

A (Possible?) Cartography of the Migratory Mobilities of Transfeminine and Transvestite People in Argentina

Una cartografía (¿posible?) de las movilidades migratorias de las personas transfemeninas y travestis en Argentina

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ABSTRACT

The following study suggests abandoning the concept of trans* migrations and/or exile in favor of naming geographical displacements of transfeminine and transvestite people, proposing to conceptualize these as migration mobilities. To exemplify the use of the proposed concept, data from an ethnographic field work carried out with transfemininities from the city of Mar del Plata, Argentina, will be presented. This research sought to reveal the material of living conditions and migration factors that forced and/or pushed migration. The main fact is that mobility appears as a milestone in their biographies, conceived not only as an open project of various movements, but also as comings and goings conceived as returns. This work focuses on the concept of *migration mobility*, since it enables two new aspects of analysis regarding the geographical displacements of transfeminine people.

Keywords: 1. transfeminine, 2. transvestite, 3. mobility, 4. Mar del Plata, 5. Argentina.

RESUMEN

El siguiente trabajo sugiere abandonar el concepto de migraciones trans* y/o exilio como nombramiento de los desplazamientos geográficos de personas transfemeninas y travestis, proponiendo conceptualizar tales desplazamientos geográficos como movilidades migratorias. Para ejemplificar el uso del concepto propuesto se dan a conocer los datos de un trabajo de campo etnográfico realizado con transfeminidades de la ciudad de Mar del Plata, en Argentina. Esa investigación buscó relevar las condiciones materiales de vida y los factores que obligaban y/o empujaban a la migración. El dato principal es que la movilidad aparece como un hito en sus biografías, pero que, además, se la concibe como un proyecto abierto de varios movimientos, y de idas y venidas concebidas como retornos. Este trabajo apuesta al concepto de *movilidad migratoria*, ya que habilita dos aristas nuevas de análisis sobre los desplazamientos geográficos de las personas transfemeninas.

Palabras clave: 1. transfeminidades, 2. travesti, 3. movilidad, 4. Mar del Plata, 5. Argentina.

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INTRODUCTION

The geographical displacements of transfeminine and transvestite people² are never—nor were they ever—called in the same way. In an attempt to make a brief conceptual cartography of these displacements, this work will evidence that, in the heat of the dictatorial context that was experienced in Argentina in the 1970s, these displacements were called exiles, to dispute, not only the memory but also the existence itself of lives that deserve to be lived and mourned (grieved) (Butler, 2009). Thereafter, within the context of the public emergence of transfeminine and transvestite identities in Argentina in the 1990s, this phenomenon experienced a name change, and took on a language specific to human rights and social movements.

This phenomenon did not occur exceptionally in that country. All throughout Latin America researchers demonstrated how the interference of discourses on human rights, freedom, and citizenship have transformed the field of dispute over sexuality, identity, and socio-sexual practices (Carrara, 2015; Pecheny, 2016). But what was novel about the Argentinian case was the process that took place in relation to the exchanges between organizations of transfeminine and transvestite people, and human rights movements linked to identity and the last military dictatorship. This relationship was the main structuring factor for the subsequent development and approval of the Gender Identity Law (Law 26 743 of 2012), which was considered at the forefront in Latin America, since it eliminates any psychiatric control or examination as a condition for access to changing the records.

But returning to the moment of emergence of the sexual diversity movements in the 1990s and the naming of geographical displacements, it can be observed that, once police edicts were repealed, transfeminine and transvestite people began to display other problems of their own: family expulsion, lack of access to housing and education, and discrimination in their city or communities, which forced them to migrate to the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, a city that in those years allowed them to live with greater sexual freedom and anonymity (Berkins, 2007; Fernández, 2004). There were also many who decided to migrate directly to Europe, since it made better living conditions possible (Berkins, 2007; Berkins & Fernández, 2005). On this point, several Latin American anthropological investigations can be cited that identify Europe as a synonym for freedom and social advancement (Fernández, 2004; Kulick, 1998; Silva, 1993). It is in this historical context of citizenship and visibility that these geographical displacements, previously categorized as exiles in relation to the dictatorship, become migrations.

In this way, a field of study of its own is being formed that picks up part of gender and sexuality studies, also analyzing the historical sources of regional migrations. In turn, this field begins to

² In this article, transfeminine categories are used to refer to transvestites, transsexuals and trans women, among other identities within the spectrum of the female gender, since this concept, in a certain way, synthesizes several identities, mainly of the population that is intended to study. The trans* umbrella concept could be used, but transmasculine people would then be included, and that objective exceeds this work. The transvestite category will also be used since in Latin America, Argentina included, it is a strategic identity category revitalized by social organizations and activists.

deploy several lines of (still incipient) analysis: migratory projects (Perez Ripossio, 2021b), the criminalization and stigmatization of migrant transfeminine and transvestite people, forms of migration and similarities among them (Darouiche, 2019), and others. However, it has not yet managed to assign a clear conceptual name that allows analyzing the phenomenon in a comprehensive and heterogeneous way. Both concepts—exile and migration—are now tied to the most structural political and social conditions.

