

THE PARTY WASN'T AT HOME, AND THE LIGHT WASN'T FLUORESCENT

On *Fiestas, memorias y archivos: Política sexual disidente y resistencias cotidianas en España en los años setenta*. Madrid, Brumaria, 2019¹

Javier Pérez Iglesias

Librarian activist and director of the Library of the Faculty of Fine Arts
(Complutense University of Madrid) / jperezi@ucm.es

Translated by George Hutton

Brumaria presents a new book from its collection UNO in which, as in other recent titles (*Exterioridades críticas* or *Arte y tecnosfera*, to name just two of the latest ones), there are a high number of contributions which come from the academic world. In each case, a number of the contributions are associated with research that has the backing of what would be called, within the academic world, "quality research projects". Many of the participants hold a PhD, or were indeed amid their doctoral studies, at the time of the book's compilation. But, wisely, the editors have also invited other kinds of knowledge, associated with activism, to join their ensemble. There are texts and voices of people who, from the fields of art, activism or the archives, work, think and act on/from sexual dissidence.

This is important because, for those of us who work in public universities and who understand knowledge and research as a possible weapon for liberation, there is a pressing need to find alternatives to academic capitalism and, without getting carried away, open ourselves up to life itself. There are other ways of thinking about history and of creating knowledge which make celebrations, memories and archives more and more necessary.

The same thing happens with this book as with certain dishes, which are back in fashion despite their long tradition, in which the flavours only come through when you stir the pot deep, right to the bottom – those ingredients which are invisible when you first see the feast on display, nestled as they are beneath the other layers. *Fiestas, memorias y archivos* is indeed composed of many different layers, and yet it all basks in the glow that comes from the epilogue by Miguel Benlloch, who speaks about the personal and the memory, from the recollections of his childhood and youth, of a life of dissent.

Reading this epilogue reminded me of the exhibition "Miguel Benlloch. Cuerpo Conjugado" ('Conjugated Body') that was in Madrid's Centro Centro

from June to October 2019, in the basement of the City Hall building. Talking with a friend of mine, the filmmaker and video artist Sally Gutiérrez, we tried to imagine what you could see/hear/read there, rising up from deep within the building and bursting into the offices of the axis of evil (heterosexual, white and cis, of course)². We saw it like a welcome, a furious welcome, screamed out by a queer, AIDS-carrying, sick, unruly, “demasculinised” body, greeting the allied necrophilic politics of neoliberalism and neofascism just as they entered the city’s government, the kind of politics that is designed to destroy us.

Miguel Benlloch died shortly after writing the text for the epilogue, and he had already died by the time the exhibition opened, this exhibition in which, like a folk hero for the marginalised, he mounted his horse again to ride and speak, because speaking, naming and expressing thought by means of writing is one of our weapons.

They want us dead, in the sense of a physical and “civil death”, as Brice Chamouveau notes in chapter 12 of the book, referring to the dissident voices of the post-Francoist period. Yes this book, which recovers certain struggles which some factions have tried to erase, is proof that we are alive, that we have a way of reading and telling the past and of situating ourselves in the present that makes us rise up against death.

In *Fiestas, Memorias y Archivos*, Benlloch’s text is not an explosion, but rather a light; it is not a bomb, but rather a pleasant warmth, which accompanies the other contributions and bestows further meaning upon them. Because it is easy to say “everyday resistances”, but it may be the case that our way of approaching those lives (for when speaking of everyday resistances we invariably think about people, about lives) is somewhat careless in terms of how we talk about them. It may be the case that the language we use is ignorant of them or deactivates them to the extent that they are turned into “documents” or even “second-rate sources”.

Because thinking, writing, historicising and bringing these forms of resistance into academia, these lives that go *a contrapelo* (i.e. “against the grain”, as Meri Torras puts it in chapter 8, which is dedicated to the poetry of Maria-Mercè Marçal), is about understanding writing, history and university-type knowledge (academic knowledge) differently, in other ways, with affectation, with campness, allowing oneself to be infected with what we are told by those people who do not have access to writing as a tool, who perhaps failed history at school (or didn’t get the chance to study it), or who do not belong to the university.

In that sense, I like the fact that poetry is so present in this book. The point is not that poetry has been removed from academic studies. It does of course form part of the canon, and it is studied and analysed within the university³. But here I would like to make a record of two different ways of approaching it. One such way is when Ramón Linaza, in chapter 6, speaks about poetry as a weapon loaded with future, paraphrasing Celaya, and about the importance of readings in the formation of the militant homosexual groups in the 1970s. Perhaps because some of the protagonists, like Eduardo Haro Ibars, were poets. But above all because in that alliance between theory and practice -which we see so clearly when we deal with people's lives - reading and poetry play a key, central role. As such, the interrelation between campaigning and reading, between thought and activism, becomes crystal clear.

