INTRODUCTION

A Poem and the *Destape*

One humid winter morning of August 2016, sexologist Mirta Granero welcomed me to her home in Rosario, Argentina's third largest city and the place where I grew up. Granero, a psychologist and sexologist, was a leading figure in the rise of sexology and sex education after the return to democracy in the 1980s. She was an original member of one of the earliest organizations devoted to the promotion of school-based sex education and the training of sex educators in the country as well as one of the founders, in 1983, of the first institute outside Buenos Aires for the training of clinical sexologists and the treatment of sexual problems. I had contacted Granero a few months earlier to tell her I was conducting research for a book on sexuality in Argentina after 1983, when one of the most repressive military dictatorships in Latin America (1976–83) ended and Argentines rejoiced in a democratic spring that began with the election of Raúl Alfonsín as president (1983–89). Granero was enthusiastic about examining the relation between sexuality and democracy, agreed to an interview, and invited me to work in her library.

The morning we met at her house, Granero walked me to a spacious office packed with bookcases and storage cabinets covering every wall, told me I had free access to everything in the room, asked me to call her

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.

if I needed her, and left. She is a fine example of the generosity and trust that I had the fortune to experience during my research. In her big and rich archive I found invaluable and unexpected materials, the type that elevate historians' heart rates and overwhelm them with a proud sense of discovery. I also found a typescript copy of a beautiful poem titled "Una utopía razonable" ("A Reasonable Utopia"), written by Josep Vicent Marqués,[1] a Spanish sociologist who specialized in sexuality and played a fundamental role in the redefinition of modern sexology in Spain after the fall of Francisco Franco's dictatorship in 1975.

> Erotizar la vida.
> Descentrar el coito del placer genital.
> Reconstruir el coito como cópula.
> Airear el sexo guardado en los genitales.
> Honrar, sin embargo, tus genitales como una parte aceptada de tu cuerpo aceptado.
> Desdramatizar los asuntos sexuales sin banalizarlos.
> Aprender a jugar y aprender la importancia del juego.
> Hacer el amor siempre que al menos dos personas quieran.
> No hacer el amor cuando es otra cosa lo que se quiere hacer.
> Hacerlo siempre con, nunca contra.
> Separar el sexo de la procreación, pero también de la machada y la resignación, de la agresividad, la competencia o la compensación de agravios.
> Saber "técnicas sexuales" pero haberlas olvidado como se olvidan los libros que se aprenden bien.
> No hacer de la masturbación un sucedáneo del intercambio.
> No hacer del intercambio un sucedáneo de la masturbación.
> Dinamitar la edad, el tiempo usurpado por el patriarca.
> Hacer en la cama un lugar al humor y a la ternura.
> Probar a hacer el amor para conocerse, pero también probar a conocerse para hacer el amor.
> Olvidar para siempre las inhibiciones y los récords.
> No ser indiferentes al acostarse o no, sin encontrar angustia en ello.
> Inventar por el camino un nuevo lenguaje para hablar de esto llanamente, sin la alternancia de la pomposidad y la burla.[2]

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.

Eroticize life.
Separate coitus from genital pleasure.
Rebuild coitus as coupling.
Air out the sex tucked in the genitals.
Yet honor your genitals as an accepted part of your accepted body.
Play down sexual matters without trivializing them.
Learn to play and learn the importance of playing.
Make love whenever at least two people want to.
Don't make love when you really want to do something else.
Always do it with, never against.
Separate sex from procreation, but also from macho bravado and from resignation, from aggressiveness, competition and revenge.
Know "sexual techniques" but then forget them like you forget a book you've studied well.
Don't make masturbation a substitute for interaction.
Don't make interaction a substitute for masturbation.
Blot out age, the time usurped by the patriarch.
Make room in bed for humor and tenderness.
Try making love to get to know someone, but also try getting to know someone to make love.
Forget the inhibitions and the records, forever.
Don't be indifferent to whether or not you get laid, but don't agonize over it.
Invent a new language for speaking plainly about this as you go, without interjecting bluster or mockery.

