cra) City

I begin here with *Ni Una Menos* for two reasons. Firstly, the event and the atrocity it protested utterly shaped my time in Buenos Aires. “There is a protest on Wednesday you should really go to” was among the first things said to me in the city. The strike and march were then mentioned in every interview I conducted and in many more casual conversations. The feminist graffiti installed during the protests decorated the city for my whole time there: *vivas nos queremos*, we want to be alive.

Secondly, it serves as evidence for the culture of mass protest in Argentina, which is of central importance. Spending more than a month there one acclimates to passing boisterous strike demos by workers of every conceivable union and protesters of various causes. While I was working out of the congressional library for a week or so in late October, even the administrators and secretarial staff of the nation’s congress were on strike. While googling that strike today (April 6th 2017) to see if I could track down the name of the administrators’ union I find that workers across the country are on general strike.

Though the reasons for Argentina’s mass demonstration culture extend far beyond what it is necessary to explore here, it is not over simplistic to recognise it for a symptom of a more general Argentinian social fact: mass politicisation. This politicisation, central to the way the Argentinian LGBT+ movement is structured, is present in its popular strikes, its regular protests, its politicized walls, buildings and street signs, and in its popular cultural-political centres — remnants from the days of anti-dictatorship resistance — of which there is nothing of comparable scale back home. It finds further expression in the country’s national elections of which there have been five so far this decade, three parliamentary and two presidential. Turnout has hovered at around 80.0% of the voting age population, a vast number, outdoing all but a handful of what are considered the world’s “advanced” democracies (source: International IDEA database).

Mass politicisation. A leaflet advertising sex work in Buenos Aires that I pulled from a bus stop about fifty metres from the National Congress. Along the right-hand side it says: “sex work is not the same as human trafficking”. Image my own.



## Federalist Capers

Mass politicisation fed into my interviews in the guise of one particular issue: the combination in Argentina of the large-scale participation of activist grassroots with the leadership of activist elites. This is because, one way or another, the various organs of Argentina’s LGBT+ movement revolve around the largest, the *Federación Argentina Lesbianas, Gays, Bisexuales y Trans*. The Federación, founded in 2005 by five grassroots activist organisations and now at the forefront of national legislative campaigns, is, unsurprisingly, a federal organisation. As María Rachid, the Federación’s General Secretary, put it to me, it is an “organisation of organisations” with more than sixty smaller groups comprising its membership at present, including representatives from all twenty-three provinces and the autonomous city of Buenos Aires.

This federal structure is very different from what we find in the UK and the USA. In each case these countries also have an easily identifiable, “go to” LGBT+ organisation. Without doubt these are Stonewall and the Human Rights Campaign, respectively. But both of these organisations are structured on a unitary, corporate model with a board of directors, a CEO, and so on, much like any big business or, indeed, most major charity sector organisations. In political science, “unitary” states are those in which power is concentrated with the central government, whereas “federal” states are those like Argentina and Brazil where smaller political units — themselves sometimes called “states” — have a portfolio of powers constitutionally reserved for them. Here, the Federación is analogous to a federal state. And while organisations like Stonewall in the UK may not wield power “over” any smaller component organisations, they are unitary in the sense that they are singular, self-contained units answerable only to themselves. In their relations with independent grassroots organisations much of the power is retained by them, the larger, better-funded, mediatically polished organisations — an arrangement that has been termed “Gay Inc.” in critical circles.

In Argentina, the relation between the “go to” Federación and the rest of the movement is very different since much of the rest of the movement is built into the Federación itself via membership. María estimates this at 85-90% of Argentina’s LGBT+ advocacy groups. A relatively well-defined division of labour exists between the member organisations and the federal structure that sits on top. The member organisations do the campaigning, advocacy and representation at the local level and are the bodies providing frontline LGBT+ services. The Federación itself is focussed on public policy and campaigning at the national, congressional level as well as providing support for regional public policy where possible by, for example, writing model bills that local groups can adapt and introduce into provincial legislatures.

