

# For a Queer Pedagogy of Friendship

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**Abstract** This hybrid essay/narrative attempts to give an account of the survival of a “queer” subject, specifically a trans child living in Lima, Peru, in the 1950s and 1960s. My theoretical claims may be simple, but the survival of this trans child was anything but simple. The essay argues that in the survival of this child, friendship played a vital role.

**Keywords** transgender; queer; friendship; Peru

This hybrid essay/narrative has quite modest theoretical objectives. I attempt here to give an account of the survival of a “queer” subject, specifically a trans child living in Lima, Peru, in the 1950s and 1960s. My theoretical claims may be simple, but the survival of this trans child was anything but simple. I argue that in the survival of this child, friendship played a vital role. I am interested in the capacity of friendship “to jam *whatever* looks like the inevitable” (Freeman 2010: 173).

Her name is Italo. I met her in the summer of 2007 in Lima. This narrative focuses on certain episodes of Italo’s childhood. Of course, Italo’s life is far richer and more complex than my short narrative. Although there has been a lot of pain in her life, it has also been filled with pleasure, love, and rebellion. Nowadays Italo combines LGBT activism and militancy, advocating for communities of people living with HIV/AIDS, with her professional life as a hair stylist and, more recently, a nursing assistant in a hospital. On more than one occasion, heteronormative norms and agents have tried to kill her, but they have failed utterly to do so. I deeply hope to give homage to this survivor.

From the beginning I was impressed by Italo’s identitarian “polygamy” and her resistance to the normative expectation of gender coherency: Italo proudly proclaims to be “gay with gays, and *travesti* with *travestis*.” She also describes herself as an “androgynous gay” or as an “intermediate trans.” She says that she is not quite trans because she does not use makeup or dress “like a woman” and not quite gay because she has long hair and a generous bosom. She claims to be like a salamander that can camouflage in and habituate to any

context. At least once I have heard her characterize herself as a woman trapped in a male body. Italo is now around sixty years old. She lives with her parents and three of her siblings in a large but humble house in a working-class district of Lima.<sup>1</sup>

This hybrid essay/narrative is based on two interviews I conducted with Italo during 2007, both of which took place in Italo's house. Each interview lasted more than two hours. All were accompanied by a lot of laughter but also tears and silences (most of which were never silent), by my (sometimes impertinent) questions, and by her (generous) answers. My methodological options tend to place me in the position of the (scientific) ethnographer, but I have attempted just like Italo to disrupt some disciplinary categorizations. These disruptions imply contradictions I cannot disavow. On the one hand, I have avoided ultratheorizing this narrative. I did my best to counter the competitive urge to make my theories always prevail over those of Italo. Thus I have avoided quoting Italo directly as a way of making visible my intervention in this narrative. This option makes explicit that I am theorizing Italo's experiences (or some of them) against my desires not to.

Naming is a very complex political matter, and naming through gender is no exception. In this essay, I use a feminine pronoun to refer to Italo, and this to me is quite surprising, because in Spanish I refer to her using feminine and male pronouns seemingly indifferently—as most of her friends do and she herself does. This essay tends to stabilize her own practices of naming that are far more queer. But I wanted to keep the “contrast” between her first name, her bodily materiality, and her gendered position. I think that my option is especially problematic when talking about Italo's early childhood, because at that time she did not use female pronouns to refer to herself. But I nonetheless found value in this choice; it stresses Italo's transness and my belief that there is no past that lasts forever. Another difficulty related to naming is to recognize that the attempts to define Italo's identity are destined to fail. Nevertheless, I use here several names to refer to her: *travesti*, trans, homosexual, *maricón*, and queer. While the first four labels are used by Italo to talk about herself, the latter is not. My choice of the term *queer*, itself very problematic, is based on my sense that the term offers a promise of imagining different times (pasts, nows, and futures) for our bodily materialities and identities in which they can coexist together. I acknowledge that this is a risky move, because it could erase several of the other identities Italo uses, especially trans and travesti identities.

