Building queer histories: A celebration of the epiphany of inadequacy.

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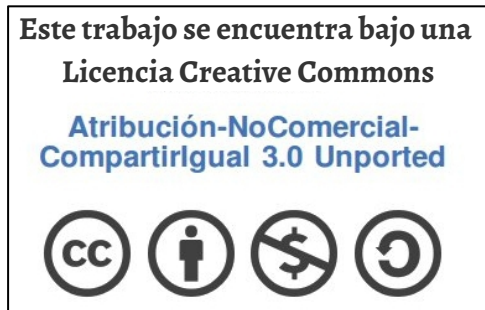
As with other subaltern groups, lgbt history representations have always been the center of many debates. One of them focuses on the inexorable bond between history and politics: In which ways is our past important for the building of our present? How can we represent it, without repeating the same problems that lead us to exclusion in the first place? Queer approaches offer fruitful perspectives in this sense, as does contemporary philosophy of history, particularly regarding the epistemological and political challenges left us by the 20th Century. In both cases, we are thinking of histories that reject traditional closures, acknowledge the author's involvement in the production process, and encourage a multiplication of interpretations and rewritings. In J. Halberstam's words, we are looking into histories that "seek not to explain, but to involve" (2011: 28).

The aim of this work[1] is to track down these and other resources offered by contemporary philosophy of history and queer theory, creating a dialogue between both in order to give shape to new ways of thinking about our past, present and future. One of the hypothesis is that certain concepts and strategies that were originally elaborated to face the challenges of representing "modernist events", can be useful when looking into queer ways of writing history – for instance, in order to continue producing the histories Halberstam calls "histories of failure".

1. Building queer histories

First of all, it is worth noting that by "queer history" I am not referring necessarily to *histories about those subjects* usually considered as paradigmatic by queer perspectives (e.g., histories of people who live dissident sexes or genders). This is more about *queer ways of making history* – that is, the ways in which we could *think of the past and represent it, taking into account the theoretical and political contributions of queer perspectives*. Which subjects, bodies or communities will this then be applied to, is a matter of the theoretical-political project in question.

There is a number of aspects we can take into account when thinking of these

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1   A version of this work was discussed at the *Metahistory 40th Anniversary* event, in Vitória, Brazil, October 2013.

queer modes of making history, and going into detail on this point is well beyond the reach of this paper. However, we *can* point at *some* aspects which are particularly relevant when placing them in dialogue with our own path in Philosophy of History. One item could be, for example, the analysis of so-called *"identities" in terms of performative constructions*, that is, as the repetition, within a scene of constraint, of discursive practices which are always incomplete and do not refer to a previous original. This focus on the lack of an original brings us to another relevant item: the defense of *genealogy* as a way of looking into the historical-political paths that led to those structures that seem natural to us today (paradigmatically, the genealogy of the construction of two sexes as binary and discrete). A third aspect relevant for our work here is the critical stance regarding *"identity politics"* and other kinds of essentialism, due to some consequences they can lead to in terms of power relations.

Today, I would like to focus on some recent developments offered by J. Halberstam, particularly in *The queer art of failure* (2011). In it, the author tries to think of how to produce theory, or thought, given the – in his opinion – unquestionable failure of current systems of knowledge (2011: 19-20). Instead of attempting a rescue from the ruins of what has been, Halberstam stands up for making use of the opportunity to *rethink the whole project of learning and thinking*.

The main focus of his work is the defense of what he calls the *"art of failure"*. Instead of "high theory" (for example, recovering a heroic past that *must* be recalled), Halberstam advocates for mistakes, banality, contradiction and inadequacy as modes of existence – modes to which, he reminds us, queer people are very much used to. Perhaps the most fruitful alternatives of thought lie in the realm of criticism, rejection, counter-intuition. The examples with which Halberstam works are far from the conventional idea of success, and more than offering alternative models, they question the very idea of having to look up to a model in the first place.

