Simplified identities: Four ‘types’ of gays and lesbians on Chilean telenovelas

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Abstract
Telenovelas have been one of the main mechanisms by which Chilean television has made gay and lesbian identities visible. Through an analysis of over 50 gay or lesbian characters that have appeared on this type of programme from 1990 to 2018, it is argued that Chilean telenovelas have privileged representations of non-heterosexuals that do not destabilise the status quo, but contribute to the reproduction of sexist, homophobic and/or classist discourses. This has been done through the utilisation of four ‘types’ of characters: funny locas, serious machos, fighting mothers and clear lesbians/confused lesbians.

Keywords
Chile, gays and lesbians, telenovelas, television, TV representations

The visibility of gays and lesbians on Chilean television has increased steadily since 1990, when Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship ended, producing a tepid loosening of moral barriers that entailed the inclusion of ‘new’ topics in a now not directly censored television. Telenovelas, one of Latin America’s particular forms of cultural production, have been central for this movement as they, while maintaining a traditional formula based on families’ and friends’ everyday dramas (Graf, 2015; Santa Cruz, 2003), have constituted the preferred mechanism through which Chilean networks have televised ‘new’ social topics, such as HIV/AIDS, violence against women and gay/lesbian identities, among others (Amigo et al., 2014; Santa Cruz, 2003). Not only in Chile but generally in the region, telenovelas have been considered not just a successful form of entertainment that attracts diverse...
audiences (Fuenzalida, 2007; Lull, 1998), but also a space for education and information: studies have concluded that telenovelas contribute to the construction of each country’s cultural identity (Pérez, 2005; Fuenzalida, 2001; Sifuentes, 2014), offer points of reference that have an impact on viewers’ identities (Sifuentes, 2014; Slade, 2010; Tate, 2013) and motivate public discussion about contemporary social situations (Pérez, 2005; García et al., 2018; La Pastina, 2002; Sifuentes, 2014; Tate, 2014). In sum, the genre has been considered ‘an essential ingredient in the tradition, culture, and history’ (Pearson, 2005: 400) of Latin America; a true ‘social force’ (González, 1998) through which gay and lesbian identifications have increased their public visibility. However, notwithstanding this new-found placement, homosexuality’s televisual presence remains weak or scarce.

Invisibility is a central part of any marginalised group’s oppression, since it contributes to their maintenance at the bottom of the social scale (Gross, 2001; Porfido, 2009). However, the problem is not only a quantifiable one of visibility versus invisibility. Activists’ aims have never been solely the existence of more images but the presence of particular types of representations, as it has become clear that the pure increasing of visibility does not necessarily imply the overcoming of the social conditions of discrimination (Becker, 2006; Burgess, 2012; Chambers, 2009; Clarkson, 2008; D’Emilio, 2007) and that a lot of these images can reify dominant discourses and not subvert them (Bateman, 2006; Shugart, 2003). Analysing gay/lesbian representations, then, implies not only focusing on the quantifiable presences or repressions but aiming attention to the ways in which this visibility has been achieved, questioning the mechanisms through which homosexuality has been televised. According to Dow (2001: 129), the presence of gays and lesbians on television has ‘followed clear norms for different kinds of silence and speech’, thus not necessarily repressing their existence altogether, but granting visibility through the design of images that ‘can be watched’. That is, watchable images (Ciasullo, 2001) that are expected to be ‘accepted’ by audiences, as they cohere with what has become stabilised as common sense at the time of their production/reception. This is particularly important in a rating-driven television system like the Chilean one, which is continually searching for those images that can be considered ‘acceptable’ and thus watched permanently by as many viewers as possible. What is singled out as watchable, then, is the result of an interpretation of society’s expectations and dominant values that is made by those who design television images.

This is a highly under-researched area of study in Chile. Nonetheless, reviews conducted in other national contexts – mainly in the US and the UK, as this is also a scarcely theorised topic in other Latin American countries – have regularly reached a set of conclusions that can help in understanding the Chilean reality. Specifically, the coexistence of an increased cultural visibility and a limited representational range that is formed by ‘old’ and ‘new’ stereotypes has been reported (Becker, 2006). In that sense, along with the persistence of demeaning stereotypes that represent ‘gay men as hysterical prissy queens, and lesbians as violent predatory butches’ (Doty and Gove, 1997: 86), there is the emergence of other
stereotypes that articulate non-heterosexual sexualities that are agreeable, tolerable and/or sanitised; in sum, undifferentiated (Avila-Saavedra, 2009). The range of depictions that these studies have described can be understood through what Duggan (2002) has called *homonormativity*, the sexual politics that does not contest heteronormative institutions but sustains them through a demobilised and depoliticised gay culture anchored in conformity, domesticity and consumption. Either way, this boosted visibility has been attained through the mainstreaming of gay/lesbian identities via *watchable* images that do not challenge the status quo, as they occupy the specific social space that has been granted for them.

