

Sex work, sexual assistance, and feminist solidarities

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Embodying diversity in collective action

Conscious of the many forms of oppression experienced in their daily lives, LGBT*Q+ and disability rights activists are envisioning a political logic of social mobilisation that experiments with the construction of new alliances. Relying on interviews and observations in a case study in Madrid, Spain, in this essay I reflect on the ways that LGBT*Q+ people with and without a disability are trying to strengthen solidarities and mutual recognition through their experiences of suffering and joy, articulating notions such as body and identity dissidence into the terrain of collective identities and struggles.

A myriad of actors is creating new sociability (comprising body and emotions) as a result of a logic of action that is embedded in antinormativity discourses. Such antinormativity is also disclosed as a tool to react to the way society sees their bodies and identities as subjected to sexual and erotic devaluation and rejection. Additionally, in bringing together the language of suffering, vulnerabilities and resistance, people have been calling for the importance of integrating their experiences of discrimination and oppression into our understanding of how bodily differences and identity differences are consubstantiated by the activist public consciousness and in the imaginary of collective struggles.

Vulnerability as support for agency and politics

In coalition building and the adoption of intersectional strategies and agendas, transformative projects and politics must face the challenging engagement of the many different actors across social divisions (such as those related to disability and sexuality). Throughout the lens of marginalisation and social justice, trans* and non-binary people have moved beyond representation and inclusion within social movements, addressing a cathartic realignment of political strategies towards LGBT*Q+ communities and activism, as well as within the disability rights activism and the [Independent Living](#)¹ actors and network (an advocacy effort within the disability movement that crosses disability and self-determination to surpass the collective imaginaries that encompass inequality and injustice to regimes of normalcy).

The Madrilénian case-based analysis of the cultural constructions of body-dissent among LGBT*Q+, feminist and disability communities and activism, drove diversity into minority difference and minority discourses in three different, and sometimes connected, activist milieus: trans*, feminist, and the Independent Living networks and spaces. Not unimportantly, body-dissent points at the rethinking of normativity “not in relation to a compulsory, uniform standard, but through an expansive relationality among and within individuals, across and within groups” (Wiegman and Wilson, *apud* Edwards 2015, 141). As such, trans*feminist activism’s intersections with disability rights agendas in the city of Madrid, Spain, have resulted in enriching outcomes to the semantic territories of collective struggles.

While carrying out part of my PhD fieldwork between 2016 and 2018, I conducted a series of interviews in the city with self-identified LGBT*Q+ activists with and without a disability. There, I had the chance to hear about their efforts in integrated forms of politics. Most of the interviewees depicted feminism as a political strategy to assert the language of vulnerability and resistance, while

they portrayed trans*feminism as a response to the oppression directed towards nonnormative bodies and identities through the sign of multiple discrimination. The integration of the terms *trans* and *feminism* is a political effort to incorporate intersectional feminist epistemologies into a project of undoing ontological narratives of self. With regards to the relationship between trans* people, feminists, and the queer community, the critiques about the feminist separatist attitudes of Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist (TERF) towards other constituencies of feminism that are interpreted as a threat to “women’s causes”, go beyond its attacks on gender fluidity or transitivity, or on the narratives that sustain biologically essentialist notions of sex and gender. Trans-inclusive feminist social movements are imagining a political project of contemporary feminist *praxis* that embraces and acknowledges a myriad of situated discourses that is not reducible to “embodied non-normativity” or gender identification, but that also intersects with other patterns of discrimination. In this way, the ongoing ‘othering’ of identities and bodies enforces a system that normalises specific bodies in the role of a model that encompasses “privileges of normality” (Masson, 2013), and creates strangeness to the bodies that are on the outside of this system of privileges: bodies that are “othered” through a regime of oppression and precariousness. Feminist researchers in the field of disability studies are aware of epistemic and imperative systems of power and privileges that enforce hierarchies onto bodies and identities (Wendell, 1989, 1996; Garland-Thomson, 2002; Hall, 2011). The collaboration between trans* and disabled people in networking their agendas and strategies towards the recognition and visibilization of “non-normative and non-hegemonic minorities” is, equally, an opportunity to think about the solidarities among feminist, queer, and disability activism in questioning the notion of compulsory able-bodiedness and normalcy over bodily differences. Through this way of “doing politics”, people put forward body-related issues as meaningful for their activist practices.

