

# An Instituting Archive for Memory Activism: The *Archivo de la Memoria Trans de Argentina*

Memory Studies  
2024, Vol. 17(2) 332–348  
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DOI: 10.1177/17506980221150900  
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## Abstract

This article introduces the concept of the instituting force of activist archives. It does so by analyzing the epistemological and ontological implications of describing and arranging archival materials, and narrativizing them in curatorial work, in the case of the *Archivo de la Memoria Trans de Argentina*—Trans Memory Archive of Argentina. On the one hand, the archival arrangement provides trans people with a frame of recognition for trans lives and transforms individual memories into collectable and usable cultural memories for activism. On the other hand, the appropriation of the language of the family in curatorial works incorporates trans memories into the framework of Argentinian post-dictatorship transition. This allows activists to gain access to, and adapt, an entire repertoire for trans causes and activist kinship. The article supports the analytical work and the presented theoretical hypothesis by creating a dialogue between cultural memory studies and critical archival studies, for the exploration of memory activism.

## Keywords

archives, Argentina, community archives, LGBT+, memory activism, trans people

## Introduction: activism before activism<sup>1</sup>

Here, through the *Archivo*, I realized that I was an activist . . . we did activism before activism. It's crazy, because people say: "How is it that you were activists before activism?." Because people didn't talk about activism in those years. But . . . for example, I rebelled against the police. For example, I didn't let them arrest me. I encouraged my friends to stick together in the corner where we stood, and protect each other, and if the police came . . . we hit them. We fought against the police to prevent them from sending us to prison, or we turned the police car upside down. Or we set fire to the police station . . .<sup>2</sup>

This article analyzes the "craziness" that this activist attributes to the project of the *Archivo de la Memoria Trans de Argentina*—Trans Memory Archive of Argentina (hereafter AMT), which made her realize that she was *an activist before activism*. One of the AMT's main slogans is indeed *activismo antes del activismo* ("activism before activism"). This slogan captures the paradox of what I will define—drawing on the critical vocabulary elaborated by Roberto Esposito (2020)—the

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“instituting force” of an activist archive in the struggle to produce cultural memory in support of trans causes;<sup>3</sup> or what Yifat Gutman (2017) and Ann Rigney (2018) call “memory activism.”

The AMT is run by a group of trans activists who collect, organize, and circulate mostly photographs by and about Argentinian trans people (Estalles, 2018; Sauri, 2018). Symbolically, the group marks its origin in 2012, when Argentina adopted a groundbreaking gender identity law.<sup>4</sup> From December 2019 to March 2020, I attended the AMT’s events, exhibitions, and onsite meetings. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the AMT has multiplied its online activities and offered partial online access to its collection at [archivotrans.ar](http://archivotrans.ar). Consequently, my participant observation and data collection also moved mostly online, covering the period until July 2021.

My methodological approach resonates with Red Chidgey’s idea of memory as “assemblage” and the archive as a cluster that brings together human and non-human actors (Chidgey, 2018): activists, records, archivists, albums, shelves, social media platforms,<sup>5</sup> onsite and online events, algorithms, and archival protocols. This perspective chimes with Bruno Latour’s methodological *motto* to “follow the actor” (Latour, 2005: 11–12) and Chidgey’s (2018) suggestion to “follow the memories” (p. 7). In this article, I “follow the archive” that I conceptualize as a dynamic actor–network with various nodes, roles, and relationships (“actants” in Latour’s semiotic approach). According to this perspective, researchers collect texts and observe practices to track such a network from their situated position.

My situated position is not that of a trans person, and the aim of this article is not to analyze trans and *travesti* experiences or Argentinian trans history, which nonetheless remains a fundamental background that I will outline in the next sections. The main aim of this article is, rather, to expand our knowledge of forms of archiving and uses of archives for the production, circulation, and transmission of cultural memory in activism.

Adopting a cultural memory studies perspective, I will engage in a dialogue with critical archival studies (Caswell et al., 2017b) and propose the concept of “instituting force” as an interpretative lens for analyzing the processes of describing, arranging, and narrativizing records in the AMT. I argue that, on one hand, the archive’s categorical architecture works both as a frame of recognition (which supports a social ontology for trans subjectivities) and a framework of memory (which organizes individual remembrances into collectable archival records); on the other hand, by circulating its records in the form of a family album, the AMT builds an open and non-biological activist kinship that supports the transmission of cultural memory.

## **The Archivo de la Memoria Trans: a community archive in the transition to democracy**

I met the AMT’s team for the first time in December 2019 at Morán, a cultural center in Buenos Aires, for the exhibition *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* (“This one left, this one was killed, this one died”). During my second visit, I was guided through the exhibition by the AMT’s activists and invited, along with other visitors, to browse four photo albums displayed on a table at the center of the room (Figure 1).

The album format fits well with the genre of photographs that the AMT preserves: vernacular pictures depicting trans people in their everyday lives, at carnival parties, in trains, and abroad. Browsing the albums, visitors engaged in a dialogue with the activists about the people depicted in the pictures, in a way that reminded me of a domestic setting. The guided visit was planned as a narrative setting for the transmission of trans memories, in which the selected archival material supported and mediated the relationship between narrators and the audience; the “*esta/this*” repeated in the title of the exhibition captures the gesture of indicating a person in a picture while we narrate a story.