The key dynamic enabled by a federal structure is the preservation of the power of the smaller grassroots member units, which in theory means those units closer to the “masses” whom the whole structure is intended to serve. In the Federación, member organisations play a major role in creating national policy, set yearly at an AGM. Indeed, the leadership figures in the Federación are all individuals who have worked in and are therefore invested in the smaller member organisations. These arrangements preserve smaller bodies’ power not just in the sense of a voice at the table but additionally in the sense of “initiative”. That is, member organisations suggest and *initiate* new policy as well as signing off on policy instigated by the leadership. As such, proposals come bottom-up as well as top-down.

Beyond federalism, the second standout feature of the Federación, ensured in part *by* its federal structure, is its representationality. Two of the Federación’s founding members were the *Asociación de Travestis, Transexuales y Transgéneros de la Argentina* (ATTTA) and *La Fulana*, a lesbian organisation. Thus the Federación has always been an inclusive LGBT+ organisation consciously resisting ‘capture’ by gay men. María, a lesbian, served as the Federación’s first president and following her Esteban Paulón, a gay man. The third and current president is Marcela Romero, a trans woman and also the General Coordinator of ATTТА. Argentina’s LGBT+ community has thus, in the twelve years of the Federación’s existence, been represented online, in newspaper articles and in meetings with government ministers by a triumvirate of diverse LGBT+ voices, not to mention Argentina’s Woman of the Year 2009 (Romero). This is no accident since it is formally agreed that the Federación’s presidency must rotate between people of different identities. This approach is carried on down the ranks: each member organisation must aim to bring three people in its AGM delegation, all of different identities. This is a conscious and formalised recognition of the value of *always* having different faces and voices involved in decision-making processes, especially those often marginalised even within “inclusive” movements.

## Critical perspectives

From Argentina I mostly draw lessons from the example the Federación sets in mobilising its base. Nevertheless, there are critical voices and I will consider these upfront before looking in more detail at the Federación’s grassroots origins and its achievements.

Inevitably, some organisations do not participate in the Federación. María attributes this to an unwillingness to participate in an organisation with a diversity of political views and this mostly takes the form of either **Kirchnerist** organisations that object to dialogue with the current right-wing national government or of self-

declared revolutionary groups whose radicality leaves them opposed to mere reform. María too identifies as Kirchnerist but believes that social organisations must actively make their demands of the state, no matter who this is at a particular time.

*Putos Peronistas* (**Peronist** Faggots), with its origins in one of the poorest parts of Buenos Aires, is one organisation that does not align itself with the Federación's politics, which it sees as not addressing the economic root of political problems. Diana Avarena, Putos' General Secretary, articulated the group's perspective as one which understands that LGBT+ problems "are not only related to our sexual identities, but with our class, with how poor we are." This is was a point of view expressed by a variety of activists, including Sandra Daria Aguillar from *Desde El Fuego* (From Fire), the major LGBT+ student organisation in Argentina, which is also not a Federación member.

**Kirchnerism and Peronism:** common political identities for left-wing Argentinians. Peronism, the legacy of President Juan Perón and his wife Eva, originated in the 1940s as a 'third position' (neither communist nor capitalist). It posited "three flags": political sovereignty, economic independence, and social justice. Kirchnerism, a form of Peronism, originates in the consecutive husband and wife presidencies of Néstor and Cristina Kirchner, 2003-2015.

Criticisms of the Federación were also offered by some of the more prominent independent queer scholars and activists. Professor Emmanuel Theumer, of the Universidad Nacional del Litoral, shared a balanced critical perspective, acknowledging the limitations of the Federación's "liberal" approach, the discourse of sexual diversity on which it draws, and the priority it has given institutional politics (i.e. legislation), but also ultimately reflected that:

it is remarkable how [the Federación] has contributed to the LGBT community's acquisition of rights. [...] It has also supported the development of smaller collectives at the local level [...] Unlike the development of liberal-institutional LGBT-inclusive policy internationally, [the Federación] invested in creating alliances with feminists and sex workers' organizations [...] helping to install their ideas into society.

Leonor Silvestri, a performer, essayist and philosopher, is profoundly critical, even cynical, of institutional politics. Nonetheless, when asked about the Federación, she shared a surprisingly charitable take: that she liked the Federación's top people, that they played their institutional role well and did not pretend to be anything they are not — particularly with respect to the (non-)radicality of their politics.

