The Future is Child's Play: A Trans, Intersex Theory of Anti-Development

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Abstract: This article argues that the recent, public focus on trans children in Argentina aims to integrate gender nonconformity into an ideology of national development. By tying trans children to familiar forms of national kinship like the Madres de Plaza de Mayo (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), the ruling class in Argentina frames a normative vision of trans life as the logical extension of neoliberal governmentality, a new "generation" of human rights recognition that erases state violence and promotes austerity under the guise of a "right to gender identity." Expanding on recent critiques of trans visibility, this essay proposes an extended model of "child's play" through close readings of Lucía Puenzo's *XXY* (2007), a film about a young intersex teenager rejecting impositions of genital surgery and hormones. Taking inspiration from Donald Winnicott's theorizations of childhood development, "The Future is Child's Play" advocates for an alternative understanding of queer domesticity and gender ambiguous becoming, one that actively combats the alignment of national transition with gender transition.

On August 11, 2021, a group of 70 *travestis*[i] and trans people organized a protest to deliver a petition to President Alberto Fernández of Argentina. In the written text, the protestors demanded that the President recognize the "systematic persecution" of *travestis*, well beyond the period of dictatorship (1976-1983) and into the present.[ii] Like many other activist groups in Buenos Aires, the organizers claimed that state violence and discrimination were ongoing, and that democratization had never truly been achieved. Though they conceded that the 2012 Gender Identity Law had given them a new form of partial recognition, they were insistent that it could not address the ongoing needs of trans and travesti people.[iii]

Part of the group's demands centered amendments to the rollout of reparations for about 20 trans and travesti people in 2018, a monumental win for activists that was intended to both recognize anti-trans violence in Argentina and establish a precedent for continuing payments. But funding and resources for *travestis* failed to materialize in subsequent years. Though some of the writers of the petition focused on granting reparations to more people, others emphasized an important distinction: age. Julieta González, also known by her nickname "La Trachy," said to journalist Matías Máximo at the protest:

> "Sabemos que este Gobierno tiene la intención de incluir a nuestro colectivo con el cupo trans y estamos agradecidas con Cristina, porque en su gestión se aprobó la Ley de Identidad que por primera vez nos reconoció como ciudadanas… Pero ahora estamos grandes, una cosa es salir a trabajar con 20 años y otra con 63, necesitamos que se acuerden de nosotras."
>
> We know that this administration intends to include our group in the trans quota [receiving reparations], and we're grateful to [past President] Cristina [Fernández de Kirchner] because under her management the Gender Identity Law was approved, recognizing us as citizens for the first time… But now we are older. It's one thing to go out and work when you're 20; it's another when you're 63. We need them to remember us.[iv]

La Trachy's insistence on a more specific recognition, as an older trans woman, is notable in part because it runs counter to much of the contemporary trans discourse and visibility in Argentina. As she acknowledges here, the 2012 Gender Identity Law (Ley de Identidad Género, LIG) was significant because it incorporated some trans people into documented citizenship, thereby giving them a track toward receiving reparations. But unlike the many public cases emphasizing trans youth and trans children in the last two decades, La Trachy highlights the exclusion of older travestis and trans women.

In his article interviewing La Trachy and the other organizers, Matías Máximo points out that many travestis were barred from access to school, healthcare, and employment during the dictatorship. For those attempting to find resources as they aged, the challenges only multiplied. With no education, dangerous side effects from black-market hormones, and no transferable employment skills, the violent exclusion of trans women only worsened over time. But La Trachy glosses over this history with a simple statement: "[w]e need them to remember us."

The failure of the 2012 Gender Identity Law, to recognize trans women like La Trachy, is, on the one hand, another symptom of neoliberal development in Argentina. As many scholars have pointed out, claims to democratization in the nation have erased both ongoing state violence in the present and the widespread removal of resources for Argentina's poor and working class. On the other hand, La Trachy's plea highlights a particular problem in current discourse about trans rights in Argentina, and by extension, trans recognition under the law. Given that organizers focused the passage of the 2012 Gender Identity Law on accessing reparations and material resources, how did trans women who survived the dictatorship get left behind? What has led to La Trachy's erasure, and why does she directly contrast herself with an abstract 20-year old subject? Pivoting away from several nations' recent focus on trans children coming of age, changing documentation, and accessing hormones, La Trachy references a much different history of trans in Argentina.

In the following sections, I trace a generational history of trans rights and periodization in Argentina with a focus on the appropriation, and potential reclamation, of trans childhood in state renditions of national development. In particular, I outline how the state's regulation of gender transition is used to strengthen ideologies of Argentina's national transition from dictatorship to democracy. As an alternative, I explore an anti-developmental I call "child's play," borrowed from Donald Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory of childhood development. To do so, I analyze Lucía Puenzo's *XXY* (2007), a film about a young intersex teenager rejecting impositions of genital surgery and hormones. *XXY* enables me to explore a trans, intersex theory of anti-development that exposes forms of neoliberal violence and refuses the alignment of national transition and gender transition.