Any image, however, holds the possibility of multiple uses and interpretations. As Muñoz (1999: 4) has explained, damaging gay/lesbian stereotypes can be re-utilised as ‘seductive sites of self-creation’. Readers can deconstruct what television is showing and produce meanings that destabilise the dominant codes through which these images have been constructed. This is all as part of a ‘survival strategy’ where an object of cultural production is decoded ‘from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy’ (Muñoz, 1999: 25). Nevertheless, it does not erase the marks that the dominant culture’s discourse leaves or the ways in which these images relate to a certain context and the place that homosexuality holds within these social conditions. Because of this inherent complexity, any image’s assessment has to be carried out paying attention to its multiple qualities and features, not losing sight of its location within the media landscape – as, for instance, television texts are designed for attracting broad audiences – and the social context that engendered it.

Consequently, this article offers an analysis of 57 gay or lesbian characters that appeared on Chilean *telenovelas* between 1990 and 2018 and asks the following questions: How has homosexuality been (re)presented in Chilean *telenovelas*? Through which characteristics have gays and lesbians been allowed to appear on these programmes? And which dramatic arcs have been made possible for these characters? The analysis focuses only on gay and lesbian representations and not on the whole LGBTQ spectrum because these are the identifications that have had a more consistent social, political and televisual negotiation over the analysed period. Other non-heterosexual sexual formations are almost invisible in Chilean *telenovelas* and the specific legal situation of other subjects – for instance, trans subjects – has only been discussed more broadly in the country over the last few years. On the contrary, the period under review could be characterised as one of deep legal transformations in the ways in which homosexuality is treated. In 1999, for instance, same-sex sexual activities were decriminalised; in 2012, an Antidiscrimination Law was enacted; and in 2015 a Civil Union Law was approved. These achievements, however, have not been consistent with broader social changes: cases of discrimination and violence are still reported regularly. Chilean gays and lesbians live in a contradictory environment that combines the periodic achievement of rights with the necessity to ‘tone down the gay’ in order to avoid homophobic attacks. The assimilative strategies that have been favoured by the main LGBTQ organisations have contributed to the production of an
acceptability that only ‘tolerates’ homosexuality as long as it does not deviate from other social norms (Galaz et al., 2018; Garrido and Barrientos, 2018). Homonormative ‘ways’ of being gay or lesbian have been regarded as more ‘appropriate’, favouring features such as gender conformity, whiteness and privileged class positions (Astudillo, 2015; Ramírez, 2017). In that sense, although legal conditions have improved and overall social attitudes have gotten better, Chile is still far from a state of equality in which all homosexualities are considered as worthy of rights.

Television and particularly telenovelas have certainly played a role in these changes, as they have contributed to the construction and magnification of shifting attitudes and discourses about sexual identifications (Becker, 2006; Tate, 2013). However, it would be inaccurate to think that TV, by itself, has produced a debate around homosexuality; instead, programmes are part of the changing socio-political environment that allows for television to surpass the limits established by conservative discourses and incorporate these ‘new’ topics (Amigo et al., 2014), transforming them into images that ‘can be watched’.

Methodology

For constructing the sample of characters to be analysed, information about all the Chilean telenovelas that have been broadcast on national television from 1990 to the first half of 2018 was sought online. Then, episodes from 36 telenovelas that included gay or lesbian characters were watched. Not all the programmes were entirely available, therefore a different number of episodes of each was included. In total, between two and 10 episodes of each telenovela that included a gay or lesbian character were watched, depending on availability.

Taking each character as a separate case, a qualitative content analysis was conducted. This is a method ‘for systematically describing the meaning of qualitative data’ (Schreier, 2014: 170). It comprises descriptions of the manifest content as well as interpretations of the latent content, which is understood as context dependent (Graneheim et al., 2017; Schreier, 2014). Through this type of analysis, it is possible ‘to analyse data qualitatively and at the same time quantify the data’ (Vaismoradi et al., 2013: 400), allowing for the presentation of findings via frequency counts.

For conducting this analysis, a coding frame was developed following a deductive or concept-driven approach. This frame is formed of theoretically defined categories that were designed to capture the ‘what?’ of the data at the manifest level (Graneheim et al., 2017; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). The utilised categories, which were designed to record the characters’ features, narrative positions, diegetic arcs and relations with others, were: gender; occupation; race; class; gender expression; approximate age; tone (humorous or serious); level of diegetic importance; gay culture; the closet; love; sexuality; character’s aims, helpers and opponents; and how the narratives were concluded.
Initially, the manifest/descriptive features of each character were recorded on a coding sheet, following the aforementioned categories. After this descriptive phase was carried out, thematic patterns were identified. During this phase, interpretations regarding the latent content – that which is ‘beneath the surface of the texts’ (Graneheim et al., 2017: 32) – were developed. These interpretations were produced through an intertwined comprehension of the recorded manifest content and the context in which these images were produced/received. Consequently, the findings should be understood as intrinsically situated and are not generalisable to other TV formats, national contexts or historical periods.