Another presence of poetry, this time from a female writer, is the contribution by Meri Torras when she speaks about the work of Maria-Mercè Marçal and the significance of her books, and her writings on literary criticism, for the construction of a lineage with a lesbian presence. That which academia and official criticism refuse to contemplate, Meri Torras's text comes and illuminates it, like a firefly, no spotlights, no blinding lights. Meri Torras's contribution is a dialogue that reaches the heights of Marçal's poems in the delicate way it takes the issue of lesbian genealogies to unexpected places, in principle, just like the low-key presence of stickers ("A lesbian was here") in the public space, so humble and yet so evocative. Also, there is reflection upon what an archive is, and how counter-archives work. It is an essay that strengthens the verses and poems cited within it, embracing us and the poems, and it rouses our desire to dance along to them (read them).

On the other hand, *Fiestas, memorias y archivos* emphasises, throughout the work, the emotion of stating what reading does for people's lives. At times they are fragmentary readings, from non-canonical texts, very often with unexpected appropriations. It is worth remembering here Michèle Petit, an anthropologist of reading, and the work undertaken by her since the 1990s, regarding the importance of reading for young people who have been or are being marginalised, or rather, to use an expression favoured by those who wish to make it sound like less of a "big deal", young people who are "at risk of exclusion"⁴.

If there were to be a queer way of reading, it ought to include the possibility of breaking with the prescribed sequence as offered to us by the work, and so the reader could start at the end, or read alternate chapters. It is true that a book like this, with these characteristics, i.e. which brings together very diverse contributions that are sorted into differently-themed

sections, encourages us to read it however we want to, without following the chapters in the order of 1 to 16 (along with Benlloch's epilogue). So let us resume with this method to try and find the force of this book-artefact that is *Fiestas, memorias y archivos*, starting at the bottom and working our way up, to see what the final section has to offer (Section IV, Archives). Here we come across four chapters that set out for us what an archive is (or can be). Though it must be said that in all the previous sections we find allusions to the difficult issue of sources, testimonies and the recovery and studying thereof.

The archive is not just a space dedicated to storing documents, as Rafael M. Mérida Jiménez notes (chapter 13), and he also speaks about how we ought to care for it so as not to betray this legacy. The act of caring, as suggested by Alejandro Simón (chapter 14), beyond physically conserving the integrity of what is being stored/looked after in the archive, is linked with how we read, how we approach these testimonies and how we hold and think about them: "We care for the archives as we care for each other; we use the past as we use each other - as we hold each other, that's how we hold these cardboard boxes" (p.376).

The final Section works like yeast, making the rest of the book rise. As with the hidden archives, the not-very-sexy archives (despite the fact they have recently enjoyed a period of glory in the world of art)⁵ are fundamental in order to tell stories. As such, these final contributions make us see the importance of the efforts of the previous sections, of the keenness to deal with voices (at times literally, because this volume includes a great deal of oral history), as well as the documents that are on the periphery, as we see in chapter 16, in the conversation between Gracia Trujillo and the activists Dolores Majoral, Mercè Otero and Bárbara Ramajo. They also talk about the care that must be given to those testimonies/documents that come from the protagonists themselves, which have come out of their houses, their albums and drawers, from their bedrooms and living rooms, to form part of a collective archive that speaks about communality.

It is now time to highlight the editors' act of feminist and queer generosity. Gracia Trujillo and Alberto Berzosa, as well as taking on the task of commissioning/selecting the texts and explaining the meaning of the work in their enlightening introduction, also contribute two interviews to the collection: the one mentioned above, and another where Berzosa interviews Nazario, in chapter 4. Both contributions are richly succulent, they add information and a freshness to the collection, but their presence is more like an indirect light when considered next to the greater intensity of the articles in which each author offers more of their own line of research and they offer more of themselves in the result.

In this Section IV, the contribution by Piro opens up debates (about the need for non-institutional archives, self-organised from activist platforms), but it goes even further, bringing up professional issues which address those of us who are archivists and librarians: how to classify without betraying (even if that means telling a few “little white lies”, as my grandmother would have put it); the importance of describing and ordering materials; the need to make use of sources that are not necessarily identified as LGTBIQ+; the importance of certain policies for urgent conservation, for precarious situations... Piro’s text is to the archives what private lives are to the activism in the stories told in this work. Piro is not a “professional” archivist, formally speaking (because he does not have the specific studies or qualifications that recognise him as such) but his experience, ever practical, and his way of thinking about and questioning this task should be included in the professional manuals on archiving.