Trans Rights and the Dangers of a Generation

Kinship has long been an important vehicle for travesti and trans activism in Argentina. In several exhibits and bound collections from *El Archivo de la Memoria Trans* (the Trans Memory Archive), organizers and curators have consistently emphasized the importance of family at multiple scales, from the chosen families established by trans women during the time of dictatorship (1974-1983) to the recent inclusion of travestis in national reckonings about the disappeared. With over 6,000 personal photographs and objects from trans and *travesti* people, the Trans Memory Archive (TMA) has helped propel the Archive's organizers into the national spotlight. As Cole Rizki notes, the TMA's framing of trans community "through everyday

grammars of kinship… puts pressure on existing national visual narratives of death and family loss during dictatorship that elide trans subjects."[v]

The TMA's repeated engagement with forms of family is strategic. Throughout national organizing efforts during the transition to democracy (1983-1989),[vi] the national emphasis on generational kinship played a central role in prosecuting state violence under the authoritarian regime known as the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (National Reorganization Process). Indeed, some of the most well-known human rights organizations like the Asociación Madres de Plaza de Mayo and Madres de Plaza de Mayo Linea Fundadora (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, 1977) featured the mothers of over 30,000 disappeared persons in a strategic mobilization of feminist organizing. Though many were and are critical of the Mothers' figuration of human rights politics,[vii] they have had a significant impact on subsequent organizing groups like HIJOS (Children for Identity and Justice against Oblivion and Silence),[viii] a group founded by the grandchildren of the disappeared in 1995. In advancing minimalist human rights frameworks, these groups aimed to name clear perpetrators in trials instituted during Raúl Alfonsín's presidency (1983-1989), but the dissolution of this process under Carlos Menem (1989-1999) shifted pursuits of legal justice to social condemnation and public memory projects.

Transitional entities like the National Commission on Disappeared Persons provided one institutional pathway to transitional justice in the 1990s. Partnering with the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, the Commission functioned as a kind of transit mechanism, "attempting to document and redress past acts of collective violence… by putting a record of that violence in an official archive, and offering an institutional process of conversion into non-violence."[ix] To gain access to some of this recognition, some trans activists pivoted toward models of national kinship, in alignment with feminist activism from the Madres to HIJOS.

Mariela Muñoz, for example, was famous for adopting twenty-three children during and after the period of dictatorship, leading her to become the first case of changes in documentation for a transgender person in Argentina. In 1997, after completing dozens of interviews about her role as a mother of lost children, the government officially granted her new documentation and recognition, the first instance of a trans person changing their ID in the nation.[x]

Since that time, organizers have continued to deploy familial tropes in representations of trans and travesti life in the early 2000s. Several groups like the Trans Memory Archive established a national presence through a discourse of domestic kinship and the quotidian. This focus on the "ordinary" lives of trans people strengthened recognition of anti-trans violence during dictatorship, helping to incorporate trans and travesti people into a national narrative of transitional justice.[xi] As a result in 2010, Argentina's National Congress began to consider a series of proposals explicitly focused on trans and travesti rights. This was a pivotal moment for queer and trans organizers, with several groups combining strategies for gay marriage legislation in 2010 with the Gender Identity Law of 2012. And in continuing narratives of trans kinship, the national discourse around both bills focused specifically on children. Using Mariela Muñoz as a precedent for trans figures in Argentina, several news outlets focused on Luana, an 8-year old trans girl who became a viral sensation for her efforts to change her legal name and gender. Headlines claimed she was "an international symbol of progress" and a "beacon of hope for Argentina."[xii]

Luana's treatment by transnational media and much of the Argentine press was reminiscent of some common transnormative tropes: a person assigned the wrong gender at birth, who knew from a young age that she was a girl, and who overcame

great adversity to "realize" her true self. It also reinforced a trans version of "reproductive futurism," a type of idealized future that incorporates difference for the sake of national development.[xiii] Luana's narrative found traction across national lines, especially in the Global North, where this type of trans developmentalism was especially familiar. But it also bolstered a framework of human rights that's been essential to Argentina's neoliberal rule.

Luana's story was ultimately appropriated into a narrative of national transition. Building on figures like Mariela Muñoz and the Madres movement that she aligned with, Luana seemed like the logical extension of a human rights movement continued. The integration of trans people into a national discourse of care necessitated an engagement with the language of kinship and generational movement from the Madres to HIJOS. This generational presentation of transitional politics in Argentina externalizes what John Beverley calls a "paradigm of disillusion [which] rests on a coming-of-age narrative." The resulting narration represents armed struggle from the 1960s as a "kind of romantic adolescence" and democratization as a period of "biological and biographical maturity."[xiv] According to Beverley, the paradigm of disillusion strengthens ideologies of human rights by representing neoliberalism as an "inevitable" stage of political and economic development.

Furthermore, these "progressive periodizing logics," writes Jennifer Ponce de León, "articulate a hegemonic aesthetics of violence that naturalizes the violence of class and (neo)colonial domination."[xv] Using developmental models of childhood and development then was a common feature in late 20th century historicization in Argentina because it helped "render invisible the continuities between Argentina's social order under authoritarian and neoliberal state regimes and the *complementariness* of these two forms of governmentality for maintaining class rule."[xvi] In this way, the dressing of national history in Argentina buried repeated forms of neoliberal domination beneath a narrative of growth and maturation, binding national development to narratives of childhood development.

