



How many men did you sleep with before me? An auto-ethnography on gender violence

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Abstract

This article is a first-person account of gender violence that utilizes auto-ethnography as a methodological and narrative tool. In the article, the author analyzes a relationship with a violent man in which two differences, class and gender, functioned as hierarchies. By analyzing certain moments of this relationship from the perspective of gender theory, the author intends to provide insight into the complex and often contradictory features of the gender violence suffered by women in different regions of the world and in a range of social and cultural contexts. This personal story and the connections with the stories of other women in her family – themselves victims of gender violence and the same social hierarchies – allow the author to analyze the mandates for women in a patriarchal society. Finally, the article narrates the strategies of empowerment that she was able to construct in certain contexts, distinguishing individual and collective empowerment as a key analytical but also political concept in the struggle against gender violence.

Keywords

Auto-ethnography, class, empowerment, gender violence, patriarchal society, social hierarchies

Introduction

From 2002 to 2004, I was in a relationship with a man 11 years my elder. This relationship was based on two differences, class and gender, that functioned as hierarchies. I was

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a young woman from a poor family living in a marginal neighborhood in Greater Buenos Aires while he hailed from an upper class family. For him, my class origin and my desire to freely experiment both emotionally and sexually justified a series of violent attacks on my physical and psychological integrity. His ability to manipulate me initially trumped my desire to end the relationship. Ultimately, however, I managed to break up with him thanks to a series of vital resources that included the emotional support of my loved ones and my work with my analyst. In this article, I intend to examine this life experience through a series of questions and reflections that came up over the course of my academic career, especially while completing my doctorate. There I had the chance to take my first seminars on the history of the feminist movement and on gender theory. This represented a watershed moment with regard to the possibility of my critically reflecting on my own life story. It was also the point where I grasped, in the flesh, one of the most common slogans of feminist thought: the personal is political.

In this work, I utilize auto-ethnography as the main methodological and narrative tool. Auto-ethnography is both a method and an alternative form of writing that can be situated in the middle ground between anthropology and literature (Denshire, 2014). I concur with Sparkes that 'Auto-ethnographic writing can be highly personal accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding' (2000: 21) and I thus believe that it can contribute to understanding a social reality and the diverse power relations at work within this reality.

Dreams and stigmas

I have a recurring dream. I run, try to escape, feel a rush of adrenaline and a force that rises within me. Yet above all, I am afraid, and it is a paralyzing fear. At some point in the dream, I come to my senses and take off running as fast as I can. Then he comes over to me and embraces me, trying to convince me to stay with him, though I no longer want to listen to his arguments. I suppose that I am afraid of being convinced yet again that he loves me; that he does what he does out of jealousy, out of desperation, out of an impulse that appears out of nowhere which he is unable to control. As if the person who was hitting me, insulting me and humiliating me all the time was this 'other' who possessed him. In the dream, I finally manage to break away from him and run down a street. There is a corner up ahead and I want to make a turn there, thus escaping his eyes and his terrifying presence. Sometimes I make it around the corner and sometimes I don't; awaking with a start, I sometimes still fear that he is in bed next to me. I always sigh in relief when it finally dawns on me that it was just the same old dream.

He was a white, rich, violent man and he unwittingly brought into the light a complex framework of identifications, stigmas and emblems that took me all the way back to my mother, in the past, to my own pain in the flesh. This pain was transformed into a personal but also a political reflection, because clearly the personal is political, and what plays out in private is also political because it is enmeshed in power relations that control and condition us. One of the countless fights we had ended with him yelling three words: *negra, puta, villera*.¹ It was a particularly cruel accusation. Furious, I insulted him back, but my words clearly did not have the same impact on him. He knew where to strike; he knew where I was weakest, the point where I felt vulnerable and

defenseless. Above all, he knew that I couldn't easily walk away from the protection and money he offered me. What did he mean when he screamed *negra, puta, villera*. Who did the phrase evoke? What did he hope to produce within me? Shame? Humiliation? Somewhere deep within, I believed him and was ashamed: although I have green eyes and white skin, I come from a poor family from La Matanza² who lived in a neighborhood of low-cost tower blocks in Ciudad Evita.³ That is enough for 'good folks' to consider you *negra* even if your skin is white. And that is synonymous with *villera*, like it or not. In Argentina, the term *negra*, which is generally derogatory, is more of a moral judgment than a racist slur (Briones, 2004; Frigerio, 2006; Vila, 1987). As I noted in a previous work (Vila and Silba, 2012), the use of the term *negra* is not necessarily associated with skin color or phenotypic traits; instead, both are included in a greater imaginary construction that also encompasses geographical references, social class and politics, as well as character. For many Argentines, one's status as *negro* is often invisible at a glance; it is carried within. Although the historic origins of the term date back to the colonial period (19th century), the broadening of the term's meaning can be traced to the internal migration within Argentina during the 1930s and 1940s, a migration that resulted from economic policies based on imports substitution (Basualdo, 2005; James, 1990; Villanueva, 1972). As a result, dark-skinned residents from across the country moved to the capital city, Buenos Aires, where they came to be known as *cabecitas negras* (Frigerio, 2006; Guber, 2002).⁴ The problem was not the color of their skin but the visibility attained by these migrant workers during the first administration of President Juan Domingo Perón (1946–1955). These workers gained political power, becoming legal subjects, an identity that they had been previously and categorically denied. Briones (2004) argues that the fact that the *cabecita negra* is in fact Argentine has always caused discomfort from a hegemonic standpoint, in terms of the look, class belonging and cultural practice associated with this figure. This white, middle-class and *porteño* (native of Buenos Aires) perspective views the *cabecita* as an embarrassment to the nation because, although they are part of this nation, they do not fit in in terms of phenotypic traits, attitude, aesthetics, consumer tendencies, perceptions of space, careers, etc. This is what produced the distinction between *negros de piel* (black skinned) and *negros de alma* (black souled), a popular expression that combines a racial slur with a moral judgment, discriminating against those whose behaviors, tastes or customs are viewed as reprehensible according to these same hegemonic criteria.

