

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Femme populism: Vulnerability and desire in Argentine political aesthetics

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Abstract

This article focuses on the role of vulnerability and desire in populist politics. I examine the political aesthetics of Argentine populism by analyzing media and supporters' representations of Argentine politician Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. The populist leader tends to conjure the image of the strongman who is either an avuncular man of the people or a muscular, industrious worker. In contrast, Kirchner's followers focus on her sexual appeal and her emotional vulnerability. Drawing on Lacanian notions of love and desire, I argue that Cristinistas' sustained focus on their leader's appearance and emotional state reveals the libidinal dimensions of populist politics. Moreover, the fetishization of Cristina as incomparably beautiful and bereaved indicates a deeply phallogocentric conception of sovereignty. While Cristina's supporters tout her femininity as a departure from the political status quo, their focus on her image and persona reinforces phallogocentric conceptions of sovereignty.

KEYWORDS

populism, fetishism, desire, Argentina, sovereignty, vulnerability

Introduction: The People Embodied

In early January 2017, Pedro, a retired railroad worker who had been active in union politics in Buenos Aires, posted a photograph on Facebook of a woman's legs from the knee down in sheer black stockings and five-inch black leather spike heels (see Figure 1). Pedro, whom I met while conducting research among Kirchnerist "political militants" between 2012 and 2016, accompanied the image with the caption "If you can guess who this is, you have her in your sentiment. Disseminate it."¹ The photograph quickly garnered "likes" and "hearts" from hundreds of Facebook users, some of whom testified effusively in their comments to their unwavering "love" (*amor*) for "that woman" (*esa mujer*), whom they described as immensely courageous, politically brilliant, caring, and incomparably beautiful.²

"That woman" was none other than Cristina Fernández de Kirchner—president of Argentina from 2007 to 2015 and leader of the Kirchnerist movement, which continues to be highly influential in Argentine politics. Kirchnerism is a contemporary center-left iteration of Argentina's populist tradition known



FIGURE 1 The photograph of Cristina's legs shared by Pedro on Facebook.
[This figure appears in color in the online issue]
Source: Photograph by Estanislao Santos.

as Peronism, which, since its inception in 1945, has largely defined Argentine partisan politics. Like Kirchnerism, established by spouses Néstor (deceased) and Cristina, Peronism is named for its founding couple, Juan and Eva (Evita) Perón.³ When Pedro posted the suggestive photo of Cristina's legs, she was on her way to being elected senator. She is, at the time I write, vice president of the republic.

Pedro's Facebook post and the comments it provoked elucidate the strong affective and libidinal response Cristina elicits from her most devoted followers, known as "Cristinistas." While other populist leaders have enjoyed reputations for incomparable cunning and moral probity, Pedro's post and its responses underscore the degree to which many of Cristina's admirers also venerate their heroine's physical appeal. This appeal, as will become evident across this article, is tethered to heteronormative conceptions of her feminine desirability and vulnerability. The photo and the excitement it evoked are part of a political logic that I call *femme populism*—a refashioning of the intrinsically phallic logic of populist representation that reifies heteronormative conceptions of feminine vulnerability and desirability as political fortitude. This reformulation of populism allows for an appropriation, or in Deleuzean terms, "reterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1986) of stereotypically feminine attributes to forward a masculinist configuration of sovereignty.⁴ Cristina's desirability is legible in terms of a traditionally patriarchal structure of signification, while her desirability reinforces the phallic and aesthetically authoritarian aspects of political representation.

The authoritarianism of populist aesthetics in the Latin American context, as theorized in much more depth by Rafael Sánchez (2016), unites the otherwise potentially unruly mass into the disciplined "people"—the subject par excellence of populism. In the context of Peronism in Argentina, *Cristinista* *femme* populism indicates generational shifts and Peronism's need to stand for increasingly diverse social sectors and, therefore, ambiguous ideological commitments. As that which eludes fixed meaning, Cristina must give the illusion of cohesion. For Sánchez (2016), this configuration of sovereignty is intimately aware of the power of the gaze, as populism is self-consciously theatrical. *Femme* populism, in particular, indexes how the gaze of "the people" is related to desire and the constitutive lack upon which it is predicated—the yearning for cohesive symbolic meaning that is intrinsically unattainable.

While Cristina is not overtly sexualized or desired by all the diverse Argentines who support her politically, the degree to which many of my passionate Kirchnerist militant interlocutors discussed her physical appearance was significant. Many of Cristina's impassioned fans with whom I spoke, like Pedro, extol her heterosexual desirability and lionize her as a faithful widow to her deceased husband and presidential predecessor, linking these qualities to her popularly and seemingly even divinely elected position as leader of "the people." These ardent *Cristinistas* depict their strategic conductor as at once mournful and resilient, doleful and seductive, desirable yet chaste, relatable and inimitable. Furthermore, the amount of attention

paid to Cristina's sexual appeal by rank-and-file militants and intellectuals alike shows how personalist conceptions of popular sovereignty constitute a stark rejection of liberal paradigms of political representation (such as deliberative discourse) in favor of representational paradigms reminiscent of divine right rule.

As such, *Cristinismo's* most sexualizing dimensions, which celebrate a woman as the indisputable embodiment of popular sovereignty, is not a feminine departure or contestation of traditional models of sovereignty. The very articulation of "the people" relies on a homogenizing signifier, a leveling of difference predicated on a "phallic cut" (Palacios, 2020, 794). For Ernesto Laclau, one of the foremost philosophers of populism, this cut is the "frontier of antagonism," which constitutes "the people" in contrast to an excluded enemy (2005). For all its sacralization of the intimate, emotional, and private—rejected in the bifurcation between the logic-oriented public and the intimate sphere of the private celebrated by Habermasian conceptions of political discourse (Losiggio, 2020, 142)—femme populism also exposes the phallogocentric limitations of the populist imaginary.⁵

For many *Cristinistas*, as a feminized fetish object associated with sexual desirability and vulnerability (viewed together as a nexus of fortitude), Cristina incarnates a "direct and immediate presencing of people" that is "eschewed and even feared in liberal republicanism" (Mazzarella, 2019, 49). This presencing, I believe, is an endorsement of sovereignty that refuses to be reformulated as the dispersed distribution of power of biopolitical, liberal governance. Moreover, at least in the context of the femme populism of *Cristinismo*, this presencing entails an enhanced focus on the sovereign's body, which, in reality, is doubled as both eminently human and intrinsically exceptional.⁶

Achille Mbembe shows how the corporeality of political leaders is often fetishized by their subjects (2001). Attention to the sovereign's flesh is, therefore, not unique to Argentine politics. Indeed, the focus on the adored leader's sexuality and corporality extends beyond *Cristinismo*. Pictures of Russian president Vladimir Putin shirtless, for example, distinctly underscore the valorization of the virility of the transcendent leader, and Indian prime minister Narendra Modi's campaign noted his broad chest.⁷ Yet, the fetishization of Cristina marks a departure from the virile strongman prototype of other populist leaders, as it foregrounds sexual desirability and feminine vulnerability—defined in explicitly heteronormative terms—as signs of semiotic fitness to represent (and even embody) "the people."