These developmental logics have been used to historicize political changes across eras. If motherhood and the Madres de Plaza de Mayo could move the nation from dictatorship to democracy, it seemed only natural then that children like Luana could usher in a new generation that leaves the past behind. The appropriation of trans stories like Luana's aligned neoliberal developmentalism, as a national and economic ideology, with models of childhood development in Argentina. Inclusion of trans and gender nonconforming children, despite *no* changes in the ruling class or forms of support for the poor and working class, were used to mark Argentina as an "international symbol of progress."[xvii]

At the time of its passing, the Gender Identity Law was touted as the cutting edge of trans progress globally. As the first national legislation in the world to grant changes in documentation without hormone therapy or surgery, the Gender Identity Law established a precedent for forms of recognition shaped around a broad definition of transition. Still, many scholars and activists like Marlene Wayar have since pointed out its shortcomings. In its reinforcement of the male/female binary, the law ignored many Argentine subjects who identified as travesti. And although the law was amended to include a third gender category (marked as "X" on legal documents) in later years, the emphasis on a singular life change in documentation reinforced developmental narratives of becoming a recognizable gender under the law. The explicit hailing of a "right to identification" for trans children like Luana emphasized a developmental narrative that tied an abstract trans child to a neoliberal future, ignoring anti-trans violence that had led to public discussion of its passage in the first place.

Though the law did integrate some gender-affirming healthcare into public funding for the lowest-income tiers of healthcare in the nation, there were important aspects of that care that were dropped in authorship stages.[xviii] Two amendments which failed to pass in the final version are especially notable given the widespread interest in aligning trans children with national development. Originally proposed by the National Front for the Gender Identity Law (Frente Nacional por la Ley de Identidad de Género, FNXLIG), these amendments represent a reduction of children's autonomy despite the very public focus on gender nonconforming children: first, the second article, marking the age of consent at sixteen years (as opposed to the threshold of eighteen years that passed in the final version) and second, the ninth article, which I quote here in full:

> "[i]t remains prohibited that intersexual children and adolescents be intervened surgically due to their intersexuality by the sole decision of a doctor, guardian, or parents without taking into account the superior interest of the child or adolescent plainly and with their consent. Intersexuality does not constitute a pathology that needs be corrected clinically."[xix]

Both amendments aimed to grant greater agency to children, but notably, any mention of intersex children and their "superior interest" was erased. The explicit statement that intersexuality need not be "corrected" had promising effects not only for intersex people but for broader forms of gender embodiment. Though the passage of the LIG was groundbreaking in part because of a prolonged conversation with trans and travesti activists that led to its creation, there has been little to no discussion about the omission of intersex intervention in the final draft.

Such erasure in the name of trans recognition has long been documented by intersex scholars despite a common interest in combatting gendered violence. In their introduction to the "The Intersex Issue" of *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Michelle Wolff and her co-authors write of a consistent contrast between trans visibility and intersex invisibility:

> "[w]hereas trans-affirmative clinicians, parents, and patient advocates have developed and disseminated various models of gender affirming care for trans* kids and adults over the last several decades, no comparable model of 'intersex affirming care' has emerged. Clinicians continue to perform nonconsensual pediatric genital surgeries that violate patients' bodily autonomy" (144).

Put another way, Noah Ben-Asher writes that while trans people are barred from technologies of transition, intersex people struggle for freedom from the imposition of these interventions.[xx] Historically, these struggles have always been interconnected. In *Histories of the Transgender Child,* Jules Gill-Peterson demonstrates that much of transition-related technology for trans people has in fact been developed through non-consensual experimentation on intersex children.[xxi] Such techniques, largely connected to medical violence performed by John Money in the 1950s, have further been exported across the Global South and disseminated widely.[xxii]

Such a contrast points to two very different demands of state governments: the removal of gatekeeping for trans people, a more passive neoliberal reform, and the active prohibition of intersex genital surgeries without patient consent. The simultaneous surge of support for trans people and erasure of intersex life in Argentina then is no coincidence. As the Argentine state continues to instantiate neoliberal forms of governance, the focus on a passive removal of gatekeeping as opposed to the more

active prevention of surgeries aligns trans "progress" with increased austerity measures, the steady removal of welfare and public resources, and a refusal to acknowledge ongoing forms of state violence.

Much like the travesti critique of the LIG, Wolff et al. argue that the shift to "patient-centered care" in discussions of trans health promotes a model of neoliberal individualization and personal responsibility.[xxiii] It also further pathologizes people with anatomical sex variations, prompting scholars like Hil Malatino to argue that intersex can only be understood under the law as a disorder.[xxiv] He writes:

> "It is this demand to discover our 'true sexes' that gives intersex an intelligible position within the law while relegating the enactment of something like intersex subjectivity to the status of impossibility. One can be intersex but only if it's a trait or disorder" (53).

By tying intersex to a "disordered" neoliberal individual, laws like the LIG place intersex people in a perpetual state of underdevelopment. Advocating for a more nuanced conception of intersex life, Malatino writes that "it would be more useful to frame [intersex conditions]… as a social rather than a medical dilemma" (88). The emphasis here is not on ignoring intersex's connection to medical violence but instead to open up the complexities of intersex life beyond the limiting discourse of disorder and individual responsibility.

