

The Silencing and the Vocalization of the Transgender Latin American Identity and the
Transgender Latinx Identity

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Introduction

The oppression of a minority group can be characterized by a state of silencing, in which individuals of this identity find their opinions, desires, needs, and livelihoods to be ignored, disregarded, overlooked, or attacked. At best, it is the suppression of the minority identity or opinion in the face of the majority, and at worst, it is the direct assault of the minority as an enforcement of the power held by the constructed majority. The concept of voice, or the agency by which individuals express such, becomes hugely vital in the discussion of minority rights and advocacy. The concept of voice exists as more than the expression of an individual. Vocalization – when viewed as the dual process of both speaking and being heard – acts as “means of escape

from stratification and suppression” as the individual finds themselves momentarily re-granted their humanity when, after speaking endlessly into a void, they are finally heard (Anastasia 262). Worldwide, characteristics of gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status can be grounds for the partial or complete loss of voice as a representation of loss of humanity, each acting independently and intersecting to form distinctive and uniquely oppressed identities.

For the purpose of this paper, I look specifically at the silencing experienced by transgender Latin American and Latinx individuals and their responding attempts at vocalization. The transgender Latin American/Latinx identity encompasses a multitude of intersections of the characteristics listed above, hinging on two specific identities: a transgender gender identity and a Latin American or Latinx racial or ethnic identity. These individuals may be widely varied in terms of other identities, but their gender identity and their racial or ethnic identity dictates their inclusion in this demographic. Gender identity refers to deep feelings of alignment with a certain identification within the constructed web of gender that may or may not match the individual’s gender assigned at birth (Lennon and Mistler 64). A transgender individual is one whose gender identity does not match their assigned gender at birth. Within this paper, the term transgender will refer to any genderqueer individual – any degree of detachment from identification with assigned gender whether within the binary or not. Binary identities refer to transitions from male to female or female to male, abbreviated MTF and FTM respectively. However, many transgender individuals fall outside of the binary, falling under a nonbinary or purely genderqueer identity. The number of facets of transgender identity cannot be covered here, as within the categories of binary and nonbinary there are an unlimited number of specific identities; ultimately, for this paper, the term transgender will refer to anyone with a gender identity at all different from their gender assigned at birth. Because I am writing about binary and nonbinary individuals, in order

to be nonbinary inclusive, I will use gender neutral language when referring to individuals of this demographic, including the term Latinx rather than Latino/a.

The variety of gender identity then intersects with an equally varied racial and/or ethnic identity of Latin American or Latinx, referring to individuals of Latin American descent. This identity includes anyone who identifies racially or ethnically as Latin American or Latinx whether or not they live in a Latin American country currently. The specific region or regions or country or countries one may be from or the degree of lightness or darkness of one's skin may have a significant impact on the extent of their oppression and on their ability to vocalize. The Latin American identity serves to unify a group of people that may share some similar experiences, but one should not disregard the variety of experience within the identity. For this paper, I am restricting the transgender identity to those in Latin America and the United States, simply by the availability of resources. Transgender individuals of Latin American descent living elsewhere may have experiences both similar to or uniquely different the ones expressed here. In addition, the factors of socioeconomic status, ethnicity with regards to indigenous or non-indigenous identity, religion, and ability may drastically affect one's experience, contributing to a greater or lesser degree of silencing, access to opportunities for vocalization, and representation by vocalizing efforts.

In both Latin America and the United States, transgender individuals experience a silencing and loss of humanity for their transgression of a rigid gender binary that leaves them susceptible to discrimination and violence. Through the creation of local, national, and international physical and virtual support communities and advocacy groups, transgender Latin American and Latinx individuals, as the voice of their identity begins to be heard publicly and their presence becomes increasingly known, develop pockets of opportunity, acceptance, and senses of humanity that

starkly contrast the deeply ingrained hate and discrimination held by significant portions of the populations in these regions. While the changes being made on national and international levels do not necessary reflect a total ideological progression or transformation, they do reveal the paths taken for the oppressed and silenced group to try to vocalize and the decades of hard work to eventually be heard as an identity group.

Section One: Silencing

Minority groups are silenced through the construction of identity, as within such constructions there becomes an in-group and an out-group and an oppressor and an oppressed. The construction of an identity not only defines who fits in the group but how they should fit in and how they should be to succeed within that group. The construction of such results in the development of norms and roles of an established group that can ultimately hinder both in-group and out-group members. In addition, identity groups force individuals into one of the preexisting groups, resulting in both severe limitations and restrictions of identity and a profound inability to move or change within those groups. An attempt at movement within or occupancy of a space between these constructions carries a socially understood risk of social death.

The construction of gender identity is commonly understood to create an oppressor and an oppressed – men and women respectively – through social, legal, and economic institutions and to silence societally women through that oppression (Heidenreich 57). In addition, transgender persons are silenced for their transgression of the rigidly enforced binary. It should be noted, then, that transgender women face an additive oppression and additive silencing in terms of the construction of gender. Transgender individuals experience a loss of personhood for their attempt to defy the fiercely and rigidly upheld social boundaries and gender role expectations (Hill 172).

When individuals fail to sit comfortably in their assigned gender role, they lose gender privilege critically tied to personhood, thus earning the label of “it” to signal the loss of humanity (Heidenreich 60). As a result, these people become increasingly vulnerable as they are denied fundamental rights of existence and exposed to transphobia that permeates across social classes and institutions (REDLACTRANS 4). These acts of transphobia – which can better be expressed as cissexism in order to recognize the acts as oppression rather than fear – enforce the construction of gender to which individuals are expected to conform and susceptible to violence, including the loss of life (Heidenreich 60), if they do not (Lennon and Mistler 63). Genderqueer persons find themselves “excluded from the imagined community of the nation” and “both less visible and more vulnerable to erasure” as they exist outside of the realm of the established societal structure (Gonzalez 124). Instances of transgender presence vocalization powerfully present a blurring of “normative assumptions about sex and gender,” and in order to societally preserve those assumptions, transgender persons are ignored, overlooked, and silenced (Anastasia 263).