These scholars' words reflect the general pragmatic benevolence towards the Federación from those more radical contributors to the movement. These individuals and organisations do not identify themselves with the Federación politically but recognize its institutional value, undeniable legislative successes and, as Emmanuel pointed out, achievements in supporting smaller collectives and forging cross-movement alliances. Not uncoincidentally, some of the most notable members of the Federación partly share this sentiment towards the organization. Perhaps because of its origins, they are perfectly comfortable in using the Federación as a tool, rather than identifying with its political core. We talked with Claudia Castrosín, from La Fulana, for a firsthand account of the relation between leader organisation and grassroots...

## La Fulana: comrades in arms

La Fulana is one of the many organisations that do participate in the Federación. In some senses, the two bodies share a lot in common. Indeed, some of the key features of the Federación can be loosely traced to La Fulana, one of its founders. La



A La Fulana promotional card, image my own.

Fulana's decision-making process is via consensus, for example, the method of choice at the Federación's AGMs. La Fulana also takes a conscious approach to monitoring its leadership, which has included María and Claudia. In fact, La Fulana's leadership is reviewed and renewed every four years and was set to change again in 2016. We can see in this formalised arrangement the forerunner of the Federación's rotating presidency, or at least the principle it embodies: that it is possible to put structures in place to combat the stagnation of leadership.

At its birth in 1998, the beginning of "Argentine Great Depression", La Fulana was a space of political organisation which truly sat at the margins, plural. The high unemployment and poverty experienced by the lower classes at this time was of course only worse for those who found themselves outside the sanctioned support framework of a nuclear family. This included lesbians and bisexual women but also sex workers since "at this time they had no spaces of their own" (Claudia). La Fulana functioned as both political space and refuge house for those outcast or homeless due to prejudice or insolvency or both. Socio-economic politics has therefore been centrally entangled with the collective's lesbian politics from the very beginning. Despite not being as radically leftist as some would like, the collective and the Federación it went on to help found do come from a place where the intersection between material need and LGBT+ issues was plain for all to see. Indeed, the collective's physical space during this period is an embodiment of this intersection: a small house, the rent for which was paid by only those members who could afford it.

In this house La Fulana functioned cooperatively and openly, along lines detectable in the Federación's later non-isolationist *modus operandi*:

It was also an open space to the community. We cooked meals that people could buy for a small amount of money. And we had a space for children — a sort of kindergarten where the **compañeras** could leave their kids while they went to their jobs or were working on tasks for the collective.

**Compañera:** literally 'companion'. Commonly used in Argentina to refer to those with whom you share a political struggle. Claudia's use of the word is always in the feminine.

La Fulana's openness to the community was maintained even when addressing the problem of a somewhat hostile local environment. To allay the fears and suspicions of neighbours about the space, a public talk was organised called "All You Ever Wanted to Know About Lesbians But Never Dared to Ask" It is not hard to

see in this episode a commitment to engaging one's peers, even when hostile, that finds later expression in María's belief in laying out one's demands of the government, no matter who they might be.

In the end, this first period of La Fulana's existence came to an end in 2007 as a result, perhaps fittingly, of a pair of events inflicted upon it as a result of its relative socio-economic marginality. Firstly, using a theft that occurred within the house as an excuse ("normal consequences of radical love affairs," Claudia remarks), twenty-seven policemen — and only men — were sent inside the house. "They wanted to know what was happening there". They were searched, some items were apprehended, and charges of theft were brought. After this intimidation, the women in the collective decided to keep maintaining the space but without people in residence. At this time several refuge houses were opening, ensuring nobody would be turned out onto the streets. Then, in 2007, the collective's landlady died and the property was sold. They moved headquarters to the more professional-looking space used by the Federación, where we interviewed members of both organisations.

Despite the criticism from more radical spheres, though perhaps not in answer to it, the Federación's ultimate origins in spaces like La Fulana has contributed to its perspective as an organisation and the perspective of its key members, which cannot be said to be completely divorced from socio-economics.

### **"The personal is political"**

It was in La Fulana's previous incarnation that some of the activists who are now leading figures in the Argentinian movement, including Claudia and María, were introduced to lesbian organizing, feminist politics, and anti-capitalist ways of living in a context of material insecurity and the mingling of people marginalised by sex, sexuality, and poverty. Claudia describes these intellectual introductions as a "reality slap" which "makes you grow as a person" and she does not divorce them from personal emotional development:

I think that people who were there at the time were really moved by [‘these amazing years of militancy’]. Especially at New Year's Eve, Christmas, those times in which people are so alone... the biggest problem we have is the fear of loneliness. I think that La Fulana sheltered and helped a lot of people in that sense. And we meet and see each other nowadays, people who have families, who have a job, who have everything, and who say that going through Fulana changed their lives.