**Figure 1.** Albums in the exhibition *Esta se fue, a esta la mataron, esta murió* (photo by Daniele Salerno, 19 December 2019).

Actually, the exhibition was originally displayed in 2017 for the Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti in Buenos Aires (Rizki, 2020a), which is located in the ex Escuela Mecánica de la Armada-ESMA. ESMA worked as Clandestine Detention Center during the dictatorship and is nowadays a museum and site of memory for the victims of the last military dictatorship (1976–1983), co-managed by those human rights organizations that formed a groundbreaking social movement in Argentina.

The AMT emerged at the intersection of two historical processes. First, it is part of the democratization processes that occurred in Argentina after the end of the last dictatorship in 1983 (Crenzel, 2017). In this context, getting access to state archival records and creating new archives became an activist cause in support of the battle for memory, truth, and justice (Da Silva Catela and Jelin, 2002). Second, the AMT can be considered as part of the transnational struggle for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBT+) liberation and rights (Encarnación, 2016; Stryker, 2017) in which LGBT+ community archives preserve and transmit memories of past injustices and activism, serving as social movement organizations across generations (Sheffield, 2020).

### **The AMT in the Argentine post-dictatorship context**

The trans movement became visible in the Argentinian public space in the 1980s, when the first public protests against police violence took place (Fernández Romero, 2019). Police repression

against trans people did not stop with the fall of the dictatorship, since the corpus of local norms—the so-called *edictos policiales* [police edicts] against public scandal and offense to morality—remained in force well beyond 1983 and was used for the repression of sexual and gender diversity and dissidence.<sup>6</sup> As Santiago Joaquín Insausti (2015) observed, these norms were introduced in 1949, first in the Buenos Aires province and then in the rest of the Argentinian provinces; they were applied throughout the second part of the century, regardless of the democratic or dictatorial nature of the government in power.

In the 1980s, LGBT+ activists tried to articulate their struggle for the abolition of police edicts through the broader Argentinian Human Rights movement (Milanesio, 2019). Although the relationship between the gay and *travesti* movements and Human Rights organizations was initially very tense (Bellucci, 2020) and trans activist suffered forms of exclusion from a part of the gay and lesbian activists (Berkins, 2003), since the 1990s, the *edictos policiales* were abolished province by province. In the 2000s, the Federal State transformed human rights organizations' causes into an official politics of memory, including LGBT+ movements within the memory framework of post-dictatorship Argentina (Rizki, 2020b).

It is within this new historical conjuncture that the AMT emerges. In the 2000s, Claudia Pía Baudracco, co-founder of several activist trans and *travesti* activist organizations, conceived the idea of an archive for and by trans people and started to create it. In 2012, Baudracco died and the material she had collected was inherited by María Belén Correa, another key activist of the 1990s and co-founder of Argentinian *Travesti Trans Transgender Association*.

Correa decided to open a private group on Facebook where Argentinian trans people living in Argentina and abroad could collect pictures and stories (Wikimedia Argentina, 2021). In 2018, the Facebook group reached 1300 members (Estalles, 2018) and—according to the activists—the archive counted 10,000 records by 2021.

Although the history and the memory of the repression of trans people exceed the historical frame of the last dictatorship, the 2017 exhibition at the former ESMA was a turning point, since it physically and symbolically included trans memories in the framework of post-dictatorship Argentine. This allowed activists to link the AMT to post-dictatorship archival activism:

Basically, I saw the model [of archiving] in a documentary when they ask mothers and grandmothers [of Plaza de Mayo] a question, telling them how it was possible to reconstruct an archive if the State aimed at destroying any evidence. They said: the most important thing was that we had the memory of the survivors. (Wikimedia Argentina, 2021)

The post-dictatorship, activist memory framework is undoubtedly a pivotal resource for the AMT. However, we cannot fully grasp the AMT's archival work if we simply frame it as an evidence-based type of activism that focuses on historical and judicial truths (Da Silva Catela, 2007: 201–208), since this is not the archive's main activity. The AMT rather seems to offer trans people a place for “representational belonging,” generating ontological, epistemological and social effects (Caswell et al., 2017a: 6). In this respect, the AMT is a community archive: “collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control” (Flinn et al., 2009: 73–75).

## The AMT as a community archive

Community archives are an activist response to “absences, misrepresentations and marginalisations” (Flinn et al., 2009: 82) that minority social groups are subjected to in mainstream and

institutional archives, recently described by Caswell (2021) with the expression “symbolic annihilation.”

Flinn and Alexander (2015) identify two configurations, in particular, in the relationship between archiving and activism: activist archiving and archiving activism. On the one hand, in activist archiving “those who self-identify primarily as activists engage in archival activity, not as a supplement to their activism but as an integral part of their social movement activism”; on the other hand, archiving activism means “to collect and document political, social movement and other activist groups and campaigns” and is the endeavor of “archivist or archival institution, whether formal or independent” (Flinn and Alexander, 2015: 331). The definition of “activist archiving” emphasizes the pre-given identification of activists as those *who* engage in archiving, whereas the concept of “archiving activism” emphasizes a somehow pre-given meaning of *what* is collected, that is, material produced by recognized social movement organizations and belonging to specific genres: public demonstrations, political documents, banners, posters, and so on.