Italo herself is familiar with the complexities of naming. She chose for herself a name that is not socially considered feminine. This is important: Italo does not necessarily seek a rigid gender coherency between bodily, linguistic, and social markers. Thus to say that Italo chose her name does not do justice to the fact

that her name allegorizes a space of encounter of diverse affects and memories. At birth, her parents assigned her the name Gustavo. Because Italo was very thin as a child, his extended family started to call him *Tallo* (stem). When Italo started to create bonds with gay and trans communities, she accepted from them the name Italo. Some queer people call her Itala sometimes, but Italo seems to prefer to keep this history of displacements of her own name. Maybe Italo knows that a name never condemns one to an unavoidable destiny, that names have histories that can be quite tangled, and that all history can be rewritten. The history of Italo's name holds an intimate relationship with the history of her body. It is for this reason, and because Italo has authorized me to do so, that I do not use a pseudonym to refer to her. Before continuing, I have to admit that Italo's (hi)story queerly touches me, and I have to ask you to allow yourself to be queerly touched by this (hi)story.<sup>2</sup>

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The first years of Italo's life were full of joy. She lovingly remembers that from about three, she was a boy living with her mom and one of her brothers at the home of her godparents, a straight married couple with a luxurious house in an upper-class district in Lima. The godparents had two daughters of Italo's age with whom she played. Italo worshiped them. They would dance ballet, go swimming, and play with pretty dolls. By age five, Italo remembers that she first desired a man, a man around fifty years old, an intimate friend of her godparents, whom she saw naked in one of the bathrooms of the house. *But nothing lasts forever, especially if you are queer*, and her happiness was interrupted. This family moved to Honduras, and after their departure, Italo was forced to return to the house of her biological family in a Lima working-class district. This transition was quite painful and traumatic not only because she lost people she loved but also because how she was seen, and consequently the ways in which she saw herself, would change radically. While her brothers spoke "bad words," Italo never said bad words, and she was very effeminate. But the greatest difference was in the gaze of the people around her. Her effeminacy in this new context occupied a centrality for which she was not prepared. When she spoke with me, she recalled the pain caused by her family and their neighbors when they would tell her, oftentimes shouting: "Don't behave like that!" "Put your hands normally! Don't break your hands!" "You are not a girl!" "Walk like a man!"

Italo speaks of an affective and economic opulence that she enjoyed through her bonds with the upper-class family via the establishment of non-biological kinship relationships. Although Italo did not explicitly say so, I thought that perhaps her mother was a domestic worker in that house. While this

supposition could be true, it might easily be false. By interpreting her story this way, I make sense of a bond that I (like Italo) read as exceptional in a city like Lima, in which colonial and neocolonial forms of relationships among different races and classes continue to persist. Taking this into account, perhaps the exceptionality with which Italo experienced this period can be complexified. Her godparents were loving but severe. However, in Italo's narrative it seems that their home did not hold a marked heteronormative burden. It may be that Italo was free of such heterosexist enslavement because of her young age. Or maybe it was not important (to these godparents) to impose a hegemonic masculinity to the "son" of a domestic worker, something that perhaps would not have been the case with (and for) a hypothetical biological son and heir. And there is always the possibility (a possibility that I unfairly dismissed too early) that indeed this bourgeois family valued, respected, and recognized Italo's femininity.<sup>3</sup>

Italo's survival demanded a lot of her imagination. Italo did her best to disidentify herself from prescribed norms over her body. For example, Italo never played soccer or with toy cars; instead, she loved playing secretly with the dolls of her sisters. Italo adored the daughters of her godparents, because with them she could explore possibilities otherwise denied her for her gender and class origin. But Italo's disidentifications had serious consequences for her: in her "new" environment she was constantly and violently punished for believing that she was not a man, that she was not *chola*, and that she was not poor.<sup>4</sup>

In Italo's narrative, she moves from a space of love inhabited by a small community that cared about her to a state of self-enforced solitude. In her new home, she was denied familial affection by her brother, who was an "example" of male heterosexuality and who treated her with hostility, and by her sisters, who were allowed to do the things that Italo wanted but that she could not do without punishment.

Italo was now just eight years old. One night after playing with her brothers, she was assigned the task of returning the ball they had just played with to one of her friends, a boy of her age whom everybody called *maricón* (faggot.) Italo recalls that at that time she did not know what that word meant. Her friend lived at the end of a long and modest street. On the way, Italo was approached by Jaime, a young man in his early twenties, who told her, "I want to talk to you." Italo recognized that he was drunk. She refused to talk with him because she had been forbidden by her parents to talk with drunk people; besides, his persistence frightened her. She ran to her friend's house and gave him the ball. Italo was terrified; she knew she was being observed by the man and so asked her friend to walk her home. Along the way, both children were intercepted by Jaime, who was now accompanied by a group of young men. Having no other alternative, Italo pushed her friend toward her persecutors and tried desperately to run. For a