Transgender Latinxs living in the United States experience oppression and erasure in terms of racial and ethnic identity in addition to oppression and erasure in terms of their gender identity. In the United States, the racial binary schema includes only the categories of white and black, identifying any racial mixture, even if predominantly white, as black (Roth 17). Racial schemas – “the bundle of racial categories and the set of rules for what they mean, how they are ordered, and how to apply them to oneself and to others” – exist both internally as lenses and externally as active agents in society to dictate one’s identity and degree of oppression (Roth 12-13). While the Hispanicized racial binary exists as well as and sometimes alongside the racial binary schema, identifying third racial category for Latinxs, there is no doubt that in the United States, the racial binary continues to hold substantial weight in terms of silencing and oppression by race and that

the Hispanicized racial binary offers very few advantages as far as representation and humanity dignity (Roth 17). Within the racial binary, Latinx individuals are forced to accept either the erasure of an identity of whiteness or the erasure and the oppression of an identity of blackness (Roth 28). Either option represents the silencing of identity as persons are forced into existing constructions. The Hispanicized racial binary, while recognizing the uniqueness of the identity rather than erasing it, still subjects Latinx individuals to racial oppression by a lack of whiteness (Roth 17). As a result, Latinxs may be subject to discrimination and violence as individuals attempt to maintain and defend the privilege of whiteness (Heidenreich 57).

Within transgender communities, the white narrative exists predominantly, receives the most attention, and comes to represent the transgender voice in terms of awareness and advocacy (Vidal-Ortiz 264). The transgender individuals of color experience then a silencing even within their own community. The representation and leadership of contemporary transgender communities and movements remain homogeneously white both to individuals within the community and to outside observers (Vidal-Ortiz 264-265). Studies of gender and race relations identify the need for the recognition of both gender and race as intersecting “axes of power” (Vidal-Ortiz 265). The fact that transgender communities worldwide come to be represented by white, heterosexual, transgender men reflects the intersection of racial and patriarchal oppression even within an oppressed community (Vidal-Ortiz 264-265). As a result, the typical instances of transgender advocacy better represents the needs and desires of white, male, elite transgender persons than the needs and desires of lower or underclass transgender persons or of transgender persons of color; the experiences of these identities even within one community may be vastly different, and the sweeping assumptions of common experience continue to silence female, nonbinary, lower class, underclass, black, Latin American/Latinx, and indigenous transgender

persons (Vidal-Ortiz 265). For this reason, even though there exists a wide variety of experience within the intersection of the transgender identity and one racial identity, it is immensely important that transgender Latin Americans and Latinxs be able to vocalize their presence as well as their needs and desires that may be unique to their experience as being distinctly separate from the best-known white, male, elite transgender experience.

Within everyday society, cissexist maintenances of silence manifest as acts of discrimination and denial of equality, acts of violence and harassment, and a lack representation in waves of feminist movements and LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) movements. These range in severity from ignorance towards the community to active and potentially violent acts of oppression, but they all work to silence an entire identity intentionally or unintentionally.

Discrimination & Denial of Equality

The silencing of a minority group most commonly appears through acts of discrimination or through the social or political restrictions on rights and freedoms. As dictated by the Declaration of Human Rights, “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Article 1). Acts of discrimination occur when some individuals are viewed as being unworthy of holding the same freedoms, equalities, dignities, and rights as others. Minority individuals and minority communities are frequently subject to these subhuman statuses (Hill 171). As a result, they may experience hate, ignorance, and inclusivity that ultimately restricts their daily life, dictating how, when, where, and why they may present themselves. Acts of discrimination deny minority groups the opportunity to fully “participate in civil society” and engage in “formal and informal economies,” thus limiting one’s political, economic, social success

(Hill 171). The relegation to a subhuman status and the exclusion from established aspects of society have significant impacts on the well-beings and the psychological and social health of minorities who are “disenfranchised from the access and accommodation that go hand in hand with the rights and privileges of citizenship” (Hill 171). Acts of discrimination span across social, political, and economic realms of life, meaning that transgender Latin Americans and Latinxs and other minority groups may face social rejection within their family and local community, discriminatory legislation or political decisions, unemployment and poor employment opportunities, lack of education or poor educational opportunities, housing discrimination, and absent, minimal, or ineffective healthcare (REDLACTRANS 8). In a recent survey of transgender Latinxs in the United States, Harrison-Quitana, Perez, and Grant identified substantially higher-than-average rates of unemployment and job loss, job denial, or service refusal due to bias surrounding gender identity, as well as increased instances of self-denial and avoidance due to fear of discrimination (2-3).

For transgender Latin American and Latinxs specifically, they exist in a position of extreme risk of subjection to discrimination and human rights violations throughout Latin America and in the United States (REDLACTRANS 10). In a study of transgender Guatemalans and Hondurans, approximately sixty percent reported experiencing an arbitrary detention in their lifetime, reflecting discriminatory targeting of an identity (REDLACTRANS 17). The majority of transgender persons surveyed across Latin America identified difficult, problematic, and uncomfortable relationships with the police force in addition to many of the above sources of discrimination. The individuals that reported these types of relationships – disproportionately women – identified experiences of “police brutality and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment” in police stations, patrol cars, and on the street (REDLACTRANS 15). In Guatemala, twenty-nine

percent of transgender women labelled the police as their main source of discrimination (REDLACTRANS 14). In Colombia, seventy-eight percent of transgender persons reported victimization by the police (REDLACTRANS 14). In Peru, thirty-one percent of assaults on transgender bodies were by the Policía Nacional (REDLACTRANS 14). As a result, discrimination against transgender persons are not only occurring but are socially permitted and even committed by those in place to keep peace and protect. Transgender individuals are thus discouraged from resisting against or reporting acts of discrimination if enforcing agents may be ultimately just as discriminatory.