One of the strategies Halberstam suggests when elaborating a "subjugated knowledge" (a notion he draws from Foucault), is to *"suspect memorialization"*. Maybe it is time to defend "certain forms of erasure over memory, precisely because memorialization has a *tendency to tidy up disorderly histories* (of slavery, the Holocaust, wars, etc.). Memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls 'a ritual of power'; it selects for what is important (the histories of triumph), it *reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions*, and it sets precedents for other 'memorializations'" (emphasis added). In Halberstam's project, instead, forgetting turns into "a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies than to inheritance, to erasure than to inscription" (2011: 28).

When it comes to applying this meta-theoretical analysis to a specific subject, Halberstam turns particularly to lgbt stories. In this respect, his stance is to "refuse triumphalist accounts of gay, lesbian, and transgender history that necessarily reinvest in robust notions of success and succession" (2011: chap. 6). As we will see in what follows, this defense of stories of a subaltern community in terms that are all but triumphalist and grand, echoes in the reflections emerged in contemporary philosophy of history after the so-called "modernist events" left to us by the 20th Century.

2. Modernist events and the tools of philosophy of history

Several authors have pointed at a number of limit events of the 20th Century as a shock for traditional historiographic paradigms. Those ways of thinking of and talking about the past which, until then, had been of use and had reached consensus, started to show their weak points, and still summon us to rethink the ways in which we relate to our past. The aim of my research is to analyze these developments, and the tools they offer us, in the light of the call for a "queerization" of history. Today, my contribution will focus on three items in particular:[2]

A) Firstly, we find this idea of the past as *a retrospective and genealogical construction stemming from a number of present interests*. This understanding of history sheds light on the inevitably political and biased nature of all productions on the past, something even more salient in the case of histories of subaltern groups such as lgbt collectives. The very idea of a stable identity, with intrinsic attributes, looses its grounds once we understand, with Hayden White, "tradition" as something built through "an actual figure-fulfillment-figure relationship, a genealogical relationship of successive expropriations" (2000: 91). From this perspective, we can appreciate that each new element we add to our genealogical tree not only gives a new meaning to that element itself, but also gives a new meaning to *ourselves*, and what we want to be. As fulfillments of that figure, we draw on its characteristics and legitimize our own reality in its being heir to it. This realization leaves us with the need to wonder which figures we are including in our canon: Who are our ancestors? And what do they say about us?

B) It may be of particular interest, and relevant when dealing with lgbt histories, to point these questions at those stories which present their "figures" as "great heroes". Which are the *ideological implications* of a tale presented in these terms, and/or that places itself - implicitly or not – within a line of progress? As Hayden White already explained in *Metahistory*: "the Ethical moment of a historical work is reflected in the mode of ideological implication by which an aesthetic perception (emplotment) and a cognitive operation (argument) can be combined so as to derive prescriptive statements from what may appear to be purely descriptive or analytical ones." (1973: 27).[3] I will come back to this point further ahead, when analysing the case of a hi(story) presented, I will suggest, in terms of "great heroes" and "progress".

C) The last item I would like to refer to today, regarding new philosophies of history, is their invitation to produce *stories which do not result in a closure*.[4] That is, histories that do not cancel the possibilities of thinking about the past, but rather multiply them, and encourage a proliferation of perspectives. This refers both to the incorporation of new voices, and the reinterpretation of the existing canon, in the light of new points of view or new contexts. Dominick LaCapra, for instance, considers that traditional canonization tends to "suspend the critical and even transforming potential of texts", as it understands "that our aim [as historians] is just to find order in chaos, structuring or explaining completely our material, or finding meanings in the past". As

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2 I would like to thank Gilda Bevilacqua for her commentaries on my research, which helped me better understand the connections between queer paradigms and the possibilities offered by the philosophies of history I work with here.

3 With White, we understand "ideological implications" of history as a number of prescriptions to position oneself in the present world of social praxis, and act according to it, be it to maintain status quo or to modify it (White 1973: 22).

4 In "The value of narrativity in the representation of reality", White refers to the "narrative closure" effect found in history as narration. Quoted in La Greca 2012: 228.

opposed to this, the author calls for a critical reflection on the *tensions inherent to historical texts*, as well as on the way in which we write it and establish our canon (2008: 57; my translation).