Another key aspect of the patriarchal system is the division between *respectable* and *deviant* women, a difference determined by their sexual activities (Pateman, 1995). Thus the subject who embodies patriarchal discourses – in this case, Javier, a violent subject – reveals his ability to *name* the other and distinguish himself from her. In this regard, Amorós (2011) argues that subjects are those with the ability to finish their own sentences, the terms that define them as subjects. By continuing with him after he had called me *negra, puta y villera*, I was assenting not only to his individual power to classify me but also to the patriarchal system that domesticates us, teaching us as women to stay in 'our' place (Rubin, 2000). And although I was in fact a woman who had accepted to be in a relationship on such terms, I did not fit into the stereotype of the submissive woman without a past that he was surely seeking; I was one of the 'deviant' women that he believed had to be disciplined. Countless times, he asked questions about my previous

relationships, demanding intimate details about who ‘those other men’ were, how many of them there had been, if I had loved them, if I still saw them, if they continued contacting me, if I still thought of them now that we were together. Yet when he yelled those three words – *negra, puta y villera* – he was not only talking about me, though he may have imagined it that way. He was also addressing others like me, the countless other blasphemous women who had dared to have a free sex life uncontrolled by any man, women who had ‘deviated’ from the norms that men like him identified as valid. Principally, he was addressing my mother. My mother, yes, with her husbands, boy-friends, affairs and relationships with men who ranged from redeemable to despicable, from decent to wicked. My mother, who was nicknamed *La Negra*, would undoubtedly have been a *puta* in his eyes. A woman brimming with contradictions, living in a hierarchical and *machista* society that judged her whenever it got the chance. A woman who had no problem causing a ruckus right on the street if she didn’t agree with something: a typical *negra villera*, who dared to break with the mandates – the gender, class and cultural mandates – that would have relegated her to household and family, keeping any interventions in the public sphere to an absolute minimum. My mother, a brave woman, a warrior, would come out on the street and defend her children whenever a neighbor attacked one of us. At the same time, she had decided on a love life that involved certain freedoms, freedoms that were frowned upon by those in her immediate surroundings. She was made to feel uncomfortable; she was always being watched. ‘Woman does not feel safe when her own culture and white culture are critical of her: where the males of all races hunt her as prey’, says Anzaldúa (2004: 77). Logically, the moral condemnation of my mother was at its strongest when it came via the ‘cultural other’ most unlike her: a rich white man who represented a system of dominant values defined as Androcentrism and characterized by a sexist, adult, racist and classist world view (Moreno Sardá, 1986). This androcentric perspective privileges the perspective of a man with masculine values, a man with strong ties to power’s hegemonic core.

Gender is thus turned into a straightjacket that forces us to inhabit a gender archetype born from patriarchal hetero-naming (García de León, 2011); embodying this stereotype is a moral duty that obliges us to defend our own position while the ‘other woman’, ‘the whore’ and ‘the deviant’ are belittled (Jones, 2010; Justo von Lurzer, 2006). Although neither my mother nor I feel comfortable wearing the straightjacket of gender, our movements are clearly limited by it. To quote Femenías and Soza Rossi (2009: 57):

Given that we are all immersed in a patriarchal model based on politics of domination, each and every one of us, men and women alike, contribute to reproducing a vision of the world that covers up male-on-female violence, even in those private acts that we consider ‘neutral’. For this reason, by viewing gender violence as merely the offshoot of a sick relationship between a man and a woman and isolating it from the framework that constructs and replicates inequality, we run the risk of removing the political from the personal.