As such, it is observed that a social phenomenon that has been repeated for years has not yet been able to develop a consolidated field of study. Perez Ripossio (2021a), in trying to show the complexity of trans*³ people displacements, recovers the reflection made by Cotten (2011) in his book *Transgender Migrations*, defining that:

Transgender migrations comprise movements of yearning, agency, and generativities without unitary subjects or foundations. They are heterotopic, multidimensional mobilities, whose flows and viral circuits resist teleology, linearity, and ordered and discrete borders (translated and cited in Perez Ripossio, 2021a, p. 15).

However, this field, not having a consolidated trajectory, allows to rethink concepts and ideas. Furthermore, such an exercise enables the contribution of all the regional heterogeneities on which the geographical movements of transfeminine and transvestite people are based. In this attempt to rethink ideas and concepts, this work suggests abandoning that first idea of trans* migrations, and conceptualizing these geographical displacements as migratory mobilities. In order to exemplify the use of the concept of *migratory mobility*, data from a research work carried out on transfemininities and transvestites in the city of Mar del Plata, in Argentina, will be presented. There, the material conditions of life and the factors that forced and/or pushed these people to migrate to Argentina, mainly to Mar del Plata, were investigated.

The research methodology included participant observation in social spaces (house meetings, meetings of an NGO dedicated to the defense of the rights of sexually-diverse people, social gatherings such as birthdays, among others) of migrant transfemininities and transvestites. Seven in-depth interviews were also conducted with different key informants. The field work was carried out in 2022.

Regarding some characteristics of the interviewed informants, most of them were street sex workers, while others carried out different professional activities such as hairdressing and jobs related to cosmetic care; one of them worked in a public agency of the State. The participants were from Peru, Ecuador, and Paraguay. Their ages ranged between 25 and 40 years old, and most had already lived in other cities before coming to Mar del Plata. Some had lived in this city for more than ten years, and only one had arrived a year ago.

Now, the work is structured in four sections: the first will provide some methodological details; in the second, the use of the concept of *exile* and the argument for it will be explained. The third

³ In this case, the trans* concept is used given that transmasculine people are also included in that field of study. This work, however, only analyzes the mobilities of transfemininities and transvestites.

section analyzes the emergence of the field of trans* migrations, the main theoretical currents it is informed by, and its main characteristics. The concept of migratory mobility is presented in the fourth and final section. At the same time, the why and wherefore of the use of this concept are analyzed and justified, exemplified by means of two new aspects, proposed at the time of the analysis of the displacements of transfeminine and transvestite people. This presentation is based on the data obtained from the research carried out.

METHODOLOGICAL DETAILS

This work is part of a research developed under qualitative methodology, understood as the best way to capture the meanings, representations, and knowledge with which the subjects themselves understand and interpret social reality. Ethnographic fieldwork was chosen from among the options provided by this methodology. This way of approaching the research process implies being there to understand how subjects construct their meanings in the world, and how they inscribe their social practices within a much broader sociocultural reality.

The field work was carried out under two methodological techniques: the first was participant observation, and the second semi-structured interviews. The first technique, as previously mentioned, was applied in different social contexts: spaces of sociability and meeting of transfeminine and transvestite people, meetings of various NGOs and social groups, and domestic spaces. The technique was applied during four months in 2022. Although from 2018 to 2020 other participant observations had been carried out for a different investigation, in 2022 an attempt was made to capture specific axes for this work; for example: what meanings transfeminine and transvestite people ascribe to mobility, what opinions they showed about returning to their countries, and what practices they considered typical of their migration.

As for the semi-structured interviews, these were carried out under a script was designed and developed in relation to the data collected by means participant observation. The data obtained through the interviews and the first technique were crossed with the interviews carried out during the previous investigation.

Both the material obtained under participant observation, as well as with the semi-structured interviews and the research in some bibliographic sources was systematized into main categories, to which properties were added as needed. Said systematization, although was carried out in a traditional manner, also served to contrast those categories constructed in the previous research. The properties evolved along and dialogued with each other; even so, in the analysis of the field diary, it was observed that the data collection was more focused on capturing the movements and how they were understood, than on the completion of a migration project, that is, biographically.

EXILE

The word *exile*, with its consequent adjectives, such as *political* or *social*, among others, would require an analysis of its own, but this work will focus on an interpretation of sexual exile,⁴ or exile related to sexuality and gender identity (Palmeiro, 2016). Particularly, the exile experienced by Argentinian transfeminine and transvestite people during the period of the last military dictatorship in 1976 in Argentina will be described. The objective is to show how this categorization works in a performative way, anchored to the social and political context of that time, to dispute the cisheterosexual narrative of the civil-military dictatorships of the 1970s, and the repressive contexts of the later developing democracy (Antoniucci, 2021).