Transgender movements are deeply rooted in the mobilization against the pathologization of identities and bodies (the medical and legal apparatus of the medicalization of dissent). Likewise, current disability activism strongly reacts to the medical narratives that regulate and discipline certain bodily forms in the stigmatizing language of defectiveness, cure, abnormality, rehabilitation, treatment and so on, leading to patterns of moral abjection that are standard for disabling societies. And yet, there was no clear consensus among activists on the meaning of medicalization and pathologization in their everyday lives, nor on the consolidation of a shared territory where LGBT*Q+ people with and without a disability could provide their activism together. Instead, the arguments for the alliances between the LGBT*Q+ community and the LGBT*Q+ disabled people activism took shape in the reaction against the collective imaginaries that encompasses, for both communities, a relation to normalcy². Anti-normativity discourses were acknowledged and incorporated into activists’ efforts in a wide range of resistance practices, as a way of spanning the distance between LGBT*Q+ activism and disability activism.

New horizons for sexuality and eroticism:

A rationale for coalition building?

While the antinormativity discourses on pathologization and medicalization were not perceived as something that could unite these activists, the mobilization against normalcy in the everyday life was however perceived as a tool to agglutinate activists claims and concerns with regard to the ways society see their bodies as subject to social devaluation and rejection. Antinormativity discourse was disclosed here as a strategy to react to the way that society sees bodies and identities as subjected to sexual and erotic devaluation. Surprisingly, all the interviewed activists were addressing sexual expressions, desires and desirability as fundamental to understand

not only the ways that they construct their corporeal identities, but also their activist attitudes towards society. Once that the topic of sexual agency was underlined as part of a culture of resistance for both the disability and the LGBT*Q+ struggles, the horizons of eroticism, desirability and sexuality enforced a refreshing debate about a relational sexual culture inspired by the political discussions on identity and difference. Debates surrounding people's experiences of sexual repression, sexual autonomy, legal and institutional apparatus that constrain intimacy and sexual rights, still frame the ongoing articulation of desire, sex, and the political struggles that recognize the control over one's body and sexual agency.

"A new focus on the body through trans and crip bodies, along with a new focus on sexuality through the postporn movement" (Espineira and Bourcier 2016, 88) has initiated new possibilities of addressing the sexual rights agenda into trans*feminism. People with disabilities are redefining sexuality in its political dimensions and framing the subjects (with and without disabilities) in a relational, erotic culture. Disability/functional diversity activists display notions around the body and sexualities in experimental ways, forging a scenario where "people with disabilities are claiming a sexual culture based on different conceptions of the erotic body, new sexual temporalities, and a variety of gender and sexed identities" (Siebers 2012, 47). All of that seems more tangible if we think about one of the most important repertoires used by some activists of the Independent Living Movement and Disability Rights Movement in the Spanish context. They politicize functional diversity through the sexualisation of people with disabilities, by positively presenting disabled people as sexual and autonomous subjects. This facilitates the inclusion of the sexual and reproductive rights' agenda with disability rights and activism. Additionally, it results in an extension of our understanding of the horizons of eroticism, sexuality, and affectivity in people's lives within the personal experience of functional diversities. At the centre of this political-cognitive

opportunity, the increasing involvement of LGBT*Q+ people with functional diversity within the Independent Living Movement heightens the discussion on the "sexualisation of functional diversity", asserting the debate about sexual assistance³ within the spheres of "care," "de-institutionalisation" and "personal assistance".

The activist's strategies of forging alliances and consolidating a network of people who live embodied situations of invisibilization, discrimination and violence, suggest a process of forging a "community in pain". To talk about pain and suffering in these terms is to acknowledge that emotions may become attributes for action and that political engagement is based on people's enactment of suffering. In this sense, the strengthening of a working alliance between trans*feminist and non-binary activists with the sex workers and the sexual assistance activists embodied political agendas is potentially groundbreaking. In such context, trans* activists and sex workers are looking at strategies that seek to align personal, intimate feelings of dissonance and dissidence to their terms of communities' alliance. Moreover, the conversations about sexual agency and desirability brought to the stage the complex imbrication of sexuality with other aspects of social and psychic life, such as the sexual practices, desires, relationships, intimacies, friendships, and the many psychological outcomes of this imbrication such as anxiety, fear, loneliness, feelings of rejection and so on.