Solvencies

My mother was not a feminist and neither was I. How paradoxical, then, that I ended up taking my first feminist seminar when she was dying. One of the many contradictory

lessons she taught me was that I should find someone 'solvent'. The first time she used the term, I went straight to the dictionary. Now that I am retelling the story, I return to the dictionary and find the first entry for 'solvent': 'capable of meeting financial obligations', along with another that says 'a substance capable of dissolving another substance'. I wonder if I misread something, or if perhaps it had to do with my mother's insistence that I find a way out of our constrained social environment. In my desire to comply with this mandate, I had dared to move up into another social class but in this upward mobility, I had been forced to give up my autonomy as both a woman and a person. This 'solvent' man met both of the definitions, meeting my financial obligations and dissolving me at the same time. Anzaldúa says,

Through our mothers, culture gave us mixed messages: *No voy a dejar que ningún pelado desgraciado maltrate a mis hijos* [I'm not going to allow any worthless bastard to mistreat my kids]. And in the next breath, it would say, *La mujer tiene que hacer lo que le diga el hombre* [A woman has to do what a man says]. Which was it to be – strong or submissive, rebellious or conforming? (2004: 74)

This contradictory message forces us to make a difficult decision. In my case, the evident message was that my mother's life did not fit the bourgeois, heteronormative ideal of the typical family. She did not have the morals associated with the sexuality of a 'good wife' and she had refused to simply sit at home waiting for a man to provide material or emotional comfort. Her life was proof that a woman could take care of herself, albeit with the enormous difficulties this entailed. A firm desire could be seen in her advice to me: she hoped I would find a man who would help me resolve my economic difficulties. Cultural transformations are never instantaneous and within my mother, like so many mothers (and perhaps even within me), two models of femininity coalesced in complex ways.

Besides advising me to find a solvent man, my mother also ingrained the value of work as a tool for autonomy and education as a path to progress. I had to get out, grow and advance. 'Getting out' went beyond leaving the neighborhood, the 'gang', the streets filled with trash and sprinkled with sewage water. She wanted me to get away from my history, from her history, from the worst version of our family. I was supposed to get away from pain, overcrowding, mistreatment, poverty and conformity, but also from hunger, from the custom of eating noodles with eggs for weeks on end because it was all we could afford. 'Malvi, I've left two pesos. Buy a package of noodles and a half dozen eggs. I went to work. Mom.' This note, versions of which I read more times than I can count, was left on the shiny wood table my mother had purchased in installments. There was often no food to put on that table because two men – the one who 'forgot' he had fathered me and the other, who accepted me as his own – had both decided they could not afford to pay child support.

The violent man builds his domination on these and other vulnerabilities, that is, on our submission. My mother dreamed of finding a husband who would fill the fridge, a man who would buy milk, fruit, meat. Every time I open my fridge and see it is full, I think how happy she would be to know I have achieved that. In the house of Javier the fridge was also full, but the cost was astronomical: it wasn't even sex, or just sex in

exchange for food. The cost was the humiliation, his fits of rage, the way he enjoyed striking me or pushing me around. Then he would cry like a little boy and take me out to buy clothes that would cover up the bruises and, as long as we were at it, cover up my body as much as possible. Never before had I owned so many long-sleeved shirts and so few miniskirts.

Autonomy and (the return to) dependence

During the 1990s, the neighborhood where I grew up had become even worse due to the effects of the government's neoliberal policies during that same decade.⁵ Unemployment had reached 18.8% of the EAP (economically active population) in 1996 but it continued to climb until peaking at 21.5% in 2001. The poverty index in 2002 reached 54.3% and extreme poverty, 24.7%.⁶ For marginal neighborhoods like Ciudad Evita, this meant that thousands of young people were forced to live in even more precarious conditions; there was also increased state repression by the police. At the same time, drug use in poor neighborhoods skyrocketed and a great number of young people – including many of kids I had grown up with – resorted to crime to feed their habit. Given this cruel and painful reality, many adults like my mother reacted by forbidding their sons and daughters to spend their free time with these young people. As a result, some of the most vulnerable youth in the neighborhood, themselves the victims of violence (institutional, family and interpersonal), were isolated from their peers, left to fend for themselves with only the support of others like them. These young people had no chance to form support networks to help them avoid what appeared an inevitable destiny. Many of the young men and women born in the 1960s and 1970s perished during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, which continued into the 1990s; others died of overdoses or at the hands of police, who regularly killed young people in order to protect the right to private property of an increasingly smaller percentage of society. Towards the end of the 1990s, you could practically hear the social outcry in the air.

In 1999, I turned 22 and decided that I could no longer spend a third of my day traveling across the city to get from home to work and to school. I thus faced the enormous challenge of letting my mother know I was going to live by myself. My work as a secretary and my social life with friends from the university kept me out of the house most of the time anyway. In addition, it was getting harder and harder to come home every day to a neighborhood that had even become dangerous for its historic residents. Still, I was afraid to tell my mother; I thought she would yell and wish me the worst for leaving her alone. Instead, she swallowed her anger and helped me in every way she could. She had worked so hard to keep me from becoming just 'another girl on the block' that she felt obliged to help me get out, in spite of how difficult it must have been for her. So three days after her birthday, I loaded up her cousin's Ford F100 with what few things I owned and went to live in a tiny studio apartment in Barrio Norte. From there, I could easily walk to the university, saving myself the two and a half hour bus ride from Ciudad Evita. In my mind, moving to Barrio Norte, one of the most exclusive neighborhoods in the city of Buenos Aires, meant moving a step up the social ladder, although during the time I lived there, the racial and moral distinctions referred to earlier became even clearer to me in the attitudes of others who lived in the neighborhood: no matter how

hard I worked to distinguish myself, no matter how white my skin or how green my eyes, the stigma of *negra villera* continued to follow me despite my efforts. On the other hand, the move provided me with a plethora of new possibilities in terms of socializing. I had officially become a college student living in the capital city and I could have a social life just like the other students.