The AMT seems to challenge these categories. First, most of the AMT’s records represent trans people in domestic and private situations, hence not engaged in canonical political events or actions like protests. In this sense, the AMT does not seem to fit the definition of “archiving activism.” Second, when a trans archivist says that she realized that she was an activist in the archive itself, she means to say that her identification as an activist does not precede the archival activity but comes with(in) it: by self-reflecting in the archival records, the archivist reinterprets her past experiences and the material she is collecting through the language of political resistance and activism, simultaneously defining herself as an activist and the archival records as a testament of past resistance.

For example, in the digital exhibition *Siempre estuvimos ahí* [We were always there],<sup>7</sup> the AMT explains that photographs depicting trans people in their house or traveling abroad actually document their resistance in a domestic space or in political asylum: for a trans person to go out in the daylight could lead to an arrest (following the application of the police edicts), while leaving Argentina was a way of escaping violence. The vernacular genre of the representation of the homeplace and daily life is thus resignified as a site of political resistance in the face of repression and violence (in a way that reminds of bell hooks’ (1997) conceptualization of the homeplace as a site of resistance and subversion for black women).

In this way, the AMT resignifies, traces back, collects, and makes visible the presence of trans resistance against state and social violence even before the public and formal emergence of trans social movement organizations. The AMT does this by reinterpreting personal events and domestic representations of the past as forms of political resistance and by retrospectively assigning the meaning of “activism” to events that happened when “activism” was not a culturally available signifier and resource. It is in this resignification of past experiences, with the concomitant political reconfiguration of a trans archivist’s individual memory and the archival material’s meanings, that we can glimpse what I call the “instituting force” of archives in memory activism.

## Memory activism and the instituting force of activist archives

We define memory activism as the struggle of social actors to produce cultural memory and steer future remembrance. As an example of memory activism, Rigney mentions the creation of revolutionary calendars in the Socialist League, which “brought together within the same frame the memory of individual activists, reformers and revolutionaries,” trials, executions, and milestones in the realization of socialist causes (Rigney, 2018: 372). The appropriation of a mnemonic technology—the calendar—as a common frame for collecting and giving form to the memory of a movement opens a “new perspective on the past” and the possibility of acts of affiliation “based on common

values and aspirations, not by ethnic descent or other inherited identities” (Rigney, 2018: 373). The calendar, as a frame, mediates the relationship between cultural memory—defined as material traces of the past—and collective memory, giving a social group the possibility to appropriate and identify with a common past and mobilize it for a cause.

In the AMT’s memory activism, the categorical architecture of the archive and the format of the family album are used for the production, organization and circulation of trans cultural memory. However, these semiotic forms (Salerno, 2021) and formats of collecting and transmitting memories need to be “bent” to serve trans activist causes: how to appropriate an institutional practice as a minority social group? And how to use a language based on biological bonds and transmission when such bonds are absent? I call “instituting force” this adaptation of existing memory languages and semiotic frames to generate new subjectivities, social bonds, and meanings.

To introduce the concept of “instituting force,” I build on Roberto Esposito’s concept of “instituting thought” (Esposito, 2020), which explores what he calls political ontology, that is, the relationship between being and politics. In particular, Esposito’s instituting thought allows us to account for two elements that emerge from the analysis of the AMT and to further delve into the exploration of its work: creativity and subjectivation.

Instituting imaginaries create new social realities and stories by disarticulating and rearticulating an “already woven canvas” (Esposito, 2020: xix), out of something already existing: “[T]he instituting creation is always conditioned by constraints and situations that are given, which channel the action [of the instituting creation] within a course at least partially traced” (Esposito, 2020: 168, my translation). Esposito’s words resonate with Stuart Hall’s idea of “living archives” (Hall, 2001), inspired by the creation of the African and Asian Visual Artists’ Archive (AAVAA). By specifically focusing on the living archives of the diaspora, Hall argues that these collections come from a critical appropriation of the master codes of the dominant culture. Such appropriations disarticulate given and traditional forms and differently re-articulate their symbolic meaning; this is not about inventing new languages out of nothing, but about “entering critically into existing configurations to re-open the closed structures into which they have ossified” (Mercer in Hall, 2001: 90).

However, the case of AAVAA is different from the case of the AMT. For Hall, the “constitution of the archive”<sup>8</sup> was the transformation of a “random collection of works” into “something more ordered and considered” (Hall, 2001: 89). In the case of AAVAA, the meaning of records as collections of art works and the identity of creators as “visual artists” come prior to their archiving: creations and creators are somehow already recognized as part of the (institutionalized) domain of arts. In the case of the AMT, the political and aesthetic interpretation of vernacular pictures is not pre-given but is established and emerges gradually as an effect of the very practice of archiving; at the same time, the identity of donors, creators, and archivists is transformed by the new political perspective of the past that is offered by the archive and the very praxis of archiving. This represents the second element that defines the instituting force of the AMT: subjectivation.