Prof. White has pointed in this direction in his reflection on *what is at stake when choosing one representation of the past over another*. Given that there is no "neutral" or "objective" standing from which to arbitrate among stories, we will do it based on ethical-ideological investments, rather than on what, at a first glimpse, could seem to be their explanatory capacity. As he maintains in *Metahistory:* "no given theory of history is convincing or compelling to a given public solely on the basis of its adequacy as an 'explanation' of the 'data' contained in its narrative, because, in history, as in the social sciences in general, there is no way of pre-establishing what will count as a 'datum' and what will count as a 'theory' by which to 'explain' what the data 'mean'" (1973: 429). One possible outcome of this assertion is that, when choosing among different representations, we value the possibilities it conveys of multiplying perspectives on the matter. As Verónica Tozzi defends in her pragmatist interpretation of figural realism: "what makes a representation really significant, is its heuristic value; that is, it leaving us open issues on the events so as to make it worth while coming back over them, or rewriting their history" (2009: 120; my translation).[5]

[*An extended version of this paper includes a section linking these traits with modernist writing: the modernist writing project is concurrent in many ways with what queer writing proposes*[6]]

Now, doesn't this echo strongly in Benjamin's proposal of a *history of the defeated?* Quite the opposite. The lgbt collective has built itself many "histories of the defeated", resurfacing certain figures and events buried by a canonic history which was and is deeply heterosexist and cissexist. While the political value of these projects is undeniable, in our present context and in the light of the analysis carried out here, we can see this as rather aligned with traditional historiography. To these projects, a "history of failure" could answer: amongst us there are also winners, traitors, collaborationists; denying it does nothing but enhancing the harm done to our communities.

Case study: the Gender Identity Law in Argentina

Our political contexts offer numerous examples of this kind of histories (histories of closure, heroes, progress, remembering and/with clarity...). In the case of the lgbt collective in particular, we do not need to go back to the civil rights movements of the 70s to find this kind of representations. In our days, Argentina offers narratives elaborated precisely under this light. Let us take for instance the descriptions that circulate more frequently in relation to our country's *Gender Identity Law*, passed in

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5 "Heuristic refers to experience-based techniques for problem solving, learning, and discovery that give a solution which is not guaranteed to be optimal". Similarly, in "La trama histórica y el problema de la verdad" White asserts: "cualquier cuerpo dado de hechos es infinita y diversamente interpretable" and "un objetivo del discurso histórico es, no tanto trabajar en pos de la producción de una 'mejor' interpretación, sino multiplicar la cantidad de interpretaciones que poseemos de cualquier conjunto dado de conocimientos" (White 2003: 193).

6 As Omar Murad states, modernist writing according to White "has three formal features consisting of (1) the dissolution of the plot, (2) *a proliferation of points of view that shatters the subject's stability;* and (3) the dissolution of the event. This, in turn, leads to some consequences: I. A certain gap between history and (pre-modernist) literature understood as fiction. II. It overcomes, on the one hand, the opposition between the literal and figurative dimensions of the discourse, and on the other hand, the opposition between the factual and fictional modes. III. It builds an image of reality *deprived of great narratives but open to multiple meanings.*" (Murad 2013; emphasis added)

2012[7]. I would like to take a few minutes to analyse this example[8] because, in my view, it conveys in a very direct manner the processes by which, up to our days, history is produced day in day out following this scheme of emplotment/ argument/ ideological implication (understood as prescriptions for the future).

It is worth noting that, at this point, there is an interruption in the quotations and bibliography offered in my paper. This interruption marks a difference, a frontier, among those subjects who can write and publish, and those who can't; those issues that are discussed in the available publications, and those that aren't. This is a problem, and also a challenge to creativity, for anyone who wishes to give space to those voices: they usually appear in videos, conversations, blogs and informal publications. It is our task then, to be aware of this gap and try to bridge it in our production.[9]

1- Firstly, these privileged narratives present the process by which the law was finally obtained, in terms of a *heroic feat*; acclaimed figures can be either martyrs (those who came from the marginalized collectives, and contributed to the struggle but did not live to see the results), or agents of change who, from a position of power, "granted" rights to a historically marginalized collective (marginalized, of course, because never before had we witnessed the emergence of a person willing to grant those rights). What is the place of collective work here? What's left of the aggregation of the innumerable interests, scenarios and decisions that result in the crystallization of a political struggle?