It was 19 July 2002, and a friend of a friend was throwing a party at this great apartment in one of the city's most exclusive neighborhoods. Puerto Madero was an area totally new to me, and I had nothing better to do that night. At the apartment, we gave our names to the doorman, who kept a wary eye on us: we were clearly not from the neighborhood. We went up to the eighth floor, the last floor, and entered a beautiful empty apartment. The living room was about 50 square meters and all it had were wood floors, an armchair, a few stools and a coffee table. He appeared from behind a door and greeted us. He seemed nice. We talked; it was clear we were attracted to one another. He asked for my phone number before we left and I gave it to him. Four days later, we started dating. Two weeks later, we took a trip together. By then, I had told him my whole story, where I came from, my fears, my contradictions. I was totally open about being so vulnerable. At that point, I had wagered on finding a man who would be a refuge for me; I had convinced myself that I needed a man to be complete, to be legitimate. I wanted to erase the phantom of me as the illegitimate child and of my mother as a promiscuous woman who dared to cheat on her husband and then demand that he accept me as his child. That was why I had moved to Barrio Norte, to leave behind that neighborhood and the supposed 'immorality' of La Matanza. After meeting him, I thought that I would finally be able to make the jump, to consolidate my new class position by marrying a rich man and 'cleaning up' my image, promising to myself and to him that I would be faithful and always tell the truth. To paraphrase Rubin (2000), I tried to become a tamed, oppressed woman, obliged to assume the sexual role of a whole woman who *belonged* to a man. In this complex and contradictory search for who I was, I replicated a traditional gender model without question. It was a costly mistake. I had no idea at the time that the truth could be transformed into a double-edged sword.

Probing questions

Javier and his family own hotels, rental cabins and their own home in the south of Argentina. The first trip we took together was to his family home. That is where my ordeal began, where he began drilling me with questions about the men I had slept with. A knot formed in my throat every time he demanded that I reveal the intimate details of my personal history. I was no good at lying and he knew it. In the past, my inability to lie had been a source of pride for me but at that point, it became my Achilles heel. Soon afterwards, he demanded to watch every time I opened my emails so that he could see who was contacting me. A few months later, he asked me for the password so that he could also check my emails when he was traveling and not seeing me every day. I gave it to him, praying to God (and all the saints I had not believed in for years) that none of my former boyfriends or lovers would ever think to contact me. In the meantime, he took long trips, spending up to two months in the south. I would stay at his place, making a concerted effort to make that luxurious apartment feel like my own; it was

luxurious all right, but it was also empty, cold and unwelcoming. Countless times I thought about walking out, disappearing from his life forever. But I didn't have the courage, at least not then.

One night in the elevator, he asked me if I was in love with him. He insisted on the question, like an interrogator. When I didn't answer, he got visible angry. I just stared at him. He continued to ask me until I answered honestly that I was not in love with him. He slapped me hard across the face and it stung for several minutes. I started screaming at him and dug my nails into him. And the fighting continued. Over time, I began to understand how he brought out the worst in me, making me insecure, vulnerable, fearful, extremely jealous and – of course – violent. At the time, the whole situation seemed shameful, like something I should keep from others. Ultimately, however, I was able to rework the experience once I understood that violence is a constitutive element in gender relations (Fernández, 2006) and that my acts in this context responded to my need to defend myself and preserve a certain subjectivity in spite of his daily attacks. I slapped him twice – once in the elevator and once in my studio apartment a short time after we started dating, the day he forced me to open up my emails so that he could keep tabs on me. Five minutes later, he was accusing me of cheating on him with a friend who had sent me an email entitled 'Girls love clowns'.⁷ It was clearly in reference to a song by Patricio Rey y sus Redonditos de Ricota,⁸ a band that my friend and I had loved since we were children. Javier was so jealous that he had neglected to notice that the email predated our relationship. Even when I pointed that out, it didn't seem to matter: anything could fuel his fantasy that I was seeing other men. And that was enough to unleash his fury and, by extension, mine as well. He accused me of being violent, creating what he considered a fair exchange; he hit me but I hit him back, so we were even. It took me a long time to realize that one of the many differences was that I hit him in the hope that he would magically disappear from my life, or even die. He was hitting me for an entirely different reason, hitting me to have control over me, which he found pleasurable. But he also hit me to teach me a lesson, so that I would understand the rules that applied to our relationship and respect his total authority. This is in line with the work of Femenías and Soza Rossi, who affirm that, 'As a result of cultural changes and shifts on the job market, men may have become more zealous and violent about disciplining the "autonomous" women whom they consider to be the cause of their troubles' (2009: 44). The 'troubles' that I caused my boyfriend stemmed from my own history, the personal and emotional ties that predated him and thus represented a latent threat. And his fear of such troubles and threats could only be overcome through violence. Segato (2010) argues that every society displays some type of mysticism around women or worships female virgins; as a result, any breakdown of this established order operates as a threat to masculine integrity. The fact that on occasion I hit him back – in spite of the notable difference in our physical strengths – made him feel 'less violent' and more entitled to hit me, to confirm once again that I was inferior to him. He also wanted to make sure I know who established the rules of our relationship, and above all, the limits of what could happen between the two of us, through psychological pressure or physical force. This confirms that while passivity may be a negative characteristic for men, the lack of passivity is tragic for women (Rubin, 2000).