As Esposito (2020) writes, “in the instituting process the subject does not pre-exist to its own praxis, but comes into existence with it, by modifying the praxis and, at the same time, modifying themselves” (p. 168, my translation). The activist subject comes into existence, in terms of conscience and self-awareness, in the very process of archiving, as epitomized by the quote that opens this article. Here, we identify a semantic tension between the institutional and the instituting. The institutional archive (i.e. the police archive, psychiatric archive, legal archive, and, in general, state archive) is a place for the “government of individualization” (Foucault, 1982: 781) where the individual is subjected to an epistemology that may impose “mystifying representations” on people and produce social ontologies of the subject: the mad, the sick, the criminal, the sane, the good boy, the healthy, and so on. These ontologies support institutions of control, forms of repression, and

physical and symbolic violence. Activist and community archives may support an ontology of the subject in which the subject does not emerge from a subjection “to someone else by control and dependence,” but from subjectivation: from “conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault, 1982: 781).

This is exactly what I am going to analytically unpack in the next sections. On one hand, the use of the archive as a frame of recognition allows for the emergence of trans subjectivities and of the memory of a trans social movement of resistance; on the other hand, we will see how the disarticulation and re-articulation of the traditional format of photo albums open the closed structure of the family as privileged social group for memory transmission and, in the Argentinian case, for activism.

## Archival arrangement as frame

By describing and arranging documents, archivist–activists produce records and give them a place in the archive. These processes reveal the way in which archivist–activists and users make sense of the documents that are stored as archival collections, transforming twentieth- and twenty-first-century Argentinian trans cultural production into recognizable, collectable, searchable, and usable cultural memories.

The AMT arranges its collection on four levels:

1. *Fonds*. The name (or pseudonym) of the “protagonist” of a set of documents.
2. *Section*. Photo on paper, documents, album, photo negatives, video, audio, and objects (i.e. the material support).
3. *Series*. Everyday life, birthday, carnival, exile, childhood, activism, and correspondence (letters and postcards), portrait made by photographers, shows, parties, sex work, body, jobs, professions, and trade.<sup>9</sup>
4. *Number*. Numbering of the records that are included in each fonds indicating whether each record is simple or composed: for example, a picture whose verso was used for writing a message, like a postcard, is numbered as a composed record; letters longer than one page are numbered as composed records.<sup>10</sup>

Fonds and series play a key role in the AMT’s multi-level arrangement (Figure 2): the former individualizes the narrative following a biographical categorization, while the latter collectivizes it, providing a general narrative schema for shaping and cross-referencing individual biographies. More specifically, the fonds’ level allows the archivist to account for the life of a single person, focusing on its “protagonist”: the life that is represented by/in the records; the series level organizes records in a way that transects the fonds and individual biographies.

Decided by the activists themselves, the level of the series describes a common life narrative structure for all the protagonists of the fonds, allowing for the construction of a collective and polyphonic memory: each life appears as an individual case on a common path. It is about childhood, birthdays, parties, exiles, as well as social practices (e.g. sex work, activism), which are interpreted as part of a common historical experience: what do trans lives have in common and what qualifies a life as a trans life (at least according to this specific group of twentieth-century, Argentinian trans woman activists)?

Drawing on Jennifer Douglas’s reconstruction of the role of provenance as the principle of organization of archives, I understand the intersection between the level of fonds and the level of series in terms of an “intellectual construct” which is “created through the archivist’s analysis of the numerous relationships that exist between records, creators, and functions” (Douglas, 2017:

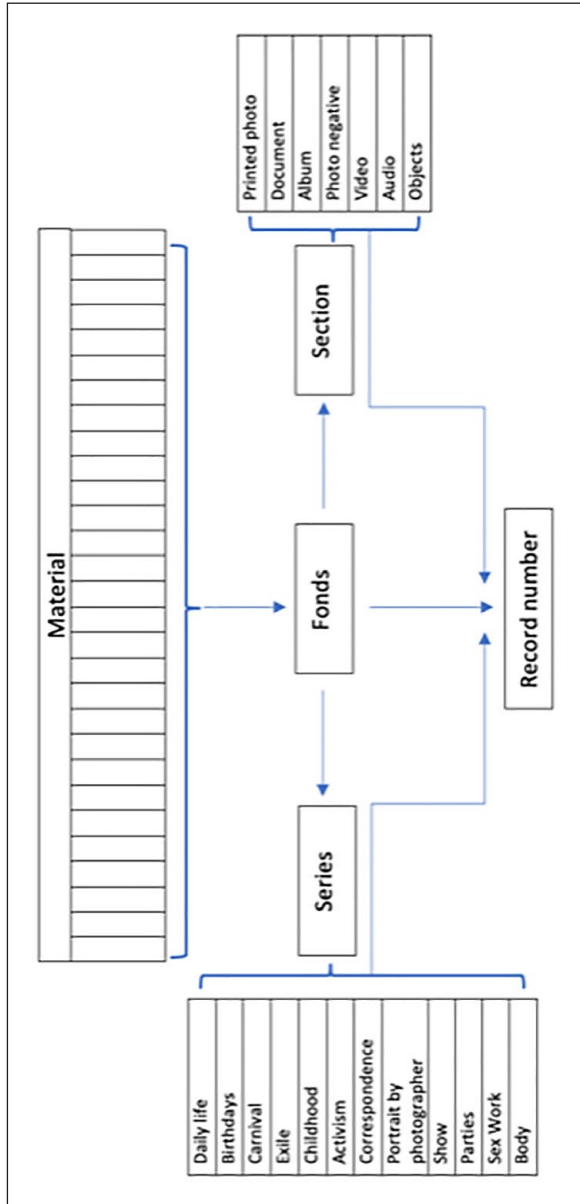


Figure 2. Archival arrangement (author's elaboration).