Taking inspiration from these scholars, I focus here on an extended reading of Lucía Puenzo's film, *XXY*, to explore the possibilities of an intersex kinship and life that escapes the capture of neoliberal developmentalism. Doing so not only moves intersex embodiment beyond "disorder" but also offers a potential rebuke to the appropriation of trans childhood for national development. Because developmental ideology aims to colonize both nations and subjects simultaneously,[xxv] I trace a potential anti-developmental practice in the subjective development of Puenzo's intersex protagonist, what I see as a potential launching point for anti-capitalist collectivity. This is primarily established through a form of "child's play," a term I borrow from psychoanalytic accounts of childhood development. Removing some of the boundaries around identity terms like queer, trans, and intersex, I highlight the collective development of protagonist Alex and their lover, Álvaro, as they combat the attempted incorporation into normative narratives of childhood (and national) development.

Though several texts across the last few decades examine forms of trans kinship in the Southern Cone, I stay at length here with a specifically intersex text to highlight unacknowledged state violence in the pursuit of trans "progress" and theorize anti-developmental practices from scenes of marginalization.[xxvi] Much like the intersex amendment to the LIG that goes unnoticed and erased, *XXY* highlights an aspect of gender nonconforming life that's received far less artistic attention. Lucía Puenzo named this an explicit goal of the film in an interview with *Cinema Without Borders*, saying, "I was surprised to see that there are almost no stories on this subject, there's a strange cultural silence over it. If [intersex] is explored it's in the language of testimony, of medical diagnosis, but with almost no fictions, as if the subject would be a taboo for any kind of poetry and fiction around it."[xxvii]

Moving through a cinematic representation then offers an anti-developmental imaginary that reappropriates gender nonconforming life away from neoliberal rule. Because the Argentine state has disciplined subjects through impositions on the domestic sphere, I aim here to outline forms of gender nonconforming life that refuse these regulations in an attempt to combat the violence of developmentalism. Accessing

"child's play" in this way suspends impingements of transnormativity and takes inspiration from the autonomy and imagination of gender nonnormative children.

State Motherhood and the Right to Illusion

Released in 2007, *XXY* follows 15-year-old intersex child, Alex Kraken, as they[xxviii] reject a series of bodily modifications including the continued use of hormones prescribed by their parents and a potential genital surgery.[xxix] Puenzo stages the film through constant seaside imagery: gray, black, and dark blue hues, the film moves from rocky coastlines to ports, docks, and outdoor turtle sanctuaries. Throughout the film, Puenzo's low lighting fills the background with shadows that seem to represent Alex's brooding anger and the family's fears about the future. Alex and their family have travelled from Buenos Aires to a small coastal town in Uruguay to "be far away from certain kinds of people" and consult with a surgeon about genital surgery. There, Alex meets their potential surgeon, Ramiro, a cold and brooding man who insists on the importance of Alex's "correction;" Ramiro's wife, Erika; and his son, Álvaro, a young questioning queer who admires Alex from afar while avoiding his father's homophobic abuse.

As the film progresses, Alex increasingly resists their family's insistence that they become a woman. They throw away pills, run away into a forest, and sabotage plans for surgery. Alex makes it clear that the parents' vision of their future is untenable. Meanwhile, Álvaro falls in love with Alex in a series of awkward and fleeting exchanges. While trying to fight off the bodily and psychic management of both pairs of parents, Alex and Álvaro come to find refuge in a shared space of experimentation. Both fight to escape the impositions of their families who find themselves at odds over Alex's future.

On one side are Álvaro's parents: his father, Ramiro, and his mother, Erika, as well as Alex's mother, Suli, who frames the surgery as a matter of life and death. On the other is Alex's father, Néstor, the only adult in the film who questions surgery and hormones and seeks out advice from other sources. According to Suli, the only guarantee of safety is through bodily modification and normative gender integration. When explaining her decision to move the family from Buenos Aires to the coast of Uruguay, Suli takes Álvaro's parents to a bleak and rocky beach, the place where she reveals she got pregnant with Alex. She crosses her arms, smokes a cigarette, and explains moodily, "I was always afraid somebody would see us. I was worried somebody would drive by and see us and ask 'Is it a boy or a girl?' It's the first thing they ask in the clinic. Is it a boy or a girl?"

Returning to what she sees as Alex's origin, Suli places Alex's life on a familiar timeline of assimilation and development. Her decision to leave the urban center for a more isolated periphery works to place Alex in an appropriate space of underdevelopment so that they may begin the proper transition into gender-normative subject. Puenzo makes clear the normative timeline that Suli aims to shape: from gender ambiguous to cis-passing (so Suli believes), from satellite to metropole, from hidden to visible, and from child to adult. Though presented as care for Alex's safety, Suli's rendition understands Alex's life solely in terms of medical violence, here a type of surveillance that Toby Beauchamp warns us "focuses first on individuals' legibility as transgender, and then following medical interventions, on their ability to conceal any trans status or gender deviance."[xxx] The proper future, and the proper subjectivity, she argues, is for Alex to be a woman.

Throughout the film, Alex is quick to point out the violence being enacted. When Álvaro tries to present his father's work as rehabilitation, Alex cuts him off.

