

Saying “Nosotras:” Speech acts and collective lesbian identities in Colombia

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Sexuality, culture and politics A South American reader

Although mature and vibrant, Latin American scholarship on sexuality still remains largely invisible to a global readership. In this collection of articles translated from Portuguese and Spanish, South American scholars explore the values, practices, knowledge, moralities and politics of sexuality in a variety of local contexts. While conventionally read as an intellectual legacy of Modernity, Latin American social thinking and research has in fact brought singular forms of engagement with, and new ways of looking at, political processes. Contributors to this reader have produced fresh and situated understandings of the relations between gender, sexuality, culture and society across the region. Topics in this volume include sexual politics and rights, sexual identities and communities, eroticism, pornography and sexual consumerism, sexual health and well-being, intersectional approaches to sexual cultures and behavior, sexual knowledge, and sexuality research methodologies in Latin America.

Saying “Nosotras:” Speech acts and collective lesbian identities in Colombia*

Camila Esguerra Muelle **

Whereas earlier moments in the civil rights movement or in feminist activism were primarily concerned with documenting and seeking redress for various forms of discrimination, the current political concern with hate speech emphasizes the linguistic form that discriminatory conduct assumes, seeking to establish verbal conduct as discriminatory action.

Judith Butler, 1997, 71.

Preliminary Considerations

Foucault (1982) speaks about the collective subject when he recognizes in Kant’s question “Who are we?” as the first attempt to establish a question not in an ontological sense—like Descartes did, whose question “Who am I?” aims at elucidating a universal subject—, but in a subjective sense, i.e., one that refers to a certain temporal and spacial location. According to Foucault, the construction of a collective subject is linked to the construction of the individual subject and is framed by certain forms of modern power that totalise and individualise at the same time.

Forms of struggle against those forms of power emerge, which differ from those opposing “domination (ethnic, social, and religious); against forms of exploitation which separate individuals from what they produce; or against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way” (Foucault, 1982, 781). Foucault explains that those forms do not replace other forms, are the struggles of resistance.

In this way Foucault associates the construction of the subject—individual and collective—to a form of power that imposes certain subjectivities, and a form of struggle that constructs others:

Finally, all these present struggles revolve around the question: Who are we? They are a refusal of these abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence, which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is (Foucault, 1982, 781)

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From this perspective I will examine how the group *Triángulo Negro* [“Black Triangle”], from Bogotá, Colombia, constructs itself as a collective subject, how a “we” is constructed and how it is situated within current struggles of resistance and for transformation, since it is therein that a collective subject is shaped.¹ I address the construction of a collective subject starting with the elaboration of the group’s history from its foundation in September 1996 until the second lesbian-gay pride carnival in June 1999, which coincided with one of the peace marches against violence due to the Colombian armed conflict. About that stage I gathered accounts from focal interviews with women from the group, and documents from the group’s modest archive. This information was processed during fieldwork, and data obtained from a survey of sixteen members in 1999. In this paper I will follow the thread of speech acts producing narratives in order to analyse how a collective “we” came to be uttered in *Triángulo Negro*.

I have to mention that I participated in the group during the first stages of its history, which is why my writing work implies a reflexivity effort to address the methodological, ethical and political problem of “writing from within” (Esguerra, 2002). It will become evident that this insider view has consequences for historical reporting, since insofar as I was a member of the group I assumed positions that shine through in this article. Historical reports are not “only a transmission but a construction in which the researcher himself participates” (Santamaría and Marinas, 1994). Also, the process of writing this article was itself a construction process from within the context of enunciation of a “we,” since “recuperating memory, the history of broken and repaired identities, offers another perspective, not a culturalist one, or an economicist one, but subjective, i.e., formative of subjects” (*Ibid.*, 263).

I make a succinct analysis of how this construction took place in accounts from the three historic moments above as an act of performative speech. I will not underestimate the series of events configuring these accounts, and that speech is but one way to construct a collective subject. But I should reckon in any case that this way of constructing collective subjects appears fascinating, due to the singular materialization capacity entailed by language. I remark this since I do not believe that that “we” was constructed exclusively at the moment when the narratives began to be told, but around a series of symbolical and historical acts, articulations and discussions at different stages. Nevertheless, I will concentrate on the speech acts that help to construct that “we”.

¹ Translator’s Note: The gender-neutral pronoun “we,” in English obscures the affirmative content of *nosotras*, the female pronoun used by the author (a she herself) in the original. Therefore, throughout this article note that, except when a different use is indicated, “we” means *nosotras*, the female pronoun.