To this end, the social phenomenon of the Archivo de la Memoria Trans Argentina (AMTA) (Argentinian Trans Memory Archive) is analyzed, which was created by Argentinian trans* and transvestite activists. It holds more than 80 000 items, with the aim of recovering the history, memory, and life of trans* and transvestite people from the beginning of the 20th century to this day. This archive, and its analysis, allow to glimpse that the lives of these people were almost always marked by geographical displacement, but their reasons, and the names given to these displacements, take on a different political meaning depending on the context.

At its first inauguration in 2018, as well as in its repeated exhibitions, installations, and online catalogues, the AMTA always presents a category called exile (*Archivo de la Memoria Trans Argentina*, 2020). This mainly consists of photographs, postcards, and passports that show the escapes, trips, and displacements that transfeminine and transvestite people made for the most part during the last Argentinian dictatorship, and then in the recent democracy of the years that followed.

It should be noted that such displacements are not called migrations or mobilities, but rather *exile*, so as to grant them political-historical relevance, one that focuses mainly on trying to do away with heterosexual memory, instead exhibiting the conflict and danger that being a transfeminine and/or transvestite person in the dictatorship, as well as in the subsequent democracy, signified. These dispute actions are also understood within the framework of the country's trajectory in terms of identity and human rights.

As for the AMTA itself, it is worth highlighting that this nomenclature is not naive. Perlongher (Palmeiro, 2016) had used the same strategy in the 1980s when trying to make visible the sexual exiles of homosexual people persecuted by dictatorial and democratic governments, and when he himself reflected on his trajectory and his escape to Brazil. The main conflict in which Perlongher and the AMTA agree are the police edicts that governed during the dictatorship, and then in democracy, and which were the main tool of the State to persecute, torture, and imprison

⁴ The interpretation of exile used here is that of those geographical displacements resulting from the identity and sexuality of people, called sexile or sexual exile. There are different nuances between the exiles of gay and lesbian people and those of trans people. In this study, only the movements of transfeminine and transvestite people are analyzed.

transfeminine and transvestite identities, as they also did with gay people, lesbians, female sex workers, among others (Berkins & Fernández, 2005; Cutuli, 2015; Fernández, 2004).

Thus, the word *exile* appears linked mainly to the political, cultural, and social conditions to which transfeminine and transvestite people were being subjected in Argentina. The interesting thing about the AMTA analysis is that it brings this category of exile, little used in the social sciences on LGTB (Lesbian, Gay, Trans*, Bisexual) problems, to a completely different social and cultural context, which names and understands these geographical displacements under a different concept. To insist on the category of exile is to continue insisting on disputing the universal and cisheterosexual narrative of the last dictatorships. As an example of this, two testimonies collected from the book *Archivo de la Memoria Trans Argentina* (Argentinian Trans Memory Archive) are presented:

During the dictatorship, many of the girls left because police edicts were toughened (moreover in the provinces). Some to Europe; Spain was all coming out, or France. And others left for Brazil, which although also under a dictatorship and having “death squads,” it still was twenty years ahead of Argentina when it came to sexual diversity and taboos. Eva Maldonado.

[...]

It was November 2001, just after the Pride March, when I decided to leave: I escaped from Argentina and went into exile in New York. I didn't have many options to escape the repression and persecution we were experiencing. María Belén Correa (Argentinian Trans Memory Archive, 2020, para. 1-4).

The incipient use of this category within the field of social sciences, especially in Argentina, is due to the transformations that have occurred not only at the legislative level, but also in the cultural and social framework of sexual citizenship (Pecheny, 2016) on the part of the LGBT movements, who have decided to use the *migration* category to contest the academic and political field. This will be addressed in the next section.

THE FIELD OF MIGRATION

The organizations of transfeminine and transvestite people in the 1990s, with the repeal of police edicts, began to problematize and make visible several of the social experiences that their lives went through; For example, family expulsion, lack of access to housing and education, and discrimination in their city or community, which forced them to migrate to the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires (CABA, acronym in Spanish for Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires), which in those years allowed people to live with greater sexual freedom and anonymity (Berkins, 2007). Regarding the latter, it is important to clarify that, although many people chose CABA, others chose to migrate directly to Europe, as it offered greater opportunities for social advancement and greater identity freedom (Fernández, 2004; Kulick, 1998; Silva, 1993).

This brief retelling of the facts seeks to note that, in this context of emergence and visibility of transfeminine and transvestite people movements, geographical displacements, which were previously called *exile* in terms of the last dictatorship, begin to be identified as migrations. But this factor always appears linked to a certain extent to the condition of marginality and exclusion, or, failing that, to the relationship between their identity construction and the search for more permissive contexts for that development.

As stated by Perez Ripossio (2021b), migration is considered a secondary factor within the research that tried to account for the identity processes and the problems that structured their living conditions. That is, it is not part of a consolidated field of study in itself, but appears as a dependent variable.