2- Within this same *character* setting, these stories work in *dichotomous terms*: on the one hand, persons and institutions that are completely evil, such as "the Church" and "the right wing"; on the other hand, well-intentioned and efficient people. These traits can never appear combined: we don't hear of people originally belonging to the subaltern collective, who were in some way detrimental to it, or people who defended the project, but due to some kind of personal interest (eg. in order to gain access to positions of power).

3- Finally, according to this narrative, in our days (more than a year after the passing of the Law) *this process would already be closed*, and this would be a time in which the problems the Law came to address have already been solved. This year, for example, we had legislative elections, and many celebrated the fact that a large number of trans* people could vote for the first time with their "real" name.[10] Some

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7 For more information on the Gender Identity Law, which in terms of trans* rights is one of the – if not *the* - most progressive laws in the world, see: Frente Nacional por la Ley de Identidad de Género (www.frentenacionaleydeidentidad.blogspot.com.ar), one of the activist organizations which led the struggle and the elaboration of the project. For an alternative narrative on the process that lead to the Law, without the problems I detect here in the mainstream reconstructions, see the conference offered by Mauro Cabral, Argentine theorist and activist, at the 4th European Transgender Council, September 2012 (in English): http://youtu.be/ELK4HjNW2D0 (last visit: 04/10/2013). The lack of available written work on these issues produced by/for the people targeted by the law, is proof of the long way we still have to go regarding trans* rights. The production that *does* circulate regarding the process that lead to this Law comes mainly from mainstream media and organizations, and is precisely the one that promotes the narrative I am analyzing critically here.

8 Another interesting process to analyze in this respect, is the one regarding pro-choice activism in our country. In Argentina, where abortion is illegal, this has been for many years one of the priorities in the agenda of feminism and women's rights movements. However, in the past few years this struggle has arguably lost much of its strength, due to the perception that its resolution is "right around the corner", and that there is actually no more battles to be fought. Thus, its being always "almost there" results in its never actually "being here".

9 I would like to thank Blas Radi for bringing this to my attention when reading a previous version of this paper. For some suggestions on strategies regarding this task, see Pérez and Radi (2013): "And now what?", available online.

10 "Primary elections 2013: Trans vote in the country" ("Primarias 2013: El voto trans en el país"), Visión 7 news program, 12/08/2013: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ir3BysuxJ0c (last visit: 4/10/2013); "For the first time, trans people voted with a document that reflects their gender identity" ("Por primera vez, las personas trans votaron con un

even applauded how, "for the first time", a trans* person went through trial with her "real" gender identity and name – detained and exposed to trial due to a number of institutional violences perpetrated by the police and the penitentiary system, but that is another story. What is important, is that this shows that the Law (all of it? No one says) is already in circulation, and that we are facing radically different times, witnessing things that would have been unimaginable years back (and yet, how did this collective create the law, if they could not imagine it?). To point instead to the lines of continuity between the previous stage and this one (be it due to the injustices that still occur, or to the advances actually conquered by the collective prior to the Law) would be to steal importance from this turning point – and all the interests that come with it.

Now, to go back to White, what is the "ideological implication" that emerges from this story structured in terms of progress, as a settled matter, and with heroes and villains? Which lines of thought and action are excluded from this road to success? If the prevailing characters are not collectives, but individuals (and, in many cases, not even trans* ones), what is left for those who, in other points of the globe, hope for a similar law? Will they just have to wait for the arrival of their own Messiah – and the death of the accompanying martyrs? What is left, within this structure, for those who insist on pointing at the problems that persist?

Here we can see just to what extent history is at the same time "doing" and "hiding"[11], resulting in narratives "invested less in the interest of establishing the facts of a given matter than that of providing a basis in fact from which to launch a judgement of action in the present" (White 2012: 31). Halberstam's presentation of these "bang" narratives[12] can give us a hint of what this "judgement" is all about: "'bang' narratives are almost always, even when describing self-shattering, to use Foucault's cliché-resistant phrase, 'to the speaker's benefit'" (Halberstam 2011: 150).