Yet this situation was complex for me in a whole other way, since I was not a stranger to physical violence. I had grown up in a family in which shouting, hitting, pushing others around and insulting them were almost daily occurrences. I had never been the victim of the physical violence but I had experienced the insults. Since I had been the civilized member of the family, the best daughter, there had been no need to hit me: I feared my mother long before she had the need to lift a threatening hand. Yet the hitting and the insults were not the only types of violence that my mother, my sisters and I suffered. We were all brought up in a social and family setting that made us easy prey for men. We had been taught to not provoke men but we were aware of our ability to break the rules; the limits between our own desire and the morbid desires of certain men were never clear. Private questions like how we dressed, how we behaved in public, and how many boyfriends we were seen with around the neighborhood were all topics that the adults in the family discussed publicly. The question was whether we were good girls or *putas*, as simple as that. We faced eternal contradictions like how to be seductive without overdoing it; how to get some attention but not too much attention. Our public behavior and clothing were constant sources of tension. If we wore miniskirts or low-cut tops, we were being provocative; if we spent time with boys in a public or private setting outside the control of adults, we were challenging authority and sending these boys the wrong message. On the other hand, however, if we stopped unwanted advances by a male friend or boyfriend, then we were teases, 'playing hard to get' by encouraging a man's desire and making them want us even more.

My mother had suffered from patriarchal violence throughout her childhood and adolescence. This violence came in different forms in her immediate family surroundings. I always knew that the pain from this violence combined with her silence on the subject kept her from understanding that the same story could be repeated, even against her will, and she would be doomed to not saying a word and looking the other way. As a result, during my childhood and adolescence, I suffered from different types of abuse by male relatives or other men close to the family. This abuse never went beyond inappropriate touching or comments but I still experienced it as humiliating and disgraceful. I was always left with the question of what I had done to them to provoke it. The victim thinks she is guilty of provoking such acts; although the perpetrator is the one responsible, such acts also accompany gender status (Segato, 2010). Using the excuse of a joke, a prank, or the fact that 'the little girl' had a 'big girl's' body, these men justified a despicable act and violated my right to decide who could touch or discuss my body. It was a right that I was not able to perceive until years later when I encountered feminism. As Segato claims, 'Any woman who does not belong to one man (a woman who is not in an exclusive sexual relationship) is perceived as belonging to all men.' In other words, we were 'a feminine body in a state of community neglect' (Segato, 2010: 30–31). Not even the physical proximity of our mothers, aunts and grandmothers was able to protect us from what men perceive and carry out as an unquestionable mandate to replicate and uphold the logics of patriarchal power. In this perverse logic, then, we have two options: belonging to one man or to all men, but never to ourselves. The mandate of men to teach us a lesson – a mandate that violent men respond to particularly, though so do those who defend the legitimacy of violence without questioning it (or questioning themselves) – would appear to tell us, time and again, that we can never be our own women.

Capitalism and patriarchy

One of Javier's preferred strategies for domination involved gift giving. After some of our most terrible fights, he would hand over a very expensive gift in an attempt to offset the damage inflicted by his fists or his words. I especially remember waking up one morning after a horrific night. He wasn't home and he hadn't left a note. A little while later, he came in with an enormous teddy bear and a bouquet of roses. He smiled nervously, playing at being romantic and supportive, asking me to forgive him, promising once again that this would be the last time, that things would work out for us. I looked down at the bear and thought, 'What do I do with this?' I pretended to be impressed by the gift; I thanked him for it, telling him how much I valued the gesture and his will to change. Two days later, we had come full circle with more violence. This time, he bought me dinner at a fancy restaurant and some beautiful clothes. Cost was no object, but he only let me choose clothes that covered up my body. Years later, in a class taught by Mabel Campagnoli, an excellent professor specializing in gender theory, I understood what the bear and all the other gifts meant. They were the subjective bond of domination. It didn't matter that there was no explicit violence in this act; 'in the dynamics of seduction-consent, the aggression cannot be seen', I jotted down in my notebook, 'but it still exists'. Situations of privilege help make this domination more invisible and more tolerable. In this regard, Lerner (1990) claims that women's cooperation is essential to the workings of the patriarchal system. This cooperation, which can take several forms, is often expressed through eroticizing the domination and providing class privileges to the women involved. Segato refers to this mechanism as psychological or moral violence:

Moral violence is the most efficient mechanism for social control and for the reproduction of inequalities. Psychological coercion becomes a constant prospect of everyday socialization, the main form of control and of social oppression ... Due to its subtlety, its diverse nature and its omnipresence, it is highly effective ... In the universe of gender relations, psychological violence is the most mechanical, routine and impetuous form of violence, yet it represents the most efficient method of subordination and intimidation. (2010: 112–113)

His gifts were merely another way to bend me to his will, his Manichean and controlling power. For me, they created the illusion of a love capable of overcoming his aggressions and gave me an outlook for a better relationship that never came to be.