The first to begin paying attention to migrations in the lives of transfeminine and transvestite people were some European and American researchers (Cantú, 2002; Fortier, 2003; Pichardo, 2003). These researchers/activists noticed the strong presence of Latin American LGBT people in Europe, and how this international phenomenon became relevant, and so they began to study, first, the reasons for such migrations, and secondly, the broader contexts in which they take place. However, displacements are analyzed within the broader context of the LGBT population, the new emerging phenomenon thus being called *queer migration* or *sexual migration*.

The concept of queer migration and/or sexual migration is informed by the field of gender studies, which discuss and question those views that aim at constructing a migrant subject *a priori* (Malimacci, 2012; Perez Ripossio, 2021a). It is also a field that has become anchored only to the experiences of gay and lesbian people, paying very little attention to trans* identities. Although the latter do appear in some research, they are secondary or have little visibility. In Spain, for example, one of the first to address sexual migration was Pichardo (2003), who asserted that it must be taken into account—just like gender and class—. For this author, the decision-making phenomenon can be structured for reasons different to those of the heterosexual population:

- a) escaping from family control; b) starting from scratch and establishing a new identity;
- c) seeking anonymity; d) finding a more respectful environment; e) better treatments for HIV-AIDS; f) obtaining citizenships in countries that allow formalizing their sexual-affective relationships; g) fleeing the death penalty (Pichardo, 2003, p. 280).

However, it took a few years for the emergence of a new subfield called trans* migrations (Perez Ripossio, 2021b; Varabedian Cabral, 2014). Under this concept, the lives and migratory projects of Latin American migrant transfemininities and transvestites are now beginning to be analyzed, migrants who seek a better quality of life, escaping police violence, engaging in sex work, and living their identity more freely in Europe. The field became more relevant internationally, especially with Brazilian sex workers who migrated to France, where they established certain communities and emotional ties, and began a new life (Varabedian Cabral, 2014).

Another relevant investigation on transfeminine and transvestite migrations in Europe is the one carried out by García and Oñate (2008) in Spain, who studied Ecuadorian transsexuals who

migrate to Murcia. This work aims at understanding the reasons for their migration, as well as the characteristics of their societies of origin. Likewise, it explores the relationship between migration as a transgression of not only geographical, but also bodily borders, echoing the reflections of trans people and the possibilities of modification in relation to their identities. From that perspective, moving from one country to another impacts their body and subjectivity.

As for Latin America, the research carried out by Rojas (2019) and Zarco-Ortiz (2018) can be cited. Both authors studied the journeys and migratory experiences of Central American trans* people who migrate to both the United States and Mexico. These investigations conclude that migratory experiences occur based on a structure of precariousness, vulnerability, and exclusion (and, sometimes, violence) suffered by transfeminine and transvestite people. Many of these migrations are undertaken with the aim of improving their quality of life, escaping violence and risks in their communities, and seeking the possibility of living their own identity without being in danger of death.

In Argentina—the case of this study—a very particular phenomenon occurred. After the Gender Identity Law (Law 26.743 of 2012), the migrations of transfeminine and transvestite people became more relevant due to the strong presence of people from other Latin American countries. Attention was also paid to the decline of the *Europe* signifier as a synonym for social advancement, due to the repressive policies that were being applied in those latitudes and the improvement that was taking place in Argentina (Darouiche, 2019). Internal and/or regional migrations were no longer focused on, attention was rather given to the arrival of many people who chose Argentina as a scenario of inclusion and respect that allowed them to live with greater freedom and greater possibilities of social advancement (Perez Ripossio, 2021b).

Thus, a field of study of its own is being developed that recovers part of gender and sexuality studies, and that analyzes the historical sources of regional migrations. Still, the assertions of Perez Ripossio (2021b) hold truth, as he stated that “the research that addresses the migration processes of trans and transvestite people is still incipient” (p. 78). This field begins to deploy several lines of analysis such as, for example, migration projects; the criminalization and stigmatization of migrant transfeminine and transvestite people; and the forms of migration and the similarities among them (Darouiche, 2019; Perez Ripossio, 2021a).

This work agrees with many of the analyzes and results that have been presented by research in the field of trans* migrations, but comes from a different conceptual framework. Appealing to the analysis of migrations constructs, in a certain sense, an a priori subject and an a priori reality of the motives, time, and stability of the person who migrates. That is to say, the concept restricts the realities and heterogeneities in the lives of transfeminine and transvestite people who move throughout much of Latin America, Europe, and the United States. Their identities, their possibilities, their corporalities, are always at stake in different cultural and social frameworks, which often conditions time and stability in the receiving society and in their country of origin.

That is why this work calls for a new concept that allows not only to leave the identity construction open, but also to better capture and reflect the heterogeneities of transfeminine and

transvestite people, and their displacements, in the heat of the new political and social contexts in the western regions.