> Alex: Have you ever been?
> Álvaro: Where?
> Alex: To surgery. To see the butchering.
> Álvaro: He doesn't butcher people. He fixes them. He does boob jobs and noses for money, but he prefers the other stuff.
> Alex: Such as?
> Álvaro: I don't know, deformities. Guys born with eleven fingers. My dad takes off the extra one.
> Alex: And eats it.
> Álvaro: I'm serious. It's not a joke.
> Alex: You said he didn't butcher bodies.

Alex refuses Álvaro's narrative of reparative savior. Rather than accepting the transformation of butchery into helpful normalization, Alex insists on a barbarity and cannibalism in Ramiro. They explicitly frame Ramiro's work in terms of consumption, a narrative of coercive surgery that highlights Ramiro's need to bolster his own subjectivity as benevolent patriarch. The final developmental stage for Alex then is butchery, the extinguishment of an underdeveloped past in the name of a developed adulthood. Given the public focus on trans children at the time of *XXY*'s release, Alex's insistence on integration as violence provides a biting critique of neoliberal human rights in Argentina. Alex's development and the parents' impositions scales quickly from the private individual to narratives of national belonging.

But throughout the film, Alex and Álvaro explore their bodies and attractions beyond the discipline of their parents. After multiple scenes of flirtation and teasing, Alex and Álvaro eventually have sex in the attic of an abandoned house. The scene has little dialogue, the two children crawling and kissing. Briefly, Alex tells Álvaro "No tengo nada" ("I don't have anything") to which Álvaro quickly responds "Me gusta. (I like it)." Álvaro reaches down Alex's pants, but they stop him and turn him over. Alex fucks Álvaro, revealed in a series of partial body shots. Minutes later, it's revealed that Alex's father, Néstor, is watching. The two separate, Alex crying in the attic and Álvaro running away. But for a blissful few minutes, the children explore their bodies without the pressures of their parents. Alex tops, something their parents later deem too closely associated with a boy, and Álvaro bottoms, ostensibly confirming his father's fear that he might be gay. The devastation of the scene is the realization of these conclusions through Néstor's gaze. The scene suddenly materializes the parents' fears, but it's not actually clear whether any of it is true. Alex and Álvaro's identifications are ambiguous, destabilizing any clear categorization of gender or sexuality. What's more, their pleasure is first articulated as lack, "No tengo nada," but quickly evolves into segmented shots of the body, the only sounds a grunt or breath.

Over the course of the film, Alex and Álvaro cycle through a similar sequence. They flirt, touch, and endure hostile impositions from their parents. But one of the film's final scenes offers an alternative reading, beyond a predetermined development and coerced subjectivity. As Alex prepares to leave the desolate seaside, they sit with Álvaro for one final exchange. The two now share an intimate history, having confessed their love for one another, anger, bitterness, and grit in the face of violence. As a final goodbye, Alex asks Álvaro, "What do you regret the most? Not seeing me again, or not having seen it? Do you want to see?" When Álvaro fails to respond, Alex lowers their pants. Álvaro frowns and stares. He looks again at Alex's face and stays silent before his father pulls him away.

Because much of the film's drive comes from an obsession with Alex's genitalia, the scene ought to serve as a sort-of climax. The visual capture, the classic trope of a gender nonconforming person's genitalia revealed, has finally been granted. And yet here, Puenzo shows restraint. She obscures our view, refusing to show us Alex's body. The effect is a deflated climax full of negative affect. Álvaro is quiet. He's unsure how to respond to the question, is *this* what he "always wanted." Here, the promise of desire through the visual fails to materialize, both for the viewer and for Álvaro.

As Toby Beauchamp notes, the act of "revealing" a person's genitalia has been closely associated with exposing a person's supposedly "real" gender or sex.[xxxi] Iain Morland adds that society's visual obsession with genitalia claims to promise a moment of satisfying confirmation, a moment when subjects can figure the production of self and other through a potential alignment with the gender binary.[xxxii] But here the confirmation and the pleasure it promises, fails. Instead, we realize, the only joy in the film comes from brief scenes of escape for Alex and Álvaro together, not the final development of the relationship nor the grand reveal. Indeed Alex and Álvaro's greatest moment of pleasure is filtered through a language of emptiness: "No tengo nada." Here, the "real"—overwhelmed by an ideology of development and visual violence—is displaced in favor of the unknown.

What Alex and Álvaro create in its place is a space of play that includes their sexual exploration in the attic, awkward fits of dancing, confessions, and running in the woods. The telos is unimportant, and in fact, what causes the greatest pain for both children. Taken together, these scenes indicate for me a queer form of "child's play": an acknowledgement and anticipation of violence combined with a commitment to lateral recognition between the two children.

Alex and Álvaro's collaborative "unknown" calls to mind scholarship about childhood development in psychoanalysis. Taking inspiration from travesti activist and scholar, Marlene Wayar,[xxxiii] I read the intimacy between Alex and Álvaro as a revision to psychoanalytic theories of development in addition to the generational periodization of human rights politics in Argentina. "Play," according to Donald Winnicott, in early stages enables children to move from an inability to differentiate between self and other to a stage of greater development, or, the capacity to distinguish between the self and the outside world. In his theory of the "good enough mother," he writes that the mother helps a child develop through a process of weaning: a transitional object (like a blanket or a stuffed animal) stands in for the mother as the child gradually learns what objects are "not me." The eventual goal of a transitional space is that the child learns to recognize the mother and the "real" world as external to the self, giving the child a sense of independence and subjectivity. Transitional objects help accomplish this psychic fulfillment by enabling the child to first identify the mother with the object, exert control over that object, and finally learn that the object (and by extension, the mother) is not a part of the child's selfhood.