The strategies to maintain a working alliance among transgender sex workers and non-binary sexual assistance activists have shown that this solidarity depends also on the intimate labour of political solidarity: the ways people bring care and emotions into the course of action. Hopefully, this may help us to better understand the promises of coalition-building between LGBT*Q+ and disability communities. Simultaneously, since transgender sex worker activists are working together with the non-binary sex workers who assist people with disabilities, we can see the beginning of a new

intersectional activist culture for the rights of sex workers and their struggles for the regulation, legalisation and unionization⁴ of sex work. It should, however, be emphasised that the debate on sexual autonomy for people with disabilities rarely engages in the discussion about the legalisation and decriminalisation of sex work. If this seems to be a premeditated strategy to grip the debate on sexual rights and sexual assistance in the context of public policies aimed at people with functional diversity, this “solution” seems problematic and deserves a more careful reflection.

The relationship between the trans* movement and the feminist agenda of sexual rights in the late 1980s and 1990s, is enlightening⁵. Back then, debates concerned prostitution and the support of sex-worker transgender women struggles against the violence perpetrated by society and by the state. This Madrilenian convergence of the trans* movement with the feminist agenda at the beginning of its organization and institutionalization is nowadays remembered by trans*feminist activists in the debates about the regulation, legalization and unionization of sex work. The associations between trans* and queer communities, disability activism and the sex worker activists call back for the different (historical and cultural biased) contexts of discrimination and the shared forms of lived vulnerabilities, but also experiences of joy and bodily utterances. Alliances are forged, routinely built upon the everyday registers of a society that (symbolically and physically) threatens trans*, non-binary, disabled and sex workers’ existence.

What is new in the current political alliances is that now sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, and affective relationships are addressed as an integral part of social inclusion of (LGBT*Q+) people with disabilities, the arena of sexual assistance within functional diversity activists begin to expand. It infiltrates other spaces of transversal struggles as, for example, the (trans*feminist) movement

for the rights of sex workers and their struggles for unionization, and the rising visibility of (non-binary) sex workers who assist people with disabilities.

In face of such social transformations that combine and reconcile queer, trans*, and disability politics, the queer mobilization (Shepard 2010) and the disabled people’s rights movement are accessing new forms of agency. Bodies that are subjected to deprivation, debilitation and oblivion are bodies marked by political subjectivities. And these bodies, socially disposable from the various forms of agency, are fruitful territories for the arising of new modes of political subjectivities and struggles.

Notes

¹ For the Associative Movement for the Independent Living in the Spanish context, see La Federación de Vida Independiente (<https://federacionvi.org>) and the Foro de Vida Independiente y Divertad (<http://forovidaindependiente.org>).

² Following the endeavours carried out by political actors, the “crip theory” emerges in an intersectional culture, stemming from disability studies and with affinities with feminist and queer scholarship and activism. As such, calls for an intersectional identity membership where the “dysfunctional” becomes a self-reflected form of resistance against normativity and against the regulation of bodies. In the context of a queer-disability alliance proclaimed by the corpus of “crip theory,” trans* and disabled people embodiment were brought to the light in conjunction and in relation to politics, as well as the strategies for intersectional coalition that rely on activist knowledge and praxis – especially among trans*feminist and disability actors and networks. For more on these topics, see Davis 1995; Garland-Thomson 2002; Ahmed 2006; McRuer and Berube 2006; Enke 2012; Siebers 2012; Espineira and Bourcier 2016; McBean 2016.

³ Sexual assistants are sex workers who assist people with disabilities. For more, see “Final Report Summary - Sexual Assistance (Commercial Sex, ‘Sexual Assistance’ and People with Disabilities: A Qualitative Inquiry on Sweden, Britain, and Switzerland)”

(<https://cordis.europa.eu/project/rcn/104412/factsheet/en>) and

“Facilitated Sexual Expression in the Independent Living Movement in Ireland”

(<https://www.independentliving.org/docs6/bonnie200208.html>).

⁴ For an overview on the movement for sex worker’s rights in Spain, see “Who’s Afraid of a Sex Workers’ Union?”

(<https://www.thenation.com/article/otras-sex-workers-union-spain-feminism-prostitution/>).

⁵ In the late 1980s and 1990s, as transgender organizations were dealing with distress and affliction in publicizing their worries, some feminist organizations supported their struggles much because of the trans* movements’ genealogy had been so closely related to the feminist agenda of sexual rights in matters like the debates on prostitution and support to sex-worker transgender women struggles “to defend themselves from police harassment” (Platero 2011, 601). The relevance of feminist political commitments to trans* activism is fundamental to remark that the trans* horizon for activism in the 2000s was profoundly influenced by the debates about public health policies and health care coverage. For the Associative Movement for the Independent Living in the Spanish context, see La Federación de Vida Independiente (<https://federacionvi.org>) and the Foro de Vida Independiente y Diversidad. (<http://forovidaindependiente.org>).

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