I first elucidate the strategies, effects, and contours of femme populism through an analysis of existing literature on populist representation to underscore the deeply personalist traditions of Latin American populism. I then examine how Cristina must stand for different social sectors and different conceptions of ideal femininity by comparing her to the matriarch of Peronism, Evita, and by drawing on conversations I have had with Kirchnerists, specifically *Cristinista* militants, over the past decade. I then analyze Kirchnerist intellectuals' focus on Cristina's appearance. I use descriptions of Cristina by pro-Kirchnerist intellectuals to consider the narcissistic structure of femme populism, and political subjectivity more generally,⁸ contemplating how love for the populist leader, a figure of identification for the mass,⁹ could be interpreted as an expression of latent narcissism. Lacanian theorizations of desire allow us to understand how political subjectivity revolves around desire—the yearning to fill a lack that is essentially impossible to satisfy. Finally, I reflect on how a feminization of populism mobilizes grief and desire to reassert traditional, and, therefore, quite patriarchal, notions of sovereignty. Throughout this article, femme populism's configuration of personalist politics underscores the centrality of desire to political subjectivity.

Populist Notions of Representation

My conceptualization of femme populism is deeply shaped by previous scholarship on populism, particularly that which has emphasized the personalist aspects of populist logics of representation of particular relevance in the Latin American context.

Scholars have argued that populism imagines a fundamentally different relationship between leader and population than liberal democracy. Historian Federico Finchelstein (2017, 110) contends that populism "demands total allegiance to authoritarian forms of leadership." With "the people" as the only fount of democratic will, their leader's legitimacy derives from their ability to "personif[y] . . . the people," resulting

in “an identification of movement and leaders with the people as a whole” (2017, 103). Moreover, as the true representative of “the people,” “the populist leader projects an image of benevolent protector of the poor and underprivileged” (Chatterjee, 2019, 104). Not just anyone can claim to represent “the people.” As Jan-Werner Müller asserts, “one chooses populist politicians because of their *superior* capacity to discern the common good as supposedly judged and willed by the people” (2014, 486), such that the leader is incomparable and irreplaceable.

The politics of exceptionality described by Müller and others resonates with the work of Sánchez, who provocatively insists that populism produces a particular habitus of the gaze to cultivate a “politics of exemplarity” that “reduc[es]” a “messy and conflictive psychological reality to a visible object” (2016, 181). The leader, standing in for the totality of “the people,” obscures the reality of social heterogeneity. In the case of Cristina, she presides over a broad and heterogeneous coalition—a polyclass alliance that has proven, at moments, to be quite tenuous (see Fierman, 2020, 2021a, 2021b). For Sánchez, the formation of “the people” out of the “inherently modern, mobile, heterogeneous, and government-averse populations” of the Latin American postcolony is intrinsically authoritarian. (2016, 25). The diversity of the masses must be flattened to create the fiction of the homogeneous people, made possible through a fetishism of the leader, akin to Lefort’s Egocrat—“the one” above all others: a homogenizing and inherently phallic signifier (Palacios, 2020).¹⁰ The “disciplined” attunement of the gaze to the leader is an essential aspect of a strategy of governance that Sánchez (2016) aptly calls “monumental governmentality.”

During my research with Kirchnerist militants between 2012 and 2016, I was struck by how often militants of all genders described Cristina as matchlessly physically attractive. Online memes, social media posts, casual conversations, and political discussions among *compañeros*—a term that in the context of Peronist militancy refers to the image of sharing bread elicited by Catholic communion, evoking a strong sentiment of loyalty (Fierman, 2021a, 247)—often highlighted her physical attributes. Thus, I take seriously Sánchez’s concept of monumental governmentality in the context of the phallic *jouissance* many of her followers feel upon visually beholding her—a *jouissance* that is “sexual as much as its symbolic . . . generat[ing] satisfaction at the level of speech and language” (Nobus, 2015, 34; see also Lacan 1999).

Thought within the paradigm set forth by Laclau (2000), the production of such a feeling unites otherwise disparate and even potentially antagonistic social forces. When Kirchnerism came to power in 2003, it brought together diverse social sectors, or popular demands; the ability to survive two decades may be due in part to a disciplined fixation on Cristina as an object of love, lust, admiration, and attraction.

Cristina’s appeal cannot be reduced to aesthetics. Her most ardent followers often explain her popularity as being due to her platform: her government garnered support from the “popular sectors” traditionally associated with Peronism, which ought not be surprising due to material gains experienced under her and her husband’s administrations. During my research interviews, urban, middle-class Cristinista militants frequently cited Kirchnerism’s human rights policies and its persecution of those responsible for the last dictatorship (1976–1983). Historically, factions of Peronists have not inherently always allied. Cristina’s ability, like that of Perón’s, to garner broad popular support is predicated on her capacity to represent “the people” as identifiable and even desirable to diverse sectors of the Argentine electorate. In the case of eroticizing Cistinismo, the fetishization of the leader’s feminine body consolidates monumental governmentality. This fetishization of the leader’s body “impl[ies] a phallicism as well as an effort to center the entire social field around a master signifier” (Morris, 2017, 300; see also Mbembe, 2001);¹¹ it indexes the intrinsically phallogocentric aesthetics of populism.

Populism cannot be reduced to simply personalism, as it relies on popular, horizontal support. Francis Cody (2015) shows how print media contributes to populist mobilization, underscoring the degree to which stranger sociability is constitutive of democratic politics, while Kabir Tambar (2009) focuses on the role of crowds in popular mobilizations. As I discuss elsewhere, populist identities consist of a heterogeneous coalition united by the same “antagonistic frontier” (Laclau, 2005, 87, quoted in Fierman, 2021a, 237)—the border that divides “the people” from their antagonists, or the “anti-people.” For Laclau, this discursive formation of the political is not only contrary to democracy, it is radically democratic. To pathologize populism as a purely personalist adulation would also prevent us from contemplating the proximity

of populism to democracy, rather than its distance. As some have provocatively argued, populism is more democracy's "shadow" (Canovan, 2004) or "mirror" (Panizza, 2005) than its antithesis.