second, Italo believed she had escaped, but Jaime and his accomplices caught her. They twisted her arm and held her by the neck. Italo screamed and cried desperately, but no one responded. Though the men violently tried to force her to remain silent, before they were able to carry Italo into a dark room, another child from the neighborhood saw her, and Italo screamed with all her might, "Tell my brother!" The kid then asked these men, "What are you doing to this boy?" They pulled a knife and threatened him, and the boy, fearing for his own life, ran away. In the room, as Italo resisted and screamed, the men cut her chest with the knife, ripped off her clothes, and raped her one after another. They then succeeded in silencing her by threatening to kill her parents and siblings if she told anyone.

When I was listening to Italo, I was trying not to cry, but this ultimately was impossible. Soon Italo was crying, and it was not long before I was doing the same. Tears can be contagious! At the same time, what came to my mind was a saying in Peru that goes something like "the man who is raped is turned into a *maricón*." This assertion of "common sense" is heteronormative. But it also potentially conceals disruptive contents in order to suit hegemonic heterosexual desires. It seems that (not only) "someone" becomes a *maricón* after being raped but that that someone is raped in the first place because he is already read as a *maricón*. And this *mariconería* (faggotry) is associated with a lack of masculinity. For that reason, this heteronormative belief affects not only the victim of rape but potentially many other subjects/objects. We need only to remember that there are other children in this scene who are also violated (in different ways). There is the other kid who was called *maricón*, and we can easily suppose that most of the times it was in very violent ways. As soon as Jaime approaches Italo, she senses the unavoidable approach of danger. So she asks the other *mariconcito* if she can walk with him, and then those men persecute both. Had this other *mariconcito* been persecuted before? Did he intimately know and share Italo's fears? There is also the other kid who was menaced and who may have thought that he was in danger of a similar fate to Italo's. His question ("what are you doing to this boy?") is answered with a threat backed by a knife. Perhaps his body and his positions were not too different from those of Italo. Perhaps Italo recognized this, and that is why the fact that this kid did not try to help her hurts her even more.

This is a bloody exercise of performativity by which heterosexual masculinity is constructed as an origin and which produces sexually marked bodies, some bodies being deemed as "other" and as legitimate to violate. These offenders need to create a *maricón*, Italo, to erect and legitimize their identitarian affiliations with masculinity and to justify their (heterosexual) male homosocial desire. They need to produce abnormal subjects to "give birth" to the male normal subject unpolluted by any stain. According to Mary Douglas (1966), the limits of the body are fragile and unstable and threatened by various forms of pollution. Judith

Butler (1990) rereads Douglas's arguments to assert that the limits of the body are the limits of the socially hegemonic. Butler also argues, around Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* (1982), that the boundary between the internal and the external is ambiguous especially within and through the excremental ducts. To Kristeva shit stands (as abject) for a threatening external menace, one which is also an internal menace. The successive anal penetrations of Italo that day serve to stabilize the boundaries of the bodies of her attackers. In this way Italo is literally reduced to shit.

If the rape of Italo has the effect of producing a *maricón*, it is also because it produces straight men. This production of straight men can be thought of as a declaration of identity. One that proclaims "I am a straight man" and for that demands a blood sacrifice. In this scene, only the child is a *maricón*, not the aggressors, despite the fact that the desiring subjects in question are these twenty-something-year-old men who assault her. These men showcase a complex and anxious desire for bodily pleasure, for bodily limits, and for a fixed identity as "straight." This is a mechanism of power/knowledge that pathologizes sexualities and gender performances alternative to an imagined heterosexuality, but at the same time it denies and attempts to vacate its own inalienable queerness. These male rapists represented themselves as a collective male body (one body made of the mesh of many men and their intimacies) that violates an abject(ed) body. They succeeded in establishing murderous boundaries between heterosexuality and queerness but only momentarily. Boundaries, especially if they are sexual or gendered, are always precarious. And perhaps because they are precarious, these demands for pure and clear-cut identities often end with violent—paranoid, homo-transphobic,<sup>5</sup> and heteronormative—outbursts.