Violence & Harassment

Violence and harassment exemplify the most extreme forms of discrimination and denial of rights and freedoms and ultimately the most definitive and obvious source of silencing. Acts of physical violence targeting minority groups or minority individuals on the basis of identity act to reinforce their minority, subhuman status, as their non-human status subjects them to acts of violence as punishment for their deviance from the constructed and established norm. For most of these acts of violence, it becomes apparent that the victim's gender identity stands as a significant motive for the crimes committed (REDLACTRANS 13). These violent acts, including assault, torture, and murder, come from sources familiar or unfamiliar to the victim as well as historically violent and non-violent sources, ranging from the members of the victim's family to members of local or regional gangs (REDLACTRANS 26). Far too frequently, the cases of violence are ignored both by the general public and the police force, allowing the perpetrator and the understanding of this as admissible and even acceptable behavior to remain unchecked

(REDLACTRANS 9). It is estimated that, in Colombia, as of 2012, the cases of the murders of sixty transgender women remain unaddressed, some up to seven years old (REDLACTRANS 9).

On February 15th, 2017, Dandara dos Santos was brutally murdered in Fortaleza, Brazil, gaining national and international attention as a result of published videos of her abuse (Phillips). The circulating videos allowed for the police force to make immediate arrests, demonstrating the availability of attention and possibilities of effect surrounding that attention (Phillips). However, according to Rede Trans, at least 144 transgender people were murdered in Brazil in 2016 (Phillips). The national and international attention of this particular case should reflect, in addition to the brutality of these instances of violence, the hundreds of murders like this one that go unnoticed and unaddressed (Phillips). Sayonara Nogueira, transgender woman and coordinator of Rede Trans, responded to the murder saying, “The repercussions only came after the video was released. If not, it would have been just another crime that would have been ignored” (Phillip). Maria da Silva, transgender woman, lawyer, and activist, “welcomed the arrests and the official condemnation of the attack,” but identified that the rise of popular public figures like Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right lawmaker known for anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments reflects the increasing Brazilian conservatism and the presence of leading and legitimizing figures (Phillips,). This case study provides insight into the violence surrounding the transgender Latin American experience in other Latin American countries in terms of the rates of overlooked acts of hate and violence and rates of growing, legitimized conservatism that function as silencing agents.

At the intersections of one or more oppressed identities, individuals may be subject to heightened degrees of violence and harassment, as they are “otherized” and deemed unhuman by two or more factors. For this reason, transgender persons of certain races or ethnic backgrounds receive a greater proportional of the violent acts against transgender bodies (Doetsch-Kidder and

Bracamonte 460). In the United States, seventy-seven percent of transgender persons of color report receiving harassment in school, and fifty-four percent report harassment in the workplace (Harrison-Quintana, Pérez, and Grant 2). Sixteen percent identify as having been the victim of physical assault in the workplace, and fourteen percent report having been the victim of sexual assault in the workplace (Harrison-Quintana, Pérez, and Grant 2). For non-citizen transgender persons of color in the United States, these numbers increase dramatically: forty-seven percent experience physical assault (in comparison to sixteen percent cited above) and thirty-eight percent experience sexual assault (in comparison to fourteen percent) in the workplace. These instances of violence and harassment function to maintain ideological and structural stratification of race and gender (Heidenreich 60).

In California in 2002, transgender Latina Gwen Araujo was beaten to death as a late teen by a group of three close male friends, sending message of danger rippling across the transgender Latinx community (Heidenreich 51). Her death was prompted by the explicit identification by these men of her transgression of the binary, pronouncing her a “fucking man” before striking her head against the wall and strangling her to death (Heidenreich 59). Her transgression of the binary removed from her her own personhood – the attackers choosing to call her “it” throughout the night of her death – and justified and even necessitated in the eyes of the three men the violence that resulted in her death (Heidenreich 60). The actions by the three men exhibited the normalization of this type of violence, going to McDonald’s for breakfast after burying her body in the Sierra foothills (Heidenreich 59). Throughout the following trial, the attorney Michael Thorman attempted to portray the entire incident as somehow understandable based on Araujo’s gender identity, thus emphasizing her subhuman status in the eyes of society (Heidenreich 60). Ultimately, the case of her murder received very little national attention, while, that same year, the

case of the murder of Matthew Shepard, a white, cisgender, gay teen ended up in national news, highlighting the differences in public perceptions of gay and transgender, whiteness and *latinidad*, masculinity and femininity (Heidenreich 52). Matthew Shepard maintained a certain degree of humanity that was denied to Gwen Araujo through his whiteness and his cisgender identity, both perceived as nonthreatening to the constructed hierarchical society. These nonthreatening identities offer him protection from the violence that serves to silence non-white, transgender voices and experiences, denying them inclusion in the narrative of humanity, society, and the LGBTQ+ identity.

Lack of Representation and Inclusion in Movements for Equality

The press for transgender Latin American/Latinx equality and protection arguably should fall within national and international movements for gender equality, racial equality, and LGBTQ+ rights. However, the vast majority of these movements overlook or fail to include either the transgender identity or the non-white identity, let alone the identity of transgender individuals of color. While their lack of inclusion in these movements does not actively deny transgender vocalization and agency as violence and discrimination do, it admits to the satisfaction with the current situation and continues to deny either the humanity of transgender persons or the validity of one's gender identity.

Until the 1970s, the development of first wave and second feminist movements advocated predominantly for the extension of equality to cisgender women and failed to address the intersection of their movement's addressed axis of power with any other, including racial and ethnic identities ("Gender, Sexuality" 416). Throughout the Americas, feminist groups have actively worked to make their voices increasingly heard and increasingly powerful in terms of

providing expansive gender equality (“Gender, Sexuality” 428). As such, feminist movements offer a potential opening for the vocalization of the transgender identity, but these efforts are primarily rooted within the constructed gender binary and heavily cissexist in emphasis on characteristics of assigned gender at birth. For this reason, feminist efforts can range from merely dismissive and ignorant to the transgender narrative, simply leaving them out due to a lack of knowledge and awareness, to pure cissexism that actively excludes transgender individuals on the basis of gender identity and a cissexist understanding of the construction of gender. In addition, feminist agendas have received little political support, even from the left, leaving a profound impact on which areas to focus on and emphasize in order to achieve possible goals and gain necessary support. The inclusion of the transgender narrative may thus ultimately hinder the success of the organization, forcing groups that may be aware of transgender issues and reject cissexist gender ideology to ultimately tailor their efforts in favor of cisgender women (Klein 327).