The ties that bound me to him began to come undone when, on top of all his other demands, he asked me to quit my job. The clinic where I worked was filled with male doctors and represented the last bastion for him to conquer. I had been a secretary there for three years and I really enjoyed my time there. Working allowed me to live by myself, cover my own expenses and go out with friends. Yet there was something else I enjoyed about my job and that was the excitement of the flirting that went on between the female secretaries and the male doctors. Luckily I had managed to avoid mentioning this to Javier, although he clearly sensed it and was acting accordingly. As soon as we started dating, I realized that my work was a source of anxiety for him. He called to check up on me as often as he could, asking me what I was doing and with whom. Yet what was it about my job that caused him so much anxiety? Making my own money gave me autonomy, but it wasn't just that. It was his conviction that flirting could eventually lead to

something else; that drove him mad. He was very familiar with the fantasies surrounding secretaries: his own father, with whom he shared an office downtown, had taken his secretary as a lover. Sexual submission is something expected of secretaries, both those who have sex with their superiors and those who don't. It is a sexual submission that is 'often ... accompanied by a more complete yet unconscious submission, the expectation of an almost loving relationship' (Bourdieu, 1998). Another thing that bothered him was my work uniform, high heels and a miniskirt. It was impossible for me not to flirt, and impossible for him not to imagine that occurring. Is that what made him despair? How short my miniskirt was? Or the possibility that I would give myself (sexually, amorously) to another man? I remember one night when he came to get me at the clinic. I was standing by the door when my boss came by; he happened to touch me on the shoulder right when Javier was parking the car. 'Now you're going to have to tell my boyfriend why you embraced me', I blurted out, not even caring how ridiculous I was making myself look in front of a man who I considered like a father. My boss got what was going on. He went over, said hello to Javier and before leaving, leaned in and said something I couldn't hear. All the color left my face; there was no way of knowing what could happen next. We got into his car and drove off. The questioning began. 'Who the hell does your boss think he is, talking to me like that?', he yelled. I remember the interminable trip back to his apartment, trying to figure out how someone could be so perverse and irrational. I ended up so anguished and furious that I vomited. What my boss had whispered in his ear was, 'Treat her right because the day she walks out, she's gone for good.'

He had a whole plan for me to leave behind my boss and 'his cronies'. If I quit working at the clinic, he said, I could speed up my classwork, take my exams and earn my sociology degree more quickly. In my last years at the university, I had been collaborating with a research group that focused on popular urban culture; it was one of the spaces I most enjoyed at that time, along with my work at the clinic. Javier, on the other hand, wanted me to move with him to the province of Neuquén and do work with the Mapuche community, fieldwork as isolated as possible from the rest of the world. He didn't stop to consider the fact that, in spite of my great respect for indigenous communities and the colleagues who research them, it was not a passion of mine. Again, he had an incredible knack for ignoring my desire and my will. I refused to move and changed the topic. I told him that I would quit working at the clinic provided he agreed to deposit an amount equivalent to my salary, health insurance coverage and social security in my account every month. I was not willing to earn a penny less than I did working, as I knew that economic independence was one of the few sources of autonomy I still had left. I had learned how important this was from my mother, her history and my family's history. He was shocked when I told him how much it was. Javier wanted to control me but he was a capitalist entrepreneur before all else and that meant he was not willing to share his earnings with me. So he countered with, 'Let's have a baby'. Again, I panicked and agreed but on one condition. 'Only if we get married first'. He again refused. He did not want his fortune to be affected in any way; that was clear from the very beginning, confirming that capitalism and patriarchy go hand in hand. Although sex oppression cannot be explained as a reflex of economic force (Rubin, 2000) and thus the struggles and demands against both are not always the same, it becomes necessary to think about them together since both systems of oppression are conditioned and mutually reinforced (Delphy, 1985).

Empowerment

In 2004, we went on vacation to Buzios, a small tourist town near Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. It was undoubtedly the worst vacation of my life. When I returned, I decided that I deserved more than a life of suffering, sobbing and bruises. That afternoon, I spent three hours talking with two different analysts. One was an aptitude test for a job given by a psychologist. I remember that as I drew the house, the tree and the woman in the rain,⁹ we discussed my future and at some point, I blurted out, 'He wants to control me'. When she heard that, this psychologist who I had just met replied, 'Sounds like he doesn't know who he's dealing with'. I was suddenly empowered. After I left, I saw my analyst for an hour and a half. She had been my staunchest supporter during that whole period. She let me make the decision, let me come out and say how much he had hurt me with his blows and his insults. I called him on the phone, crying. 'We have to talk. Come over.' I hung up and called several of my friends, still crying, seeking refuge. They provided it.

Empowerment means taking control of one's own life, successfully setting one's own agenda, making a desirable change (León, 2001). The author notes a distinction between individual empowerment – doing things for oneself – and collective empowerment, which also includes joint actions. At that time, I was just barely able to handle individual action; going public with the experience was embarrassing to me because I blamed myself for the situation and interpreted it as a personal limitation.