Results: Intersections of gender, sexuality and class

A major fact about gayness, according to Dyer (2002), is that it does not show: there is nothing about gays’ and lesbians’ physicality that declares their sexual orientation. What is available, however, is a set of culturally defined repertoires of gestures, signs and expressions that convey homosexuality, ‘making visible the invisible’ (Dyer, 2002: 19). In Chile – as well as generally in Latin America – this repertoire is mainly based on the association between homosexuality and gender non-conformity (Asencio, 2011; Cantú, 2000; Jeffries, 2009; Mutchler, 2000; Tate, 2011), being crystallised in stereotypes that conceive gay men as effeminate and lesbians as masculine. These cultural formations, although not always necessary, are the basis for the representation of homosexuality, particularly in cases where a character’s sexual identity is not directly named. This is what took place until 2001 in the analysed telenovelas, where the sexual orientation of the six characters – all male – that appeared until that year was only suggested through their effeminate behaviour but never named or addressed as part of their narrative development. Nevertheless, as all these characters were represented through the repertoires that articulate the ways in which homosexuality had been conceived/visualised in Chile, it is possible to read them as gays. From that year, all characters have verbally identified themselves as gay/lesbian and have reflected, though briefly, on their sexual identifications.

In general, the majority of the 57 analysed characters are male (34 versus 23 female). Out of all of them, 18 (32%) act in gender non-conforming ways (one lesbian and 17 gay men), while 39 (68%) act in gender conforming ways (22 lesbians and 17 gay men). It is worth noting, however, that until 2003 the available telenovela narratives did not admit the existence of gender conforming homosexuals. The emergence of the masculine gay man and the feminine lesbian is a more recent phenomenon that has been developed in the context of strengthening assimilative gay/lesbian politics. The appearance of these characters should be understood as a consequence of these processes but also as one of the favoured sites where these ‘appropriate’ gay/lesbian identifications have been articulated. This has, however, only partially dismantled the association between homosexuality and gender non-conformity, consolidating coexisting gay/lesbian repertoires. Furthermore, this has been done through ways that have further marginalised
the figures of the gender non-conforming gay (*loca*) and lesbian (*camiona*). Unlike what has happened in other national contexts, on Chilean television these images have generally not been reclaimed or celebrated as figures that refuse homosexuality’s effacement through the assertion of a way of being, behaving and feeling that rejects the standard forms of gender expression (Halperin, 2014; McNicholas and Tyler, 2017; Richardson, 2018; Richardson et al., 2012), but only placed in the specific situations where they can reproduce the ideologies of heteronormativity.

A striking difference between the frequency of representation of gender non-conforming gays and lesbians was also identified, with the former being more regularly present. This could be explained as a consequence of the fact that the figure of the *loca* is one that has a long history in different forms of cultural expression in Chile: it has become a fairly common trope in cinema, literature and even other TV formats (Fischer, 2016; López, 2011) and has, therefore, become familiar for producers and audiences. *Camionas*, on the other hand, have not been presented in other forms of cultural expression as frequently as *locas* have. TV producers know ‘what to do’ with *locas*, as they are characters that have ‘been around’ for decades; they have learned how to incorporate them into the heterosexist narratives. On the contrary, they do not have a solid cultural base on which to support gender non-conforming lesbians. Consequently, as producers do not know ‘how to deal’ with them, their presence is avoided. All this, however, does not explain why butch lesbianism is so rarely depicted in the first place, both on TV and other forms of cultural expression. About this, it can be argued that in a *machista* society such as Chile, which places high value on a femininity that is associated with dependency, vulnerability, hegemonically defined beauty, motherhood and male-directed sexuality (Antezana, 2011; Asencio, 2011; Saavedra and Toro, 2018; Valdés, 2018), the depiction of an ‘unattractive’ woman who does not hold many of these features would be highly resisted or plainly rejected. Masculinity is a serious matter, a privilege that must only reside in the *macho*, avoiding its presence in any other body. Femininity, on the other hand, does not hold this privileged position; it is an unserious matter that can be ridiculed notwithstanding the body on which it is placed. In fact, the ‘type’ of femininity that is embodied by *locas* on TV – flamboyant, (melo)dratic, excessive, superficial – is one that is also ridiculed when it is embodied by female characters. In that sense, while masculinity is encouraged for gay characters, gay femininity has become acceptable through its laughable sanitisation; for lesbians, on the other hand, hegemonic femininity is almost always the only option.