Triángulo Negro 1996-99: an attempt to say “We”

Foundation

The first stage corresponds to the group’s initial works and extends from 16 September 1996, date of the first meeting, until 18 March 1997, date of the group’s launch. At that moment outstanding events took place, associated to particular speech acts. For instance, the founders were in their majority people whom the members of the group called “NGO-ists,”² “intellectuals” and “foreigners,” characterized by particular uses of social discourses. This gave them an air of authority on which the functioning of the group was based for some time.

Speech networks of words were fundamental when the first women were summoned for the foundation the group. In this sense it is remarkable that the first meeting to create Triángulo was organized through word of mouth, or withes’ post [*correo de brujas*], as Manuela (interviewed by the author), one of the founders, called the communication between lesbians on informal speech networks, i.e. dispersed networks woven of informal channels. The dissemination of the group’s messages has to be stressed in a time when the use of the Internet was incipient. Particularly, one of the group’s tasks was to overcome the privacy of such dynamics, and turn the discussion about lesbianism into a public affair. Nevertheless, in this first speech act, the power of the word “lesbian” became evident as a category of self-denomination at the moment of the call.

Also important as background to the group’s foundation was the already existing group *Feministas Autónomas*. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that this importance is recognized in the narratives, there is a reference to the nickname given to this group by some founders of Triángulo Negro: “automaton feminists”. This nickname was invented as a critique to the position of some of the lesbians in that group who had not come out as lesbians. *Feministas Autónomas* was not what Sheila Jeffreys (1993) would call a hetero-feminist organization, i.e. a feminist organization but with an expulsing heterosexist attitude, although it was hetero-centered. Nor was it a group of feminist lesbians given that, although lesbianism was not completely excluded from their work, it was not a central issue in their agenda.

For feminist groups, lesbianism sometimes is seen a threat to their identity, dangerous in the sense of calling for an external characterization which could link them, for instance, to andro-phobic attitudes attributed to lesbians. According to popular anti-feminist discourse, the exclusion of men is the big mistake in feminist struggles. Paradoxically, echoing this prejudice, some feminists fear being called lesbians, because for hetero-centered feminisms, the relation between feminism and lesbianism lurks like cloud of de-legitimization over their work towards gender equality and equity. At least at that

² Women working in non-governmental and feminist organizations.

time many feminisms in Colombia evidently reproduced the idea of lesbianism as a mirror to masculine homosexuality, and did not take to heart Adrienne Rich's and many other feminist theorists' critiques, which argued for the meaning of lesbianism as an act of rebellion against the heterosexual regime, rather than an annex or a subject second to feminist struggles.

Hetero-centered feminist groups also represented to lesbians what I would call an "identity risk," insofar as they absorb them, blur them, and invisibilize them. Triángulo Negro was founded as a bid to explicitly talk about lesbians, to construct, starting from speech, the social existence of a group hitherto unnamed. Nevertheless, as we will see below, the group's dilemma was between saying and not saying.

At this first stage, personal expressions like friendship and pleasure were in fact political group manifestations. They were structuring elements of their "we." Participants defined this moment as a romance, as *enchanting*. That thrill produced a very emotional stage. This episode resembles Jeffreys' account of the lesbian meetings in San Francisco in the 1950s and 1960s, at the height of lesbian feminism: "The question of lesbian friendship is central to the building of lesbian community and realising a lesbian vision" (1993: 167). At this first stage, friendship and the apparent absence of hierarchies were ingredients of a political project deeply influenced by feminist women.

Triángulo Negro never conceived itself as a radical separatist group, but it maintained radical positions regarding the group's female exclusivity and towards what Janice Raymond calls "gynaffection," i.e. the consolidation of networks and relations through affection between women-as-women (Ibid.).

The myths, rites and symbols of the group were carefully chosen by the founders in their mission to visibilize—in short, give existence to—not only Triángulo Negro, but to lesbians in general. The ones who conceived or proposed those symbols were mainly the ones classified as "intellectuals," "NGO-ists," or "foreigners". Their logo, which merged New Age, gay (the rainbow flag) and lesbian (the black triangle) symbols, was chosen after a broad participatory discussion. The election of the name obviously preceded the making of the symbol. The name was also proposed by one of the "foreign NGO-ists" who, remarked above, played an important role in the construction of symbols and meanings within the group. At the beginning, only she knew the meaning of the black triangle, but it was enthusiastically received by the rest of the members.

The black triangle, like the pink triangle one, originates from Nazi Germany. Although Section 175 of the German Penal Code did not mention lesbians, there is evidence that the black triangle was used to signal prisoners with an "antisocial" behaviour. All women who did not comply with their reproductive according in the family were considered antisocial. That included lesbians, prostitutes, women who refused to procreate, and even sterile women.