Granero told me she and her colleagues had used the poem in the mid-1980s to jumpstart discussion in the popular sexual enrichment workshops that flourished in those years. She conveyed how relevant this piece was as an invitation to rethink sexuality in the new context of freedom after years of authoritarianism. At the time of our interviews, puzzled by archival finds and my own thrilling but disjointed ideas about how to make sense of it all, I was unable to understand what I realized months later, at my desk in Houston, while rereading the poem aloud. Marqués's work was an effective tool to talk about sex in the return to democracy in Argentina because it perfectly reflected the new meanings and representations of sexuality. The poem separated sex from reproduction, contested fears and ideas of morality and duty, and focused on pleasure, well-being, identity,

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.

rights, and choice. These were the central components of the unparalleled sexualization of Argentine culture and society after 1983 that contemporaries called the *destape.* Following cultural and media studies expert Feona Attwood, I understand a "sexualized culture" to be "a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex."[3]

The destape was the biggest and most explosive sociocultural phenomenon after the fall of the military dictatorship. *Destapar* means "to take the lid off, uncover, expose, or undress," and the destape was, in fact, an avalanche of sexual images and narratives characterized by new levels of visual and discursive explicitness about sex and the body, topics the dictatorship had considered tasteless, immoral, mystifying, and, for all these reasons, dangerous. Scholars of Argentina have traditionally studied the process of redemocratization by focusing on the reconstruction of the public sphere in a postdictatorial context, the reorganization of the state, the emergence of new social movements, and the resurgence of political parties and labor unions—themes that are common in the scholarship of democratic transitions all over the world, from European postcommunist countries to more contemporary experiences in Arab countries.[4] Less attention has been devoted to cultural issues, and nothing has been said about sex or the destape. The omission is interesting because scholars and historians of sexuality have been particularly interested in the relation between sex and politics.[5] Paradigmatically, in the context of the rapid spread of fascism through Europe, Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who is considered the intellectual father of the sexual revolution, believed that a vibrant sexuality was a precondition for a vibrant democracy. For Reich, on the contrary, sexual repression was a vehicle for the transmission of authoritarian ideologies.[6]

Destape: Sex, Democracy, and Freedom in Postdictatorial Argentina is the first history of the destape considered as both a large-scale media phenomenon and a far-reaching process of change in sexual ideologies and practices. The destape timidly emerged in 1981, with the military weakened but still in power, and gained momentum between 1983, with the return to democracy, and 1987. Although it ran out of steam by the

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.

end of the decade, when the novelty and the scandal wore off, the destape's influences and legacies have pervaded Argentine culture to this day. This book asks a significant question that historians of democratic transitions in Latin America and beyond have overlooked: How did the restoration of democracy in 1983, after years of repression and censorship, transform sexuality as well as representations and ideas about sexuality? In answering this question, the book is guided by anthropologist Gayle Rubin's argument that although sex is always political, there are "historical periods in which sexuality is more sharply contested and more overtly politicized. In such periods, the domain of erotic life is, in effect, renegotiated."[7] The first history of Argentine sexuality in the 1980s, this study is devoted to understanding the country's transition to democracy as a prime example of these unique historical moments by examining the complex relationship among the fall of political and social authoritarianism, freedom, democracy, and sex. This is a relationship that remains unexplored, although it is relevant to the many Latin American countries in the region that experienced similar transitions to democracy, most notably, Chile, Brazil, and Uruguay.

With the end of the military dictatorship and the return to democracy, nudity and sex became ubiquitous. Sexual images and texts saturated all types of publications, 15 percent of all magazines sold were erotic, soft-porn movies topped the lists of the ten highest-grossing films each year, erotic novels and sexology books became best sellers and quickly sold out, and seminudity and erotic innuendos inundated television shows. Argentina experienced an unprecedented sexual exhibitionism in mainstream culture, or the rise of "on/scenity," as film scholar Linda Williams has described the process by which a society makes public, bringing "on/scene," what was once deemed obscenity and kept off scene.[8] I argue, however, that the destape went beyond the sexualization of media content and was a profound transformation of the way Argentines talked about, understood, and experienced sexuality. In order to reveal the destape as a sweeping change of discourses, representations, manners, and morals that both grew from and reinforced the newborn democracy, this book examines the boom of sex therapy and sexology, the fight for the introduction of sex education in schools, the expansion of family planning services and the emergence of organizations dedicated to sexual health care, and the centrality of discussions on sexuality among feminist as well as gay and

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.

lesbian organizations, which reawakened with the return to democracy. Therefore, this book offers a historical analysis of the sexualization of mass media alongside a larger social and cultural history of sex.