When he showed up, I told him it was over, terrified that the 'other' man inside him might appear and things would go south once again. I was crying the whole time. He asked if there was another man. I shook my head, not sure whether or not he would believe me. He realized I was serious about ending it. The one thing he asked was that if we ever got back together, I talk to him about what was happening between us and not to my psychologist.

My mother had a broken foot at the time but that didn't stop her from helping me move out. She was right next to me until I got my last box of stuff out of his creepy pent-house. When we were finished, she shook his hand, she looked him in the eye, and with an ironic but totally strategic tone, quipped, 'Thanks for everything'. We climbed into the Ford F100 truck that belonged to my mother's cousin, the same one that had once taken me out of Ciudad Evita and that now brought me back like a prodigal daughter.

At that point, my empowerment ability was focused principally on individual actions (family support, work with my analyst) that always occurred behind closed doors. I didn't know how to transform this personal suffering into collective actions that could, for example, put me in touch with other women who had had similar experiences, offering them support and solace. It was not until I was able to connect my own story with a broader social context that I understood that this experience was not the result of my limitations in terms of connecting with men, in keeping with the arguments of Femenías and Soza Rossi (2009): it was the fruit of a hierarchical sex-gender system that necessitated a change (León, 2001).

Conclusions

In this article, I proposed combining personal testimony with social analysis, emphasizing the meaning that my personal story acquires when it is transformed into an ethnographic tale. Connecting my own story with that of my mother's allowed me to see certain aspects of our trajectories that I had not perceived previously. I suddenly

understood how she had taught me to be a rebellious woman, a woman who wasn't content to be what others expected her to be – not even her own mother. I also came to realize that both of us – in our own time and on our own terms – had begun a search for a gender position that would not limit our own desire, challenging the notion that men make the rules and women limit themselves to disseminating them (Anzaldúa, 2004). Our challenging of this notion, however, often subsisted alongside the traditional mandate for us to seek out economic and emotional protection from a man; we believed that we needed this protection to be whole women. The relationship with this violent man was essential to understanding the cost of rebellion for women who refuse to prioritize a relationship over our own desire. In following with Fernández (2006), it is critical to insist on society's institutive role, since 'the focus on the reproduction of inequality draws attention away from the processes of resistance, the transgressions and the counter-violence that have historically allowed women to establish a tangible difference between obeying and merely complying' (2006: 111).

It was also important for me to be able to see the connections between the abusive relationships my mother and I were both subjected to during different points of our lives. All this violence (physical, psychological, symbolic) came together over the course of our life trajectories to show time and again the different ways in which men can exercise their power to subjugate us. In this regard, as noted by Femenías and Soza Rossi (2009), it is important 'not only to recognize the potential suffering or lack of satisfaction experienced by the female victims of violence but also ... associate this discontent with the inequality that women face as members of society'. We live in a system where difference implies hierarchy, a system with a range of violence between the poles of 'men versus women' in which a man is defined by his essential form and a woman by her condition as a 'marked' term (Laclau, 1990), pointing to an error, an accident, a gap. This 'incomplete' condition apparently defines one's prospects: a woman must always aspire to finding a man who makes her whole, allowing him to tame her and bend her to his will.

In my story, empowerment was essential. By empowerment, I mean the chance to become aware of my situation and transform it into the will to change the order of things. This process occurs in many different ways and each woman forges her own path based on her personal circumstances. However, it is necessary to strengthen public policies to provide solace as well as material and symbolic support for women who are the victims of gender violence. It is also essential to work together to effect a radical change of the current social structures in order for gender to no longer be a cause for oppression or an argument for discriminating against women, treating them unequally or suppressing them. Finally, we must give women the right to be sexual beings and ultimately transform the relationship that all of us women want to have, living our own lives on our own terms.

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Notes

1. The word *negra*, black, is a complex insult that is frequently applied to Caucasians as well as individuals with indigenous features, with connotations of a low social class, laziness, a lack of education or manners, etc. To further complicate matters, it is sometimes used as a term of affection. *Putá* is the word for a prostitute but can also be used against women who freely explore their sexuality. The final term, *villera*, refers to a female resident of the slums, though, like *negra*, also carries a range of derogatory meanings.
2. La Matanza is one of the 135 counties in the province of Buenos Aires. It is part of Greater Buenos Aires, which includes the city of Buenos Aires and surrounding towns. La Matanza is the largest county in the suburban area and has the highest population of any county in the province. Its urbanization process has been sluggish and its population is mainly comprised of migrants from other provinces in Argentina and from neighboring countries, the majority working class.
3. The tower blocks in Ciudad Evita were constructed with funding from the FONAVI (National Housing Fund). Such housing was designed for middle and long-term programs to resettle those living in the slums to new houses or apartments located in neighborhoods such as these. The poor generally end up dwelling in apartments such as these. In particular, the Ciudad Evita tower blocks were constructed during the 1960s and are characterized by their precarious construction materials and the supposedly dangerous residents, who bear the stigma of residing in one of the most infamous neighborhoods of Greater Buenos Aires.
4. Other references to this topic include Murmis and Portantiero (1971), Skupch (1972), Halperin Donghi (1975), Dorfman (1983), Llach (1984) and Torre (1995), among others.
5. Since the mid-1970s, Argentina had been subjected to a process of social and economic restructuring whose negative repercussions had no precedent in the country's history, breaking down the social ties that had characterized Argentine society and dismantling national industry (Kessler et al., 2010). These policies produced an even more severe gap in income distribution and as a result, extreme poverty was widespread (Beccaria, 2002). During the 1980s, extensive areas of the country that had been 'hidden' from the military regime in order to cover up this poverty were 'discovered'; at the same time, another economic crisis had begun along with a social crisis provoked by the hyperinflation that marked the end of that decade. President Menem, who took office in 1989, undertook a radical process of transforming the social and economic structures of Argentina through a series of measures that would have disastrous effects on the country's poor: labor market flexibility, which would take unemployment and informal employment to unprecedented levels along with other measures aimed at furthering deindustrialization; the reduction of state social services and their subsequent restructuring in search of a welfare model as opposed to overseeing the market's role as a social mediator that could help tip 'the scale' in favor of those most in need (Merklen, 2005; Svampa, 2005).
6. Data taken from the website of INDEC (National Institute of Statistics and Censuses) and available at: www.indec.mecon.ar/nuevaweb/cuadros/74/incid_07_03.pdf (accessed 31 August 2015).