The major importance of this act was the resemantization of the black triangle, represented in the first leaflet as a foundational symbol. The group members’ proposal consisted in turning around the position of the triangle the Nazis had attached to the clothes, to “change the course of history” through the subversion of the icon’s significance. I argue that this responded to the purpose to formulate a timeless, common origin, which had nothing to do with the women’s everyday life, but sought to build a unifying sign that would comprise lesbians.

Another important symbolic construction, another of those founding acts through speech, was the definition of the group’s mission and first motto: “for the right to have a face”.

Mission: by empowering women with a lesbian option, to build better life quality conditions, respect their rights, their diversity and their personal identity in the framework of a positive identity (first strategic planning document, *Triángulo Negro*, 1996).

The mission as well as the motto were speech acts attributed a performative potential which, as we will see, was not necessarily effective, or at least not in the short term.

This moment was marked by cohesion around shared goals, but above all by the women’s joy to see themselves as part of a “we,” vis-à-vis [male] “others” who invisibilized them then, and still do today.³ The work they started was based on the consensus that society effectively discriminated lesbians. Nevertheless, factors such as the exclusion of lesbians from the homosexual, or the lesbian world, or by women’s organizations were not considered. The juxtaposition of other oppressive matrices like that of race/racialization/racism, ethnicity, age systems, physical, mental and sensorial condition, class, among others, were neither considered.

One of the presumably most important activities that articulated the process of constructing an individual, self-denominated subject to the building of a “we” was the workshop on life histories. In this workshop a group could listen to biographical accounts by the first members, which over time became significant references for women who saw the manifestation of their sexual identity restricted to rather narrow networks of lesbians or heterosexual women, and to some lesbian spaces.

Although the group met in a private space, it had its first appearances in important public spaces days before the launch: first in the so-called *Ruta por la Paz* [Route for Peace], a march to the town of Mutatá organized by the NGO *Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres* [Women’s Peace Route], which took place on 25 November 1996; and its second one in the *Marcha del Silencio* [March of Silence] that took place on 8 March 1997, to make

³ Translator’s Note: The original highlights the alternation between the female *nosotras*, and the male *otros*.

the voices of mothers of soldiers detained by the FARC guerrilla heard. Paradoxically, Triángulo Negro had its first public appearance at this *Marcha del Silencio* and "spoke" for the first time in a public place in a context where it would be wrong to come out. This was due to the wrong assumption of sexual identity as metonymic; implying that the political action of the subjects constructed by such identities could only be framed in terms of sexuality issues.

The group said: "we, the lesbians, are also victims of violence, a violence which extends from invisibilization to elimination; we too are part and victims of the social and armed conflict in Colombia". This act of visibilizing—of social existence—caused fear among all on a both larger and smaller scale. It was a moment of truth; a moment of confrontation that caused collective reflection. This came after a lapse of cooling down the emotions and feelings of the moment. It was the first time that the "we" of the group was heard in public. This act of visibilization was a spontaneous, unplanned, foundational rite that emotionally and ideologically moved both the members of Triángulo Negro and other people who participated in that historical moment, among them many renowned feminists who remained amazed by this unexpected cry.

I speak of the acts of existence that happen through enunciation. From that moment on members also worried about the external impact of this act of denomination, which diverted into questions like "Who are we?", "What are they going to think we are?" and "How to build a 'positive we'?" There was great concern to stabilize an identity; everything was considered definitive. This stabilization of identity was actually sought as a primordial issue for constructing a "resistant" political subject. Nevertheless, already at this time, many members of the group asked themselves whether sexuality was a strong enough identity bond to find political articulations. Also important to stress, is that the prestige of "NGO-ists", "foreigners" and "intellectuals"—founders of the group—was maintained through power relations configured by a sometimes restricted use of speech which, at a later stage, would generate a series of further struggles for power and prestige. Thus, the founders started to be seen as role models, and were not only recognized as leaders but also as desirable women: the power and attractiveness infused by a certain cultural capital became evident. Speech was power to create, and give existence to the group.

Finally, at its launch, Triángulo Negro found itself facing an unexpected conflict in relation to the construction of its subject. Until then the group had been more or less consolidated as a closed one with clear class identity and affections. It did not consider issues related to race/racialization, ethnicity and other systems, or to the realities of women who became involved but did not adjust to the desired state of affairs within the group. The sign "lesbian," whose consolidation was still in progress, was shattered and became the subject of controversy, demanding its recomposition at the next stage. While the configuration of a "we" was achieved at the start, when ideological or material differences were not put into question, then later, at a second stage, a series of

contradictions erupted that had not been anticipated, which confronted the group with schemes of hierarchy, almost irreconcilable differences of class, and highly hierarchical acting schemes .