After having been violated, stabbed, and abandoned by the men, Italo arrived at her house, climbing through a window so no one could see her. She went directly to the bathroom, and in the mirror she saw her body covered in blood. Sobbing and moaning silently she took off her torn and bloodied clothes as quickly as possible and threw them away. That night she tried desperately to sleep, but she could not. On the following nights she had harrowing dreams of her rapists overrunning her bedroom, returning to rape her again and again. She said nothing to her parents, and they did not act as if they had noticed anything. Italo could not tell her parents of this horrible aggression. The threats of which she was a victim could not be countered. Yet to reduce Italo to a condition of radical subordination even in that moment of extreme violence fails to do justice to her. After being so violently made shit, she needed to take off her bloodstained clothes and dispose of them. What might have Italo intended by this? Rocío Silva Santisteban, writing in the context of political violence in Peru in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s about the successive rapes by male soldiers against Giorgina Gamboa, calls our attention to the fact that the first thing Giorgina did after the

brutal occupation of her body was to leave behind her bloody clothes. Of this Silva Santisteban says: “The only way to survive this deadly wound is conceiving of a possibility for symbolic resurrection, of being able to join life in a ‘fair’ and ‘healthy’ manner” (2008: 85). Although Italo’s rape was a deadly psychic wound, the act of throwing out her bloodstained clothes could be read as a silent cry of life, of not allowing herself to be obliterated by violence. To take off her bloodstained clothes is to struggle for life even when one has been radically expelled from the notion of “human life.”

Some time later, Italo told two of her school friends what had happened. This turned out to be a big mistake: they spread the news throughout their school and never spoke to her again. The violence committed against Italo was not perceived as such. Ultimately, what had happened not only made her supposed impurity more visible but also threatened to contaminate those around her.

But there was also someone who was not afraid of her. Soon thereafter the *mariconcito* who owned the ball entered her class. Italo immediately realized that despite being the same biological age, her friend was much more mature. Italo told him everything. Her friend looked at her straight in the eyes and said with conviction: “Don’t worry because if they touch or grab you again just tell them that they have raped you, and that you are going to talk with the police, and that the police will go after them to kill them.” Italo memorized those words and she repeated them when one of her assailants intercepted her with the intention of raping her again. This strategy worked; the rapists never attempted to touch her again. Her aggressors may have thought that identity declarations and their dominion over Italo would last forever. *But nothing lasts forever, especially if you are a mariconcito.*

Italo learned a hard lesson and an enabling one: shit is sticky. She learned this from her queer friend. Her friend already possessed a vivid knowledge about homo-transphobic violence from his own experience and about ways of negotiating and dealing with it. He taught Italo some of this knowledge; this would open previously unimaginable possibilities for her. And importantly, Italo later taught some of those lessons to many other subjects and communities. Another important lesson that Italo learned from this queer kid was the meaning of *maricón*. In fact, Italo learned and participated in the collective creation of new meanings of *maricón*, as we will see.

Some lessons are very difficult to learn (and to teach), and others are not. While Italo was very open to the lessons of her queer friend, her aggressors were not. Although they did not rape Italo again, they did harass her. These young men were friends of her older brother, and they constantly warned him that Italo was a *maricón*. As a result, her brother became her worst enemy. He never missed an opportunity to beat and torture her. He inflicted even more violence on her body

every time he found her with her queer friend. And every time Italo complained about the daily abuse to her parents, they would say, "If I have a *maricón* son I'll kill him." What becomes of a person whose death is considered a necessity for social harmony? The worst part is that her life was threatened by people she deeply loved. So when Italo characterizes that moment of her life as a living hell, she does not exaggerate. At this point in her narrative, it was very difficult for me to ask questions, because I was very afraid of hurting Italo or, even worse, of being complicit in any way with her aggressors. I remember thinking that it felt impossible to ask her if she did not suspect that the success of the threats of her parents, expressed in their implicit approval of her silence, were not based on at least a partial knowledge of her queerness. And I found this thought so disturbing, because it implies that the threats of death launched by her own parents were not that different from those of her rapists.

Italo usually remained silent when she was hit. *But nothing lasts forever, especially if you are a little travesti.* And one day when her brother hit her as usual for secretly maintaining her friendship with her queer friend, Italo could not take it any more and started throwing dishes at him, wanting to hurt him. The sound of the dishes crashing on the floor and against the walls was accompanied by her enraged screams. Her screams repeated just one sentence: "Yes, I am a *maricón*! Yes, I am a *maricón*! Yes, I am a *maricón*!" Her brother called her *maricón*, as did her neighbors, her classmates, her rapists, and her parents. *Maricón* to Italo (like to many other queer subjects) sounded like a chorus, because, as Butler (1990) argues, this insult bases its power in its violent historicity. When someone interpellated her as *maricón*, he or she did it for all the people that have yelled *maricón* at her before, and for all those who will do it after. Italo desperately repeated the word *maricón*, accepting that label: "Yes, I am a *maricón*!" Not only did her repetitions attempt to respond to each and every one of the homo-transphobic interpellations that she had received, but her repetitions are an invocation for other realities, possibilities, and futures.