LGBTQ+ movements throughout the Americas, while carrying the transgender identity in the name, focus primarily on the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and queer cisgender individuals. Most often, the ‘T’ in the LGBTQ+ acronym is overlooked entirely (Movement Advancement Project 1). Thus, despite the fact that, akin to feminist organizations, although LGBTQ+ groups have been increasingly successful, few gains have been made for transgender individuals in the Americas (“Gender, Sexuality” 428). As has also been the case with feminist movements, even left-wing governments have shown only minimal commitment to LGBTQ+ rights and advocacy, forcing the tempering and limiting of missions and goals to accomplish the most within the government confines, in which the ‘achievable’ goals are usually cisgender-focused (“Gender, Sexuality” 430). The Human Rights Campaign has repeatedly diverted efforts away from transgender activism for the success of a greater number of LGBTQ+ goals, including the refusal

to include the protection of transgender persons in the Employment Non-Discrimination Act in order to improve likelihood that it would pass (Heidenreich 66). In addition, within LGBTQ+ communities, supposedly safe and inclusive environments for both queer and genderqueer individuals, transgender individuals are viewed and treated as second-class citizens, even within an already oppressed and marginalized community (Klein 328). All too often the needs of transgender persons are lumped into those of cisgender queer individuals, thus eliminating the possibility of addressing transgender-specific issues. Additionally, LGBTQ+ groups tend to overlook racial and ethnic intersections of identity, homogenizing the appearance of the community and ignoring the unique experiences of racial and ethnic minorities. Ruby Bracamonte, Washington, D.C. advocate for transgender Latinxs, identifies that the needs and experiences of black and Latinx queer and transgender persons are very different from those commonly represented in homogenized movements (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 460). As a result, the organizations designed to advocate for and better the lives of queer and transgender persons, very rarely communicate or address the needs and experiences of transgender Latinx individuals, ultimately furthering their societal silencing.

Section Two: Paths of Vocalization

In response to these systems of oppression, in which individuals lose their own humanity, the quest for vocalization is not just the attempt to be heard but the desperate search for the status of personhood as well. Feelings of personhood may accompany feelings of being heard, included, represented, and respected, which commonly begins through community formation, in which individuals deprived of humanity offer each other a space in which one receives the elements necessary to regain it. Local and internet communities both have the potential to develop a sphere

counter to the mainstream society in which their “otherize” identity or identities are no longer other, in which their experiences are normalized and shared. Smaller communities function as platforms for national, regional, and international organizations and movements which have significantly greater visibility and opportunity for advocacy and awareness. The development of extra-community vocalization often hinges on intra-community recognition of humanity in terms of support, resources, and opportunities. These initial communities, no matter the size or the extent of extra-community involvement or interaction, serve as essential elements for the validation of identity and humanity of individuals in order to encourage the discussions and forms of expression that challenge the forces of oppression and silencing.

Local Community Formation

Much like the “coming out” process, the development of a local community around an identity or the immersion within an existing identity community has the potential to offer the greatest rewards and the greatest risks for individuals. Communities of individuals with like identities and similar experiences offer not only an opportunity to be connected to like others but also to be connected with their truest selves (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 445). Often minorities find these types of groups when they have identified within themselves a desire to belong within a certain in-group, which takes the shape of an identity community in which their identity fits into the realm of normalcy (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 446). Within these in-groups, there exists a profound sense of respect for themselves, each other, and their identity, despite the disrespect and foulness frequently faced outside of the community (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 446). These groups not only offer one validation of their humanity and identity but support for and education regarding economic struggles, like unemployment and poverty, and

health issues, such as HIV and drug or alcohol addiction (Bracamonte 446). By helping transgender individuals with all aspects of their life regardless of any status or identity, these communities validate the depth of their experiences and their own fundamental worth and begin to function as a safe home environment for individuals of a marginalized identity (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 446). The safety net provided by the community paired with guidance of compassionate others can foster a confidence in the expression of true identity (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 446). Over all, they have the ability to provide both a sense of support and belonging as well as the feeling of agency and independence when the general society may otherwise deny it.

Unfortunately, the risk associated with joining these community groups may prevent individuals who would benefit greatly from reaching out to them. A closeted transgender person may remain protected from possible violence, and the active, public association with such a stigmatized identity may completely eliminate that protection. For the most part, entirely aware of the possible risks, these communities are very well-hidden and exist almost entirely underground on an agreement of anonymity for the sake of safety (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 446). However, the possibility of discovery and violence may be enough to drive certain people away, especially if they are in an economically, politically, or socially pressured position, feeling they absolutely cannot lose anything else. As a result, these developing communities tend to be more accessible to individuals with some degree of socioeconomic privilege, thus contributing to the continued silencing of certain members of the transgender identity based on intersections with socioeconomic status. Non-citizens may also feel isolated from these communities based on the risk involved in exposing one's identity, preventing their vocalization and benefit within the community as well.

A victim of gang violence, transgender Latina Ruby Bracamonte fled from El Salvador to the United States in 1986 at the age of sixteen after she was kidnapped and raped (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 441). Upon settling in Washington, D.C., she identified the need for a queer Hispanic group, which she established unofficially, providing many with support, socialization, confidence, and comfort in identity (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 444). This initial group eased the processes of immigrating and of existing as a queer Latina in the white, heteronormative United States. The community gave her the exposure to individuals of different transgender identities and helped her to come to terms with and gain the confidence to express her own womanhood (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 449). The exposure to these individuals left her with the thought of, “If they could do it, why not?” regarding her own transition and stressed the importance of community in identity development (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 449). The process of transitioning, especially as a Latina, provided endless obstacles, but the guidance of those who had already transitioned as well as the support of those transitioning with her eased the experience (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 449). Both the queer Latinx and the transgender Latinx communities that she immersed herself in contributed significantly to her well-being in Washington, D.C. As a result, she has continued to work actively in developing the transgender Latinx community in Washington D.C. and in advocating on behalf of the transgender Latinx identity (Doetsch-Kidder 447).

Other groups specifically aiding transgender Latinxs like Ruby Bracamonte’s have appeared throughout the Americas, officially and unofficially with varying degrees of publicity and varying goals and missions. However, they all work to support and better the lives of transgender Latinxs within society at large. Whether or not these groups emphasize direct and

active advocacy for the identity, the benefits of community formation immensely aid the process of vocalization.