This work, as a whole, is dedicated to the task of recovering, from everyday lives, the forms of resistance by communities that we now call LGTBIQ+, during the end of the Francoist dictatorship and the beginning of the transition. It is an era of struggles, of ideas about revolution and liberation which would mark a split (a confrontation) between activism and the everyday attempts (both in the personal sense, and as a community) to start up spaces for socialisation, safe places for being trans, queer or dyke. In fact, Section II, “Lineages and Memories”, stresses what “life” contributes to activism, making use of certain porosities to ensure that “the personal is political”. The text by Ramón Linaza – a dual activist – is highly illustrative, for it lays bare how there are places for gathering and socialising that elude the prescribed norms of revolution: “we rejected the ghetto, though we did go there to hook up” (p.169). In the same Section, Kerman Calvo goes over the revolutionary and identity-based movements during the transition, while Maialen Aranguren focuses on the lesbian movement in the Basque Country.

As for Section I, “Networks and Spaces of Socialisation”, it highlights what was going on in all those places that the militant discourse would perhaps call the ‘ghetto’: pubs, discos, saunas, bars, cruising sites... But also women’s football clubs, as told by Naria Dolors Ribalta and Xavier Pujadas. Spaces that were more or less safe begin to appear, spaces in which sexual non-conformers could express themselves and take a stand against the otherwise hostile, aggressive and violent outside world. Without idealising, as made clear by Pau López when speaking about the scene in Valencia between 1975 and 1982, it is revealed how what could be seen as business or commercialism is also an attempt at and a need for getting together, for creating networks and building spaces to express those forms of sexuality that were not allowed in the city undergoing democratic transition.

The book is faithful to that spirit of bringing life itself to these matters, and of using formats that are not necessarily academic in order to present the ideas. In this sense, it is a sheer joy (and not just because of the colours) to find, at the start of Section II "Rebel Bodies", the score of the performance by O.R.G.I.A., a collective that works with texts from the margins (this time using leaflets and slogans created for protests), to stage how "we are the struggle, we are history, we are us"⁶.

This section also has a special quality, something like a cabinet of curiosities, if you will allow me the forced metaphor, in the way it mixes performance with the analysis of *quinqui* films (Alberto Mira), the study of medical/psychiatric literature in the authoritarian regimes of the Iberian peninsula (Francisco Molina Artaloytia), or legal/constitutional issues in post-Francoist Spain (Brice Chamouleau). In this case, its way of pointing to different disciplines, which are not always understood as being linked, further boosts the queer force of the work as a whole.

Two issues are intertwined throughout the volume, and they come to the surface like a golden thread that makes the whole textual fabric glow: the importance of feminism in the formulation of theories about sexual liberation, theories which have brought us the current LGTBIQ+ movement, and the often-erased contributions of trans people, acting as an engine for a richer understanding of our struggles.

These glowing threads are a good way of summing up a piece of work that is read with pleasure, which addresses those who lived through those years, and those who wish to "remember what we ourselves have never lived".

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Notes

¹ *Celebrations, Memories and Archives: Dissident Sexual Politics and Everyday Resistance in Spain in the 1970s*.

² This exhibition of Miguel Benlloch coincided with the investiture of a new right-wing City Council in Madrid (i.e. an 'axis' of the PP, Ciudadanos and Vox). [Translator's Note]

³ It is also true that saying "poetry" is like saying "homosexuality", and that we should speak of "poetries" and "homosexualities" because, looking beyond how texts are analysed, there are forms of poetry that are still not being considered within academia.

⁴ Michèle Petit, anthropologist and socialist, researches the act of reading and its function in the construction or reconstruction of identity, as well as spaces for reading, fundamentally libraries. Her books have been widely read by librarians, teachers and those who foster reading in Argentina, Brazil,

Colombia, Mexico... Some of her books published in Spanish include *Leer el mundo. Experiencias de transmisión cultural hoy en día*. Buenos Aires, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2015; *El arte de la lectura en tiempos de crisis*, Barcelona/México, Ed. Océano, Col. Agora, 2009; *Una infancia en el país de los libros*, Barcelona/México, Ed. Océano-Travesía, Col. Agora, 2008; *Lecturas : del espacio íntimo al espacio público*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Col. « Espacios para la lectura », 2001; *Nuevos acercamientos a los jóvenes y la lectura*, México, Fondo de Cultura Económica, Col. « Espacios para la lectura », 1999.

⁵ This is not the place to discuss this, but there are a great many exhibitions and publications which, from within the world of art, work on the idea of the archive. It is true that the archive is often trivialised, or “collections of documents” are dealt with as if they were archives, or purely formal questions remain the focal point. But we can say that art thinks that archives are sexy (or have become sexy of late), even if this is yet to seep through into wider society.

⁶ Feminine morphology is used in the original version, as well as the fact that ‘struggle’ (*lucha*) and ‘history’ (*historia*) are feminine nouns in Spanish – that is, the feminist/queer message here is somewhat lost when rendered into English. [Translator’s Note]