In terms of other identifications, the majority of gay and lesbian characters are upper class (38 or 67%), while 13 (23%) are working class and six (10%) could be placed somewhere in the middle. Upper-class belonging, although the most common position for both groups, is much more common among gender conforming characters (74%) than among gender non-conforming ones (50%). In Chilean *telenovelas*, therefore, gender expression is tightly connected to class: lower-class gays and lesbians behave in gender non-conforming ways more often than upper-class ones. In terms of race, it is quite similar for both groups: almost all of them
are considered white in the Chilean context, a phenomena that, however, not only characterises the representation of gays and lesbians but the whole Chilean televisual visibility, which regularly ignores darker skins. As for their ages, they are regularly young to middle-aged, commonly around 30 to 40 years old. The few older characters – who are all men, as the machista ideal femininity also implies youth – receive extremely reduced diegetic attention.

**Chilean telenovelas’ gay/lesbian ‘typology’**

Stereotypes are a form of ordering the world through the categorisation of people, a process that constitutes an inescapable ‘part of the way societies make sense of themselves’ (Dyer, 2002: 12). They express a general agreement about a social group, becoming one of the principal ways for understanding the individuals who belong to that group. Stereotypes, however, are not unique: they can coexist or supersede one another, once they are reproduced enough for their stabilisation. One of the ways in which this is produced is through their media use, as they form the basis for constructing characters and narratives that can be easily recognised by viewers; what Dyer (2002) calls ‘types’. A type will be understood as a ‘mode of characterization in fiction’ (Dyer, 2002: 13) that is constructed through defining traits that point to recurrent features, which can be ‘conceptualized as universal and eternal, the “archetype”, or historically and culturally specific, “social types” and “stereotypes”’ (Dyer, 2002: 13). While social types can have a wide range of plot positions, stereotypes ‘always carry within their very representation an implicit narrative’ (Dyer, 2002: 15). The latter is what can be viewed in Chilean telenovelas, where gay/lesbian characters have generally been represented by sets of features that are routinely paired to narrative possibilities, consolidating a number of ‘types’ through which homosexuality has been televised. These modes of representing gay/lesbian identifications are not only the product of social conventions but are one of the main mechanisms through which these stereotypes are routinely reproduced, and which therefore provide their social significance. The four types that will be explained below have been constructed through the identification of storylines and sets of more or less stable features. This does not mean that all of them are identical, as variations can be found within each type. However, the repetition of significant diegetic patterns that establish particular narrative functions for each type and the ways in which they are connected to broader discussions about homosexuality in the country make possible their identification as differentiated modes of representation.

**Funny loca**

These are 17 effeminate gay men who are depicted in humorous ways: an excuse for audiences to laugh about those men who embody a particular type of femininity – flamboyant, excessive, overtly dramatic, sometimes even mischievous. Their presence rarely goes beyond their gendered behaviour; they are reduced to it, mostly
simplified. Historically and across audio-visual formats, effeminate men have usually occupied the role of either monsters to be feared or figures of fun (Dyer, 2002; Gross, 1991; Richardson, 2009). In this case, the second option is the one that has been prioritised. There is nothing to be feared about locas. Apart from their scheming and gossiping, they are harmless. They are not there to modify the gender system but to reinforce it through the pairing of femininity to a certain set of demeaning features. It is arguable, therefore, that locas have constituted a device through which Chilean TV has further placed femininity – and, through that, the bodies who inhabit it: mostly women – in a secondary social position, as a consequence of its apparent incapacity to deal with ‘serious’ issues, which have been reserved for straight men, masculine gay men and only some women; those who have, with effort, gained this space.

The class position of funny locas – coded through their occupations and the places where they live – is fairly divided: eight (47%) of them could be considered upper class, six (35%) working class and three (18%) somewhere in the middle. When they are upper class, that position is generally the result of having recently moved up the social ladder via effort and work – usually in an occupation associated with showbusiness or night life – and not through being a member of a well-off family. These upper-class funny locas usually show snobby attitudes, rejecting everything that is too common when compared to their refined tastes. On the other hand, when they are working class, they show aspirational attitudes, wanting to appear wealthier or more sophisticated. They do this via changing their names, showing a refined sense of fashion or using words in French or English, trying to look international. The result is usually the same: a mostly likable but pitiful figure who breathes some air into serious (heterosexual) problems. In this sense, funny locas are not only a testament to how Chilean TV depicts homosexuality but they also reveal its classist functioning, as they are a device through which lower-class positions are ridiculed and singled out as funnily pretentious and thus phony.

When analysing gay representations, authors like Muñoz (1999) have utilised the term camp to describe strategic responses to interpreting/understanding images that breathe ‘new life into old situations’ (Muñoz, 1999: 128), while asserting ‘through auspices of humor a pointed social critique’ (Muñoz, 1999: 133). However, while funny locas’ representation does rely on humour, this is not used as a strategy to criticise dominant social discourses. Funny locas are not directing at themselves the mockery they ‘direct [...] at the larger social world’ (Halperin, 2014: 203). Instead, they are the object of a mockery that sustains their hierarchically inferior position, thus preventing access to ‘new realities’ (Muñoz, 1999).