A queer historiographical perspective on these same events would be built more like a 'whimper' narrative, avoiding, when possible, those lines of progress – and avoiding lines in general, since we prefer to think of clutter, frontiers, entanglements and contradictions. In the first place, these perspectives would acknowledge the political-ideological-prescriptive content of all representations of the past (could one even conceive a history without this prescriptive load?). Secondly, these projects would propose an unsettling of those same contents by exposing its contradictions, its crevices, its dark spots ("dark" both as in "unintelligible", and as in "uncomfortable"). These complications are born from, among other things, the understanding of historical processes as collective, and thus conflictive, hesitating, somewhat random, and never closed. History is not presented as a praise of our fathers (sic), but as betrayal: a betrayal that disturbs us, because in its selection of figures it does not hide those who convey a negative image of us.[13] In our times, betrayal can even come to be a political

documento que refleja su identidad de género"), Telam news agency, 11/08/2013:
http://www.telam.com.ar/notas/201308/28417-votar-con-el-documento-que-refleja-la-identidad-de-genero.html (last visit: 4/10/2013). Apart from this, what is a *real* name? Progress narratives seem to need, over and over again, the confirmation that "the new" thing is the truth, and what is left behind is falsehood, error, inauthentic.
11 Each presentation is as much "history" as it is "anti-history", as much *from* as *against* what we call "the truth"; all of this depending on the present positionings of one who looks to the past in search of something (White 2012: 22). Similarly, in "El texto histórico como artefacto literario", the author confirms: "Nuestras *explicaciones* de las estructuras históricas y los procesos están así determinados más por lo que dejamos fuera de nuestras representaciones que por lo que incluimos en ellas" (White 2003: 124) See also "Teoría literaria y escrito histórico", p. 153.
12 Here the author toys with the closing lines of "The Hollow Men" (1925), by TS Eliot: "This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper".
13 To address this point, Halberstam takes as a paradigmatic example the relation between homosexuality and Nazi Germany, and the sensations surfaced in our days by that past, among many homosexual people. In the case

urgency: "At a time when loyalty to the nation often means unquestioned acquiescence to [its brutalities], betrayal and disloyalty are part of the arsenal of a vital and dynamic oppositional discourse" (2011: 164).[14]

Finally, in contrast to a realism which seeks to work into its object of representation an order which it lacks (La Greca 2012: 236),[15] queer writing (as well as the modernist writing analysed by those philosophies of history we are working with here) aims at challenging "the reader's yearn for synthetic interpretation" (La Greca 2012: 237). In this respect, relationships with the past approached from a queer perspective have a lot to learn from the mode White calls "satire"[16], characterized, among other things, by the epiphany of the inadequacy of our conscience to live happily in this world, or to understand it thoroughly, as well as the inadequacy of the image of reality that the text itself could ever offer.[17] Furthermore, from a tropological point of view this writing is closest to the ironic mode, and its "favored stylistic device", "aporia (literally 'doubt'), in which the author signals in advance a real or feigned disbelief in the truth of his own statements" (White 1973: 37).[18] In this way, through the rhetorical denial of what is being said, the author manages to remain critical of its own production, while exposing the problems of the discipline at large.

3. Towards the opening of history

So, why should we "queerize" our ways of dealing with the past?

In "The Practical Past", Hayden White exposes the way in which "historical discourse" has quietly "slipped into the place formerly occupied by religion and metaphysics, and become a kind of degree zero of factuality on which the other human and social sciences could draw as a fund (...)" (White 2012: 38). The case I brought as an example today, regarding the Gender Identity Law, shows us some of the real risks of this turn, as well as the dangers of embarking in tidy, lineal and binary constructions of the past.

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of Argentina's Gender Identity Law, it is interesting to analyze this idea of "traitors" in relation to the place assigned to those who, within our local trans* communities, continue to point at the problems that have not ceased after the passing of the Law. "Traitors", maybe, but in any case we are looking at those "traitors" mentioned by Halberstam: those who, when making history - and when analyzing our current context – do not stop short at exposing the deficiencies and miseries that we insist on hiding in the closet – ironically, that same closet from which we already came out a long time ago.