For María and Claudia these years have a particular emotional resonance since the pair were together for years after meeting at La Fulana, as lovers and as comrades. In 2003 they were one of the first and most prominent couples to push for same-sex civil unions in Latin America.

Above all, La Fulana is a reminder of the centrality of personal experience, emotion and relationships to activism for people marginalised *by* their experiences, emotions and relations. The group actually only came into existence in the first place when two other lesbian collectives joined forces because they felt the need to create a broader and more radically empowering space... and because they started to sleep together and to fall in love.





“Tits as they are.” Claudia at La Fulana HQ with some images from a photo project aiming to reclaim the female chest from a place of shame. Images my own.

Even the collective’s name is a reference to this deeply personal politics. In Argentina, *fulana* is a way to refer to a woman without having to say her name, something like “whatshername”. Early members thought this term, referring to an abstract, non-existent person perfectly captured the problems they faced as lesbians: anonymized, depersonalised and, even, of questionable existence:

After all, nobody can define someone who doesn’t exist. [...] “[F]ulana” is also the person who starts without a name, that always needs to *be* named. As we say in La Fulana: “What is not seen, does not exist. What does not exist, is not named. What has no name, has no rights.”

The collective’s activities are dominated by this concern for richness of and respect for personal experience and the politics of validating and transforming this. They have maintained broadly the same organizational configuration they have had from the start: two branches with different roles. The first is dedicated to the organization of reflective meeting groups, which from the beginning have been held every Friday to discuss whatever members find to be relevant. Claudia explains that

lesbians have the same worries about their work, their friends, their partners, their sexuality... how to take care of oneself, discussing sexual practices, how to pick someone up. Because we don’t learn about these anywhere else, nobody teaches us about these things...

These discussions, successors to the consciousness-raising groups of 1960s feminism, are not merely about principles of justice, or abstract species of discrimination, nor are they about helping some excluded “others”, those “whatshernames”. Instead they bring politics deeply into their own lives, rethinking and

reconsidering their experiences as lesbians collectively, thereby reconnecting to these marginalised experiences. They then bring the personal into the realm of public politics by acting in it not only as those who are affected *by* the way this realm is structured but as those who are more deeply connected to it for having reflected *on* it together. This is where the second branch comes in: the one responsible for public political intervention, protests, campaigns and the rest.

## Political Results

One might assume that the establishment of the Federación would have drained the grassroots energy and resources of the member organisations like La Fulana. And one could point out that on committing to fully invest in the Federación, as La Fulana did, one of the first things to happen was the transfer of a central figure: María Rachid left her position of coordinator of La Fulana to become the Federación's first president. Early signs, perhaps, of a 'brain drain'.

Overall, though, the opposite is true. Following the foundation of the Federación, according to Claudia:

La Fulana and the *Secretariado de la Juventud* [another member collective] were the ones in the street making sure [people knew the Federación existed]. We were in front of the congress everyday collecting signatures to pressure for the marriage bill. And all of the *compañeras* were participating in this but we all knew that part of what we were doing was to strengthen the Federación.

The existence of the Federación and newly enlarged scope of Argentina's LGBT+ movement actually improved the energies of the base. Claudia speaks of these years with full confidence that they fuelled La Fulana rather than draining it. In fact La Fulana feel that the Federación is, at least in part, *theirs*. Echoing some of the critics cited earlier, Claudia revealed that from the beginning the Federación was a

political instrument. It is not something with which I fundamentally identify myself politically but rather is a device to reach institutional realms.

Claudia and her *compañeras*, beginning from a place of utter focus on personal, emotional and social development as marginalised subjects, developed, if you like, a 'strategic institutionalism' in order to penetrate spheres that grassroot collectives could not hope to.

This basic dynamic between member organisation and federal body is something to learn from. There is perhaps little point in saying "UK LGBT+ advocacy should be federal". As a matter of fact, the UK movement did not develop in this way and offers no immediately desirable pathway for a transition. Rather obviously too, the Argentinian model matured within the context of a *federal* state, the local organisations and national body of the movement logically building themselves around the political structure they had to work in as a matter of *realpolitik*.