The group had never asked the fundamental question of who was supposedly summoned when they said “lesbian,” which differences concerning origin, behaviour, class, age, race, ethnic background, and profession, among others, would follow the call, and how these differences should be understood.

Understood was the need to set oneself apart from others as a lesbian, but at the same time it became necessary to create individual identities or new forms of grouping to progressively construct a wider yet not totalising collective. Nevertheless, the struggle continued to be over identity and nomination, so the group generated an identity similar to the one produced by the dynamics of ethnocentrism. As Geertz (1988) has claimed, ethnocentrism is useful concerning identity because it makes it possible to achieving distinction, but at the same time it generates models that subject the individual to rules of conduct. Also, according to Barth (1998), identities get formed within boundaries, through the exchange and the contrast of groups and individuals. The incapacity to cross these boundaries (Rosaldo, 1993) seemed to weaken the group. Identity boundaries were seen as functional divisions posed by Modernity, more than as spaces of possibility, of contradiction, and of rupture, in line with Anzaldúa’s (1987) notion of border. This type of bordering divisions, which were starting to become evident among the women of Triángulo Negro, were fundamentally marked by class and different meanings given to what is supposed to be a lesbian.

At the second stage, the group’s name met resistance by members who entered at that time, regarding the negative connotations of the colour black, and even of triangle itself as an allusion of the female pubis. In response, some founders wrote a presentation text proposing a “subversion of the symbol”, not only regarding graphics—something that had already been done—but also concerning its meanings. It called to give new meanings to signs such as “witch,” and “female eroticism”:

What is Triángulo Negro?

If you thought about magic or esotericism, you are wrong. If you happened to think of witches or female erogenous zones ... you might be closer. If you plainly thought about lesbian women, you are right. Let's put things into context: During World War II lesbian women were marked with a black triangle by the Nazis, who discriminated them for their sexual preference. The lesbian group Triángulo Negro has turned this symbol upside down to say: no more of the discrimination against us. It has done so even more as a way of reaffirming the pride of being lesbians, which is why the flag of the gay movement is superimposed on the triangle.⁴

⁴ Taken from a presentation leaflet of the group from 1997, second moment.

We can paradoxically see that the cohesion of the first stage would be the seed of tensions and struggles that took shape in the second.

Second Moment: Power Struggles

“They are an opposition to the effects of power which are linked with knowledge, competence, and qualification.”

Foucault, 1982.

The second moment corresponds to the work of opening the group on 18 March 1997 and ends in December of that same year, when the work of the organization was revised following a planning exercise. The motto that marked this moment was “for the right to have a face”, which was agreed upon earlier on. Members attempted to write by-laws collectively, in order to obtain legal status. To reconstruct this part of the group history I conducted a focal interview with women who actively participated and played key roles at that time.

Triángulo Negro was a conflictive field for construction of meaning. At the same time it was a field plenty of feelings and emotions. The battle was not only about what the group was as a political subject, or how the “politic lesbian” should be outlined, but also about love, relationships, and desire.

In this period politics became preponderant and discursive exchanges started to dominate the relations. Rather chaotic struggles started to be fought within the group around the axis of knowledge-power in the cultural field (Bourdieu, 1998b). The “intellectuals”, “NGO-ists,” and “foreigners” began to be identified as a hegemonic group. A deliberate flow of knowledge, and internal resistances to it became evident. The interviews highlight that the founders eventually subjected the other members to their empire. Nevertheless, as Foucault (1992) has pointed out, relations of power are relations of resistance. There was a constant struggle within the group and not a total predominance of some over the others. In other words, no state of domination was shaped. Each person or sub-group used different strategies to act oppositionally. Indeed, there was a hegemonic imperative, which projected an altruist goal based knowledge. But also those not classified as “intellectuals” certainly had discourses and *praxis* associated to the struggle for hegemony: they sought and deployed strategies, probably more refined than those by the “intellectuals;” and thus were certainly part of the knowledge-power regime. In this sense one can say that the “the coordinators” (consisting at this moment not only of the so-called “NGO-ists” or “intellectuals,” but also of women who “represented the counter-hegemony”) undertook a sort of *psycogogical* exercise, meaning the transmission of a truth aimed at modifying the way of being of a subject (Foucault, 1992: 101).

Although knowledge was used within the group as a tool for the joint adoption or, sometimes, imposition of decisions, it was also used as an oppositional strategy against commonplace external representations which make the part and parcel of oppression. Therefore, when some members claimed the need to create an exclusively lesbian space, they not only faced a powers struggle against women who counter-argued, but also had to struggle against a discursive regime founded in misogyny, sexism, and lesbophobia; a regime of truth that supported a colonial, hetero-centered, binary and dimorphic sex-gender system. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that among those dynamics, as in any power relation, there was a certain degree of liberty (Foucault, 1992, 126), i.e. the possibility to resist. The simple exercise of argumentation and discussion was seen by many members of the group as the establishment of a “regime of knowledge” (Foucault, 1982) because that who spoke was read as doing so from a privileged position in the exercise of power.