Internet Community Formation

The internet has become a powerful tool for activism and advocacy, especially for marginalized or oppressed identities, as it provides “a unique space for the expression and transmission of often ostracized ideas and identities” (“The Reality of Virtual Reality” 2). The internet has functioned as both an alternative sphere for activism and as an alternate space for community development (“The Reality of Virtual Reality” 5). Internet communities have the potential to offer many of the same benefits of local and regional groups in terms of support, education, and a sense of belonging. To a certain extent, they can provide the same sense of family and security that is so critical of minority communities. In addition, they are frequently, depending on the platform of the community, anonymous, allowing individuals to stay closeted if desired and to maintain a certain sense of protection from violence or discrimination targeting their identity.

The wide, international reach of the internet has enabled marginalized perspectives to dramatically increase the scope of the dissemination of their ideas and perspectives, with potential to access a greater number of bodies than ever before (“The Reality of Virtual Reality” 3). The scope of the internet has both enabled the breakdown of separation of intra-community separation by socioeconomic status and enforced divisions between those with access to the internet, who tend to be more urban, of higher socioeconomic status, and non-indigenous, and those do not (“The Reality of Virtual Reality” 3). Thus, internet communities, like locally organizing communities, have a tendency to better vocalize certain perspectives within the identity that others simply based on the nature of the platform for communication itself. However, nevertheless, the internet has a

profound potential to connect individuals of a certain identity and allow the formation of community between individuals who may otherwise remain disconnected. These internet communities foster nation-wide and international community development, benefiting a wide range of transgender persons while protecting them through anonymity. Like local communities, it does not matter what type of extra-community impact these internet communities have, as their benefit extends beyond advocacy and awareness; they function primarily to provide a space that fosters identity development, safety, and confidence and eliminates the sense of “otherization” and the notion of a subhuman status. The fact that transgender Latin Americans and Latinxs can connect with individuals of common identities and experiences and be heard and respected in their true expression and opinions serves a substantial purpose in the vocalization of the identity on an individual level that facilitates the identity’s vocalization on the national, international, and regional scale that has potential to make substantial, lasting social, economic, and political changes for the betterment of lives.

National, International, and Regional Organizations and Movements

Local community development and internet community development serve as the foundations for the formation of national, international, and regional organizations, as they provide the initial connections and the support to sustain growth. These larger organizations are hugely important as they have the ability to challenge and fight the systemic oppression that individuals experience but cannot address. Such organizations that have the potential to change legislation in order to protect transgender Latin Americans and Latinxs from violence and discrimination as well as facilitate the social change to breakdown the notion of otherness. The national organization Association of Transgenders, Transsexuals, and Transvestites of Argentina (ATTA) has been very

successful in terms of facilitating the passing of groundbreaking and hugely influential legislation in Argentina, which has directly inspired and encouraged national and regional groups in other parts of Latin America (Fountain-Stokes 239). The regional organization Red Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Personas Trans (REDLACTRANS) demonstrates the importance of the development of international organization and international communities through the extent of their reach and impact in terms of monitoring human rights violations against transgender persons and publicly expressing problematic areas and their recommended remedies throughout Latin America (REDLACTRANS 10).

These larger organizations have a greater capability for effective advocacy based on their visibility, and the achievement of LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality remains entirely dependent on the work done by activists that seeks to keep governments aware and accountable, thus the chance of change and progress riding heavily on the actions of national and international advocacy groups (“Gender, Sexuality” 431). They also serve to make the issue known to the general public as well as to other like-minded advocacy groups (REDLACTRANS 10). In the work done for transgender Latin Americans and Latinxs, the interactions of transgender Latin American and Latinx specific advocacy groups with those of women’s and LGBTQ+ rights enable the opportunity to expand or adjust the focus of these movements to increase transgender inclusivity and benefit (“Gender, Sexuality” 431). The increased awareness of the presence and needs of transgender individuals by the general public, government, and similar social movements and organizations reflects the vocalization of the identity and serves as avenues for change in pursuit of equality.

Section Three: Evidence of Vocalized Identity

As a reflection of the steady progress made in the expression of these identities, a slow shift in attitude towards gender and sexual minorities has occurred throughout the Americas in recent decades. While this progress has been relatively slow, in the first decade of the 2000s, there was a dramatic paradigm shift in the perception and framing of the presence and concerns of genderqueer and transgender persons (Balzer/Lagata 100). This wave of rapid change was characterized by the challenging of the “dominant and globalized Western medical-psychiatric perspective” that emphasizes the essentialism of the natural gender binary and gender order and frames genderqueer and transgender persons as inherently deviant and worthy of stigmatization (Balzer/Lagata 100). The newer perspectives express the social construction of the gender binary and the social, political, and economic consequences that it has on individuals oppressed by imposed gender identity and gender roles, including women and transgender persons (Balzer/Lagata 100). The understanding fights the notion of otherness that plagues gender minority existence and conceives of women and transgender individuals as equal members of society, worthy of safety, protection, freedom, and expression (Balzer/Lagata 100). The focus falls instead on the human rights violations occurring rather than the upholding of the social structural elements surrounding gender (Balzer/Lagata 100). However, it is important to note that this wave does not represent ideological shifts across all portions of all populations. Instead, it has developed and flourished in certain pockets of individuals, which reflects a rising of a counter to the predominant, preexisting ideology. These beliefs still exist in the minority in most parts of the world, but they are becoming increasingly known, adopted, and shared, providing pockets of support for transgender humanity and transgender rights and protection. The diffusion of this ideology throughout Latin America reflects the vocalization of the transgender identity, but it has not

replaced or even matched the strength of prior ideology that threatens transgender lives. The progress that has been made as a result of the increased awareness of and regard for the transgender identity, for that reason, reflects not a societal progression of ideology, but the activism and advocacy of transgender individuals and organizations themselves. These formal and informal changes have occurred and are occurring as a result of transgender Latin American and Latinx voices and the recognition of the identity's humanity.