Yet, while populist politics should not be vulgarly reduced to personality sects, or personalism (*personalismo*), Peronism has always been imbued with profoundly personalist conceptions of loyalty: for example, its different incarnations have been named for their respective leaders (Kirchnerismo, Menemismo, Cristinismo). One of the constants across the ideologically variegated history of Peronism, which has ranged from protectionist to neoliberal, left to right, has been its unceasing commitment to a "personalist . . . style of governance" (Knight, 1998, 244, quoted in Fierman, 2021a, 239). As such, while populism's success is contingent on alliance-building among diverse sectors of society, at least in the context of Argentina, and Peronism more specifically, personalism is also an essential aspect of populist paradigms of representation.

Some argue that personalist conceptions of political leadership are intrinsic to Latin American conceptions of sovereignty. According to Lauren Derby (2009, 7), the region has a "long tradition of imagining sovereignty through the personal qualities of leaders" that goes back to the idea of the divine right Spanish monarch in colonial times, "who at times became the embodiment of popular expectations and desires." This personification of sovereignty was "reinscribed through the 19th century in the era of caudillo rule." Similarly, Sánchez claims that Latin American postcolonies, unlike republican democracies in Europe, for example, never transitioned to liberal, disciplinary strategies of governance (2016, 20). Instead, "self-monumentalizing figures" embodying a hard sovereignty akin to a divine right monarch are reified as authentic representations of popular will or desire in the context of dictatorship and democracy.

In my own research, many militants and significant sectors of Kirchnerists and Peronists were critical of personalist, or in this case, Cristinista conceptions of political loyalty. They contended that the national and popular project over which she presided transcended any individual leader. However, at the time of my fieldwork, the hegemonic force within Kirchnerism was adamantly Cristinista and unabashedly equated loyalty to the project, and therefore "the people," with personalist allegiance to Cristina.

Cristina's erotic charisma underscores how sexuality and desire are indelibly linked to conceptions of citizenship and political power—the leader's sexual desirability across social sectors is "a means through which [they] can communicate [their] ability" to govern the whole nation (Canessa, 2008, 59). In the femme populism of Cristinismo, we see how a politics of exemplarity already presupposes a monumental governmentality that produces a presencing of sovereignty that is deeply embodied. As we shall see, Cristina is not the first woman in Argentine politics to be at the center of this orchestrated gaze.

Eva Perón: A Harbinger of Femme Populism

Any reference to Cristina's appearance recalls her famous and infamous forerunner, whose physical appearance served as fetish-object of her admirers and enemies alike—Eva Perón, First Lady of the Argentine Republic from 1946 until her death in 1952. Evita was reified as an ideal model of femininity in ways that also related her body to "the people." While she never held elected office, Evita was vital to the appeal of early Peronism. Her current popularity is broader than that of her husband—particularly among the Kirchnerist militant interlocutors, most of whom identify as Cristinista. Consequently, Evita's personal aesthetics—her penchant for bourgeois markers of femininity, such as fine furs and designer dresses—necessarily play a role in fashioning femme populism in contemporary Argentina. Peronist women militants and leaders have consciously self-fashioned themselves after her (Auyero, 2000).

Cristina is no exception, but the differences between the two women are significant. Like Cristina, feminine vulnerability and fidelity to her husband played a central role in Evita's public persona, but Cristina's juxtaposition of sexuality, strength, and vulnerability also departs from Evita's public image, which was largely predicated on a disposition of obedience to her husband. Cristina's performance of femininity emulates and pays homage to Evita, who was also considered an exemplary figure of incomparable grace, strength, beauty, and selflessness. Peronists interpreted Evita's penchant for expensive clothing, jewelry, and accessories—a penchant shared by Cristina—as a sign of her love and respect for the downtrodden "humble ones" (*los humildes*). Her elegant wardrobe was part and parcel of her self-fashioning as a

rag-to-riches icon, suggesting the promise of class ascendancy while also symbolically transgressing normative assumptions about elegance and socioeconomic class through conspicuous consumption.

“For us, she was like our queen,” a docent at the Evita Museum explained to a group of Brazilian visitors. “When she wore jewels, it was like she was giving us these jewels, these [luxury items] that before only the few could have access to,” he explained. His words suggested that Evita’s body stood in for “the people”—her followers, upon seeing her resplendence, underwent an experience of transubstantiation. Her body represented and embodied the body politic (Kantorowicz, [1957] 2016, 220–21). “When she wore those things it was for us,” another admirer of hers, who had been a child at the time of her death, told me while we discussed her penchant for designer outfits and accessories.

For anthropologist Julie Taylor (1979), Evita’s power is deeply gendered, as her femininity marks her as liminal—sacred and dangerous. As a woman, Evita is associated with an “uninstitutionalized, uncontrolled, irrational or incomprehensible” power that is considered divine by her admirers and vulgar by her detractors (1979, 15). For Evita’s followers, her beauty, a sign of her divine femininity, is related to a saintly virginal purity; in contrast, her detractors disparaged her as a tramp. Evita’s sacral liminality was dramatically enhanced by her death from cancer at the early, and spiritually significant, age of 33. “In her martyrdom,” Taylor writes, “Eva associates herself with spiritual power in the form of a sanctity that Christianity granted its martyrs in their elect place in the company of saints” (1979, 147). As a childless woman who proudly and publicly deferred to her husband, Evita cast herself as a faithful servant of her paternal and omniscient husband, untainted by carnal desire. While Peronists describe her as beautiful, they do not sexualize her beauty.

In contrast, while Cristina’s critics have depicted her as materialistic and sexually wanton, her admirers explicitly sexualize her as well—portraying her as desirable, but faithful. Cristina is of a different generation from Evita and comes from a more affluent and educated background. She has a university degree and worked as a successful lawyer before becoming a politician. However, there are noteworthy similarities between the women, one of which is their position as doting wives whose marriages are highly idealized by their acolytes. My militant interlocutors told me that they believed Cristina to be a celibate widow ever faithful to the memory of her deceased husband—although many have fantasized about her finding love with one of her close allies, in particular Hugo Chávez (before his death in 2013) or Vladimir Putin.

In an article published in *Página/12* in November 2010, a month after Néstor Kirchner’s death, philosopher León Rozitchner (2010) eulogized Kirchner, describing the Kirchner marriage as paradigm shifting. Rozitchner attributes the differences in Cristina’s and Evita’s performances of femininity to the transformation of a woman’s role in politics and society over the six intervening decades. This social transformation, he argues, is also linked to the deserved embrace of human rights organizations representing the mothers of those “disappeared” during the 1976–1983 dictatorship. Kirchnerism, he suggests, has resignified the role of women in the political sphere.

Yet, as a self-proclaimed Peronist, Cristina must also appeal to referents associated with Evita’s public persona: 70 years after her death, Eva Perón remains the most universally beloved figure among Peronists. Thus, Cristina’s capacity to represent “the people” relies, in significant part, on her ability to represent aspects of femininity celebrated by Peronists for decades: the Peronism of Evita’s time guaranteed women’s right to vote and emphasized traditional heteronormative expectations of women’s roles as feminine wives and mothers and also as workers.¹² In the 1970s, many women participated in Peronist militancy, including the armed guerrilla factions of Peronism. To be an effective symbol of Peronist femininity, Cristina must stand for differing conceptions of what it means to authentically represent and embody *el pueblo*.

