

## Women, Violence, and Cultural Production in Contemporary Latin America

*A Reflection by Emily Sun, CLACS Undergraduate Fellow, class of 2018*

On May 30 2017, while I was an exchange student in Buenos Aires, a group of over forty women gathered in the city's Congressional District. They stood in regimented lines, and some of the busy passerby stopped to watch, while others hurried past, unfazed. The women slowly took off their backpacks, sweaters, and scarves, leaving their garments in small colorful piles across the asphalt. Once naked, they crumpled into two fleshy mounds.

A voice blasted through a megaphone, denouncing ongoing femicides in Argentina and Latin America. Femicides are homicides that target women for their perceived gender or sexual expression, and darker-skinned, working-class, indigenous, and trans women are particularly vulnerable. The performance, organized by the collective "Fuerza Artística Choque Comunicativo" (F.A.C.C.), conjured a tradition of women baring their bodies in public space to protest racial and sexual violence.

That night, the woman hosting me brought the performance up over dinner. She had seen the "spectacle" on Facebook. "I want equal treatment as a woman," she said, "but I want to be respected. If I go around with my shirt too low, I'm just asking for men's attention." I stared down at my plate, thinking of the men on the street and their arsenal of looks and whistles and names for me no matter what I wore. I thought of when I attended a demonstration for "[Ni Una Menos](#)", a Latin American social movement working to eradicate violence against women. I thought of the two girls crowded next to me, one carrying the other on her shoulders. Their four sober eyes, caked in glitter.

I thought of the note I saw scrawled in a University of Buenos Aires (UBA) bathroom stall: *If you have suffered from gender-based violence, mark your hand with a black dot. Someone somewhere will hear you.* A mark small enough to hide, but look closely and it's as loud as a megaphone.

I was studying abroad, and so among other privileges, I had the opportunity to leave, to reinhabit the fabric of what I knew. When I returned to Brown this fall, I joined the CLACS Reading Group on "Women, Violence, and Cultural Production in Latin America", looking to more widely contextualize what I had witnessed in Buenos Aires. The reading group creates a space to engage artistic responses to violence against women in Latin America and the Caribbean. Launched by Brown PhD student Elizabeth Gray and Visiting Associate Professor of Latin America and Caribbean Studies Erica Durante, the group is open to all students and faculty in the Humanities and Social Sciences.

The group's first guest, Françoise Vergès, has been a Cogut Visiting Professor in the Humanities at Brown during the past Fall semester. Parisian-born and raised in Reunion Island, Vergès has lived in Algeria, Mexico and the United States, and has worked as an antiracist and feminist journalist before obtaining her PhD degree in Political Theory at

University of California/Berkeley. She is currently the Global South(s) Chair at the Collège d'Études Mondiales (School of Global Studies), in the Fondation Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, in Paris.

As a woman journalist in France, Vergès often confronted the racism of French feminism. Similar to mainstream white feminism in the United States, French feminism has long ignored the specific struggles of women of color, as well as legacies of slavery and colonization. “I didn’t learn about colonialism and racism by reading about it,” Vergès said. “I learned by experience.”

Françoise Vergès is now filling these gaps through her scholarship. Her new book, *Le Ventre des Femmes: capitalisme, racialisation, féminisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2017; English translation forthcoming at Duke University Press), brings attention to women of color living in French Overseas departments, who were forcibly sterilized during the 1960’s-70’s. Vergès connects these abuses to the history of transatlantic slavery, which established property rights to black women’s bodies. Histories of slavery, Vergès adds, rarely talk about the mothers of enslaved people. To understand the connections between capitalism, imperialism, and sexual violence today, we must understand the silences around black women’s wombs.

I find Vergès’ work urgent not just in a Francophone context, but across the Americas. In the U.S., media narratives of “welfare queens” and the mothers of “anchor babies” are some of many ways in which the state continues to frame women of color’s wombs as threats to national security. In Argentina, I heard feminist cries ring loud and clear, but they rarely addressed racism and colorism.

For the second meeting, our reading group dives further into issues of control over women’s bodies. We watch *La Teta Asustada* (2009) by Peruvian filmmaker Claudia Llosa (released in English as *The Milk of Sorrow*), a narrative film portraying the transmission of trauma. The heroine, Fausta, wrestles with her fear of rape, of going through what her mother did during Peru’s Civil War, when widespread violence was perpetrated against indigenous communities. Fausta’s community believes such fear is passed through mothers’ breast milk. While the film drew rave reviews abroad, it was criticized domestically, including by indigenous communities who took issue with the anthropological research at the base of the film.

We also pour over images of vibrant, intricate textiles called *arpilleras*. Upon closer inspection, however, the *arpilleras* depict Chilean women’s experiences with poverty and violence during the Augusto Pinochet dictatorship. These women, or *arpilleristas*, formed secret workshops to weave their stories undercover. They began exporting their work abroad to make a living. Yet, similar to the film *La Teta Asustada*, *arpilleras*, suddenly sought after by international art collectors and craft museums, changed meaning abroad. In fact, *arpilleras* are now hard to come by domestically, in Chile.

As part of a reading group at an American university focusing on Latin American and Caribbean women's narratives and cultural productions, I wondered how we responsibly engage art across borders. Can we talk about women's resistance, creative or otherwise, without reinforcing gender norms? In the Spring semester, I hope to continue paying close attention to the whispers, the silences, and the voices that get lost in translation.

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