Although Italo hated living in her working-class district, she changed her mind when she met a colorful group of queer and trans kids and teenagers on its streets. Most of them were between ten and thirteen years old. They called themselves "*Las trece conchitas*," which literally translates to "the thirteen little shells." "Concha" also refers to what is commonly understood as female genitalia. The *conchitas* used that name despite the fact that there were more than thirteen of them. Italo remembers that they would be pursued by men in their cars. Some of the men were probably motivated by homo-transphobia, but others by lust. And in many cases, *las conchitas* shared this lust too. What Italo most enjoyed of her friendship with *las conchitas* was their daily sharing of stories and experiences. These friendships opened previously unavailable social, affective, and sexual

possibilities to her. *Las conchitas* gave her the gift of enduring the hell that her life had become after the rape. For her, these queer friendships were the difference between dying and clinging to life.

Michel Foucault (1996) attributes to queer friendships a radical creativity that does not condemn them to a simple parodic repetition of social norms. For Foucault, queer friendships can create new ways of life.<sup>6</sup> When I think of *las trece conchitas* I cannot avoid thinking about the conjunctions of pleasures and bodies that Foucault calls for at the end of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978). Although it is not clear to me whether Italo had sex with any of *las conchitas*, their friendships produced important changes in her own sex life. After the rape, Italo had thought for a time that sex and misery go always together. With her queer friends, she (re)discovered that sex, pain, and violence were not always linked. In Italo's narrative, only after meeting *las conchitas* was she able to explore eroticism with men of varying ages—some were children like her, others were adults several decades older. Here friendship has a reparative role: friendship can create affective spaces that heal wounds inflicted by social norms. If for Italo her body was a site of social abjection, after meeting *las conchitas* it also became a space that defied biological frontiers and allowed her to dream about, and begin acting on, desires for embodiment and life that were socially categorized as unrealistic or impossible. *Las conchitas* taught her how to roll her t-shirts and to put them in her chest to simulate breasts. Indeed, these queer friendships created pleasures and bodies for which heterosexual norms did not have scripts, or at least not good scripts.

To emphasize the reparative effects of friendship here does not preclude the existence of disputes and quarrels within these communities. It was not uncommon for *las conchitas* to fight over a guy or about the degrees of visibility of their sexual difference. Moreover, *las trece conchitas* could get Italo into trouble. In one of her physical education classes, three *conchitas* approached her in front of her teacher, loudly calling her “Fanni!” Italo tried ignoring them, but her teacher understood the situation and could not stop laughing. Italo started laughing, too. The laughter did not prevent Italo from seeking out these particular *conchitas* that night and hitting them so that they would never “out” her without her permission. Italo had become one of *las conchitas*; in this way she earned the right to fight with her friends.

Neither did the *conchitas*' friendship stop the homo-transphobia that confronted Italo daily in her school. What the friendship did was to put an end to her tolerance of homophobic violence. When Italo was in seventh grade, there was a boy who always yelled at her, *maricón!* and once spiked a pen in her arm. In response, Italo raised her fist and broke his nose. As a form of punishment, she was sent to the principal's office. In eighth grade, another boy shouted *maricón!* at

Italo, and when she confronted him, he slapped her in the face. One more time Italo raised her fist and broke his nose. Italo was again sent to the principal's office. Since Italo had now acquired a reputation for breaking straight boys' noses, on the first day of school the following year the principal warned her: "One more nose and I will expel you from the school." A few days later, during a class break, some *conchitas* came to visit her. They had also come to admire the bodies of the most handsome and athletic of the guys of Italo's class, hoping to see them playing soccer. One of the boys noticed the presence of *las conchitas* and asked Italo, "Are you a *maricón*?" Italo proudly answered "Yes. Is there a problem?" The boy said "yes" and slapped her face. Her friends rushed to constrain Italo, who may have wanted to break another straight nose. They reminded her that she was threatened with expulsion, but this led her to stop going to classes and to hide that from her parents.