While Argentines have commonly used destape as a term to refer exclusively to the new, abundant, and explicit sexual content in the media, I propose a reconceptualization that includes mass media commodities but goes beyond. Here, the destape was not only a market development or a commercial manifestation of popular culture but also a process of individual and collective sexual discovery and liberation as well as the social disclosure of sexism, homophobia, and sexual injustice. There was a destape in films, the press, television, advertising, theater, and literature. There was also a women's destape; a destape of feminist, gay, and lesbian activists; and a destape led by sexologists, sex educators, and sexual health experts. Together, these destapes took the lid off Argentine sexuality. They all emerged from the same postdictatorial conditions and participated in the same cultural and political milieu, but they represented distinctive positions, had differing goals, and engaged with and benefited from democracy and freedom differently. Consequently, they all made contributions to reformulating sexual culture in Argentina but, despite some commonalities and overlapping, in their own very idiosyncratic ways.

This book engages with a scholarship that has drawn attention to the fascinating and intrinsic connection between media representations and sexual culture. Media and cultural studies expert Brian McNair has argued that this connection happens at three different levels. First, media representations reveal sexual and behavioral norms, both lived and aspirational. Second, they are bearers of ideology, disseminating views about sexual roles, rights, and responsibilities from which individuals may learn or find inspiration. In this regard, Linda Williams has asserted that "moving images are surely the most powerful sex education most of us will receive."[9] Finally, media representations are, at the same time, influenced by consumers who may respond unfavorably to images and messages that do not resonate with what they want, what they do, or who they are in a given historical context.[10] This book shows that cultural commodities affect and reflect sexual culture, but consumers have the power to endorse, reject, or alter their messages. This is one reason why the destape emerges as riddled with ambivalences; it was a process in which new and progressive ideas, defiant of the sexual and gender status quo, coexisted

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.

with reactionary and conventional ones that reinforced traditional sexual morality. Indeed, this book tests the argument that speaking more about sex necessarily and unconditionally advances the cause of sexual freedom for all. In Argentina, more and more explicit sexual speech and imagery broke a monolithic sexual culture. However, the book asks how, why, and to what extent this break happened to demonstrate that neither the process nor the outcome was mechanical, predictable, or homogenous.[11]

Through different levels of analysis, this study offers a multivocal social and cultural history of sexuality that includes the contributions of movie directors; writers; scholars; educators; sex therapists; journalists; physicians; gay, lesbian, and feminist activists; audiences; readers; family planning experts; the Catholic Church and Catholic organizations—the strongest opponents of the destape—and the state. The analysis is based on a large and diverse body of sources, including untapped magazine collections, films, television shows, sexology books and journals, sex education books, literature, surveys, polls, and statistics. The rich archive of publishing house Perfil provided me with access to some of the most iconic destape publications. I conducted oral interviews with feminists, sexologists, sex educators, and journalists, and explored their personal archives. In addition, bulletins and internal documents of gay, lesbian, and feminist organizations; sex therapists' personal papers; and sex research were invaluable in reconstructing sexuality in the 1980s. The documents and newsletters authored by Catholic organizations and Argentina's episcopal conference provided insights to understand the most important enemies of the destape. To effectively incorporate this broad range of primary sources, I combined the methodological tools and theoretical insights of cultural studies, film and media studies, feminist theory, and oral history.

FROM DICTATORSHIP TO DEMOCRACY

Legendary populist leader Juan Domingo Perón returned to Argentina in 1973 after being exiled for almost two decades. Upon Perón's return to the country to assume the presidency for the third time, many believed that he would be able to control the leftist forces that had emerged in the 1960s authoritarian context as well as the escalating volatile social and political conditions. Instead, violence increased, particularly when the internecine fighting between left-wing Peronist guerrillas and right-wing Peronists

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.