

Siempre con las Pibas

By Noelle McManus

I wasn't very graceful, dropping my backpack onto our building's front steps and untying the green bandanna from its left strap like my life depended on it. Passersby slowed to see what I was up to. I stuffed the bandanna inside my bag and zipped it up; clearly, I was hiding something. My host mother, unaware of what I had stashed away, greeted me when I arrived at the door to our apartment. For a bit, I sat by her side in the living room, while the television blared on in front of us. "PROTESTS FILL THE STREETS," newscasts declared in bold letters. "ABORTION DEBATE RAGES ON."

The green bandannas first caught my eye early in my semester abroad in Buenos Aires. I'd been hearing about them on social media since August of 2018, when the Argentine Senate rejected a proposal for the legalization of abortion. Where pale blue represents pro-life sentiment, green represents pro-choice. As soon as I had the opportunity, I rushed to a street vendor selling bandannas corresponding with Argentina's remarkably color-coded social justice movements—in addition to the pale blue and green, orange represents support for the separation of church and state, and purple represents women's rights—and bought myself a green one. I dreamed of displaying it proudly like the Argentines my age.

"WHAT SORT OF FEMINIST AM I?"

The explosion of feminism that resulted from the abortion proposal—and, later, the rejection—was loud, angry, unapologetic. Girls began doing everything they could to push against the age-old Latin American concept of *marianismo*, the idea that women should be as placid and innocent as the Virgin Mary. They cut their hair themselves in wild, choppy bangs. They filled their skin with tattoos and wore shorts out in public. They kicked, they screamed, they sprayed graffiti on churches and government offices. On the way home from buying my bandanna, I passed a brick wall painted with the words, "MUERTE A LOS MACHISTAS," and a footnote below: "No es una metáfora." The bandanna newly tied to my backpack, I stared in muted awe, aware that I was a mere witness to something much, much bigger than I was.

"People don't know what feminism is," a porteña friend told me early in the term, fingering the frayed ends of her bandanna. "They're scared of it. They think we're all crazy." I noted the furrow of her brows, the tired frustration in her voice, and thought to myself, *I'm so lucky that my country is different.*

I was still in Argentina when Governor Kay Ivey signed Alabama's Human Life Protection Act. When Missouri, Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and Ohio rushed into line behind her. States were dropping like flies, led by ringleaders who believed that "all life has value" besides women's, and there was nothing I could do about it. I was shocked into quiet, this time for the horrors of a people—*my* people—who, in my ignorance, I thought were past this stage.

Though I had seen it growing up in a Catholic Long Island suburb and spending my high school years in an institution that, as part of its official curriculum, compared today's abortion "body count" to that of the Holocaust,



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I'd always assumed that the rest of the country was different. That our past decisions would never be overturned. But, as more and more state governments proposed heartbeat bills and jailtime for doctors, I began to rethink what it meant to identify with a movement. If we had green bandannas in the US, would I now be afraid to display one?

The radical fervor of Argentina's feminists is something I fear US feminists may have lost a bit, as we "grow out of" our rage-filled past. In Argentina, I glimpsed a reality where being sent to prison for choosing an abortion is a real fear. We can discuss and debate all we like. But there's a sharp distinction between saying what you stand for and sticking it on your forehead, putting yourself in the way of critique by any person—friend or stranger—that you come across. Some days, I felt vulnerable and self-conscious with my bandanna on my backpack, trying to keep myself resolute against the side-eyes, the people scooching away from me on the bus. I visited the Casa Rosada, the office of conservative President Mauricio Macri, and, fearing judgment, hid the bandanna away. *What sort of feminist am I?* I thought one afternoon. I had just opened a book in a local bookstore to find that the author included "feminist" in her bio—despite the novel itself having little to do with feminism.

In an instant, I understood more fully why the *Women's Review of Books* has to exist—something I thought I'd comprehended before. To write "feminist" beside one's name and publish it goes beyond simply having a belief and sharing it. Once it's out in the world, you can't take it away; people will think of you what they will. I walked home that day, the bandanna a flash of green on my form, and was reminded of a poster I'd seen stuck to a wall just by the Metropolitan Cathedral. It was green, filled with drawn faces of angry, shouting women, and marked by the words, "SIEMPRE CON LAS PIBAS"—roughly meaning, "Always with the girls." I hadn't been doing all I could. There were people I needed to stand beside. Who I needed to stand beside me, bravely, loudly, as ferociously as a feminist in the streets of Buenos Aires.

When I opened the apartment door, my host mother asked me about school. I answered. Our conversation progressed for a minute or so before her eyes drifted down and she noticed my bandanna, dangling over my left shoulder.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "How wonderful!"

The looming shadow of the world outside diminished. We had signaled we were safe with each other. 🌱

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