33). This “construct” plays a double role: on one hand, it works as a general historical schema that I read through Judith Butler’s concept of “frame of recognition” (Butler, 2009: 37); on the other hand, it transforms individual memories into collectable and transmittable records and part of a common, larger story.

According to Butler, frames of recognition allow us to recognize a living life, paving the way for the following political and ethical implications: respect, protection, preservation, and conditions for thriving. Such recognition depends upon schemas of apprehension and intelligibility (Butler, 2009: 37) that encompass the epistemological (the domain of the knowable), the ontological (what a life is, and in the case of the AMT, what a trans life is), and the ethical–political dimension (the protection and support of lives that are recognized as such). The AMT’s protocols for describing and arranging records set those “categories, conventions, and norms that prepare or establish a subject for recognition” (Butler, 2020: 34) and “the assertion of a life that matters” (Butler, 2020: 18). If epistemologies in institutional archives produce social ontologies of trans people that push them into pathologizing and criminalizing categories, the instituting force of the AMT’s archival arrangement provides the general schema of a life story—with its different phases, moments, and situations—that acts as an ontology for the (self-)recognition of trans subjectivities *in their own terms*.

The second function of the AMT’s system of description and arrangement is comparable to the use of the calendar as a mnemonic technology (as analyzed by Rigney) for bringing together different events—in our case, different lives—within the same framework. The AMT’s appropriation of a professional archival arrangement system<sup>11</sup> transforms private and not connected material into organized records, with the tangible emergence of the collective memory of a social group: what Rigney (2018) defines as an emergent framework of memory. As Douglas (2017) observes, just as records contribute to the formation of collective memory, “they are also created, at least in part, as a result of the influence of collective memory” (p. 37). The AMT’s archival arrangement provides a frame that works as a principle of organization of individual memories to transform them into cultural memories—namely, the records—and collective memory: the shared past of a social group. Indeed, the production and organization of cultural memories by trans activists during and through the process of archiving transforms records into a resource that activists can tap into and mobilize to challenge dominant narratives. This is the case of the AMT’s first published book, whose internal organization uses the archival arrangement as a frame and challenges the traditional idea of the family as privileged social group for memory transmission and for activism.

### **Narrativizing: the photo album, the language of the family, and activist kinship**

At the end of 2020, the AMT published its first book (Archivo de la Memoria Trans, 2020): a selection and collection of pictures, interspersed with texts and testimonies by individual members and by the AMT as a collective. This publication is considered a true milestone for the AMT, as it condenses the activists’ philosophy and their efforts to shape an archive for trans memories. Moreover, it defies genre expectations, allowing us to better assess the AMT’s memory work.

The book is titled “Archivo de la Memoria Trans Argentina”; there is no index and there are no page numbers, and the pictures have no captions.<sup>12</sup> The book has two flaps that, unfolded, present a list of names and nicknames, which the reader can only assume to be those of the trans people depicted in the book. The first flap of the book contains a dedication to the trans people who are part of “our life,” to people who donated or borrowed “their recollections,” and to the new generations that will inherit “all this material.”

The first picture we see is a black-and-white photograph of a woman in profile against a white background. A short anonymous text follows on the next page, where a first-person narrator describes the many meanings of the act of taking pictures in the daily life of a trans person. Turning the page, we next see a woman holding a camera in her hands. The trans subject is visualized in the act of taking possession and gaining control of the means of representation: the pocket camera. The woman is photographed by someone else standing in front of her, while it seems that she, in turn, is also portraying the photographer with her own camera. This sequence visually shapes the very philosophy of the archive: in the mutual act of portraying, the trans subject is moved from being the object of the gaze to becoming the gaze that organizes the representation in the form of a collective self-narration. The mutual portrait therefore implies that this narration does not emerge from an external perspective but is about the construction of a network of people and narrations from within the community. The archive weaves these self-narrations by cross-referencing them: in narrating one's own story, one also narrates the story of other members of the community.

What follows in the book is a two-and-a-half-page presentation of the archive that opens with this definition: "Archivo de la Memoria Trans is a family get-together." Tens of pictures follow, interspersed with 14 autobiographical texts (organized in four groups). Only at the end of the book, we find six pictures—reprinted in a smaller format—that are accompanied by texts explaining their story. The book ends with a text that again provides a self-description of the AMT archive: "[T]he Archivo is tenderness, a fragile network that reveals bonds between communities that cut across generations, rebellious bindings and unions of hearths, beyond blood ties."

Although there is no explicit division in chapters or sections, this distribution of texts and photos draws on the archival arrangement and, in particular, on the categories proposed by the series: daily life, parties, body, carnival, exile. However, the archival arrangement as a frame intersects with the family album as a format.