Thus, strategies were articulated against the ways knowledge circulated within the group. One of these strategies was the so-called “electoral campaign,” intended to separate from the coordination group those who possessed academic knowledge, or who had exhibited their experience in other movements: the “NGO-ists” and the “intellectuals”. The aim was choose Helena,⁵ a woman who was considered charismatic and who did not count herself among the “intellectuals,” as coordinator. It is very meaningful that this resistance oppositional strategy came out to the open only during the focal interview. One may say that their victory was rounded off for this account.

The confrontations were rooted not in discourse content, but in *praxis*. There were thus problems of legitimacy and leadership among the “intellectuals.” not so much due to the content of their discourse but to their passionate way of addressing the others. What was first considered advantageous—some members’ knowledge of social disciplines, the experience of the “NGO-ists” in organizing work and the “foreigners” careers in social, particularly feminist, movements—began to be considered an obstacle to collectivization. Women who had privileged to that sort of knowledge began to occupy a dominant position, which caused reactions and resistance. The use of speech became the backbone of hegemony, while the counter-hegemonic struggle was fought by means of more collective and organized practices, which eventually fell back on the regimes of truth of a society ordered by the institution of compulsory heterosexuality, and in general by the dominant sex-gender system. Seniority and the strength of the bond between the founders became dissociating or segregating factors which at the same time held together the coordinating sub-group. This one in turn, as we have pointed out, was not only integrated by “NGO-ists” and “intellectuals”. Thus, denominations were created to define the sub-groups: “the coordinators”, “the intellectuals”, and “the newcomers”. This sort of internal reconfiguration had already been taking place over the first stage,

⁵ I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of the women with whom I have worked, as well as to protect myself from being affected by a process of objectivisation; this also being a speech strategy as performance.

as seen above. But it was elaborated retrospectively, while new member classifications of acquired currency only during the development of the second stage. At the beginning no one called each other "intellectual" or "foreigner." If they ever did so, there was no pejorative content involved, although it was clear that the "NGO-ists" and the "intellectuals" coordinated the meetings and administered speech and knowledge. These struggles resulted in the exclusion of women who were recognized for having what was called "good use of discourse," in a sort of induced selection. This highlights that power is not held, but exercised, power is a form of relation that generates answers and new strategies in a perennial way (Foucault, 1992).

During this second stage the women expressed their personal opinions, their interests, disclosed their particular attitudes and, in general, their behaviour expressed their boundaries and differences towards each other. Boundaries became evident, in terms of class affiliation or, using Bourdieu's concept, *habitus*—of class (knowledge, capacity to acquire information, bias in knowledge); sexual identity (whether one was bi-sexual or lesbian, or simply how one understood to be one thing or the other); gender (demeanor, attitudes associated with masculinity or femininity); race (phenotype, closely associated with class condition); and age (related to autonomy and legitimacy based on the "experience," or rather on a life career).

Collectivity both binds and segregates, because the process of organization or of collectivization is part of those struggles which, according to Foucault (1998: 781) "question the status of the individual". They are struggles that recover the right to difference, but at the same time they are struggles against the division of the individual from the collective that "ties it to its identity." Resistance struggles by the individual subject make collectivity necessary to face the risk posed by Modern society (Giddens, 1991), although at the same time it can impose rules of exclusion.

At that second stage an intense debate about the group's "trade name" also took place, i.e. the summary of the organization's goals expressed in its name or legal entity. Some women considered that the group should omit the word "lesbian" in its legal entity because they thought this would "close doors." They held that the group should not call itself association or lesbian group, which went against the original denomination and visibility ideas. The group was subject to the external logic of the juridical field, and tried to abide to it, causing a series of confrontations. The search for a "legal entity" was but a new act of nomination, another form of faith in the performative capacity of language, juridical.

Gatherings were held to counter contradictions which eventually became painful. They were spaces where meaning construction about lesbian identity was grounded in other forms of knowledge, like playing games. Initially, at social gatherings members of the group and the newly arrived met in order to produce shared meanings, distant from the organizational spaces at which dryer issues such as the organization's by-laws, or

the definition of the legal entity were discussed. It was suggested that Triángulo Negro should not be a totally open group, as this had caused difficulties to the consolidation of a common “we”. The gatherings were alternative spaces to those of the struggles for authority where the already mentioned contests for knowledge were waged. They were an attempt to disentangle those struggles for authority by means of other speech acts, preferably in the form of performing acts of magic incantation, poetry readings, or collective writing of “exquisite corpses”: lesbian feminist and witch surrealism.