The queer friendships of *las conchitas* meant that Italo no longer experienced pain in solitude. During the period when she did not attend school, she met a policewoman who seemed very kind. Perhaps the kindness of this woman resides in the fact that unlike other adults, she actually listened to Italo. Convinced by her demeanor, Italo told her all that had happened. At that moment Italo felt that a huge weight had been removed from her, but some days later she would realize that she had made a mistake. The police officer told everything she had heard to the principal of her school. Italo had thought that she would bear the pain of her secrets alone or with the friendly support of her queer friends. *But nothing lasts forever, especially if you are a conchita.* When her mother heard the rumor that her son was skipping classes, she checked Italo's notebooks and found that nothing had been written in them in the last few weeks. Early the next day they went together to the school, Italo to her classes and her mother to the principal's office. Within a few minutes, some girls warned Italo that her mother had fainted. Italo ran desperately to the office. When she arrived, she saw her mother crying and everyone else staring at her. Her mother then looked at her and asked her how it had all happened. At that moment Italo wanted nothing more than to escape, but the principal would not allow that, instead calling in all of Italo's teachers. They supported her and testified as to her good behavior and outstanding academic performance. And although Italo asked the principal to not do so, she expelled the boy who had kept his nose intact after having bullied Italo.

After this, quite frightened, Italo went to her house, and to her surprise found no one there. She grabbed a backpack and she put everything she could into it, including her and her sister's clothes, her birth certificate, and some savings. She hid everything on the roof. Her plan was, the next time that her parents hit her, "I grab my stuff and go." All the broken noses perhaps presaged things to come. Her silence would be broken. Yet the disclosure also (re)opened some of

her psychic wounds and threatened her body with extermination. As she retells it, at that moment the only possibility she could imagine after being outed in that way was being kicked out of her home. The sexual assault had confirmed her subordinate position in front of her family and did not allow them (or her) ambivalence or hesitation. Her parents would assume, she thought, following heteronormative common sense, that after being raped she was now a *maricón*, someone to be despised by them. In this way the constant threats that she suffered as a child would come true. Her terror from this was more than justified, yet her planning to escape showed that she continued to cling to life and that her persistent desire to live became possible only after meeting her small community of gay and trans kids. Italo could imagine taking flight from her house and community because she had already been embraced by *las conchitas*. They had taught her other possibilities of living.

When Italo's parents returned that afternoon, they did not give her the beating she had imagined. Instead, they asked her to accompany them to the police station. There, the policemen listened to the parents denouncing the rape of their son. But these officers were more interested in gazing at Italo's body than in listening to her parents. She wanted to die out of shame. Some police officers took her alone to a back room to supposedly continue with the questioning. But what they did instead was to show her their genitals and then masturbate. They said things like, "Look at my penis. Do you like it? Why don't you suck it?" After ejaculating, they took Italo back to her parents, advising them to take Italo for medical examinations to corroborate the rape. To be examined made no sense, since her rape had been four years earlier and she had had sex with many other men since. Italo asked (almost begged) her parents to drop the matter and to return to their house.

This scene in which the young Italo is confronted by the police alludes to her unreality. Italo was not intelligible, her life was not conceivable as a possibility of being. The police took Italo for questioning, but from the beginning they did not expect any response from her other than sucking their cocks. They compulsively repeated the homophobic fantasy that believes all *maricones* want and deserve to be raped. Although inevitably Italo had to live this (state) sexual violence as a reenactment of the rape she had suffered at the age of eight, and even if her silence was also reactualized, her aggressors were unable to inflict the same damage on her. This is an important difference: Italo now had a community of friends, and with them she had changed. With *las conchitas* she created a "now" that was very different from the time of her rape.

When the three returned to their house, her father tearfully told Italo something that she would have never imagined. "Son, I wish you were a man, but if you've decided to be what you want to be, I support you. I am very sorry that

you haven't told me what happened to you, but from now on no matter what I'll be by your side. And none of your brothers or any motherfucker is going to lay a finger on you." These words marked an important event in her life. For the first time ever, her father recognized the queer life of his son as a possibility, and he had promised to help her to live that possibility. He did so, at least in their home. For the first time, her father saw her not simply as the projections of his heterosexist desires. Although this parental statement of support and recognition is very important, so is Italo's community of gay and trans kids. It is very common to hear (especially, but not exclusively, in the most reactionary sectors) that LGBTQI communities can only copy (previously and unproblematically defined) heterosexual kinship models. My interest lies in showing that if someone copies or imitates in this story, it is the (presumably) heterosexual father of Italo. Italo's father learned from *las trece conchitas* to imagine the life of his child in ways other than those prescribed by hegemonic norms. He learned from them the beauty of friendship. This straight-identified man began to value life with forms, textures, colors, and flavors other than those of a dichotomous heteronormativity. The *trece conchitas* taught him that he needed to distance himself from a culture that was trying to kill his son.