Nevertheless, we can learn at a more general level from the twelve years the federal model has functioned in Argentina. It offers us the insight of how important empowering and mobilising energetic grassroots voices is for (1) policy success, (2) intersectional politics, and (3) intra-movement equality.

Firstly, there is no question that the combination of federal leadership and energized masses have proved devastatingly effective legislatively. On being founded the Federación had five explicit goals:

1. Equal marriage,
2. A gender identity law,
3. Getting diversity into sex education law,
4. Derogating every provincial law which criminalised non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities and behaviours,
5. An anti-discrimination law.

All of these bar the last have now been achieved, a legislative overhaul just shy of Uruguay's. Because of this a new generation of aims were agreed upon at the annual congress of 2015. This time, five new LGBT+ objectives were agreed as well as five other objectives related to the aims of other, allied progressive political movements. The five second-generation LGBT+ objectives are:

6. Completing no. 5,
7. Stopping blood donation discrimination against LGB men,
8. Taking action to prevent school bullying and segregation,
9. Social and labour protection laws for trans people/ workers,
10. Producing a national plan for LGBT+ citizenship.

The five new, non-LGBT aims are:

11. Legalized abortion,
12. Full acknowledgement of sex workers' rights,
13. Legalized medical and recreational cannabis,
14. Separating church and state such that the Republic of Argentina stops funding the Catholic Church,
15. Stopping all forms of institutional violence.

Secondly, then, as so often during this project, we run into an intersectional approach. This one is especially interesting since LGBT+ organisations in the global Northwest do not tend to offer any views on such things as drugs or abortion, still less actively participate in campaigns. We have considered the reasons for conducting LGBT+ politics in this way previously. María's own justification for it was two-fold: intrinsic and instrumental. Firstly, "because our community is directly affected by [i.e., for example,] the prohibition of cannabis". Secondly, because there are things agreeable between movements which result in valuable alliances:

Particularly now we have a right-wing government, we need to raise their flags so that they will raise ours and we will act together in a lot of things.

This approach is not limited to the Federación itself. The Buenos Aires Pride March is also a broad umbrella with abortion and cannabis included in the platform. The inclusion of sex workers is something María says is being worked on now.



A previous Pride in Buenos Aires. The various slogans include references to blackness, indigeness, breastfeeding and migration. Image courtesy of Celeste Gallardo on Flickr, licensed under Creative Commons.

The now formally cross-movement aims of the Federación are largely due to the energy and power of its diverse set of grassroots organisations. The Federación didn't start out with such a broad platform and it took many years, María recounts, before this shift occurred. The key was learning from organisations such as AMMAR (an organisation for sex workers) and ATTTA (for trans people) as well as the extensive, years-long discussions occurring at the grassroots level before finally a consensus was reached there. Still, eventually the dynamic between national leaders and grassroots individuals gave a decisive result in favour of the intersectional approach to questions of political struggle.

Thirdly, we can see from a survey of these three lists of aims that this grassroots-enabling structure has also produced priorities that give plenty of weight to the most marginalised and vulnerable in the LGBT+ community: trans people (2 & 9), sex workers (12), children (3), and those living outside relative metropolitan safety (4).

For trans Argentinians the upshot of this prioritisation is living in the country with the current gold standard for gender identity laws worldwide, passed in 2012. María is clear on just how ambitious the project was:

We wanted a law unlike any in the world. We wanted to be free from doctors, psychologists, and judges. We wanted to include children and we wanted to include immigrants. We didn't want to accept things that other groups around the world had accepted.

Crucially, in contrast to the proposal for marriage equality, which came 'top-down', the ambitious gender identity law began with the grassroots trans organisations — one of which, recall, was also one the founding members of the Federación — who then requested that the Federación to take it on as an objective.