Central to this process is illusion: a space created by both mother and child that gives the child the ability to control and define external objects (like the blanket) and eventually explore the possibility that the mother is part of the external world. He writes:

> "[t]he intermediate area to which I am referring is the area that is allowed to the infant between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality testing. The transitional phenomena represent the early stages of the use of illusions, without which there is no meaning for the human being in the idea of a

> relationship with an object that is perceived by others as external to that being."[xxxiv]

Later, Winnicott adds,

> "This early stage in development is made possible by the mother's special capacity for making adaptation to the needs of her infant, thus allowing the infant the illusion that what the infant creates really exists. This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience[.]"[xxxv]

In order for the child to move through these development phases, Winnicott argues that the child's "intermediate area of experience" go "unchallenged" as they move through the use of illusions. Doing so enables the child to remain in a state of play and work toward greater understandings of self and other.

I'm especially interested here in Winnicott's insistence that a transitional space (the "space of play") go unchallenged and provide an object for the child to control. To define the self and the external world, the developing child must be able to distinguish a transitional object, slowly understanding what is considered "me" and "not me." Furthermore, illusion here is more than adolescent fantasy, it's an essential tool, "without which there is no meaning for the human being."

Winnicott's model is especially useful for understanding two competing visions of development in *XXY*. If we understand Ramiro and Suli as invested in a type of normative, integrationist development for Alex, we can see the failure to provide a "good enough mother" in Winnicott's framing. The space of play, complete with illusions for Alex to explore, is challenged by both sets of parents. Alex cannot maintain control over objects, and they cannot freely explore conceptions of the self. Even more striking in *XXY*'s portrayal of normative development, is that Alex's *body* is presented as the transitional object. The transitioning body has become the transitional object, not blanket or stuffed animal, but a body being controlled by multiple parties.

Because Ramiro and Suli aim to take control over Alex's body without their consent, a split occurs between Alex's subjectivity and their body as object. While Alex tries to exert control over the transitional object, to understand what is "me" and what is "not me," they are immediately met with discipline and control. The process of distinguishing self and other is interrupted. Rather than leaving the space of play unchallenged, Alex's parents wrest control over their body, ruining the very possibility that they insist on: a normatively developed subject with distinctions between self and external world. Instead Alex learns that their body is being disciplined by an external reality. Testing has only led to limitations and an ambiguous self.

Alex and Álvaro, however, establish a different development. While Alex's body is framed as a transitional object by the parents and surgeon, the only real moments of "play" and object control for Alex are in their interactions with Álvaro. The "illusion" they create when Alex and Álvaro have sex—"I don't have anything" and "I like it"—provides a space of play, enabling Alex to distinguish self from other (in this case, Álvaro). It is only in this shared space of intimacy that Alex manages to retain their body as *both* self and external object. The outside impositions from their parents effectively functions as Winnicott's "objective perception," but as the final climax demonstrates, it's not clear this is a desirable development. Instead what Alex has learned is an external "reality" imposed by their parents.

XXY then seems to suggest that the space of play be maintained without end. Throughout the film, Alex's "reality testing" with Álvaro leads not to a distinction between self and other but rather an objecthood defined by parental expectation and a subjectivity defined by exploration. This alternative form of development offers a novel take on trans visibility and national development, one that separates gender nonconformity from conditions of assimilation and integration. Read in this way, the climax of the film suggests that Alex hold onto the space of play forever. Though Alex is made aware of the external forces impinging on their play, they find solace in controlling their body in relation to Álvaro. Here a model of trans and intersex "child's play" offers a different developmental timeline: the maintenance of control over a transitional object (Alex's body), the balance of both subject and object simultaneously (both "me" and "not-me"), and the refusal to let go of the experimental "illusion" (the sexual exploration between both children).

Though Winnicott suggests that illusions are temporary and immaterial, Puenzo makes a case for a much more extended instantiation of illusion. Taking seriously Alex and Álvaro's sex scene of "lack," I want to suggest instead that "illusion" might instead operate as a form of gender nonnormative practice, one that is still rooted in the physical and relational, but that moves beyond the linguistic limitations of gender recognition.

Rather than rejecting all narratives about gender non-conforming children in popular discourse, *XXY* provides a model of anti-development that re-appropriates trans childhood away from a framing of human rights under the LIG and state recognition. Alex and Álvaro name parental intervention as gendered violence—the "barbarity" and "cannibalism" of Ramiro—but they also manage to create something else. In the failed climax, Álvaro literalizes Marquis Bey's "decline to state."[xxxvi] His silence about Alex's big reveal subverts the demand for a "yes or no" around trans recognition in Argentina. The real excitement generated by the film rests with Alex and Álvaro's play: a collectively established space of experimentation that enables them to see each other in a new light without the demand for a developed subject. Alex's telos is de-emphasized; the parents' projection, rejected. Here we're left with a new vision of being and relation.