After this episode, Italo's parents became closer to Italo and to her gay and trans friends. They welcomed some of the *conchitas*, letting them live in their house after their parents had thrown them out on the street. They talked with the families of these queer children and encouraged them to question their own homophobia. Italo cannot contain her pride in revealing that after these conversations, several of her queer friends were welcomed back into their own homes. Here we can see an act of reciprocity from Italo and her parents to these queer children. If Italo at various times was sustained by them, she also helped to sustain them. Italo learned from *las conchitas* that friendship is tested precisely in the hardest times. Italo's parents had learned from *las conchitas* how to be friends of their queer son. And now they wanted other families to learn how to be friends of their queer children. The queer pedagogy of friendship working here has only one certainty: *nothing lasts forever, especially if you love queers.*

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Italo taught me that friendship is something one needs to learn. Here I would like to translate this reflection into the ethnographic encounter. As the families of these queer children have learned the value of friendship from them, perhaps ethnographers can also learn the same lesson. Perhaps thinking about the encounter between the ethnographer and the informant in terms of friendship can counter the urge to make the ethnographer's theories always prevail over

those of the informant—an urge intimately bound to an unacknowledged desire of the ethnographer to make his or her theories look far more intelligent than the informant(s).<sup>7</sup> This kind of paranoid thinking is of no help when we talk about friendship.

Of course, to think of this relationship as friendship also carries many risks. As Don Kulick (2006) asserts, an unproblematic ethnographer's identification with the dispossessed can make invisible his or her masochistic investment in enjoying the privileges of power structures and can erase the subjectivities of many marginalized communities. Perhaps we should return to Foucault in thinking about friendship as a project, as an unfinished project that always takes effort. Following Foucault, we should remember that friendship cannot transcend power relationships. One of the most obvious asymmetries in the ethnographic encounter has to do with the power of narrating. In this piece, we read my version of Italo's childhood, not her version of her childhood or her version of my childhood.

I admit that I would like to think of Italo as a friend, but I cannot make that statement, mainly because she is a person I do not see often and because of the many privileges that I enjoy that separate us. What is certain is that Italo offered me that which is basic in any friendship: vulnerability. Italo did not offer me her vulnerability as a spectacle but as an invitation to reciprocate. As Ruth Behar (1996) argues, ethnographies are often a business of making other people vulnerable. But queer friendships require the recognition of mutual vulnerability. In my case, I had previously attempted the impossible task of reciprocating Italo's generosity in writing about my own vulnerability, that of my own queer childhood (Cornejo 2011). And this is an impossible task because, like Kath Weston, I must acknowledge that "reflexivity is not, in itself, an equalizing act" (1998: 201). Recently, I met Italo to share that autoethnographic essay with her and also to show her a draft of the essay that you are now reading. She generously gave me some comments and suggestions. She shared with me the lyrics of a song (a sort of hymn) that the *conchitas* sang to themselves:

Somos somos unas putas	(We are we are whores)
unas prostitutas del	(prostitutes of)
mismo burdel burdel burdel.	(the same brothel brothel brothel.)

At this moment I do not want to interpret the lyrics of this song, I just want to stress that Italo always has more stories to tell—but also some complaints. She was very insistent, after reading the piece, on the fact that she did not blame her parents for her rape or what happened after. In some ways I think she reads my narrative as judging her parents in an unfair way. And she might be right. It also

became obvious that we were now in different places than we had been a few years ago. Italo did not allow me to freeze her in the role of a (or my?) “queer heroine.” While I do not know if Italo thinks of me as a friend, she told me that we both have something in common: the desire to resist. Perhaps Italo and I are not yet friends, but we always can become friends.