Funny locas usually occupy a secondary diegetic position in a narrative world that is almost exclusively inhabited by heterosexuals: they are the only gay characters living in an otherwise completely straight world. Although most of them appear in almost every episode, they do not have narrative arcs of their own; their only role is to support someone else (usually a female friend), helping them in their decisions, particularly those related to romantic issues. As a consequence, audiences do not know much about funny locas. Not much is said about their personal
lives, their problems or reasons for happiness. They are helpers whose lives are only shaken as a consequence of the events that take place in someone else’s life. Even the closet, which is a common narrative device through which homosexuality receives televisual visibility (Allen, 1995), is not a problem for them. The way they behave grants them a position outside of it.

The fact that they do not have narrative arcs of their own implies that they generally do not occupy one of the principal storylines in telenovelas: the tribulations of love and passion. In fact, only three of all the funny locas have a love interest at some point in the narration. Regardless of this, all of them are desexualised. They never engage in sexual activities, despite their sometimes-lustful behaviour, which is always directed at straight men. These feelings, however, are strongly rejected, disgusting the desired men. Effeminate men’s sex drive is therefore continuously rendered pathetic: they intensely want what they cannot have, transforming them into sexually frustrated creatures who only desire without materialising their cravings. In that sense, their desire is permanently ridiculed, just another reason for audiences to laugh at them and pity them. Accordingly, only two funny locas kiss. These kisses, however, could hardly be considered ‘real’, passionate or embedded with romantic feelings as both of them are depicted internally as a misunderstanding and externally as a joke for audiences to laugh at. Benito in Los Treinta (TVN, 2005), for instance, kisses his straight boss as a way to contest and hopefully put an end to his homophobic attitudes; needless to say, it does not work. Likewise, Tomás in Los Exitosos Pells (TVN, 2009) kisses someone he thinks is his boyfriend but who, in reality, is his boyfriend’s twin. As a result of the misunderstanding, another burst of laughter is suggested – via the utilisation of comic music and a close-up of the confused straight men – as a consequence of unrequited gay lust.

As funny locas’ own tribulations are only slightly addressed, there is a big area of social problems that is simplified or plainly ignored: the consequences of living in a homophobic society are either not addressed at all or are depicted as mere individual/psychological issues. When they experience what could be singled out as a homophobic event, this is shown as an unserious matter that has a simple solution or does not need a solution at all, and/or as a purely individual problem whose solutions are to be found within intimate bounds. These topics are never politicised or explained as something that goes beyond the character suffering from it. Benito in Los Treinta (TVN, 2005), for instance, is continuously mistreated by his boss. However, all these episodes are treated lightly, as funny occurrences. Even the way Benito tries to put an end to this – by kissing his boss – implies a profound simplification of homophobia, as in reality this would be a potentially dangerous situation that would not even cross the mind of someone being abused. In other telenovelas, homophobic acts carried out by (heterosexual) friends are also simplified: Mateo in Separados (TVN, 2012), Enrie-André in Pituca sin Lucas (MEGA, 2014) and Rubén in Si Yo Fuera Rico (MEGA, 2018) receive continuous comments about their sexuality. Phrases such as ‘stop being a pussy’ or ‘I don’t want weird men here’ are treated as innocuous interactions which are, in fact, received with
laughter by the gay characters. Via these strategies, homophobia is rendered harmless, just another aspect of gay life which is even depicted as enjoyable. These comments and attitudes are the price funny locas have had to pay for being part of a heterosexual televisual world, therefore not only reproducing classist and sexist attitudes but also homophobic ones. None of this is to say that the only purpose of funny locas – or any other gay or lesbian character, for that matter – should be to reveal Chile’s homophobic logics. Or that all of their stories should be continuously politicised, as this would also be unexpected for a telenovela. However, oversimplifying or eliminating from the storyline the homophobic context in which these stories are placed constructs an inadequate image of a Chilean society in which these issues are not a problem.

**Serious macho**

These are 17 masculine gay men who are always depicted in serious ways. This is consistent with the machista gender order, which imbues masculinity with values such as seriousness and worth (Asencio, 2011; Cantú, 2000; Jeffries, 2009; Mutchler, 2000). Triviality is reserved for women (and effeminate gays); ‘real’ men have important things to worry about. Consequently, serious machos have ‘important’ jobs (they are doctors or economists), and worry about their families (mostly their parents) and/or want to form one of their own. These characteristics underline their class position: the majority of them could be considered upper class (13 or 76%), while other class positions are marginal. In general, serious machos’ upper-class position is coded as genuine, unlike funny locas’ phoniness. They are members of well-off families, work in highly regarded occupations and do not feel the need to show off their class position via pretentious attitudes. Seriousness, therefore, gets attached not only to gender conformity but also more regularly to privileged class positions. Audiences are supposed to suffer and think with serious machos, as they usually lead dramatic lives through which some homophobic structures are revealed, and laugh at the phony and flamboyant funny locas. This response is not only suggested by the differentiated storylines they lead but also by the utilisation of narrative tools such as music – comic for locas and dramatic/tense for machos – and ways of acting – exaggerated and naturalistic, respectively.