Still, there are moments of Alex's gendered exploration that seem to suggest a dependence on the reduction of others, rather than the more mutual recognition we see with Álvaro. As Katie Goss points out, the mise-en-scéne in *XXY* is saturated with figurines, dolls, sculptures, and images that point to Alex's experimentation with body and gender.[xxxvii] One set of props appears repeatedly: a standing, dark-skinned doll with long hair and a cigarette between its legs; a blue-haired, wide-eyed doll with no arms and the label "ALEX" across its chest; and a very small, pale doll housed in a small bell jar. In her reading of the dolls, Goss helpfully explains that "Alex's plastic arts gesture toward alternative interpretive logics by which the body's composition is generated by its own productions."[xxxviii] And while I agree with this reading, I worry that Alex's dolls also point to a buried history of racism in Argentina, given especially my readings of Alex's transition in dialogue with Argentina's national development.

Literally relegated to the background, the dark-skinned doll with a cigarette in place of its genitalia could register briefly that Alex is in fact understanding the self through a partial understanding of the buried racial other in Argentina, the mestizo and/or indigenous subject. As Mariela Eva Rodríguez argues, the supposed 'disappearance' of the Tehuelche and Mapuche peoples in Argentina was formulated through an explicit suppression of the category mestizo in the mid-twentieth century.[xxxix] Others have noted neoliberalism's continued erasure of race in the 21st century in Argentina in an effort to whiten the nation. That being said, it's difficult to

find other moments in the film that suggest *XXY* is explicitly grappling with this history and its connection to gender formation. But the presence of racialization in the background serves as a useful reminder that Alex and Álvaro's space of play is not without history or context. Instead just as Alex and Álvaro combat ideologies of national development in the neoliberal contemporary, they too are not without connections to Argentina's racist past.

Released in 2007, *XXY* came out at a time of pronounced public discourse about trans kinship in Argentina. By rejecting not only the continued imposition of intersex surgeries but also an ideology of national transition, the film imbues notions of "chosen family" with a new radical possibility. Child's play and illusion enable a non-telelological form of anti-development: flexible, mobile, and disinvested in a neoliberal future.

If children like Luana represent a bright and gleaming future, women like La Trachy and Mariela Muñoz are locked into the period of dictatorship. With the granting of limited reparations, the state effectively relegates the lives of many travestis and trans women to the past. As a narrative form forced to coalesce in service of the nation, this generational model of recognition ties the regulation of Alex's body and gender to a continued reliance on neoliberal development in Argentina. It also offers a trans subjectivity predicated solely on strengthening the nation's transition to democracy.

The alternative model of child's play, introduced here by *XXY*, separates trans childhood from human rights politics in Argentina by outlining a new model of relation and becoming. Alex and Álvaro refuse integration and the dissolution of illusion. In the final scene between them, we see both children understand the limits of "objective reality" and the violent process of subjectification. Álvaro's decline to state frames trans child's play as praxis. In fighting against a developmental telos, Alex and Álvaro offer a potential pushback against the nationalist exploitation of trans children. Child's play combats the appropriation of trans children like Luana into a sanitized history of state violence; imbues trans kinship with a new form of belonging that resists assimilation; and combats an identitarian future, blurring the distinctions between gay, trans, and intersex. Perhaps here then is a right that Alex and Álvaro push us towards, not the right to gender identity, but instead the right to play.

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[i] "Travesti" is a regionally specific term used to describe racialized, trans-feminine, gender nonconforming people in Latin America including Argentina, Chile, Brazil, and Peru. In Argentina, the late travesti activist, Lohana Berkins, distinguishes travesti from transgender, saying that "transgender comes from theoretical work developed within the North American academy." She further defines travesti as a political identification that "has been and continues to be used as a synonym for [an] AIDS-ridden, criminal, scandalous, infectious, and marginal subject." (Lohana Berkins, "Travestis: Una Identidad Política," in *Paper Presented at the Conference "VIII Jornadas Nacionales de Historia de Las Mujeres/III Congreso Iberoamericano de Estudios de Género Diferencia Desigualdad: Construirnos En La Diversidad"* (Villa Giardino, Córdoba, Argentina, 2006).). Travesti explicitly invokes a politics of class revolt and anti-imperialism.

[ii] Matías Máximo, "Travestis y Trans Mayores Pidieron Una Reparación Histórica Frente a Casa Rosada," *El Diario AR*, 2021.

[iii] The 2012 Gender Identity Law or "Ley de Identidad de Género," Ley 26.743 Establécese El Derecho a La Identidad de Género de Las Personas" (2012). Established what the Argentina National Congress called the right to gender identity. Authored in partnersip with several trans and travesti organizations and collectives, the law removed several barriers to changing legal name and gender on state documents. It also included an explicit process for children under the age of 18 to change name and gender only with the written support of a lawyer.

[iv] Translation my own. Máximo, "Travestis y Trans Mayores Pidieron Una Reparación Histórica Frente a Casa Rosada."

[v] Cole Rizki, "Familiar Grammars of Loss and Belonging: Curating Trans Kinship in Post-Dictatorship Argentina," *Journal of Visual Culture* 19, no. 2 (August 1, 2020): 197–211.