One of the means through which the AMT institutes the community is through the appropriation and reshaping of the language of the family, and of kinship. To do so, the Archivo works specifically on the genre expectations that are implied in the collection of photographs, giving us an object that—without captions, descriptions, historical contextualization, or names of photographers and photographed people—resembles more a family album than a photographic book. As in the case of family albums, the stories behind the pictures are supposed to be present in the community members' living memories, which are ritually told during meetings, as I described above in the case of the exhibition *Esta se fué, a esta la mataron, esta murió*.

Pierre Bourdieu dedicated a study to this topic that has gained much attention. He explains how the family album expresses the essence of social memory:

the images of the past arranged in chronological order, the logical order of social memory, evoke and communicate the memory of events which deserve to be preserved because the group sees a factor of unification in the monuments of its past unity or—which amounts to the same thing—because it draws confirmation of its present unity from its past. (Bourdieu, 1996 [1965]: 31)

A chronological order is also present in the AMT's book, which opens with a black-and-white photo of Malva Solis—who died in 2015, aged 95, and is considered the matriarch of the trans community—and ends with a reference to generational transmission. In the thematic representation of the trans community's—individual and collective—historical experiences, the album allows trans people to imagine themselves as a family.

Ever since Maurice Halbwachs's (1997) [1950] work, the family has been considered a pivotal and privileged social framework in the construction and transmission of memories, which includes "different forms of mediation as well as the transnational circulation of memory" (Erl, 2011: 311).

In *Family Frames*, Marianne Hirsch (1997) analyzes how, ever since the invention of Kodak in 1888, albums and vernacular snapshots have become “the family’s primary instrument of self-knowledge and representation—the means by which family memory would be continued and perpetuated, by which the family’s story would be henceforth be told,” underpinning the ideology of the modern family (pp. 6–7).

However, the family photograph album has historically been “one of the most pernicious of affective technologies” (Brown and Davidmann, 2015: 190): it tends to erase LGBT+ subjectivities, considering them part of an uncomfortable past. For LGBT+ people, family photograph albums are an amnesia archive (Brown and Davidmann, 2015: 195), more than technologies for remembering. Nevertheless, the institution of the family based on biological bonds has been a key legitimizing and strategic resource for activism in post-dictatorship Argentina.

The social institution of the family was the main point of access to activism, and the language of the family and its different forms of mediation were therefore turned into a repertoire of protests ever since the 1970s. Think, for example, of the photos of the disappeared, taken from their IDs (then part of the same state archive) and from family albums; these photos were used in gatherings and are part of the repertoire of protest of the Mothers and Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo (Longoni, 2010). In this way, the ideology and language of the family was used for building activist networks. Elizabeth Jelin (2008) has argued that biological and genetic bonds were used as (exclusionary) forms of political legitimation, intervention, and activism: she called this “familism.” The latter explains the tensions between LGBT+ and human rights organizations: “[F]or the Mothers [of Plaza de Mayo] we are not the perfect children they wanted” (Bellucci, 2020: 71), one of the leaders of the movement, Carlos Jáuregui, said in the 1980s. Hence, the ideology of the family originally cut LGBT+ people out from the “wounded national family” and the country’s main activist movements.

However, in her seminal work on mourning in post-dictatorship Argentina, Cecilia Sosa (2014) shows how family activist groups gradually expanded the language of kinship, exceeding the biological sphere and creating “feelings of kinship” that go beyond the bloodline. Mothers reacted to the wound caused by state violence and to the rupture in the biological lineage by gradually constructing a political, chosen family that shared the struggle for truth and justice and the affective work of mourning: in this way, the bonds underpinning the construction of the family shifted from the biological to the affective. This has allowed activist movements, at least since the late 2000s, to move away from “conventional conceptions of kinship” (Sosa, 2014: 15) for activism, which the AMT seems to have grasped in the 2000s, thanks to its founder Baudracco.

The vital importance of having access to the language of the family is clearly pointed out by Correa (2018):

Indeed, yes, there was activism before activism. Fellow activists who went missing, killed by police, who were not claimed by anyone, because they did not have a family, because, at that time [if] they threw you out of the home, you had already died for that family. So, we were going to claim [the bodies], but they did not give you the body because you were not a direct relative. So many pretended to be aunts, sisters, or went with a lawyer, Ángela Vanni, who was a key figure because she could claim the bodies, otherwise they were buried as NN.

In Correa’s words, using the language of the family was therefore strategic: a fundamental tool for trans activists on a symbolic, affective, and also practical level.

In his illuminating analysis of the 2017 AMT exhibition at the Haroldo Conti Center, Cole Rizki (2020a) describes how the AMT’s drew on “familiar grammars of loss and belonging.” Through the appropriation of the language of the family and its cultural forms, the AMT elaborates a truly

political claim, a means of gaining access to a form of the social, and to an entire repertoire of memory and memory activism: the family as a social framework for remembering and also protesting. However, Rizki sees in the tension between “the image’s celebratory iconography” and the exhibition’s title (“This one left, this one was killed, this one died”), which enumerates losses and absences, the space between “images and their [of depicted people] now haunting presence” (Rizki, 2020a: 200). Pictures speak of the violence that “often lurks behind the photographed smile” (Phu and Brown, 2014: 350) and of the “shadow history of corporeal and subjective violence” (Brown and Davidmann, 2015: 193).