7. The title has a double meaning. Besides the obvious ones (little girls and circus clowns), it also refers to how women like a certain type of guy who is a 'clown', which has many meanings, though all ridicule, belittle or bring attention to features associated with a non-hegemonic masculinity (weakness, inappropriate behaviors, etc.).
8. A classic Argentine rock band led by Carlos 'El Indio' Solari, the author and composer of all the band's songs. For more information (in Spanish), see www.rock.com.ar/artistas/los-redonditos-de-ricota.shtml.
9. Drawings that job applicants are often asked to complete for psychologists to then evaluate multiple facets of their personality.

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Author biography

Malvina L Silba has a bachelor's degree in sociology (2005) and a doctorate in social sciences (2011) from the Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA). An assistant researcher with CONICET (the National Scientific and Technical Research Council of Argentina) and the Centro de Estudios Sociales y Políticos (CESP – School of Humanities, Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata), she has also worked as a professor at the Department of Sociology (FH-UNMdP) since 2015. From 2005 to 2014, she taught in the Social Communications Program at UBA. She was a UBA and CONICET grant recipient between 2005 and 2013. Her research fields include popular urban culture, youth, popular music and the articulation between class, gender, age and territory. Silba is a member of research project teams at UBA, UNMdP and UNSAM (Universidad Nacional de San

Martín). She has published several book chapters and articles on her topics of interests in journals in Argentina and abroad. This is her first auto-ethnographic essay.

Resumé

Cet article est construit sur un récit à la première personne de violences sexistes. J'utilise la méthode et les modes narratifs de l'auto-ethnographie pour analyser une relation avec un homme violent, dont la nature hiérarchique est fondée sur des différences de classe sociale et de sexe. Après avoir examiné certains épisodes de cette relation dans la perspective du genre, je me propose de jeter une lumière nouvelle sur les caractéristiques complexes et souvent contradictoires des violences sexistes dont les femmes sont victimes dans différentes régions et situations sociales et culturelles. Cet article met aussi en évidence les différentes stratégies d'autonomisation qui permettent à de nombreuses femmes de lutter contre ce type de violence en allant à l'encontre des structures de base de la société patriarcale. Mon histoire personnelle et ma familiarité avec le vécu des autres femmes de ma famille, victimes elles aussi des violences sexistes et des mêmes hiérarchies sociales, me permettent d'analyser les formes de subordination des femmes dans cette même société patriarcale. Finalement, cet article décrit les stratégies d'autonomisation que j'ai adoptées pour faire face à certaines situations. Il met en évidence des formes d'autonomisation individuelles et collectives comme autant d'outils d'analyse et de concepts politiques utiles pour lutter contre les violences sexistes.

Mots-clés

Violence sexiste, auto-ethnographie, classe, hiérarchies sociales, société patriarcale, autonomisation

Resumen

Este artículo es un relato en primera persona sobre la violencia de género, en el cual recorro a la autoetnografía como principal herramienta metodológica y narrativa. En él analizo una relación de pareja con un varón violento signada por dos diferencias que operaban como jerarquías sociales: la clase y el género. A lo largo del artículo relataré desde la auto-etnografía, algunas escenas de mi historia, analizándolas desde la teoría de género, con el objetivo de comprender las características complejas y muchas veces contradictorias de la violencia de género, perpetrada contra las mujeres en diversas regiones del mundo y en distintos contextos sociales y culturales. Un eje central será el análisis de mi historia personal y las conexiones con las historias de otras mujeres de mi familia, también víctimas de violencia de género y de las mismas jerarquías sociales, respecto a ciertos mandatos en tanto miembros de esa misma sociedad patriarcal. Finalmente, el artículo narra las estrategias de empoderamiento que pude construir en determinado contexto, distinguiendo, a su vez, el empoderamiento individual del colectivo, como una clave analítica pero también política en la lucha contra la violencia de género.

Palabras clave

Autoetnografía, clase, empoderamiento, jerarquías sociales, sociedad patriarcal, violencia de género