Within the LGBT+ movement as a whole there was initially some division on the gender identity law, with other potential, competing bills being advocated by an assemblage of prominent figures and organizations, such as trans activists Diana Sacayan (murdered in 2015), Lohana Berkins, and Emiliano Ricardo, intersex activist Mauro Cabral, and ABOSEX, a collective of lawyers for sexual rights. I heard conflicting accounts from activists about the substantive differences between the proposals but, notwithstanding initial disagreement, a single combined legal project was eventually presented to Congress and all agree that the process of passing the law was a catalyzing experience. Claudia from La Fulana remembers the years that lead to its approval as “one of the LGBT movement's best moments”. Stéphane Jacob, trans organizer of the wonderful “Festival Anormales” (Festival of the Abnormals) I attended in La Plata, recalls a “huge, huge amount of actions and demonstrations organized by faggots and trannies” in support of the law. Diana from Putos Peronistas explained its role in “visiting every deputy [MP] and explaining to all of them the importance of the law...”

Argentina's gender identity law is case in point of a policy born from admirable priorities and from ensuring grassroots trans organisations have a prominent voice, an example of the key dynamic of interest I have presented in this section. It is also the best example of the productivity of the Federación as a legislative machine, being the fulfilment of its second original aim.<sup>2</sup>

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*The major themes of this consideration of Argentina have been the relation between activist elites and the base and intersectionality (particularly with respect to socio-economics). I particularly draw on it in the conclusion section for lessons 1a, 1c, 2a and 4a-c.*

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<sup>2</sup> Similar to Uruguay, the Federación is currently working on a “holistic trans law with similar provisions including a public sector employment quota and pension. The city of Buenos Aires already has microcosmic version of this law in place locally.

## CONCLUSION: ON BEING MORE

This text has been patchworked from stories about particular people, places, organisations and events. It has allowed me to explore some more abstract ideas through very concrete examples and experiences. We are living in a transitional period for Northwestern LGBT+ movements. Buzzwords like ‘intersectionality’ and ‘essentialism’ are gaining currency and even raising some ire. But what is really needed is some understanding of what these semi-familiar ideas look like when applied to real activism. To this end, here are eleven things I learned from my weeks in South America, divided into five themes and phrased as instructions to act.

### 1. Priority

#### 1a) *Prioritise by precarity.*

There are a great many people whose socio-economic position, level of education, presence on the streets, means of income (and so on) in combination with their sexual orientation or gender identity make them especially vulnerable to violence, discrimination, abuse, and other harms. In Brazil we saw how this has informed the total priority given to the materially insecure by the TransCidadania program. I also presented the history of Argentina’s Federación, itself materially precarious, and drew attention to its formal priorities, which have included some of the most vulnerable LGBT+ populations. As a matter of morality and of politics these populations must surely be LGBT+ movements’ most urgent focus.

#### 1b) *Consider at all times who is being excluded.*

Even when abiding by 1a we risk contributing to subtle hierarchies, further marginalising others who themselves are among the most vulnerable. Uruguay raised the possibility that prioritising the fight for “trans women” risks erasing the related struggles of individuals whose gender variance does not fit within this category.

We must always be conscious of these exclusionary dynamics so that we can avoid them where possible, advocating effectively for the most vulnerable, with the right motivations, and be in a position to mitigate the consequences of our actions should this be required.



1c) *Prioritise the base.*

To some extent the activist class constitutes a marginal elite. There is perhaps no avoiding this completely but it is the responsibility of the ‘vanguard’ to maintain open channels to the base. In Argentina, the Federación’s structure attempts to do this by ensuring that groups who do the everyday work with Argentina’s LGBT+ community help set national policy alongside those working for the community at a higher level. La Fulana additionally remind us of the importance of politically transforming the base itself.

It might seem obvious to say that activism should “prioritise the base” but the practical consequences of doing this are big: actively interrogating one’s position as an elite within a marginal group and allowing “the community” at large to set its activists’ priorities.

## 2. Representation

2a) *Put your queers to the front.*

Successfully inclusive LGBT+ activism does not just prioritise marginalised groups. To articulate the key message that difference is both acceptable and valuable this activism is often led by members of these groups, is presented in their voices and is represented by their faces. In Argentina we saw that this lesson can be heeded formally through mechanisms like the Federación’s rotating presidency and the specification that conference delegations include three differently-identified people.

2b) *Invest in open-ends.*

More generally, we do not need to present hardened, stunted, or simplified versions of people’s identities. We might demand, per 2a, “trans visibility now” and elevate trans people to the very front of our movement. But this is not the same as investing discursively in the trans identity to the exclusion of other forms of gender variance, transgression and queering. The same goes for the representation of sexual identities.