“The Chick That We Like”

My concept of femme populism comes out of extensive time spent with self-proclaimed Kirchnerist militants between 2012 and 2016, and the frequency with which I heard allusions to Cristina’s desirability. Focusing on Buenos Aires, my research consisted of spending time with militants from various political associations, including but not limited to New Encounter (Nuevo Encuentro) and La C  mpora, which are

generally considered to espouse a deeply personalist ultra-Kirchnerism. Sometimes, my Kirchnerist militant interlocutors would refer to Cristina without using her name, often calling her “the girl/chick that we like,” or “*la chica*” or “*la mina que nos gusta*.”¹³ While these two political associations—which, at that time, were the most visible and powerful Kirchnerist associations in Buenos Aires—consist primarily of young (under 45) people, this term of affection was most commonly used by those around Cristina’s age, born in the 1950s.

I first took note of this reference to Cristina while talking to Leonardo. He was in his mid- to late 50s and, like his slightly older brother, Teo, was an adamant Kirchnerist, even though he had never identified as Peronist. Leonardo belonged to New Encounter, while Teo was less formally tied to any specific political association. I met them while they were working on the failed mayoral primary campaign of Gabriela Ceruti, a leader of New Encounter (currently the press secretary for President Alberto Fernández), who like many high-profile leaders of the association, comes from the progressive center-left rather than Peronism. New Encounter is widely perceived as presenting a non-Peronist, progressive Kirchnerism; the reality is more complex. However, this perception of New Encounter as non-Peronist Kirchnerism is important, because New Encounter appeals to some of Teo and Leonardo’s generation, as well as to middle-class youths in urban Buenos Aires, who are critical of the Peronism associated with labor unions and the suburbs surrounding the city of Buenos Aires.

Teo and Leonardo felt a deep generational bond with Cristina and, they believed, a deep ideological one as well. Like many Kirchnerist militants of their age, Cristina was one of them—the generation of leftists and left-leaning Peronists who lived through much, if not all, of the proscription (to varying degrees) of Peronism from 1955 to 1973, Perón’s celebrated return from exile in 1973, and the atrocities of the dictatorship that took over in 1976, “disappearing” many of their *compañeros* among the 30,000 unaccounted for resulting from the junta’s process of national reorganization.

Like Leonardo and Teo, many of my interlocutors of this generation tied their involvement to Kirchnerist militancy to the legacy of the disappeared (*los desaparecidos*). They felt a debt, they indicated, to these “martyrs,” whose legacy was carried on by their surviving contemporaries—the Kirchners. For my interlocutors who referred to Cristina as “the chick that we like,” Cristina’s (and her late husband’s) dedication to pursuing retributive justice against the “*represores*” of the dictatorship was the most commonly named reason for their support of Cristina. While the Kirchners were certainly not leading protagonists of anti-dictatorship militancy during the junta, they were associated with Peronist militancy at that time; thus, their pursuit of center-left policies (albeit in a context of neoliberalism) and commitment to prosecuting the crimes of the junta render them, in the eyes of many Kirchnerists, an emblem of generational perseverance.

Thus, lust for an object-cause of desire is not the sole, nor even the most significant, source of Cristina’s appeal to her followers, but the fact that even those who claim a profound ideological link often speak of her in very gendered and even sexualizing (yet respectful) terms should not be glossed over. That admiration is often articulated in a lexicon of desire, underscoring how, in femme populism, the capacity to embody superlative feminine qualities is interpreted as a sign of authenticity.

Many militants born after the dictatorship associate Cristina with the generation of the disappeared and the utopian marriage of socialism and Peronism that defined much of urban 1960s and 1970s militancy, which they, of course, did not experience firsthand. During small-group and one-on-one interviews, many young militants from La Cámpora and New Encounter told me that they were part of the 1970s (*setentista*) legacy; they modeled themselves on the generation of the disappeared and the Kirchners. Among these younger militants, Cristina was a model of courage. She was described as maternal—which ought not be surprising, as she is around the age of many of their parents. Young militants also spoke of her as incomparably beautiful, even if she seemed to favor a far more exuberant aesthetic than many of them.

Among many of these younger militants, particularly heterosexual women, Cristina was described as an icon for women—flirtatious, beautiful, aware of her own sexual power. Members of this demographic usually only showed similar Axelike admiration for their leader’s seemingly favorite functionary—the dashingly minister of economy, Axel Kicillof, renowned for his unwavering allegiance to Cristina and considered to be left of Kirchnerism.¹⁴ In addition to his confrontational approach toward international creditors,



FIGURE 2 Underwear decorated with the likeness of Axel Kicillof's face.

[This figure appears in color in the online issue]
Source: Photograph by Julia Fierman.

Kicillof's loyalty to Cristina was the most common reason I heard for militants' adoration of him. Every time Kicillof made an appearance at any of the dozens of rallies I attended during my fieldwork, he was met with Beatlemania fanfare. "Axel is the sex symbol of Kirchnerism. Nobody affects the militants, particularly the young ones, like he does," reported Clara, a younger militant from New Encounter. It is worth noting that because Kicillof is not of Peronist origins, he is far more popular among the progressive, urban, "white" factions of Kirchnerism and is therefore a less uniting figure than Cristina.

On October 17, 2015, at the annual celebration of Peronism's birth, a month before the first round of the national elections, I came across a material artifact that testified to Kicillof's sexual magnetism among the Kirchnerist rank and file. As I walked through Plaza de Mayo on the day that commemorates the massive uprising of the first discrete group identified as "Peronists," who gathered in 1945 to protest the imprisonment of their beloved labor secretary, Juan Perón, I perused the vendor stalls.¹⁵ Among one vendor's Cristinista wares, I spotted a pair of women's underwear emblazoned with stencils of Kicillof's face with the English words "Kiss & Love," which sounds like "Kicillof" (see Figure 2). The imagined consumer of this object, I concluded, was a young woman whose crush on Kicillof revealed a fantasy of self-fashioning in which Cristina implicitly serves as an aspirational figure. Or at least the underwear suggested a desiring heterosexual female gaze, equating empowerment with lustful yearning—a yearning that is assured satisfaction through Kicillof's unwavering loyalty.