It has already been shown that exile is not a conceptual option due to the political burden it implies, but it can also be seen that the concept of *migration* is limited when it comes to scientifically investigating the geographical displacements of transfeminine and transvestite identities.

In the following section, a new concept will be introduced, taken from the field of study itself and from Argentinian transvestite activists and academics, who are thinking about and studying population displacements—both regional and international—of transfeminine and transvestite people.

MIGRATORY MOBILITY

In an attempt to rethink ideas and concepts, this work suggests abandoning that first idea of trans* migrations and conceptualizing geographical displacements as *migratory mobilities*. This concept, proposed by the transvestite activist/academic Marce Buitiérrez (Gudiño, 2021), is particularly useful when analyzing the geographical displacements of transfeminine and transvestite people. The author takes into account corporality, subjectivity, and the possibility of movement, among other points. To illustrate this, a fragment of an interview with the activist is presented here:

—What is it that you don't like about it [the migration concept]?

—I feel that the concept is tinged with the idea that a migrant is someone who left and changed their status. And that's it. It has this teleological character. The cycle is much more complex. It's not always about departing and leaving everything behind. What I find, what I investigate, regarding the experience of *travas* is that they come and go. They go somewhere else. When they leave they look for a friend. They go with that friend. Then the friend comes back because it was too much, because she doesn't like the city... I find it interesting to think about it in that key of mobility, because it is more complex. It uncovers the complexity of the phenomenon.

—What is the purpose of your work?

—Over time I also understood that this matter of moving in space had more than one meaning. There is the idea that people leave for work, because there are more opportunities in the city. Or that the transvestites leave because they would have more clients in the city, and so that frames them into the sexual market. Later I began to understand that there are a lot of reasons why you leave, and why you come back. You're leaving because you want to get boobs. Because you want to get some treatment. Because you are going after a lover. Or you leave for a bunch of other things. So, I started thinking about all those stories that are out there moving in transit. I like the mobility paradigm, because it not only thinks about the movement of people, but also about the movement of objects. The objects, the technologies that come and go with people. And the ideas. Those stories are also taking shape. Because

every time you leave, you come back, and you are a different person. Or you are the same person, but with other things. You went there, you got a boob job, you came back, you changed them, you leave again, you get butt implants. I also intend to delve into how all these experiences of mobility become flesh in the body of the *travas*; to make this intersection between this very geographical and spatial issue and the configuration of a trans body (Gudiño, 2021, para. 9-12).

Although the author makes an interesting intersection, and new reasons for mobility appear (not only that of escaping family control), two edges also appear that structure the geographical displacement of transfeminine and transvestite people. The first is the possibility of movement and/or various destinations. This aspect is evidenced among some of the Argentinian and Latin American migrants, but it is even more relevant in the mobilities of sex workers. The latter are always looking for better cities and places to raise more money, and they move based on how much the destination is permissive of their line of work. The second aspect that accounts for the concept of *mobility* is return, a phenomenon that appears very commonly and displays different dynamics with a variety of positive and negative factors, and it remains a structuring element in their geographical movements.

This section stands for the conceptualization of the geographical movements of transfeminine and transvestite people as migratory mobilities. This is done so because this concept reveals the realities of people's projects to greater detail. The concept, first of all, recovers the edge of movements, that is, it allows capturing the different movements made before staying in a city. Secondly, it also makes it possible to study the return of this populations, that very particular and heterogeneous phenomenon in the lives of transfeminine and transvestite people.

In order to exemplify the use of the concept of migratory mobility, data from an investigation on transfemininities and transvestites in the city of Mar del Plata, Argentina will be presented. This investigation delved into the material living conditions and the migratory factors that forced and/or pushed these people to migrate to Argentina, and to Mar del Plata for the most part. The key informants had different professions; one of them worked in a beauty center performing different activities (waxing, massages, among others); another was a hairdresser, and the rest were sex workers. Their ages ranged between 25 and 40 years. Some had lived in the country for many years. Only one had arrived in the country and the city a year ago. In turn, all of them had lived in other cities before arriving in Mar del Plata. The informants came from different countries: two from Paraguay, one from Ecuador, and the rest from Peru.

Before delving into the two new aspects revealed by the concept of migratory mobility, this section intends to show that this analysis can contribute to the field of mobility studies and the field of Autonomy of Migration (AoM). This concept aims at moving away from the rational decisions (based on costs and benefits) that migrants make at the time of displacement. The movements of transfeminine and transvestite people are taken as skills to move, with diverse and continuous conditioning factors. In turn, like in the AoM field, this work considers that such creative movements challenge many of the concepts of citizenship, class, race, community, and

rights (Corbarrubias, 2020; Neyrs, 2015). That is why it is now an urgent task to continue analyzing these movements and their various aspects (since there are surely more than the two presented in this work) to further enrich this concept.