Third Moment: Alliances

A third stage began in January 1998 with the motto “for the pride of being a lesbian” and was characterized by a radical organizational change: a better established core coordination was established and alliances were systematically sought with women’s and gay organizations in the country, as well as with some international lesbian organizations, particularly in Latin America and the Caribbean. At the same time the group tended to become hierarchical. In fact, at this stage the core of coordinators gained stability, and at least two levels of membership were established, which installed a new working structure.

To reconstruct this moment I conducted a focal interview with the members of the coordinating group at the time: Helena, María, Sara, and Ariadna. Laura, who at the time of the interview had already left the group, participated by asking questions. The women who participated in the focal interview entered Triángulo Negro in different moments of its history. This third stage coincided with my fieldwork, during which my role was not that of a regular member of the group. My narrative ends on 28 June 1999, at the lesbian-gay pride parade, and my fieldwork culminated.

During 1998, when the organizational changes were proposed, the group’s goals were also revised. Discourses on diversity, sexual orientation, and gay pride—taken from the US Gay Liberation and uncritically transplanted to Colombia—began to dominate. Their discourse on sexual orientation has been contested by feminist lesbian theses on the “lesbian existence” (Rich, 1980) as a political choice, rather than an orientation. The notion of “orientation” is tied to that of “diversity.” Like that of “deviance,” “perversion,” and “inversion,” it is linked to that of “normality.” In this context, “diversity” is but a spectrum of behaviours or ways of being, which are legitimised according to a particular understanding of what is normal (Giddens, 1992).

As mentioned above, in this third moment the linking motto “for the pride of being a lesbian” was established. Mottos were meant as a synthesis of the group’s political project. It was not accidental that this motto was much closer to the discourse of gay pride, given the influence of the relations with groups and gay leaders that had become a clear and definitive reference. With the change of motto, the fundamental discussion about the self-recognition of lesbians as subjects of rights was put on the table.

The model then used and adopted by Triángulo Negro was that of gay pride, which had originated in the United States after the *Stonewall* events. There were no major reflections about the origin of this model and what it could mean in Colombia. Nevertheless, for Laura, one of the “foreign” “NGO-ist” founders who at that time was no longer a member of the group, the project to constitute a lesbian community, to construct furthermore a sort of lesbian ethics and mentality to confront the “heterosexual mind” mentioned by Monique Wittig (1978), was the horizon the group should not be lost from sight.

Another important event for the group during this period was the Action for Unconstitutionality brought against the article 79 of the Teacher’s Statute. Triángulo Negro participated with a representation. Many of its members were teachers, including the coordinator. Notably, the roles of social reproduction (mother, teacher) are forbidden to lesbians, while they are prescribed for the rest of women. This, paradoxically, does not exclude lesbians from the economy of exploitation in child care. Lesbians are not saved from the capitalist system that extracts an unrecognised added value for not observing the sexual facet of compulsory heterosexuality.

When Helena, the group coordinator, made her presentation, she used a mask to protect her identity. This can be read as an involuntary metaphor expressing that lesbians do not have a social face, they are invisible, because their visibility is severely punished. Helena, like the other women in the group, were afraid of aggressions and retaliation they might be exposed to. So they chose an act of visibility in a way less compromising for their integrity. This represents a stark contrast to the Euro-American (U.S.) model for *coming out of the closet*. Besides the possible aggressions and retaliations which María, Sara, and Helena—all of them teachers and members of the core coordination—could face in the educational institutions they belonged to, there was a real risk: if the Constitutional Court did not decide in favour, they would have to face the application of the article of the statute against which the action was introduced. In this case, the performative power of the juridical discourse was evident.

Additionally, the visibility offered by the mass media coverage of the event means a reduction of the “we” to processes of stereotypization and the production of metonymical, stable identity. Rather than a complex, problematizing view of this subject, such kind of visibilization generates a dangerous identitarian subjection. Butler (1990), pointing out the difficulties related to the use of “lesbian,” shows that such singular word cannot imply plurality, i.e. the particularity of the women included in this category. On the other hand, she shows that it is difficult to modify the negative meanings associated to this category.

The problem of representation is not limited to the discursive level, i.e. to what a representative can say on behalf of a collective. It is related to the construction of an image. Thus, while the men involved in the process wanted Helena to speak during the audience wearing a specific outfit (skirt, high-heels—in short, feminine clothes), some

lesbians rejected the mask she wore during the public hearing before the Constitutional Court and during a TV interview with the journalist Yamid Amat. For these women it was important to show the “right face”, something they considered Helena did not do.