[vi] I mark the end of the transition here with Carlos Menem's presidency and decision to pardon all officers serving sentences for human rights abuses during the dictatorship. I write more about the temporalization of transition in Argentina later in the chapter.

[vii] Ari Gandsman, "The Limits of Kinship Mobilizations and the (A)Politics of Human Rights in Argentina," *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (July 1, 2012): 193–214.

[viii] The full name of HIJOS is "Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio."

[ix] Randall Williams, *The Divided World: Human Rights and Its Violence*, *Radical Philosophy*, 2010.

[x] Patricio Simonetto and Johana Kunin, "Mariela Muñoz: Citizenship, Motherhood, and Transsexual Politics in Argentina (1943–2017)," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (November 1, 2021): 516–31, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9311102.

[xi] Rizki, "Familiar Grammars of Loss and Belonging: Curating Trans Kinship in Post-Dictatorship Argentina," (201-202).

[xii] Peter Prengaman, "For Transgender Community, Argentine Girl a Sign of Hope," Associated Press, 2015, https://apnews.com/article/552f4517397f491aba297f17cd27b921.

[xiii] Lee Edelman, "The Future Is Kid Stuff: Queer Theory, Disidentification, and the Death Drive," *Narrative* 6, no. 1 (1998): 18–30.

[xiv] John Beverley, "Latinamericanism after 9/11" (Duke University Press, August 1, 2011). 99.

[xv] Jennifer Ponce De Léon, *Another Aesthetics Is Possible* (Duke University Press, 2021).

[xvi] Ponce De Léon. Italics in original.

[xvii] Prengaman, "For Transgender Community, Argentine Girl a Sign of Hope."

[xviii] Christoph Hanssmann, "Epidemiological Rage: Population, Biography, and State Responsibility in Trans- Health Activism," *Social Science & Medicine* 247 (2020): 112808.

[xix] Martín De Mauro Rucovsky and Ian Russell, "The *Travesti* Critique of the Gender Identity Law in Argentina," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 2 (May 1, 2019): 223–38.

[xx] Noa Ben-Asher, "The Necessity of Sex Change: A Struggle for Intersex and Transsex Liberties," SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, January 1, 2006).

[xxi] Jules Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

[xxii] Zine Magubane, "Spectacles and Scholarship: Caster Semenya, Intersex Studies, and the Problem of Race in Feminist Theory," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 3 (March 2014): 778.

[xxiii] Michelle Wolff, David A. Rubin, and Amanda Lock Swarr, "The Intersex Issue: An Introduction," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (May 1, 2022): 144.

[xxiv] Hil Malatino, *Queer Embodiment: Monstrosity, Medical Violence, and Intersex Experience*, *Somatechnics*, vol. 11 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 53.

[xxv] María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development*, ed. Walter D. Mignolo, Irene Silverblatt, and Sonia Saldívar-Hull (Duke University Press, 2003).

[xxvi] In my book, titled *Still / Life*: *The Trans Art of Anti-Development*, I read *XXY* in a much longer history of texts on trans and travesti kinship including César Aira's *Como me hice monja* (*How I became a nun*, 1993) and Camila Sosa Villada's *Las malas* (*Bad girls*, 2019).

[xxvii] Bijan Tehrani, "An Interview with Lucia Puenzo, Director of XXY," *Cinema Without Borders* (blog), February 20, 2008, https://www.cinemawithoutborders.com/1477-an-interview-with-lucia-puenzo-director-of-xxy/.

[xxviii] Though most characters refer to Alex using she/her pronouns, Alex's father Néstor begins to use he/him(/son) pronouns by the end of the film, in accordance with Alex's shifting bodily priorities. To reflect this ambiguity, I use they/them pronouns when referring to Alex for the remainder of the essay.

[xxix] According to the film, Alex was born with both "male" and "female" genitals, though they have primarily presented as female, using medicines to suppress masculine features. Near the beginning of the film, Alex reveals that they have recently stopped taking medication, which will cause them to develop more "masculine" bodily features.

[xxx] Toby Beauchamp, "Artful Concealment and Strategic Visibility: Transgender Bodies and U.S . State Surveillance After 9/11" 6, no. 4 (2009): 357.

[xxxi] Toby Beauchamp, *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and U.S. Surveillance Practices* (Duke University Press, 2019), 32-33.

[xxxii] Iain Morland, "Intersex Surgery between the Gaze and the Subject," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (May 1, 2022): 160–71, https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9612781.

[xxxiii] Marlene Wayar, *Travesti: Una Teoría Lo Suficientemente Buena* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Muchas Nueces, 2018).

[xxxiv] D. W. Winnicott, "Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena—A Study of the First Not-Me Possession," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34 (1953): 95.

[xxxv] Winnicott.

[xxxvi] Marquis Bey, *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

[xxxvii] Katie Goss, "Intersex's New Materialism: More-than-Binary Bio-Logics in Lucia Puenzo's XXY," *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (May 1, 2022): 228–47.

[xxxviii] Goss, 241.

[xxxix] Rodríguez, Mariela Eva "'Invisible Indians,' 'Degenerate Descendants': Idiosyncrasies of Mestizaje in Southern Patagonia," in *Rethinking Race in Modern Argentina* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 126–54.