Several Destinations

Research has already exposed that the majority of transfemininities undertake their migratory mobilities, in principle, to try to escape family control and repression, and look for places where they can engage in sexual commerce, which allows them to raise money to perform body modifications (Darouiche, 2019; Howe et al., 2008; Perez Ripossio, 2021b; Varabedian Cabral, 2014; Zarco-Ortiz, 2018). These movements often take place within the country of origin, to other countries in the region, or straight to another continent; it quite depends on the person's biographical history, and on the possibilities and the capital they have. It still should be noted that most of those who carry out migratory mobility count at least two movements in their biography.

In the case of the interviewees, at first, most had migrated within their own countries (if they were from a province); then, they had moved to the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and, finally, to the city of Mar del Plata. No one was known who had not moved before.

According to Perez Ripossio (2022a), this phenomenon of several destinations is known as *migratory prelude*, being the necessary, try-out step in which the needs to move away from families of origin are combined, and the difficulties involved in becoming independent and in living new experiences are also faced. For this author:

[In] the migratory prelude, experiences of transgression of gender and sexual norms are played out, with the possibility of returning to their contexts with relative ease, due to geographical proximity. That is, they are transit stages that account for a certain plasticity, because they can move away from their environments, but at the same time return to familiar environments in the face of unavoidable difficulties (Perez Ripossio, 2022a, p. 89).

These migratory preludes, in that sense, are that moment of migration try-out, where transfeminine and transvestite people begin to transit through nearby destinations, through cities in their country, and in turn begin to experience freedom, anonymity, and some independence from family control. Preludes can be low intensity, or may involve several movements before settling in the chosen destination. However, the present study differs in two issues regarding the contribution of that research. The first is conceptual. The second is about the conclusions of thinking about stability in conclusive terms once a destination is chosen (in the case of this research, the Metropolitan Area of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires). This second issue would prevent one from seeing, in the interviews and observations, that transfeminine people continue to move in the heat of legal permissiveness or broader social contexts.

Regarding the conceptual disagreement, contrary to the name *preludes* otherwise given to these first geographical displacements, in this work they are called *first movements* or *first destinations*, and they are part of a larger migratory mobility project that does not include stability in a

conclusive manner. Naming them in this way acknowledges the agency of the subjects, allows one to recognize the itinerancy of the mobility project and to understand it as something open, where transfeminine people not only know what freedom and anonymity are, but also strengthen networks in different geographical locations to continue moving; it also allows them learning different forms of sociability and, finally, thus they gain experiences and symbolic and social capital for future movements.

This particular phenomenon of several destinations or several movements occurs, to a great extent, due to the mode of mobility in which they travel, since they do so with the help and support of networks of friends and/or through mother-daughter relationships (Darouiche, 2019; Perez Ripossio, 2021b, 2022a). Friends and/or mothers are the ones who receive the person, lend them money (in most cases), and teach them the codes of the street, among other actions of support and containment in the receiving country and/or city. Another important factor is that friends or mothers who are in places that become profitable in terms of work, always invite a daughter or someone they know to join the sexual market and live in that territory.

Still, on some occasions these places become worse with repressive policies, as in the case of the city of Mar del Plata,⁵ which is why many transfeminine and transvestite people also decide to leave their home and way of life behind, looking for another place where they can practice sex work. Here, the second disagreement raised above regarding the concepts of *prelude*, *final destination*, and *stability*, emerges.

Perez Ripossio (2022a) notes that trans and transvestite people, after several try-outs—several destinations—decide to settle in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, due to the legal framework and access to rights that they have in Argentina (particularly in that city). However, is this legal framework stable and definitive? Could it change? Could new indirect policies not be set forwards in which the rights of trans* and transvestite people become restricted? Particularly when it comes to sex workers, would not they want to move to places where they can earn more money? These are questions that could enrich the analysis of the movements of transfeminine and transvestite people.

In defense of naming these displacements *mobilizations* and framing them in a more dynamic category called *various destinations*, the data collected in the research carried out with transfeminine and transvestite migrants in the city of Mar del Plata, Argentina were analyzed. It is interesting to note that, when the interviewees were asked about the possibility of going somewhere else where they would earn more money doing the sex work, they ascertained that they had no problem in having to move again. That is to say, for the moment they felt comfortable in the city working in their homes, but they also considered that, in their life plans, they did not see themselves in the same city forever. They agreed that moving or coming and going seasonally is

⁵ In 2022, the Municipality of General Pueyrredon approved ordinance 25 590 (2022), which attempts to regulate street sex work through the establishment of a red-light district, while fining and imprisoning those who carry out such activity in the non-permissive zones in the city.

something very common among sex workers. Furthermore, Europe or even some cities within the same country where they are located are destinations that would allow them to raise more money and escape, in a sense, criminalization. This last axis is relevant, since, for the majority of sex workers, moving also implies leaving their usual area, being able to escape police controls and stigmas, and being new in the sexual market.