Legislation & State Recognition

Within the past decade, countries throughout Latin America have implemented formal legislation that provides recognition of and protection of transgender persons. Among other changes, legislation provides opportunities for legal changes of name and gender, access to gender-specific activities and facilities that match one's identified gender, and access to medical programs for hormones and surgeries as well as challenge the occurrence of violence and discrimination against specific individuals on the basis of identity. Even though transgender persons are still predominantly viewed as subhuman and other, state and legal recognition reflects the identification of transgender humanity and helps to develop the societal notion of transgender normativity (Gonzalez 123-124). The following sections are divided by country or region to address the progress made by transgender rights activists in each area individually.

Argentina

Implemented in May of 2012, Argentina's Gender Identity Law stands as one of the most substantial, extensive, and thorough pieces of legislation globally to provide the rights and protections of transgender persons (REDLACTRANS 31). It stands as the standard globally for

practices of legal gender recognition for transgender persons (Balzer/Lagata 101). The law guarantees the fundamental rights, dignity, and humanity of transgender Argentineans, and establishes the mechanisms for changes to legal gender and name (REDLACTRANS 31). The entire piece of legislation is based upon human rights discourse rather than medical discourse, reflecting the shift in understanding from the essentialism of gender to a more constructivist approach (Balzer/Lagata 101).

Brazil

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva – Lula – established a Special Secretariat for Women’s Policies (SPM), an advisory body to facilitate the addressing of gender issues in public policies (“Gender, Sexuality” 423). In 2007, their conference increased dramatically in terms of intersectionality and highlighted specifically the needs of transgender Brazilian women and how they may differ from the needs for cisgender Brazilian women with the ultimate goal to benefit all identities equally (“Gender, Sexuality” 423). This conference unfortunately had very little impact, as there was a significant lack of follow-through in the implementation of policy, but the sheer recognition of the transgender Brazilian lives and experiences reflects the state’s awareness of the presence and uniqueness of the identity (“Gender, Sexuality” 423).

In 2008, the Brazilian national government held the First National Conference of Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transsexuals, specifically recognizing the transgender identity (“Gender, Sexuality” 429). Also in 2008, Brazil presented Resolution 2435 (Human Rights, Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) to the General Assembly of the Organization of American States as the first inter-American document to address the human rights violations that occur on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity (“Gender, Sexuality” 429).

Mexico

In Mexico, an amendment to Article 138 of the Criminal Code for the Federal District added both sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of characteristics targeted in hate crimes in an attempt to protect all members of the LGBTQ+ community from acts of violence and discrimination based entirely on their identity (REDLACTRANS 32). The acknowledgement of gender identity functions specifically to protect transgender Mexicans from otherization. In addition, in 2012, a Mexican transgender woman was appointed director of the *Gestión Corporativa de Integración Social*, and a transgender woman stood for the Senate for the first time, providing formal political opportunities for the representation of transgender Mexican voices (REDLACTRANS 32).

Chile

In 2011, the Chilean Ministry of Health developed a standard of national protocol to regulate procedure of gender confirmation surgery in order to increase the probability of surgery for the majority of the transgender Chilean population and reduce many of the possible risks associated with it (REDLACTRANS 32). In 2012, Chile passed an anti-discrimination law that explicitly listed gender identity in order to protect transgender Chilean persons from hate crimes and targeting based on identity (REDLACTRANS 32). Both of these measures serve to try to address the problems unique to the transgender experience in an effort to eliminate structures of inequality.

Bolivia

In 2009, the Bolivian constitutional reform delivered a significant increase in anti-discrimination policy, in which Article 14 states, “The State prohibits and punishes all forms of discrimination based on sexual orientation [and] gender identity” (“Gender, Sexuality” 249). This

addition to the constitution reflects the stance of the nation in the recognition of transgender Bolivian humanity and in the drive for the delivery of equality to affirm that sense of humanity. This statement identifies the “otherization” of an LGBTQ+ community as being a punishable offense to counter any pressures by systematic social structures in order to protect transgender Bolivian lives.

Ecuador

Ecuador’s constitution explicitly addresses and prohibits any and all discrimination based on gender identity, in order to protect women and transgender Ecuadorans and to combat gender inequality (REDLACTRANS 31). This explicit statement functions similarly to Article 14 of the Bolivian constitution that affirms humanity and right to equality regardless of gender identity, attempting to break down the concept of otherness that robs the personhood from genderqueer persons.

Central America

While Central America remains one of the regions of the greatest hostility towards transgender persons, especially towards transgender women, there has been some recent progress in protecting and providing equality for LGBTQ+ individuals (REDLACTRANS 31). In 2009, Nicaragua appointed the first *procuradora especial para la Diversidad Sexual* to analyze the state of the rights of LGBTQ+ individuals and to monitor implementation of legislation to promote those rights (REDLACTRANS 31). Honduras has attempted to reduce gender-related inequality, discrimination, and violence with the *Plan de Igualdad y Equidad de Género*. El Salvador tried to remedy the sense of otherness through a state recognition of the citizenship of LGBTQ+ persons and through the establishment of the *Dirección de Diversidad Sexual* in 2010 (REDLACTRANS 32). The Salvadoran government addressed gender identity discrimination in the executive decree

“Disposiciones para evitar toda forma de discriminación en la Administración Pública por razones de identidad de género y/o de orientación sexual” (REDLACTRANS 31). Each of these measures serves as an initial foundation for the protection of transgender citizens. While they have had little to no effect on the transgender experience, they have established the position of the state as being one in which LGBTQ+ individuals are viewed as maintaining their personhood.

Regional Developments

Certain pronouncements have been made concerning LGBTQ+ rights and protections on a regional level, in an effort to address the state of transgender lives in Latin America as a whole. In 2011, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights created the Unit of the Rights of LGBTI Persons in order to address specifically the queer and genderqueer experience, rights, and freedoms in Latin America (REDLACTRANS 32). Of the acts on a regional level, the resolutions passed by the General Assembly of the Organization of American States have been the most substantial and most extensive thus far by condemning violence and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity and by asking Latin American nations to actively combat the human rights violations committed against the LGBTQ+ population (REDLACTRANS 11). The states that align themselves with these international standards identify that they are interested and committed to fight human rights violations against and to promote rights and freedoms for LGBTQ+ persons (REDLACTRANS 11). While these resolutions address both the oppression of both sexual and gender minorities, the explicit statement requesting for the protection of individuals from discrimination based on gender identity demonstrates the drive to value and protect specifically transgender Latin American lives. However, despite these resolutions, the acts of silencing against LGBTQ+ persons still continue as common practice throughout Latin America (REDLACTRANS 11).