An example of what I call the “affective gap” between the conventional meaning of what we see—a snapshot representing a happy family context or using celebratory iconography—and the meanings conveyed by the AMT’s narratives in titles and descriptions is offered by the exhibition *Siempre estuvimos ahí*, which ran online in July 2020 during the first COVID-19 lockdown. The pictures are presented in online galleries that draw on the archival arrangement: childhood, daily life, exile, and birthdays. The gallery about daily life is introduced by the following quotation: “Although the police was waiting for us outside, in our houses—inside the confinement and clandestinely—we took pictures of our place of happiness.” The use of the word “confinement” (*encierro*) creates a resonance between the condition of the entire Argentinian population, forced to stay at home for almost all of 2020 owing to the pandemic, and the condition of trans people in the past, forced to stay at home during the day because of the police edicts.

By creating an affective gap between what we see of the past on the surface of a picture (smiles, hugs, kisses in a domestic context), what we learn from titles and descriptions of the context (the homeplace as a site of resistance against violence), and what we, as viewers, feel in the present of the lockdown (often publishing pictures similar to the AMTs on social media platforms), the AMT destabilizes the superficial convention of the representation of familiar happiness, critically entering into its master code for conveying new meanings: “unfixing qualities” of the language of the family, to use Hirsch’s terminology. This affective gap allows for a sense of vulnerability and precarity to prick the superficial convention of the representation of the “happy family” and resonate with the viewers’ vulnerability, confined in their home during the lockdown, paving also the way for a possible process of identification.

The AMT’s book offers us a further example of the adaptation of memory practices through the appropriation of the language of the family in the list of nicknames printed on the two flaps that frame the book. The focus on names and naming is closely connected to activist causes in post-dictatorship Argentina, in terms of both the right to identity and the right to memory. Disappearance as a practice of repression was the notorious trademark of the last Argentinian dictatorship and, in general, of the dictatorships in the Southern Cone under the US-backed campaign “Operation Condor.” It entailed a systematic violation of the right to be remembered for the 30,000 disappeared and of the right to an identity—that is, a name, family relationships, and public records—for the estimated 500 children who were born while their mothers were in captivity and illegally “appropriated” by the perpetrators and their families. Human rights activists have collected information to reconstruct the biographies of individual victims and to locate the children—now adults—of the disappeared, who have lived unaware of the truth about their parents and their own real names. For this purpose, different actors have created archives, databases, monuments, textual and artistic artifacts, and commemorative occasions: forms of archival activism and memory activism as previously defined. Examples of such acts of remembrance include the National Day for the Right to Identity (October 22)—celebrating the activism of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo in their search for their kidnapped grandchildren and for the restoring of their identities and their original names—and the listing of names of the disappeared, as epitomized by the walls of the

Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires, where the names of the victims are engraved (Demaria and Salerno, 2017).

In its Facebook group, the AMT asked members to give their names and nicknames after gender transitioning, as well as the names and nicknames of their friends and loved ones. More than 600 names were gathered into lists on different occasions, including the abovementioned book. The names and nicknames are preceded by “la,” the Spanish female of the definite article “the.” The continuous repetition of “la” gives the list a certain musicality, while the continuous use of the female article genders the practice of listing names. The playful nature of the nicknames and the musicality of the list thus queer a memorial practice for the mourning victims of the dictatorship and also a bureaucratic practice (registering a person’s identity and name). The AMT appropriates and resignifies the practice of listing and claiming names for one of its causes: to claim and celebrate the right to identity as the right to a gender identity. In other words, the right to a publicly recognized and registered name that chimes with one’s own identity in both the private and the public sphere.

In this way the AMT constitutes also a sort of counterarchive to the State’s register of persons (*Registro Nacional de las personas*). An archival, administrative, and legal practice (to register a person’s identity and name) is subverted by a celebratory tone that transforms it into a sort of poetic list (Eco, 2009). This connects the right to memory, a name and a biography for the victims of the dictatorship to the right to gender identity, identity documentation, and records for trans people. In the words of Jacques Rancière (1992), the logic of political emancipation implies “the denial of an identity given by another, given by the ruling order of policy” (p. 62), or what I call, after Foucault, a *subject formation through subjection*, which in the case of the AMT is the name given at birth and registered by the authorities; political emancipation, instead, means celebrating the name chosen by oneself and by the community, aligned with gender identity. What I have defined a *subject formation through subjectivation* is exactly what the AMT makes possible through its local epistemology and social ontology of the subject.

## Conclusion

Engaging with the archival work of the AMT, this article has shown how memory activism enters into the ossified structures of traditional and institutional languages to reconfigure meanings in support of a cause. I have called this capacity of activists to generate epistemological and ontological changes in the present through their archival and memory work an “instituting force.”

The creation of a system of categories for the arrangement and description of records is not just a practical tool for organizing pictures. On one hand, the archival architecture lends itself to be used by trans people as a frame to recognize themselves as members of a community and to resignify their past in political terms: to fight against police violence was activism before activism; home was a site of resistance; life abroad was exile and a form of survival. On the other hand, by bringing together different events and different life stories within a common frame, the archive incorporates individual stories into the collective memory of the Argentinian trans social movement.