As an example, two excerpts from the field notes taken in the participant observations with two transfeminities are presented next, one Peruvian and the other Paraguayan:

After a brief conversation on different topics [we were at a park and talking about various topics: beauty tips, things related to relationships, among others], I asked her why she had decided to migrate, if she could tell me the reasons. She argued that there were several reasons. First of all, because she wanted to start living her new identity, but away from the family, that is why she had first migrated to a city within her country [Peru], and then she was presented with the opportunity to come to Argentina [Autonomous City of Buenos Aires], a country that she did not know, but knew would allow her to raise money because there is a strong sex work market there: “Argentines love naughty girls, there are a lot of them, I earned more here than there in Peru.” Then she came to Mar del Plata to lead an easier life, because Buenos Aires [CABA] is huge and there is a lot of chaos. Then we talked about the sexual market and she explained to me that the money she gets here in Argentina allows her to get body modifications, rent a place, and even save money at times. I asked her if she had moved somewhere else before, and she answered yes, that she had gone to the south of the country for a season a few times, or even to Buenos Aires [CABA]. When I asked her she meant with a season, she explained to me that it is a few months [between six and eight], and that this is how she manages to save some extra money (Darouiche, C., field diary, May 10, 2022).

We met Marcela, and the first thing she told me when I walked through her door was “you saw that with this ordinance that prohibits street sex work four of my colleagues went to Buenos Aires [CABA], because they don’t want to know anything about staying here.” At that moment I asked her if she was planning to leave, to which she answered no, that she already moved a lot, first from Paraguay to Buenos Aires [CABA], and then to Mar del Plata, and all the trips she made throughout the south of the country when she did sex work there in seasons. That in any case she was going to eventually travel to Buenos Aires [CABA], but that she had already moved a lot and that she was now looking for an easier life; she also thought that she would do fine with her other job as a hairdresser, she would raise money (Darouiche, C., field diary, December 20, 2022).

This way one can see that temporal movements are a recurring phenomenon within the lives of transfeminine people. The movements appear as work strategies or as a constant striving for better living conditions, tranquility, and to exist without being stigmatized. These temporal movements should also be understood as a variant to be investigated in migratory mobility projects, since this aspect structures sociability, access to rights, and health conditions, among others factors. However, they should not be considered preludes, but rather a constitute part of the very same

mobility and life project. Furthermore, these movements guarantee an accumulation of symbolic and social capital, translated into learning about new cultures and other social frameworks, and strengthening networks of friendships and family relationships that in the long run guarantee the material reproduction of life. Migratory mobility allows one to think about movements once trans* people are *settled*—italics are used ironically this time—, since the social and cultural frameworks of rights of trans* and transvestite people are always under threat, and new social inequalities keep being produced that affect and violate their rights.

Return

Including the variable of return in the migratory mobilities of transfeminine and transvestite people allows for one to expand and analyze not only the reasons for migration, but also the material conditions of their existence and the value of family ties, while enriching the analysis of the subjectivities of transfeminine and transvestite people in relation to themselves as migrant subjects.

In this sense, it is advisable to include return as a dimension in the interviews and field observations in research focused on this topic. It must be taken into account that they all migrate, but not forever; not all of them want to live migrating, and not all of them think of themselves as migrants; some only do it for semi-prolonged periods, but with the idea of returning to their country and growing old (if possible) as close to their culture as possible; others come and go, sustaining transnational ties.

Thus, the return is there in fantasy, in reality, for periods of months, or in comings and goings. It is also worth clarifying that this does not have to be a homogeneous phenomenon, since it does not occur only under certain pre-established social conditions (greater family acceptance, greater economic capital), but rather also under different social and material dynamics and conditions; it is not even exclusively a return to the city of origin, but it can also be a return (or a movement) to the country of origin.

Within transnationalism studies, it has been observed that return is no longer just the return (and establishment) to the migrant's place of origin. Shinji (2013) clarifies this very well when he states that there are several ways to reintegrate into such a place, thus understanding that return involves numerous events that are part of a system of social and economic exchanges, relationships, and activities that open the possibility of returning. That is to say, as in transnationalist positions, here return is not considered the end of a cycle or the closure of a project, but rather is a constitutive part of social and cultural biographies, and appears in various ways.

Some of the analyzes that have included the return or coming back of transfeminine and transvestite people have done so from a perspective in which the economic bias prevails, while others have investigated based on the structure of family acceptance, that is, focusing on two particular social conditions: the acceptance—and restitution—of the family bond, and/or the greater economic capital. Both have thought of this phenomenon as *the end of the migratory cycle*, as exemplified by Perez Ripossio (2022b):

In general, the writings that addressed the return projects of transvestites/trans people associate the acceptance of their families with an increase in economic capital [...] An economic bias has prevailed in these investigations, given that the improvement of the bond with the families was found related to asset increase, leaving aside other factors (p. 4).

Although this author analyzes the returns of South American transvestites and transfemininities who live in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, he ends up delimiting the return, once again, to family acceptance and the accumulation of symbolic and social capitals (Perez Ripossio, 2022b). However, he also highlights the particularity of the return experiences of these people, in relation to other migrant populations, since their gender identities and expressions represent the structuring axis of these experiences.