Public Presence & Linguistics

While the changes in legislation and the recognition of the transgender presence by the state serve to legally eliminate the otherness and silencing, non-legal, non-governmental changes have potentially a greater opportunity to directly change the lives of transgender persons and the beliefs and actions of those around them, reflecting the awareness of transgender presence and vocalization. These developments have the potential to alter systemic ideology in a way unlike changes to legislation and legality, as they are much closer and much more personal therefore more likely to have a significant and lasting impact. Of the different instances of transgender vocalization, some are more likely than others to be heard by the general public in such a way that actually serve to increase one's sense of their own personhood. These tend to be not the distant, ineffective, and often unenforced legislation and pronouncements but rather the familiar, recurring, and personal presence of extra-governmental developments.

Public Presence

The development of the scope and reach of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the rise in visibility of certain transgender Latin American and Latinx spokespeople has increased the awareness of the general public in terms of transgender rights and freedoms. In the 2000s, there was a significant spike in the number of regional and international networks and organizations supporting and advocating for transgender Latin Americans and Latinxs, including the organization *Red Latinoamericano y del Caribe de Personas Trans* founded in 2004 (Balzer/Lagata 101). These organizations were predominantly founded upon local communities and serve to bridge the gap between these local communities that may or may not wish to remain anonymous and underground and the general public, in which the most substantial changes need

to be made. They facilitate the spread of the notion of transgender humanity and equality to an ever-increasing portion of the population as the organizations themselves and their reach continue to increase. Large organizations, such as the Brazilian NGO THEMIS representing transgender sex workers, serve as amplifiers for the transgender voice in terms of community access and mobilization (Klein 338). Following the murder of genderqueer Brazilian Cris Loira, NGOs played the most substantial role in the mobilization of the general public and the government agencies in order to change the perception of transgender Brazilian lives and the treatment of them (Klein 338). These organizations function as paths for transgender vocalization and representation, but the fact that they have been able to thrive and grow serves as evidence of not only the voices themselves but the possibility of a changing environment in which they are increasingly heard.

Also reflective of that changing environment, certain transgender or genderqueer Latinxs like Pedro Lemebel and Ruby Bracamonte have been able to reach positions of significant publicity in their work that draws attention to the structural disadvantage by gender and the silencing of transgender lives. Chilean author and artist, Pedro Lemebel, identifies as *loca*, a genderqueer identity, and has become famous for his commentary of the constructions of gender and the stigmatization of non-normative femininity and non-normative masculinity, thus contributing to the breakdown of the structured binary (Gonzalez 124). Ruby Bracamonte, transgender Latina living in Washington, D.C., works as an advocate, activist, and national spokesperson on behalf of transgender Latinxs to reduce the acts of violence committed against them (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 441). She has represented her community by speaking, educating, and supporting, but she has also gone to court with arrested individuals, visited people in jail, and opened her home to transgender individuals in need (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte

451). When in need of a speaker on transgender issues in Washington, D.C. and surrounding areas, Bracamonte is the first person recommended as the voice of the community (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 455). She has a certain degree of visibility that most members of her community do not, giving her a better position for advocacy against the acts of violence and discrimination (Doetsch-Kidder and Bracamonte 457). The fact that she and Lemebel have achieved positions of such visibility reflects the progress of the environment and serves as means for further progress for transgender vocalization.

Linguistic Changes

The development and increasing use of language to express the transgender experience, including gender neutral language and identity terminology, reflects the change towards trans-inclusivity in the environment. The highly gendered Romance languages throughout Latin America serve to reinforce the structured presence of gender throughout the region (Eichler et al. 554). The development of gender neutral language can both reflect and contribute to the breakdown of the social structure of gender and its oppression. Language can function as demonstration of ideology, with changes of language revealing changes of thought, and as force, in that language has the potential to activate change in thought. In that sense, language both mirrors the structures, beliefs, and conventions of society and culture and actively shapes one's cognitive understanding of that society and culture (Prewitt-Freilino et al. 268).

In the context of gender, the presence or absence of grammatical gender has a significant relationship in the interpretation of gender roles, gender relations, and gender equality (Prewitt-Freilino et al. 268). Spanish has always been highly gendered following the constructed binary with masculine and feminine noun endings of '-o' and '-a' respectively as well as gendered articles

and adjectives to provide agreement with the gendered nouns (Eichler et al. 554). The language remains highly androcentric in that the default is masculine to represent an unstated gender or a group of mixed genders. For that reason, the development of gender neutral language often accompanies the feminist movement in the deconstruction of androcentric practices. However, the presence of both binary and nonbinary-inclusive gender neutral language help to create fluidity in the concept of gender and eliminate some of the deeply engrained understanding of the essentialism of gender. In the creation of gender neutral Spanish, some proposed alternate endings include ‘-@,’ ‘-æ,’ and ‘-x,’ the first two being binary endings and the last being nonbinary-inclusive (Demby). The ‘-@’ ending has been used by academics and bloggers more and more frequently over the past couple decades, as it combines the masculine ‘o’ and the feminine ‘a’ (Demby). It has become increasingly common to see binary-inclusive language, reflecting the work done in the quest for gender equality, which can provide some benefit to transgender Spanish speakers, but the rigid construction of gender still exists linguistically nevertheless. The ‘-x’ ending, as it has no ties to gendered endings, provides an inclusive option for nonbinary and genderqueer persons in the Spanish language, and scholars and activists worldwide have begun to utilize this ending. However, limiting the popularized use of this ending, there is no agreed upon or widely approved pronunciation. Nevertheless, popularization of these options reflects the societal accommodation to meet the needs of transgender persons in order to provide them with the full sense of equality and humanity.