Pedro, who had posted the photo of Cristina's legs on Facebook, was older than Cristina by about a decade. He spoke of Cristina's beauty often in conversations but was critical of those who tried to convert Peronism into a leftist project. For him, as for many Peronist militants associated with trade unions, equating Peronism with revolutionary socialism illustrated a fundamental misunderstanding of Peronist doctrine. In Cristina, he saw a champion of "the worker." She was a "chick" that he liked because

her courage was reminiscent of Evita, and she, like the matriarch of Peronism, understood the “humble ones”—the “popular sectors”—to be the true Argentine *pueblo*.

Cristina’s political success in the world of Peronist politics has been largely due to her ability to serve as an overdetermined signifier of “the people.” For Pedro and for Leonardo, she is the only person who can authentically represent “the people,” but to what object or concepts this signifier refers is not equivalent to them. Yet, among these different generations of Cristinistas, we see femme populism’s interplay between incomparability and relatability; Cristina is both another *compañera*, and she is also characterized by many of her followers as unique—she is *única* in her style, her beauty, and her fortitude. To all of them, she is always doing what is strategically of interest to advancing the well-being of “the people”—even if they disagree over to whom “the people” refers.

Kirchnerist Intellectuals and Cristina’s Beauty

It was not only in informal conversation or participant observation with fervent Cristinista militants where Cristina’s sexual appeal and vulnerability were exalted. In this section, I examine how high-profile Kirchnerist intellectuals engaged in the production of femme populism, testifying to the extent to which fetishizations of the leader’s corporeal aspects figured into the reification of Cristina as the sole representative of “the people.” Furthermore, these authors’ investments in Cristina’s sexual desirability elucidates the centrality of desire in political subjectivity as that which is generative of a relationship of identification that marks a constitutive lack—an object-cause of desire that embodies the void around which signification is organized. In the words of Slavoj Žižek (1989, 178), the Lacanian object-cause of desire, or *objet petit a*, is “the original lost object” that “coincides with its own loss.”

I turn to Lacanian readings of desire to understand the place of longing and lack in political ideology—a topic notably elaborated by Slavoj Žižek (1977, 1989), Judith Butler (2016), and Ernesto Laclau (2000), with the latter’s intervention being of most relevance here. The media artifacts I focus on in this section, the aforementioned Rozitchner article and a biography of Cristina by journalist Sandra Russo, underscore the centrality of desire in the production of political subjectivities. By foregrounding the importance of Cristina’s desirability to her intellectual elite, this section highlights how elements of Cristinista discourse (femme populism) reify femininity (as vulnerability beauty) as indexing the exceptional fitness of the overtly feminine leader to represent “the people.”

Rozitchner’s (2010) previously mentioned article, published as an homage to Néstor Kirchner, hails the Kirchner marriage and presidencies as paradigm shifting. Most pertinent to my theorization of femme populism are his descriptions of Cristina’s enemies. Rozitchner analyzes Cristina’s detractors as motivated by desire, or at least stymied desire, dividing Cristina’s detractors into a gendered binary based on deeply heteronormative conceptions of desire: (1) resentful men who know they would never have a chance with a woman so attractive and intelligent; (2) “submissive and fed up” women, “slaves of men,” who hate Cristina because they know that she “has the same as them or more.” According to Rozitchner’s logic, Cristina is offensive to her enemies precisely because they desire her: men resent her knowing that they are not good enough to have their desire for her returned in kind; women are poisoned by envy and the knowledge of their own insufficiency in comparison to *la presidenta*. Rozitchner’s aggressively heteromasculine and narcissistic conception of Cristina’s legitimacy unambiguously situates desire at the center of political identity—an unhealthy relationship that, he suggests, breeds bad politics.

Lacan ([1973] 1998, 186) characterizes love as a “fundamentally narcissistic structure”: a “narcissistic relation by which the subject becomes an object worthy of love.” Furthermore, the subject, in this case, “tries to induce the Other into a mirage relation in which he convinces him of being worthy of love” (267). In other words, one loves oneself as mirrored back through the gaze of the Other (12). One loves the Other because they recognize themselves as desirable to the gaze of the Other. Not only do Cristina’s followers feel close to power through their loyalty to her, but they see in her their ideal selves—how they wish to be seen (e.g., the imagined consumer of the Kicillof underwear). Žižek, pursuing Lacan’s contention that “to love is, essentially, to wish to be loved” ([1973] 1998, 253), concisely states: “The

original question of desire is not directly ‘What do I want?’, but ‘What do *others* want from me? What do they see in me? What I am to others?’” (Žižek, 1997, 9, emphasis in original). By orienting their gaze toward their monumental leader, “the people” see themselves as objects of her desire—ideal subjects. By admiring her through a habituated politics of spectatorship they recognize themselves as perfected—an indomitable sexual fetish. In Rozitchner’s eyes, those who do not recognize Cristina as the true leader and embodiment of the people resentfully reside in the bitterness of thwarted desire or even sexual dysfunction.

For Lacan, desire is also about lack: one yearns for that which one cannot possess—a lack that Žižek (1997) and Laclau (2000, 2005) argue is central to political subjectivity. The subject and society more broadly are defined by a constitutive lack—fantasy allows for the illusion of filling this lack; thus, ideology is itself based in fantasy (Kabgani and Clarke, 2016, 160–61). According to the Lacanian approach, “ideologies can elicit affective identification from their followers to the extent that they can offer them partial jouissance of a sustained desire;” ideologies promise a “future of full satisfaction. But this must in a sense remain an unfulfilled promise precisely to sustain the communal desire that it evokes” (Kølvraa, 2018, 1408–9). Cristina is a signifier that gives an illusion of closure, or fullness—a signifier that can appeal to disparate sectors of society, uniting them under the fictional, cohesive identity of “the people” (*el pueblo*). Cristina at once represents the people as they are but also that which they can never be. As an idealized object of desire, she surpasses them and remains inaccessible. She represents the “mythical” fullness offered by belonging to “the people” (Laclau, 2005, 116), subscribing to a “logic of love/identification” with the leader, who represents an “absent fullness” (Sabsay, 2020, 815).¹⁶

In Sandra Russo’s laudatory profile of Cristina, *La Presidenta*, her attention to the leader’s body further underscores the libidinal aspect to the Cristinista and, perhaps more generally, populist regime of signification. For Russo (2011, 88), who, like Rozitchner characterizes anti-Kirchnerist men as full of “contempt for women” and their women counterparts as suffering from “envy,” Cristina’s coquettish presentation of self is, itself, a potent political message. Her unapologetic use of heavy cosmetics, often mocked in overtly sexist fashion by anti-Kirchnerists and the media, is an homage to the 1970s generation to which she, Néstor, and Russo belong (2011, 86)—a generation marked by the tragedies of dictatorship and forced disappearances. As such, Cristina’s makeup is a courageous political expression—particularly as Russo goes on to suggest that Cristina is so naturally beautiful that her makeup is not intended to conceal.