At this stage the women of Triángulo Negro started competing with other lesbian groups such as *Sol*. The same had happened with the male gay groups, but in a different sense. Sara, one of the coordinators, called gay activists the “older bros” [*hermanitos mayores*], a name which implies acceptance of sexist subordination towards the gay organizations with which work alliances had been established. It must be born in mind at this stage that during the foundational stage of *Triángulo Negro* many mixed groups—actually male ones—and explicitly gay male groups were alarmed by the existence of an open group of lesbian women. They even tried even to invite the group not to “split.”

Sara considered it strategic and “diplomatic” to remain silent on this. She and other Triángulo Negro women of the group took for granted the existence of a gay movement, as a result the investments made by gay men. The strategy of “diplomacy” seems to have consisted not only in confronting men and concentrating in achievements which escaped the men’s control. For instance, they sought to include into explicit references to lesbians in the banners and names of public events, such as the “lesbian and gay pride week.”

Another rather sensitive issue bears mentioning: the possibility of misogyny—on different levels, hostile or kind—linked to internalized lesbophobia or anti-lesbianism by lesbian women themselves. In my view, the explicit rivalry between lesbians reproduces a sexist framework which underestimates the female gender. Lesbophobia derives from ideas of what is natural, normal and, on the other hand, what is sinful, configured by European misogynous discourses since the High Middle Ages, which lasted until the 20th century. Those discourses synthesize women’s nemesis: witch, prostitute, antisocial (according to the Nazis), or hysterical according to Psychoanalysis (Bosch, Ferrer and Gili, 1999). Such images are indeed reproduced in the “homosexual world.” As pointed out by Sheila Jeffreys (1993), feminist lesbians did not doubt that the creation of exclusively feminine spaces was an imperative urgency as a response to gay mix initiatives whose results would have been predominantly male. The coordinators feared to be designated as misandrious when presenting the group as exclusively female. That ghost haunted the group’s autonomous actions.

At this point the coordinators considered that collaborating with the gay movement was an opportunity to learn how to construct a more advantageous “we” (gays and lesbians) than a “they” (gays). Probably not having resolved the construction of a “we” [female-gender *nosotras*] well, the group faced the problem of how to speak of “all of us” [neutral=male gendered *nosotros*] without invisibilizing their own [female] “we”. Because doing so was necessary to recognise the “them” [male-gendered *ellos*] as valid and to be equally recognised at the same time.

Epilogue for the story

In 1999, when I finished my fieldwork, Triángulo Negro was held together mainly by the need of lesbian and bisexual women who each Thursday participated in the almost only one space of recognition they had. This space helped them to face the threats of a “risk society:” a sexist, hetero-centered and lesbophobic society whose boundaries for lesbians have multiplied—not as spaces of existence but as neighbouring restrictions. Society has blurred and invisibilized the sign “lesbian” in such a way that the hope to have meetings around this sign could become the basis of the lesbians’ project who, aspire to live like multidimensional social, rather than mere sexual, beings.

Since June 1999 a long history has passed for the group, involving a diversification of its activities. While probably some tensions intensified, at the same time core coordination was partially renewed. Some founders returned and proposed new ways to invest in a [female] “we.” For instance, a rather solid theatre group was established. Nevertheless, some internal conflicts caused the disintegration of the group. By the time I finished writing my thesis, they had to close their physical seat.

The history of Triángulo Negro was constructed polyphonically, which is not easy since in many occasions this means a counterpoint. Although in some episodes of this retrospective course the tone is one of dismay, and reproaches are not omitted, I believe that the big strength of the group lay precisely in its tensions: Triángulo Negro was a territory of struggles but not of elimination. My work has been an attempt to register as many of its voices as possible, and add mine to their chorus, sometimes in harmony, others in dissonance. On occasion I have spoken from the near experience offered by my membership in the group. I have also taken a more objective stand, which I had to impose on myself when writing. This work would have been impossible without that separation.

Later attempts to say “We”

From the middle of 1999 until 2002 several organizations were founded in Colombia, most of them by women who had participated in, or been members of, *Triángulo Negro: Colectivo Lésbico*, with researcher and political activist profile: *Mujeres al Borde*, an organization devoted to artistic performances; *Dalai*, a young group in consolidation; *Labrys*, working issues regarding the symbolic and cultural constructions of women who think based on their gender and sexual options; and more recently the *Grupo de mamás lesbianas* established partially thanks to a movement called *Cercanía*, incited by *Mujeres al Borde* and *Labrys*. Later other organizations formed, which, rather than identity, focus on goals. This is the case of the group *DeGeneres-E* and others, which tries to confront the violence intrinsic to a hetero-centered, cisgendered, binary and dimorphic sex-gender system, at the same time articulated to other oppressive systems.