Crudely speaking in terms of identitarian ABC’s (or LGBT’s) does not ultimately make our minority sexual and gender identities more accessible. Long-term, it ossifies them, closing them off to access from the outside and, indeed, forces those on the outside to stay there. We have seen how being maximally expansive in their representation of sexual and gender minority communities has been a particular achievement of Ovejas Negras in Uruguay.

### 3. Hygiene

#### 3a) *Stand with the 'dirty', 'freakish', and 'low'.*



Activist Pao Lin at *Tierra Violeta* cultural centre and feminist library, Buenos Aires. Image my own.

Sanitizing the image of marginalised groups to make them more palatable presents a significant obstacle for empowerment politics that aims for tolerance of difference. It also places a significant burden onto those who are, or wish to behave in ways that are, less normalised. In Brazil this most prominently means trans sex workers and we saw how TransCidadania not only prioritises this group but embraces them. Indianara Siqueira's life and work sends an even firmer message: squeamishness is just no good in the face of sexual oppression.

LGBT+ movements should interrogate and to some extent forego the palatability of their public image in order to stand shoulder to shoulder with *all* those marginalised by their relation to sex and gender. This includes sex workers but extends also to people of low class, people with fringe sexual tastes, people who use drugs, and many more.

#### 3b) *Distinguish professionalism from efficacy.*

Ovejas Negras in Uruguay force us to consider the palatability of activism directly in relation to its substance. Particularly, Ovejas — respected, competent and successful beyond belief — do not have and do not cultivate a business-like approach or a professional image.

We should not confuse professional activism for effective activism. One is a style and tool, the other is the goal. The two are not in a necessary relationship and thus professionalism should be discarded at each and every moment that it is not directly contributing to the betterment of LGBT+ lives. Where it is not so discarded it can only be serving some other purpose.

### 4. Intersectionality

#### 4a) *Don't forget who people really are.*

The task of the LGBT+ movement is to improve LGBT+ lives. But lives are not simply “LGBT+” or “not LGBT+”. They are really comprised of a whole panoply of different

social identities. The movement must understand this if it is to be fit for purpose.

In São Paulo this is something the movement is keenly aware of and the inauguration of the new citizenship centre stands as a shining success by this standard. In Argentina many voices articulated the centrality of socio-economics to the marginality of LGBT+ lives. Indeed this issue is a spectre for the Federación, being both a part of its own history and the central thrusts of criticism directed at it.



A still from *The Way He Looks* (*Hoje Eu Quero Voltar Sozinho*) directed by Daniel Ribeiro, who I interviewed in a São Paulo cinema. He described his films as “unconventional by being conventional”, inserting LGBT+ characters into traditional cinematic styles. I couldn’t help but notice that even this ‘conventional’ Brazilian director’s biggest film is about a young man with intersecting vulnerabilities: he is gay and also blind. Used with permission.

#### 4b) *Campaign for justice as comprehensively as possible*

Because of 4a, LGBT+ struggles are not separable from struggles against social and economic regressivity across the board. So, to improve actual LGBT+ lives, fight for political justice broadly construed.

Uruguay’s recent LGBT+ struggle has been interwoven with a very broad array of other social and political issues across an activism conducted by a ‘united social left’. In Argentina, the Federación have again heeded this lesson formally by ratifying two sets of aims for the movement: one LGBT+, the other cross-movement. In both Uruguay and Argentina I saw the particular value of dominant organisations taking it upon themselves to reach out.

#### 4c) *Raise others’ flags so they will raise yours.*

As for 4b but for a different reason. Involving other movement’s struggles in LGBT+ politics is important because of the alliances that are forged towards shared ends.

## 5. Culture-politics

### 5) *Put on a goddamn show.*

From the events I attended in Brazil I draw a final lesson: use culture to do politics. Proudly centering dynamic queer music, art and comedy, cutting-edge drag and street fashion at political events serves as a showcase. It is a positive representation of what our community has been blessed with. But it is also practical, breathing life and light into political events and campaigns. Queer politics is itself dynamic, cutting-edge and even fashionable so why *wouldn't* we present as such?



Photos from the Festival Anormales in La Plata, November 2016. Left image my own, right image from Festival Anormales' Facebook page, used with permission.

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