For me, the most striking part of Russo’s adoring profile is her description of seeing Cristina’s natural face, bereft of any maquillage. Because Cristina always appears in public heavily made-up, this is a rare occurrence. In *La Presidenta*, Russo describes her excitement as she awaits the opportunity to see Cristina in such an intimate state in her family home in Patagonia. Russo has been told by fellow journalists that, in the comfort and privacy of her home, Cristina does not use “a drop of makeup.” But Russo has been told by those who have previously had the opportunity to see Kirchner in a stripped-down state, “the chick (*la mina*) is still beautiful (*preciosa*)” (2011, 69).

Russo herself ends up dedicating two full pages to describing Cristina’s bare-skinned appearance, noting that the “humectant glow” of her complexion has a “faint luminosity” (70). When she wears her usual heavy makeup, observes Russo, her eyes become the center of attention; yet, in the family living room, Cristina’s unpainted eyes beautifully “melt into her face” (70). Without mascara, their brown tone becomes even more evident. “Free of makeup,” writes Russo, “Cristina’s face is that of a middle-aged woman etched with the markings of time, which combine harmoniously with her other features. Cristina is plainly beautiful” (70).

What is exposed by Cristina’s unmade-up face? What does Russo believe she has seen? Beholding her idol without makeup seems to confirm her exceptionality and authenticity—both how identifiable (like Russo, she is a middle-aged woman) and unparalleled Cristina is. When she says she acts in the interests of *el pueblo*, she is true loyalty to them—she is honest, as genuine as her “humectant” glow and evocative brown eyes. She is not false or treacherous—her makeup is not deceitful; there are no deceptive masks. At the same time, stripped down, Kirchner is vulnerable, she lets Russo, her loyal follower, catch a glimpse of her as she really is, as a middle-aged woman. And, to the relief of those who idolize her, the way she *really* looks lives up to their expectations. At the same time, following Lacanian logic, Russo sees herself, or “the people,” reflected back in Cristina’s beautiful unlined eyes as how she would like to be seen herself.

“The people” are desirable and desired, worthy of a beauty that is authentic and a libidinal force that is authoritative.

For these Kirchnerist intellectuals, there is a concerted effort to read in Cristina’s supposedly unrivaled beauty the validation of their leader as both exceptional—beyond compare—and affirmative of their own desirability. They are like her, worthy of her, and yet she is unsurpassed.¹⁷ Rozitchner’s and Russo’s emphasis on Cristina’s desirability underscores the centrality of desire in the experience of political subjectivity and the dialogic dialectic of recognition by which subjects feel themselves to be interpellated (and therefore, rendered desirable) by their leaders. Their role in creating an official Cristinista discourse—participation that in no way calls into question the genuine nature of their laudatory remarks—illustrates how femme populism fetishizes the leader, perhaps clarifying how the leader serves as the object-cause of desire in political imaginaries in populist contexts and beyond.

I bring attention to these media artifacts to illustrate how femme populism ties vulnerability and desirability together, reformulating this amalgamation of sentiments as fortitude. This femmed-up reformulation of Sánchez’s (2016) “monumental governmentality” never abandons the phallic ordering of populist logic of representation.

The Political Aesthetics of Grief

In this section, I further clarify the role of vulnerability in femme populism, specifically as related to Cristina’s position as a widow, by reflecting on scholarship on gender and vulnerability in political thought and political anthropology—in particular, scholarship that aims to further comprehend the affective dimensions of political mobilization. Cristina as a widow has united grief with desirability, pain, and pleasure; her brand of populism understands that, as Lacan theorized, the incredible pleasure of *jouissance* “can easily tip into its opposite” (Rose, 1982, 34). Moreover, I reflect on how femme populism uses this union of vulnerability and desire—an aesthetic of *jouissance*—to reformulate traditional sovereignty as novel.

In his ethnography of the press in Venezuela, Robert Samet (2019, 57–58) elucidates how discourses of victimhood have played a key role in populist politics, acting as a “charismatic signifier” that unites disparate groups into a unified populist identity. Many Kirchnerist militants told me they got involved out of a desire to “protect,” to be a “soldier” or “guardian,” to Cristina after Néstor’s death in 2010. This response was particularly common among militants belonging to La Cámpora, whose most prominent figurehead is Cristina’s son.

I note this detail because “protecting” Cristina is related to her inherently gendered position as widow—one who lacks the companion who would traditionally protect her. Cristina’s victimhood is tethered to her femininity, both because her position as widow is intrinsically gendered and because, as Russo (2011) and Rozitchner (2010) claim, her heterosexual desirability is so potent as to provoke hatred. Thus, her performances of vulnerability—attached to highly feminine performances of widowhood—throw into stark relief the extent to which sexuality is “at the heart of an idealized national subject” (Hota, 2020, 382) and the degree to which women are enfolded into the political community as specifically sexed citizens (Das, 2008, 285). Citizenship is “performed as a form of belonging with regard to both the state and the domestic sphere” (Das and Addlakha, 2001, 526). Women, as particularly marked as bound to the domestic (rather than public) sphere, are associated with “shared intimacies,” gossip, networks of kin, friends, and neighbors (Han, 2012, 79–80).

Cristina’s status as both political leader and woman collapses the public and the private, the exterior with the intimate. Cristina’s blurring of the boundary between the masculine political subject and feminine domestic subject is particularly potent in its capacity to cast the hard sovereignty of monumental governmentality in the guise of a less hierarchical, softer configuration of power. In this section, I explore how grief renders Cristina a fetish—at once essentially identifiable yet intrinsically incomparable—that mobilizes “the people” around a phallic regime of political representation that appropriates and even reterritorializes the feminine to expand the appeal of hard, masculine models of sovereignty. Grief is, therefore, an essential aspect of femme populism that renders tangible what Samet (2019) identifies as populism’s



FIGURE 3 On December 10, 2011, Cristina was inaugurated as president for the second time. She was in her period of mourning, wearing black, and visibly emotional.

[This figure appears in color in the online issue]

Source: Photograph by Juan Mabromata/Argentina's re-elected President Cristina via Getty Images

proclivity for casting “the people” as a victim, an injured party—an aspect of populism that Laclau posits as central to its logic.