14 Also in p. 171: "I have argued in traitorous terms (traitorous to a politically pure history of homosexuality) (...)"; instead of this "pure" history, the author proposes a "disloyal historiography".

15 Auerbach considered that modernist writers "temen imponer a la vida y a su tema una ordenación que no ofrecen ellos mismos" (La Greca 2012: 236).

16 Satire sees "the hopes, possibilities, and truths of human existence (...) Ironically, in the atmosphere generated by the apprehension of the ultimate inadequacy of consciousness to live in the world happily or to comprehend it fully. Satire presupposes the ultimate inadequacy of the visions of the world dramatically represented in the genres of Romance, Comedy, and Tragedy alike. As a phase in the evolution of an artistic style or literary tradition, the advent of the Satirical mode of representation signals a conviction that the world has grown old. Like philosophy itself, Satire 'paints its gray on gray' in the awareness of its own inadequacy as an image of reality." White 1973: 10.

17 As Judith Butler has noticed regarding her own work, this is also the case with the text we produce: it will never be completely under the control of our initial intentions when circulating it. Our production has a life of its own – and this impossibility to control it is part of its political force. "Una de las implicaciones ambivalentes de la descentralización del sujeto es que su escritura sea el sitio de una expropiación necesaria e inevitable". Butler 2002: 338-339.

18 "The basic figurative tactic of Irony is catachresis (literally "misuse"), the manifestly absurd Metaphor designed to inspire Ironic second thoughts about the nature of the thing characterized or the inadequacy of the characterization itself. The rhetorical figure of aporia (literally "doubt"), in which the author signals in advance a real or feigned disbelief in the truth of his own statements, could be considered the favored stylistic device of Ironic language, in both fiction of the more "realistic" sort and histories that are cast in a self-consciously skeptical tone or are "relativizing" in their intention. The aim of the Ironic statement is to affirm tacitly the negative of what is on the literal level affirmed positively, or the reverse." White 1973: 37.

To think of different ways of looking at the past is, above all, to give place to that "basic desire to live life otherwise" which Halberstam (2011: 15) sets as a horizon when producing this "low theory". Through different paths, queer thought, historiography, literature and philosophy of history have looked into modes of giving shape to these "other ways" of living life. In all of them, the "epiphany of inadequacy" brought home by White can be considered, in broader terms, as the epiphany of the always incomplete, problematic, contradictory and, yes, obscure nature of our theoretical production and our political involvement.[19]

Queer approaches and the philosophies of history we are working with here, with their various ways of relating to past, present and future, can help rescue history when and where it is captured in that static prison exposed by White. They can bring it out to the field, where people can vote but do not have access to basic needs such as housing, health, education, employment and food. In Stuart Hall's words: "theory is not an end unto itself but 'a detour en route to something else' (1991: 43)" (Halberstam 2011: 28).

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On the Gender Identity Law:

• Frente Nacional por la Ley de Identidad de Género (www.frentenacionaleydeidentidad.blogspot.com.ar), one of the activist organizations which led the struggle and the elaboration of the project.

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19 The product of our work, as well as the historical event understood as figuration, remains open to retrospective appropriations from any group which in the future chooses it as a legitimizing prototype of its own self-creation project, and, therefore, as an element of their genealogy (White 2010: 46).

• Conference offered by Mauro Cabral, Argentine theorist and activist, at the 4th European Transgender Council, September 2012: http://youtu.be/ELK4HjNW2D0 (last visit: 04/10/2013)

• "Primarias 2013: El voto trans en el país", noticiero Visión 7 día 12/08/2013: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ir3BysuxJ0c (last visit: 4/10/2013)

• "Por primera vez, las personas trans votaron con un documento que refleja su identidad de género " (Telam, 11/08/2013) http://www.telam.com.ar/notas/201308/28417-votar-con-el-documento-que-refleja-la-identidad-de-genero.html (last visit: 4/10/2013)