Prior studies that referred to this topic explored economic capital as a reference to explain the recomposition of the ties between transvestites/trans and their families. Indeed, the accumulated capital allows them to position themselves in better social conditions, but acceptance, tolerance, and hostility towards their gender identities are more complex factors. Both university studies and affections and a beautiful and readjusted body physiognomy affect the degrees of acceptance experienced in the corresponding environments (Perez Ripossio, 2022b, p. 11).

What this work defends is the idea of return under different modalities. The aim is not to limit it to family acceptance or the accumulation of capital, but also extend it to factors linked to the subjectivity of trans identities related to living a different profession (if sex work is practiced) in other places, as well as to coming and going to maintain friendly and cultural ties in both places.

In the case of the interviewees, the possibility of return appears in the form of raising the money necessary to return and start a business or venture, to stop engaging in sex work and stay in their country, closer to their family, their traditions and its idiosyncrasy, but always coming and going, or even traveling.

— How do you plan to return to your country of origin?

— Well I often go back to Peru. I have a business there, and well, I come and go. When I go, I stay there for a few months. While I know I can stay there, I'm always wanting to travel. That is why I am not definitely coming back, but I am always coming and going, and also to take care of my entrepreneurship, my little business (Marixa, personal communication, transfeminine person of Peruvian origin, November 22, 2022).

Investigating the phenomenon of return allows, turning to the concept above, to strengthen mobility projects and the axes of analysis. Other interviewees ascertained that they return to their country of origin a lot to spend time with their families, and some friends. These returns are important in their lives, since they help maintain certain social ties in both countries.

Today we met Luciana, she is Paraguayan, and has lived in the city for at least 10 years. She came home to have some mate because she wanted to talk to me. While I was preparing things for a snack, she asked me for help to find out how to get tickets to Paraguay, since she was thinking about returning for a while, in May 2023. I asked her if she was planning

to return and live in Paraguay, and she told me no, but that she wanted to go spend some time with her mother as she hadn't seen her in a long time. We talked about returning, and she told me that she likes the idea of returning, that she thinks it is a good opportunity to spend time with her family, in her country, that when she went there it was only for a short time, and now she had saved some money and wanted to spend it in her country with her mother (Darouiche, C., field diary, October 2, 2022).

This idea of return is not only taken from the testimony of the interviewees, but can also be found in the testimony of activists and national leaders of the transvestite identity movement. Lohana Berkins, an undisputed activist for the rights of trans* and transvestite people in Argentina and Latin America, stated that she always liked to return to her native province because it was a valuable experience, since she met with friends who had stayed or who had returned to live there after finding the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires very intense and unsafe (Canal Encuentro, 2017). She problematizes the movements and returns of transvestites and trans* people who moved before the Gender Identity Law.

On the other hand, Marce Buitérrez, a regional trans migrant—who migrated from the Province of Salta to the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires—also problematizes the idea of returns in the experiences of her friends, who returned to their place of origin due to the desire to grow old there, be close to their friends, and transform their society by getting involved in the activities of their community and in social organizations (Gudiño, 2021).

This work invites those interested in researching population displacements to include the concept of return, asking those involved what they think about it, how they understand it and how it affects their reality. The research results become more complex and dynamic, evidencing how heterogeneous the mobilities of transfeminine and transvestite people are. It should also be clarified that in this work it was not possible to delve into how this factor is related to the age of people. It is suspected that the comparison of the discourse of people of different ages can strengthen the concepts and the discussion of the idea of return as an end to the cycle started with the migration project.

CLOSING REMARKS

This work provided a conceptual journey on the naming of the geographical movements in Argentina of transfeminine and transvestite people. First, it was shown that these were priorly named *exiles*, mainly due to the dictatorial contexts of the seventies, this evidencing the danger involved in embodying a trans/transvestite identity.

Thereafter it was shown that, in the heat of the processes of citizenship, these displacements came to be named migrations, part as they are of an integral process of queer migrations or migrations due to sexual choice. It took several years for the emergence of a field under the name of trans* migrations, in which the specificities of the geographical movements of the Latin American transfeminine and transvestite population are analyzed.

However, it was also possible to glimpse at the fact that the field of trans* migrations is not yet consolidated in the social sciences. In an attempt to rethink the concepts, this work suggests abandoning that first idea, and conceptualizing geographical displacements as *migratory mobilities*. This signifies an important wealth when analyzing the movements of transfeminine and transvestite people. Under this concept, new reasons for mobility become visible (not only that of escaping family control), as well as two new aspects. The first is the possibility of movement and/or various destinations, which appears related to sex workers and some of the Argentinian and Latin American migrants. The second aspect is return, which appears very commonly and with different dynamics, with various positive and negative factors, and it remains a structuring element in their geographical movements.

Translation: Fernando Llanas.

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