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### Notes

1. Throughout the years, Lima has changed a lot. In the 1950s and 1960s, the decades in which the events that this narrative recalls took place, Peru and its capital city, Lima, were experiencing the consequences of some important changes. In 1956, women (well, nonindigenous Spanish-speaking women, to be more accurate) voted for the first time. These decades also witnessed intense migration, migration mainly from the Peruvian highlands to Lima. During these years it became clear that the “face” of Lima and of its inhabitants was experiencing a metamorphosis. These dynamics reflected but also enabled important political work of racial and sexual decolonization. But these movements also awakened many racial and sexual panics. These panics were partially responsible for the exclusion of many people in Peru. It was in 1968 that these political reconfigurations reached the *Palacio de gobierno* with the left-wing general Juan Velasco as president of Peru. It is a paradox of Peruvian history that the most progressive Peruvian president of the twentieth century was a military officer who ascended to power through a coup d'état. Velasco, with the advice of many left-wing militants and professionals, attempted an agrarian reform that was a direct critique of the continuity of colonialism in the Peruvian republic and of the expropriation of the most basic rights of *indios* and indigenous communities. But of course changes do not come in a single direction. In 1975, the Peruvian oligarchy supported a right-wing military officer, Francisco Morales Bermúdez, to lead a counterrevolution. Peruvian oligarchy since then has created many narratives that construct Velasco's government as a monstrous

dictatorship and as the biggest enemy of democracy. These elites fought with other narratives that reclaimed or reappropriated the most radical aspects of those years. Actually, the Peruvian right wing has not only produced narratives to counter more progressive ones but had attempted, and attempts, to eradicate and erase even the fact that these promises for a more just and democratic country did exist once in Peru and still exist today. I think that this is similar to the memories of many queer childhoods. It is as if (some) heteronormative norms not only work to repress any queerness in childhood but also act systematically as if queerness never existed in the first place. The 1980s and 1990s were marked by a civil war in Peru between two political parties—*Sendero Luminoso* and *Movimiento Revolucionario Túpac Amaru*—and the Peruvian state. This war used the bodies of indigenous peasants as a battlefield. In 2003, the *Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación* published its conclusions. It estimated that the number of deaths caused by this war was 69,280. Most of the victims were male indigenous peasants. That commission recollected most of its information through oral testimonies. Some of these testimonies were screened through TV. Because of this, I wonder if Italo's narrative of her queer childhood, a narrative that she shared with me in 2007, is related to the telling of all these narratives about previously unspeakable violences.

2. Carolyn Dinshaw (1999) conceptualizes historical encounters as queer touches. This turn to a painful past or history has an important place in queer studies. See Love 2007.
3. Whatever the case, we cannot make an ahistorical generalization about the upper classes of Lima from Italo's experiences with this particular upper-class family. Likewise, we cannot think of upper classes in Lima as intrinsically less homophobic than their middle- and working-class counterparts. For instance, Patricia Ruiz Bravo (2001) argues that homophobia plays a key role in the constitution of contemporary upper-class masculinities in Lima. In the same way, and for similar reasons, we cannot make a generalization about the working classes in Lima. What I do hope is to contribute to demystify the exoticist perception that depicts "Latin American working classes" as intrinsically more permissive or even tolerant of sexual and gender dissidents, especially trans people. Those kinds of statements, unfortunately common even in Peruvian LGBTQ activism and scholarship, tend to deny the structural difficulties and challenges that Peruvian queer working-class subjects, and especially trans working-class people, face on a daily basis.
4. *Cholo* (the masculine noun) and *chola* (the feminine one) are complex racial markers in the Peruvian political and cultural landscape. They tend to stress an ambivalent tension about and a desire for miscegenation between white colonizers and indigenous native populations. And just like "queer," it is also a name intimately associated with pain and shame, but like "queer," it has been reclaimed and reappropriated.
5. *Homo-transphobia* is a term that I use to reference the kind of queerphobia targeting mainly trans people. I use it to stress the continuities that do not exclude tensions between homophobia and transphobia and consequently between homosexual and trans identities (see Cornejo 2013).
6. It is not a secret that Foucault's insights on friendships are based mainly on adult gay males in the West. What is surprising is that the most intelligent and recent readings of these Foucauldian views are still centered on white first-world gay male subjectivities and communities. A notable exception is Jafari Allen (2011).
7. Viviane Namaste (2000) rightly criticizes the functional and hierarchical relationships between queer theorists and their idealized trans subjects/objects. She also argues the importance of exploring the conditions of survival and erasure of trans people.

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