Serious machos usually occupy a main diegetic position, appearing in plenty of scenes in each episode. As a consequence, they do have emotional or romantic attachments. They are usually accompanied by their partners or love interests: another serious macho. The romantic pairing of a serious macho with a funny loca is still an almost invisible narrative, which took place in Separados (TVN, 2012). The idea of an effeminate man who loves and who is loved is a potentially destabilising image that has been strongly resisted. The presence of more than one gay character, however, does not imply that what can be considered ‘gay culture’ is televised. These couples inhabit heterosexual worlds where they only have straight friends, do not visit places directed at a gay clientele and do not enjoy products of queer culture. They are also highly desexualised. Even though the majority of them
has a partner, more than half never kiss and none of them engages in sexual activity. They are, however, less desexualised than locas, giving these characters the possibility of a slightly more complex depiction. This higher sexualisation can be explained by these characters’ more constant presence in night-time telenovelas, which are aired around 11 pm, giving channels the possibility to present ‘adult content’. However, the fact that the only couple in one of these productions who did not kiss is the one formed by a serious macho and a funny loca implies that there is more to it than that: effeminate gay men will be denied physical affection regardless of the time of the day that the programme is broadcast.

Beyond their (lack of) sexual activity, serious machos usually lead their own narrative arcs. They are not only there to be companions or advisers to their heterosexual friends. This, however, does not mean that their lives are less defined by the straight people that surround them. Serious machos’ main narratives are marked by ‘the closet’, which has become ‘a common trope, an easy, tacit reference to queer culture that has a million uses’ (Barnhurst, 2007: 4). Their preoccupations, therefore, are usually delineated by who knows and who does not know about their sexual identifications. They are constantly trying to hide their sexuality and/or fighting for someone’s acceptance. Homosexuality is treated as an ‘issue’ that must be dealt with and that, furthermore, has strong consequences for friends and family. Through these characters, the closet is depicted as a space that must be urgently vacated. Serious machos are not expected to inhabit it for long time; they must be brave – to ‘be a man’ – and speak out. To ‘confess’ their sexuality is depicted as a decision that implies being responsible to others and oneself. Others have to know the truth, even if it causes surprise and suffering (at least at the beginning). For themselves, on the other hand, the ‘confession is regarded as cathartic, purifying and empowering’ (Gill, 2007: 169), constructing the closet as a space that is filled with senseless fear, therefore placing the responsibility onto gay men’s own ideas and decisions and not onto the homophobic social order which would produce an understandable fear. Ariel in Machos (Canal 13, 2003), for instance, says:

I’ve been fighting for my family’s love and acceptance my whole life. But after 10 years, I’ve discovered that the problem is mine. When I started loving and accepting myself, things started changing. Furthermore, this country is also changing, and it is now easier to live here.

Coming out of the closet is thus constructed as an individual/psychological event in which social factors play only a secondary role, if any. Putting all the responsibility of the suffering caused by ‘the closet’ on the gay men themselves – their senseless fears – erases the existence and consequences of homophobia in the country.

Fighting mother

The great majority of these lesbian women (eight out of nine) act in gender-conforming ways, while the other one represents, at least in image, what could be
considered butch lesbianism. Here a noticeable difference between the televisual presence of gays and lesbians is identified: while the depiction of the former gets completely differentiated depending on their gender expression, the representation of the latter is not as marked by this category. This might be due to the aforementioned fact that camionas have been rarely depicted in different forms of cultural production in Chile, so a specific role for them to occupy has not been developed; when they do appear, it is only a matter of appearance – ‘masculine’ clothes, short hair – but not of other characteristics or a specific set of dramatic situations, as is the case with gender non-conforming gay men. The machista ideal femininity has been pervasive enough to homogenise the desires, identities and plot positions of the depicted lesbians even if they do not look or behave in the ways that this ideal mandates them to do. In that sense, these nine women’s representation is marked by the two poles that have been defined within this gender order: a domestic role as mothers or mothers-to-be and a sexualised existence. Although both of these poles are present, in the case of fighting mothers the first one is highlighted; while the second is foregrounded in the next type of character. Regarding other belongings, fighting mothers’ position is fairly similar to the other types: the majority of them are upper class (seven, or 78%) and could be considered white within the Chilean context.

Fighting mothers usually occupy a main diegetic position, appearing regularly in almost every episode, although there is also a considerable presence of tertiary characters who appear only in one or a few episodes as circumstantial parts of the main characters’ narrative arcs, giving them the possibility of being ‘open’ about their politics on sexuality. Regardless of their level of diegetic relevance, none of these characters is the only lesbian in the telenovela. They are all accompanied by their partners. In that sense, the representation of lesbian motherhood is restricted to couples. There are no lesbians who want to become single mothers or part of other forms of family arrangements. The maternal instinct only gets activated within ‘traditional’ distributions. There are, however, different ways to reach this goal: fighting mothers try adoption, assisted reproductive technology treatments or even having sex with a male friend. All these options, however, are always depicted as a couple’s project, never only individual. Likewise, those who are already mothers – as a consequence of past relationships – are shown as having the full support of their partners, making maternity a shared issue anyway.