Cristina’s public image as a visibly aggrieved widow intensified her femininity as not simply an object of desire but also an object of empathy (see Figure 3). Her vulnerability had a sensorial effect on her followers, who felt, and continue to feel, an intensified closeness to her as a wounded subject. Her voice often cracked in public, and she cried during speeches. These public performances of grief further transformed her, in the eyes of her most loyal followers, into a supremely identifiable and remarkable figure.¹⁸

Her public expressions of grief led many of her followers to believe that she personally wanted to retire from politics. She had no personal desire to run for reelection, many of my Kirchnerist militant

interlocutors claimed; she felt obligated to protect “the people” and ensure the continuity of Kirchnerism’s national and popular project aimed at expanded social welfare programs. She was standing for reelection against her own personal desire because she valued the well-being of “the people” more than her individual happiness. Thus, Cristina’s decision to run for reelection was viewed by many of her most ardent followers as a profound sacrifice (see Fierman, 2020). Not only had Cristina lost her husband—who had sacrificed his health by exhausting himself in the service of “the people” by continuing to participate in national politics after, as my militant interlocutors contend, he was told to slow down by his doctors. Yet, as the only one fit to represent “the people,” she made a selfless choice to continue to lead “the people,” who needed her to protect them from their enemies (depending on who I asked, these enemies were named as “the right,” “the media,” or “the oligarchs”).

Some feminists posit vulnerability as the possible grounds for a horizontal anti-sovereignty. Many scholars making this argument underscore how vulnerability can be the site of resistance, specifically to authoritarianism. Thus, fortitude and resistance, on the one hand, and vulnerability, on the other, are not diametrically opposed; instead, “receptivity and responsiveness become the basis for mobilizing vulnerability” as a powerful force of resistance, often to conditions of “infrastructural and social precarity” (Butler, 2016, 25). For example, Athena Athanasiou (2016) considers the woman in mourning, particularly in contexts of war, to be a sign of resistance, even potentially a direct challenge to the oppression of (masculinist, authoritarian) sovereignty. Judith Butler characterizes precarity and precariousness as “a common ontological condition of exposure and interdependency that seems to be independent of forms of life” (Han, 2018, 332; see also Butler, 2004). Furthermore, Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (2016) argue that the body in mourning, particularly as collectives in public, can be a radical and transformative political act. In this vein, Sabsay (2016, 286–287, 297) emphasizes the significance of “permeability.”

The importance of this feminist scholarship in reconsidering the role of affect in confronting authoritarian configurations of sovereignty cannot be understated. Moreover, understanding the centrality of affect to political identity is essential to understanding the appeal of femme populism. However, in the case of the most ardent Cristinistas, vulnerability is used to further masculinist notions of sovereignty—or at least their logic of spectatorship—that produce the “monumental governmentality” of Sánchez (2016)—a strategy of governance by which a “shared object of devotion and identification . . . provide[s] the common ground” between the disparate social sectors that must join together as a coalition for populist politics to be possible.

This authoritarian logic of spectatorship appears in Jon Beasley-Murray’s (2010) analysis of populism (through an examination of Peronism), which he believes is primarily concerned with consolidating hegemony through the figure/s of the sovereign: Peronism clearly does this, he claims, through ritualized elicitations of emotion that reinforce the hierarchical relation between leaders and the led.¹⁹ Femme populism employs a Deleuzian reterritorialization of femme desirability and vulnerability to recast sovereignty as something softer, more sympathetic.

Yet, Cristina’s presentation of self and her appeal reveal something fundamental about the nature of political subjectivity that we might miss if we simply reject the theatricality of populist politics as deceptively opiating. The effectiveness of Cristina’s performance and how strongly it affects her followers reveals an innate susceptibility of the subject. Still, this permeability is mobilized to reaffirm the role of the sovereign, and it is far removed from producing the “post-sovereignty” imagined by Athanasiou, Gambetti, Sabsay, and Butler. Permeability on the part of the leader does not reflect a softening of sovereignty but rather sovereignty’s response to a “people” that demands demonstrations of sensitivity alongside libidinal longing.

As a charismatic signifier, Samet (2019) argues victimhood can serve as the glue that holds otherwise disparate social forces together, forging populist unity out of a social heterogeneity through a structure of feeling that has adapted to the desires of “the people,” which are essentially unsatisfiable—the constitutive lack that is the basis of political ideology for Laclau. After Néstor Kirchner’s death, Kirchnerism, as a political movement dependent upon polyclass alliances in a highly classist society, was unified by the figure of the saintly and desirable widow—a collective totemic representation tasked with tethering diverse social sectors together as a homogeneous “people.” Vulnerability can be seductive, bringing together otherwise

incongruent aspects of Argentine society. It has the capacity to at least temporarily satisfy the desires of those who impute onto their leader distinct and even conflicting conceptions of “the people.”

Conclusion: The Phallogentric Desire of Populism

What I call *femme populism* consists of a phallic reappropriation of the feminine in the service of what Butler, Sabsay, Gambetti, and Athanasiou would categorize as a masculinist configuration of sovereignty. Perhaps this reterritorialization ought not be so surprising, as there are examples of neoliberal movements embracing the (traditionally feminine) affective, private sphere to advance political projects that are still based on logics of social exclusion and marginalization (Losiggio, 2020, 142–43). However, the aesthetics of empathy and loyalty at play in *Cristinismo* can expand our understanding of how quite traditional configurations of sovereignty can appear as something novel, modern, updated, even empathetic. In the context of the Peronist tradition, which arguably has survived based on its ability to reinvent itself over its almost eight-decade history, this should not be surprising.

After completing her second term as president in 2015, and constitutionally prohibited from seeking a third, Cristina temporarily retired from politics. Yet she remained the uncontested leader of her doting *Cristinistas*, who awaited her return to the political scene with great anticipation. She served as a strong electoral asset to Alberto Fernandez as his running mate in 2019, leading to the Peronists’ return to power after four years of opposition rule that had eroded social welfare programs put in place under *Kirchnerism*. In the words of one of my key interlocutors in 2019, a militant associated with the *Cristinista* political association *New Encounter*, “We [*Cristinistas*] voted for Alberto because Cristina told us to.”

While Cristina’s support cannot be simply explained through personalist fetishism, the libidinal dimensions of *Cristinismo* offer insight into the relationship between desire and political subjectivity beyond the context of *Kirchnerism* and *Peronism* in Argentina. Accordingly, the remarkable love—and I would argue desire—that many *Kirchnerists* claim to feel for their beloved “strategic conductor,” as illustrated by the official discourse of *Kirchnerist* intellectuals and the sentiments of my militant interlocutors, indicates a populist tendency to deify individuals who are perceived to be the sole representatives of “the people.” *Femme populism* exposes the libidinal economy that suffuses personalist conceptions of political representation, figuring the leader as an ambiguous fetish that is at once of the people and far beyond them. Moreover, the libidinal economy of *Cristinismo* foregrounds the role of desire in political subjectivity more broadly. This desire, in turn, elucidates the phallogentrism of conceptions of political power more generally, since in *femme populism*, as elsewhere, phallic power and desire “assure . . . normal speech” (Siegel, 2006, 51), defining the parameters of political discourse and representation.