Stemming from archival work, the appropriation of the language of the family in its curatorial work is pivotal to the AMT. The language of the family allows the AMT to position the trans movement inside the memory framework of the Argentinian post-dictatorship movement for truth, memory, and justice; tapping into forms of representation that are immediately recognizable by a general public, namely that of the conventional domestic scene, the AMT generates new meanings that support trans activist causes.

As written in the blurb of their book and family album, “[this book is], finally, for the new generations that are going to inherit all this archival material. We hope they can take care of and love

this archive like we have been doing in all those years.” If memory activism is not only the struggle of social actors to produce cultural memory but also the struggle to steer future remembrance, the appropriation of the language of the family bends the idea of memory transmission for a cause not based on biological bonds but on affective and political ones: forms of activist kinship.

To study the case of the AMT requires a deepening of the dialogue between cultural memory studies and archival studies for the purpose of exploring memory activism. Through the category of instituting force, I have described the capacity of memory activism to enter into already existing languages and archival practices—which are sustained by the institutional force of social actors, like the State or the family—to open their structures and turn these semiotic configurations into support of activist causes. This produces ontological and epistemological effects, as a result of which new perspectives on the past and, consequently, new forms of possible subjectivation and identification in the present are made available for people who have been pushed into categories of non-being by institutional violence.

## Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and publication of this article: Research for this article was financially supported by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions under grant agreement 840302: MemoRights - Cultural Memory in LGBT Activism for Rights.

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## Notes

1. My gratitude goes to two research groups that accompanied the elaboration of this article. In the Netherlands, the group led by Ann Rigney at Utrecht University for the ERC project “Remembering Activism: The Cultural Memory of Protest in Europe—ReAct,” with Tashina Blom, Duygu Erbil, Sophie van den Elzen and Clara Vlessing; in Argentina, the group of the Workshop Virtual de Investigación sobre Memoria Social e Historia Reciente del Núcleo de Estudios sobre Memoria, led by Claudia Feld, Julieta Lampasona, Luciana Messina, and Valentina Salvi. Finally, I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and suggestions.
2. From the documentary *Memoria Reveladas* (dir. Worthington, 2019), on the history of the AMT.
3. In this article, I will use the word *trans* both as an umbrella term for those people who move away from the gender identity they were assigned at birth (Stryker, 2017: 13) and as a “political umbrella” term (Wayar, 2019: 42) for designing a social movement composed of different subjectivities. This will allow me to gather “transhistorical and transcultural practices under the same banner” for the analysis of archival practices (Rawson, 2015: 544). In the Latin American context, a pivotal role is played by *travesti* people. The word *travesti* refers to those people who were assigned male at birth but who identify with the female gender and who, differently from transsexual people, do not necessarily envision genital surgery, destabilizing the sex–gender binary logic (Berkins, 2003).
4. According to trans activists, this law represents the restitution of Argentinian trans people’s rights and their full entry into democracy. For a thorough analysis of this groundbreaking law, see, in particular, the work of Emmanuel Theumer (2020).
5. [www.instagram.com/archivotrans/](http://www.instagram.com/archivotrans/); [www.facebook.com/archivotrans](http://www.facebook.com/archivotrans) (accessed 21 August 2021).
6. On the history of the *edictos policiales* see, in particular, Insausti (2015). For an analysis of historical temporalities and the blurred boundary between “democratic times” and “dictatorial times” emerging in LGBT+ memories, see Salerno (2017).
7. The exhibition was hosted on the Instagram account of the General Directorate of Culture of the Chamber of Deputies of the Argentine Nation, from 21 July to 30 July 2020, and is now available at: [www.hcdn.gob.ar/secparl/dcultura/agenda/2020/julio/trans](http://www.hcdn.gob.ar/secparl/dcultura/agenda/2020/julio/trans) (accessed 12 July 2022).

8. On the conceptual and lexical difference between “institution” and “constitution,” see also Esposito (2020: 167–168).
9. The category “jobs, professions, and trade” (*trabajos, profesiones y oficios*) was added during the writing of this article. This addition responds to the approval, between 2020 and 2021, of two laws meant to support trans people in getting access to the job market in the public and private sectors. This change speaks of the constructive and always evolving nature of the activist archive: it is organized not only for the purpose of documenting the past but also to support present struggles and envision changes for a better future (like equal access to the job market). In other terms, the categorization also reflects the activists’ causes in the present. It is very likely that these categories will be modified in the near future so as to reflect the recent inclusion in the organization of trans men, whose biographies and archival materials have their own peculiarities when compared with those pertaining to trans women.
10. This analysis draws on the online catalog (archivotrans.ar) and on the material the AMT shared during the workshop “La línea quebrada: clínica intensiva sobre prácticas archivísticas personales,” held on 10 and 11 March 2020, in Montevideo, before the inauguration of the exhibition *El tiempo de las flores* (Centro de Fotografía de Montevideo): <https://cdf.montevideo.gub.uy/actividad/la-linea-quebrada-clinica-intensiva-sobre-practicas-archivisticas-personales> (accessed 21 August 2021).
11. In 2018, the activists received an award from the Mexican Iberoamericana Sonora y Audiovisual program, which allowed them to receive archival training and arrange the material according to archival conventions.
12. <https://editorialchaco.com/producto/archivo-de-la-memoria-trans-argentina/> (accessed 21 August 2021).

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