As has been already stated, fighting mothers are more sexualised than all the male characters: four of them kiss and two of them engage in sexual activities, revealing that lesbian sexuality has been singled out as far more watchable than gay sexuality in Chilean telenovelas. This can be framed as the result of the male porn fantasy of lesbianism (Ciasullo, 2001; Diamond, 2005; Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009; Jenkins, 2005; Taylor, 2005). In that sense, the possibility that a scene of lesbian sexuality can be enjoyed by straight men has arguably increased the televisual visibility of this type of encounter. The fact that the two characters who engage in sexual activity – Daniela and Carla in No Abras la Puerta (TVN, 2014) – can be considered beautiful women, in conventionally defined terms, reinforces this
explanation: the type of queer sexuality that can be televised is the one that can be enjoyed by those who, in a *machista* social order, hold the preferential right to sexual pleasure.

Each one of these *fighting mothers’* experiences is narrated in a way that reveals the different complications the characters have gone through in the process of forming a family in a homophobic country like Chile. However, these narrations mostly follow a ‘case logic’ in which the conflicts are always narrated within the bounds of the couple – which is, however, an expected feature for a *telenovela*. Nevertheless, the fact that these narrations are led by class- and race-privileged subjects and that the solutions are mostly achieved via economic and not social or political terms – with the help of social organisations, for instance – hinders the understanding of shared social phenomena. In that sense, although these experiences have the potential to reveal the homophobic functioning of several institutions, the fact that the televised stories dwell mainly on cases with particular features impedes a broader explanation of the ways in which homophobia works, particularly in intersection with other forms of discrimination.

**Clear lesbian/confused lesbian**

This type refers to women who generally occupy a main diegetic position, appearing in almost every episode, and whose sexual identification is ‘discovered’ throughout the series. This configuration takes different forms, however always keeping as the main narrative the changeable conditions of female sexuality. Its more common design is formed by two women: a clearly identified lesbian and a woman who self-identifies as straight but who, during the *telenovela*, shows different levels of ‘openness’ to lesbianism, embodying what Diamond (2005) has called ‘heteroflexibility’. This is what happens with Lucrecia and Herminia in *El Señor de la Querencia* (*TVN*, 2008), Perla and Zafiro in *Mujeres de Lujo* (*Chilevisión*, 2010) and Macarena and Nina in *Infiltradas* (*Chilevisión*, 2011), who respectively take the role of *clear lesbian* and *confused lesbian*. Their stories, however, end in rather dissimilar ways: the first two end up dead; the second two as friends, as Zafiro ‘goes back’ to heterosexuality; and the last two get married. Slightly different is the story of Emilia and Denisse in *Idolos* (*TVN*, 2004), where both take the role of *confused lesbians* or initially self-identified straight women who start questioning their sexuality, and end up together. However, they go through this process as a couple; unlike Pastora in *Vivir con 10* (*Chilevisión*, 2007), who ‘discovers’ her sexuality without a partner. The last arrangement features lesbians who fall in love with self-identified straight women who do not develop same-sex desires, but who, nevertheless, never react in a negative or violent way. This is the case of Ursula in *Conde Vrolock* (*TVN*, 2008), Jacqueline in *Reserva de Familia* (*TVN*, 2012) and Trinidad in *Wena Profe* (*TVN*, 2017). Regardless of the specific configuration, by the last episode the *confused lesbian* has to make a decision: either to become a ‘full-time’ lesbian or to ‘go back’ to heterosexuality. Other options are absolutely disregarded: there is no space for bisexuality or other sexual formations.
This is a narrative that is not occupied by men in any of the analysed telenovelas; for them, sexual identification has to be clearly defined from beginning to end. Women’s sexuality, therefore, is depicted as more mutable and less clearly defined, and they are shown as being more open to seduction. This could be interpreted as a positive feature, since it could contribute to destabilising the conceptualisation of sexuality as a binary identification. However, the ways in which these narratives are constructed – demanding a decision by the end of the story – and the fact that this is a position only occupied by women makes it possible to argue that these narratives are not contesting the machista gender/sexuality order, but being complicit with it.