Cristina’s fastidious attention to her appearance is a calculated practice of caring for the self, of cultivating power through self-objectification (Foucault, [1984] 1988). Her power largely resides in her deep comprehension of phallogentric desire and her playful and even subversive making do of the discourses it produces. Cristina’s insistence on presenting herself as a sexualized fetish is interpreted as a sign of her exceptional capacity to intuit and interpret the desires of the Argentine people. They are enchanted by the performance itself—the concerted effort at seduction and its self-aware reflexivity that reveals a deep, psychological understanding of the people’s public and intimate desires.

In the case of *femme populism*, as Sánchez (2016) and Derby (2009) would argue, a reification of a *femme* configuration of sovereignty signals a resistance to liberal paradigms of political representation characteristic of Latin American politics—although, a turn to populism across continents certainly indicates global disenchantment with liberal regimes of representation. Thus, *Cristinista* desire also throws into stark relief the degree to which such paradigms are considered dissatisfying, as people long for a deeply embodied presencing of sovereignty. In *femme populism*, this embodied presencing most approximates the desires of “the people” (or at least “a people”), as a figure that openly embraces the intimate, the sentimental, the vulnerable.

Perhaps it is inevitable that a longing for such presencing might become increasingly preoccupied with the corporeal, revealing the centrality of desire to political subjectivity. This encompasses both a desire for

the leader and the people's desire to recognize themselves as desirable as they see themselves mirrored in her gaze. This indicates the projection of their own longing to be desired onto their chosen love object, oscillating between intense identification with the leader and the recognition of her intrinsic singularity. In this configuration of political representation, hard, masculinist sovereignty reterritorializes the vulnerable and desirable feminine, underscoring the adaptability and enduring appeal of illiberal conceptions of sovereignty.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Endnotes *Militantes* are highly dedicated political activists. However, “militancy” (*militancia*) conveys a sense of obedience and structure that “activism” loses. As such, to maintain close proximity to the meaning in the original Spanish, I translate *militante* as “militant.” Militants are not armed; although, in the 1970s, some Peronists were members of guerrilla organizations.

² During her time as First Lady of Argentina, Eva Perón was often derisively referred to by her opponents as “that woman” (*esa mujer*).

³ I refer to Cristina Fernández de Kirchner as simply “Cristina,” as that is how she is generally referred to by both her admirers and her detractors.

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari’s “Treatise on Nomadology: The War Machine” speaks of reterritorialization as using one’s opponents’ methods against them. For example, “the way in which total war, popular war, and even guerrilla warfare . . . borrow one another’s methods” (1986, 62).

⁵ As Daniela Losiggio points out, this bifurcation between the public-logical and the affective-private serves a “patriarchal-ideological function” (2020, 142), essentially excluding the affective “outside of democratic debate” (143).

⁶ Rafael Sánchez declares that in post-independence Venezuela “the passage from sovereignty to discipline, or from politics to biopolitics analyzed by Foucault has never been successfully accomplished” (2016, 20).

⁷ Narendra Modi’s campaign claimed his chest measured 56 inches, associating his virility with his political fitness (see Sandhu 2014).

⁸ As Darlene Demandante, paraphrasing Lacan, puts it, “love springs from a subject’s identification of an ideal ego, which he finds in the image of the other” (2014, 108; see also Lacan 1988).

⁹ Freud ([1921] 1999) states that the cohesiveness of a crowd is largely predicated on a group’s identification with a leader. In his landmark work on populism, Laclau (2005) draws on Freud to argue that populist movements are largely united by a leader with whom people feel a strong sense of identification. For Laclau, this feeling of identification plays a significant role in uniting diverse sectors of a population to form a single political identity—“the people.”

¹⁰ As I have said elsewhere, “For Lefort, totalitarian notions of organization and political representation understand ‘the Peoples-as-One’ as exclusively ‘represented and affirmed only by a great Other’” (Fierman 2021b, 9; see Lefort 1986, 297). Margarita Palacios (2020) recognizes this logic of signification—the identification of “the people” with the one—in Laclau’s theorization of populism, and deems it intrinsically phallic.

¹¹ Mbembe (2001) addresses the phallogentrism of corporeal fetishization in the context of autocratic politics. While populist governments are not intrinsically authoritarian in their policies, the concept of monumental governmentality that Sánchez (2016) claims is central to populist aesthetics certainly has authoritarian overtones.

¹² Eduardo Elena argues that Peronist politics of consumption positions women as consumers of luxury goods, relating luxury consumption to feminine behaviors. During Evita’s lifetime, the Eva Perón Foundation distributed goods to women and children and gave women objects for housework, associating them with domestic labor—even if they were also celebrated as workers with employment outside of the household (2011, 137–42).

¹³ It is important to note that “like” here does not simply mean that something or someone is pleasing or leaves a good impression. In that case, one would use the verb *caer*. The verb *gustar* in this context conveys a sense of like that is laden with desire. It conveys “liking” in the adolescent sense of lusting or yearning and presents Cristina as someone in their proximity, as if she were a classmate in secondary school on whom they have a crush.

¹⁴ Since December 2019, Axel Kicillof has served as governor of the Province of Buenos Aires.

¹⁵ Perón served as secretary of labor, among other positions, under the military dictatorship brought to power by a coup d’état led by General Arturo Rawson in 1943. Forging close relations with labor unions, the junta began to view Perón as an internal threat. On October 9, 1945, he was forced to resign from all his government posts. A few days later, he was arrested and imprisoned. In reaction, the unions declared a general strike on October 17, calling for a mass mobilization to converge upon Plaza de Mayo. On October 18, Perón was liberated. He would go on to win the 1946 elections.

¹⁶ In the Lacanian lexicon, which is very much at the center of Laclau’s analysis, this lack is named as *objet petit a*—the innately unattainable object of desire (see Lacan [2001]2015).

¹⁷ Derby argues that much of Trujillo’s appeal relied on his capacity to be at once human and, if not divine, at least touched by the occult (2009, 113). Her analysis is strongly shaped Kantorowicz’s work on the king’s two bodies. This double quality, Derby argues, renders Trujillo, and particularly his body, ambiguous, and therefore deeply seductive.

¹⁸To speak of Cristina “performing” or “enacting” her mourning is not to argue that Cristina’s public widowhood is a farce. In consonance with Butler (2016), I believe that performativity is essential to subjectivity, and performance is not always an agentive enactment of different roles, whether they be defined by gender, class, or other factors. As a post-structuralist critique of the work of Erving Goffman (1959) and those theorizing performance as agentive, Butler (2016) conceives of performance as that which is not always calculatedly authored.

¹⁹Beasley-Murray (2010, 65) finds in Peronist iconography the paradigmatic populist *mise-en-scène*: Perón and Evita addressing an adoring multitude in the plaza, perched high above the adoring crowd from the balcony of the house of government, gazing down at “the people,” their adulating supporters, who, in turn, gaze up at their beloved leaders.

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