In addition to the development of gender neutral options in Spanish, transgender communities have proposed identity terminology to specifically reflect the transgender Latin American experience as being separate from any other transgender experience and any other queer Latin American experience. Like the term ‘queer’ in English, the once-derogatory term *loca* has

been reclaimed by groups throughout Latin America to mean some non-normative form of femininity or something along the lines of the term ‘genderqueer’ (Gonzalez 123). Some but not all transgender Latinxs may choose to identify with the recently coined terms *translatinas/os* or *translatinxs* (Fountain-Stokes 238). Certain terms represent more specific identities within the transgender identity, including *travesti* in Brazil and *jota* and *vestida* in Mexico, all usually referring to transfeminine individuals in sex work (Fountain-Stokes 238). These types of identity terms used to project a specific portion of the population provides not only communication of presence to those outside of the identity but communication to those within as well to aid in the formation of community groups. Their regular use reinforces the recognition of these identities, and, while these labels can be used as “othering” agents, they serve to identify the presence and unique experience of a certain group of the population in order to specifically address their identity’s needs.

Section Four: Effects of Vocalization Thus Far

Vocalization of an identity can facilitate the societal restoration of one’s personhood, as the individuals of that identity resist the imposed silencing. For individuals of minority identities, vocalization provides the opportunity to address and understand the unique facets of that minority’s experience. As a result of the increased vocalization, some transgender Latin Americans and Latinxs have been able to regain some sense of humanity through the representation of their identity and through the experience and guarantee of fundamental rights and freedoms. The growing organizations and movements around the issues and the identity form ever-widening bases of support that will provide increasing paths of resistance against the systematic oppression.

However, the progress that has been made as a result of the transgender presence is limited (REDLACTRANS 33). These countries and regions have become marked by extremely polarized views in which both extremes simultaneously act out their beliefs. Some countries like Argentina and Brazil and some cities like Mexico City and Bogotá far surpass the progress of the rest of the world in terms of LGBTQ+ rights and protections with legal same-sex marriage, powerful legislation against discrimination and hate crimes, and influential social movements fighting for rights and equality (Corrales 54). Other nations leave LGBTQ+ rights unaddressed or underdeveloped, but even more significant, the unevenness exists within the same countries and cities (Corrales 54). Often the progress made by the hard work of transgender rights advocates does not reflect sweeping change in attitude throughout the area but rather the change of law prior to significant social change (Corrales 56). This serves to recognize the presence and vocalization of the transgender community, side in their support, and, ideally, facilitate social progress, but it operates as a starting point rather than an end (Corrales 56). As a result, despite the progress made, transgender Latin Americans and Latinxs continue to experience oppression and societal silencing in the forms of discrimination and violence (Corrales 58). In addition, in the process of resistance to a social structural element by an otherized group, heightened awareness can expose members of that group to more severe or more frequent violence or discrimination, meaning that vocalization yields the benefit and unfortunately the detriment of transgender persons. Nevertheless, the progress made thus far reveals that the transgender Latin American and Latinx community has been heard in some capacity, even if they are not supported by the majority of the general public.

Some members of the transgender Latin American and Latinx community remain unrepresented by the progress made, reflecting their continued silencing and oppression. All possible intersections and identities within the transgender Latin American and Latinx community

must be able to vocalize in order to restore the humanity of the identity. The degree of one's silencing within the transgender identity is determined by one's socioeconomic status, age, race, ethnicity, language, immigration status, ability, and HIV status (REDLACTRANS 26). Those of lower socioeconomic statuses remain at a greater risk of violence and lack the resources to access the benefits of the progress thus far. Additionally, areas characterized by higher income levels are much more likely to display tolerance towards LGBTQ+ rights (Corrales 54). Therefore, individuals of socioeconomic statuses not only have a lessened access to aiding resources but they have an increased need for those very resources in the face of more discriminatory communities and situations. Transgender indigenous individuals in the Americas experience additional silencing by their indigenous identity and may find themselves in situations in which they cannot feel fully included holding both simultaneously. In order to gain acceptance in the transgender community and to develop an inclusive space for the restoration of humanity, Maya women report concealing their indigenous identity and, for some individuals, gradually moving away from it or losing it completely (REDLACTRANS 27). These persons have to identify one community as being more important than the other in order to develop a sense of inclusivity and of family, which represents the continued oppression of transgender persons and of those of other intersectional identities within the transgender community. For transgender Latinxs in the United States, one's citizenship status can have a significant impact on one's experience within the progress made thus far. In February of 2017, a non-citizen transgender woman living in El Paso sought court protection from domestic abuse but instead was arrested by federal immigration agents (Reuters). This case made national news, demonstrating the increasing transgender Latinx presence in the U.S., but more importantly, it points to the vulnerability that noncitizens transgender Latinxs – especially Latinas – experience. Non-citizen persons and transgender women of color occupy the

most vulnerable positions in the United States, with those at the intersection of the two identities at the greatest risk and under the greatest degree of oppression (Harrison-Quintana, Pérez, and Grant 1). The vocalization of the transgender identity has the potential to restore some degree of humanity, but it unevenly affects individuals within the identity based on their other sources of oppression and silencing. Therefore, the escape from oppression and the restoration of humanity is not uniform across the transgender experience, and the community's goals and progress must reflect such.

The presence of further oppressed identities within the transgender Latin American and Latinx community highlights the navigation of the relationship between the vocalization of identity and the vocalization in pursuit of the accomplishment of some goal. Often, these fall into alignment, but in terms of transgender rights within LGBTQ+ communities and the rights of silenced groups within transgender communities, there exists a discrepancy between the wide range of identities within the communities and who the current goals best reflect and benefit. More conservative discourse facilitates the accomplishment of certain goals but aids the continued oppression of further silenced individuals (Corrales 57). The path to vocalization and equality, even within such a specific community, is far from uniform in nature based on the individual, their identities, and their context. Therefore, while the progress made thus far has been significant and hugely beneficial to many transgender Latin Americans and Latinxs, there exists still substantial progress yet to be made in order to restore humanity to all those currently denied. The navigation of the simultaneously vocalization and continued silencing of transgender Latin Americans and Latinxs rests upon the recognition of the the humanity and the uniqueness of each identity by governmental organization and acts, the general public, and those within LGBTQ+ and

transgender communities in order to ultimately provide a sense of equality to all those previously and currently denied within the transgender Latin American/Latinx identity.

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