Out of all the gay and lesbian characters, this ‘type’ is the most sexualised one: all of them kiss and four of them engage in sexual activities; encounters that are led by women that can be considered conventionally attractive. The fact that these relationships and sexual encounters can only be led by women – and particularly, women who look and act in a certain way, since all these women behave in gender conforming ways – emphasises these characters’ coherence with machismo, as sexuality will only be televised if it is pleasurable to the macho. These characters are made possible through the ‘hot lesbian’ narrative (Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009) where same-sex female sexuality is preferably presented for the male gaze. However, opposite to what was found by Diamond (2005), in the case of Chilean telenovelas sexual acts between women are not presented as experiments that are premised on stable heterosexual identities: lesbian sex is not a one-night adventure that ends up strengthening the characters’ heterosexuality, but the expression of a sexual identity that is being ‘questioned’ in the context of a caring and loving relationship. During the telenovela, there is nothing stable about the confused lesbians’ identities; it is constantly in the process of (re)construction. The ending, however, always breaks these potentially destabilising narratives, as a firm sexual identification has to be achieved.

While ‘questioning’ or ‘discovering’ their sexual identifications, these women never take into consideration the social conditions of homophobia in Chile. This is a purely individual/psychological process in which broad social phenomena are ignored. When it is depicted, the ‘resistance’ to lesbianism generally comes from friends and/or members of the family, who represent the homophobic forces, and not from institutions. In that sense, lesbianism is not represented as something to ‘decide upon’ – which would have been a questionable feature – but as the result of a natural process of ‘discovering’ that is conducted in purely psychological terms; the confused lesbians never discuss or talk about how this potential ‘new identification’ would alter their material conditions of living, thus rendering homophobia and discrimination as a whole less visible.

Conclusions
In different ways, the aforementioned types of representation of gays and lesbians have functioned as devices for the reproduction of dominant social discourses.
Through different characterisations and narrative strategies, these watchable images have left the heterosexual norm unquestioned. Although some of them have been framed as more ‘appropriate’, as a consequence, for instance, of their closer adjustment to the norms of gender, they are still treated as hierarchically inferior. These characters live ‘incomplete lives’ from which certain aspects of homosexual existence, such as intimacy, sexuality and queer friendship, are avoided. Also regularly eschewed are the social conditions through which homosexuality is lived in Chile, with homophobia and its effects being only lightly addressed if addressed at all. Likewise, not many programmes have broken the fixed characterisation of individuals in terms of their features and social belongings. This is, however, not to say that all the mentioned representations are essentially bad or detrimental, since many of them have rightfully contributed to the advancement of gays’ and lesbians’ visibility, creating characters that, although problematic, have helped to state ‘we exist’. This has been achieved, nonetheless, through representations that have not shown the immense plurality of the experiences and identities of Chilean gays and lesbians.

Over the last years, some exceptions have appeared. During a year and a half, for instance, audiences witnessed Mercedes and Bárbara’s (*Perdona Nuestros Pecados, MEGA*, 2017) strategies to hide their love, how they engaged in sexual and romantic encounters and, also, how Mercedes was violently rejected by her family in the context of homophobic 1960s Chile and how she defended her identity and love. What more prominently stood out in this programme is the fact that neither Mercedes nor Bárbara were looking for their family’s acceptance. They just wanted to live their lives on their own terms. In a dramatic scene, for instance, when all her family finds out about her relationship, Mercedes claims:

> You won’t treat me like that! [. . .] Who do you think you are? Judging me . . . You? For years I’ve been putting up with your sins and lies, and now you have the nerve to judge me? No, I won’t tolerate that. I . . . I’m in love with Bárbara Román. And I don’t feel ashamed about it. If I could, I would scream my love for her! And I’m not asking for your understanding. I’m not!

Although Mercedes’ and Bárbara’s lives are delineated by their (heterosexual) families in the context of a homophobic country in a highly conservative era, they refuse their ruling, constantly developing strategies for overcoming their authority. This marks a powerful difference from other characters who are constantly looking for someone’s ‘acceptance’, therefore being complicit in the reproduction of heterosexist domination patterns.

However, although interesting cases, these are still no more than exceptions in a television system that continues to privilege representations of gays and lesbians that do not destabilise the status quo – as Bravo et al. (2018) describe in the case of non-fiction programmes – and that, actually, can contribute to the reproduction of sexist, homophobic and/or classist discourses.

Notwithstanding these textual conditions, it is central for future researches to assess audiences’ responses and interpretations of these characters in order to find
out if strategies of resistance have been developed in contextualising, understanding and using these programmes in members of the audience’s own lives.

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**Notes**
1. Some exceptions are: Amigo et al. (2014), who succinctly covers the topic of gay identifications in fictional programmes; and Bravo et al. (2018), whose work mostly reflects on the absence of gay and lesbian people/characters in non-fiction programmes.
2. Exceptions to this are the researches carried out by Tate (2011, 2013, 2014), La Pastina (2002) and Marentes (2017).
3. These concepts could be translated as *queen* and *dyke*.
4. *Machismo* is the endemic gender order of Latin America that is ‘related to the social domination and privilege that men have over women in economic, legal, judicial, political, cultural and psychological spheres’ (Cianelli et al., 2008).
5. All translations from Spanish have been made by the author.

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