This group found a terrain for political expression in electronic networks and public spaces.

Most of these processes, to which Triángulo Negro was a very important predecessor—in fact most appeared as alternative spaces to this group’s proposals—united in 2002 in the initiative called *Nosotras LBT* [“We LBT”] which stemmed out of the so called LGBT social sectors (lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender) within the project *Planeta Paz*.⁶

This initiative, which worked like a network, united lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, as well as organizations from different regions in the country.⁷ Its explicit goal is to find a space for reflection about the construction of a particular “we” [female-gender] that is not gay, heterosexual, or cisgender, but that calls together women with different sexual and gender identities. Furthermore, the initiative is explicitly situated in the legal field as an effective form of enunciation, and is articulated to processes seeking political solutions to the country’s social and armed conflict. The work initiated by this new form of organization, or of meta-organization, clearly aimed at the creation of an LBT movement articulated with other social sectors: feminists, women, environmentalists, unionists, among others. It appeared as a reaction to the systematic misogynous, lesbophobic, transphobic, racist and classist expressions by men and gay groups that upsurged during the process of political construction of what started to be called *the*—singular—LGBT sector within the *Planeta Paz* project.

Their actions were aimed at achieving impact in public affairs, strengthening the social bases and performing research. My succinct approach to this latter process is not intended to diminish its importance, but is effect of my approach from the point of view of my earlier research on *Triángulo Negro*. As I see it, the diversification and strengthening of other organizations of the so called LGBT sectors that have occurred since 2002 until the date of this publication, has been fundamental for constructing a collective subject struggling for the development of new forms of citizenship or social existence that do not buy into the restrictive liberal notion of citizenship. That process should, however, be considered in another paper.

⁶ The project was financed by the Norwegian government, and articulated different social sectors otherwise traditionally not heard.

⁷ The organizations joining the initiative are: *Mujeres al Borde*, *Grupo de mamás lesbianas*, *Labrys Quirón*, *Transer*, *Cotransgénero*, and *Triángulo Negro*, among others.

Conclusion: Speaking to crack the silence that condemns to Ostracism

So, what is the importance to approach in such a detailed way one so particular process of organization of lesbian or LBT women? I wanted to explore the construction of a collective subject that has slowly achieved clarity about the fact that organization is important because it offers its members the possibility of constituting themselves as social subjects. It offers the possibility of building new citizenships or forms of social existence beyond the restrictions of citizenship, not only for LBT women, but for a huge number of subjects in a country that faces an armed and social conflict marked by elimination and exclusion.

At this point I would like to propose a brief reflection about the proximity between exclusion and elimination. The struggle for a name is not capricious or particular for lesbian, bisexual or transgender women: it is referred to their possibility of social existence. Insofar as the “subject” is unnamable (abominable), silent, subalterned, or hetero-designed, it does not socially exist, i.e., it is not a subjective subject, a subjected subject at the most. These struggles for recognition are therefore struggles for social existence. As long as one does not exist socially, one is neither a political, nor a legal subject. That is why speech acts are so important, due to their performative strength.

On the contrary, silence is social non-existence, it is ostracism to what in particular lesbians have been submitted to. Homoerotic female behaviour was not in vain called *peccatum mutum* during the Middle Ages. Ostracism consists in ignoring the presence of someone and insofar causing her social death. Speaking out and saying “we” lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders is a matter of social existence and physical survival. Through the analysis of the genealogical account I considered, my research made possible to see how women, particularly those with a homoerotic desire, have been and continue to be condemned to social death by ostracism. This, unfortunately, is never far from physical elimination.

Other consequence of this silence is the underreporting of cases of explicit violence against LBT women. We know through oral networks of a huge number of prejudice-driven criminal cases, lesbophobic and transphobic crimes committed against LBT women, most commonly against transgenders and lesbians. Nevertheless, these crimes have not been written into the criminal code in Colombia and there is no interest within the forensic and medical system that would allow to identify these crimes. Therefore, they are invisibilized under different motives and covered by impunity, which gives a social authorization to lesbophobic and transphobic acts, which have become an efficient weapon for para-legal security forces.

My work as a researcher and lecturer and my participation in organizations has been marked by the interest to investigate about more noble, and also more creative, alternative social existences, that do not only search for models of inclusion, but for ways

to achieve cultural change and transformation of social life in general. I also understand that language has performative power, i.e., a very important capacity of materialization that I want to further investigate, of course not from a post-materialistic perspective.

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