

REPERTOIRES FOR ACTION TOWARDS A TRANSFEMINIST PRAXIS



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This essay invites the reader to actively engage in the theoretical and methodological interface between disability studies, transgender studies and queer theory, paying close attention to the role of social discriminations towards bodily differences. In here, the aim is to call the attention for the prefiguration of a strategic intersectional subjectivity to reflect on some of the potentials of doing politics within anti-oppressive bodies of knowledge.

Trans, queer, disability, and feminist scholarships contributed to the (re)creation of the narrative about the body and the debate that interconnects performative accounts of gendered subjectivity to intersecting forms of social oppression (as race, class, or disability). The solidarities among feminist, queer, and disability studies and activism in the questioning of the notion of compulsory able-bodiedness (McRuer, 2006) and normalcy over bodily differences, strengthened new horizons for resistance against the narratives that regulates and disciplines specific bodily forms in a scale of abject bodies and identities' normalisation.

To realise on the impacts that different systems of recognition and belonging may have on the embodied approach of the everyday life politics of resistance is also to recognise the impacts that such forms of politics have to the construction of new regimes of visibilities. Equally, highlights non-normative bodies and identities as belonging to minority groups (Barnes, 2016) and accounting for "minority groups and identities" as the "symbolic of inequality and injustice" (Crowther, 2006: 9-10) that constitute the human experience of embodiment and

“create misfits with minority forms of embodiment” (Garland-Thomson, 2011: 594).

Many feminist perspectives on the body render personal identity through performative accounts of gendered subjectivity and social oppression. Along with that, the theories that take the body as its object have acknowledged that different bodies are subjected to different regimes of exploitation and social rejection. That social rejection requires exceptionalising the ‘anomic’ body (the dysfunctional body, the undesirable body, the unproductive body, the monstrous body and so on).

Drawing on the definition of a ‘political project of belonging’¹ asserted by Yuval-Davis (2011), intersecting individual and collective normative values (and their heterogeneous and differentially situated meanings about the social life) to the contextual power relations along social locations, we can understand better the collaborative process of transgender and disabled people in networking their agendas and strategies towards the recognition and visibilisation of ‘non-normative and non-hegemonic minorities’ – figuring, in the meantime, an understanding for the political project of contemporary feminist praxis that embraces and acknowledge a myriad of situated discourse on minorities that is not reducible to ‘embodied nonnormativity’ or gender identification, but crossed with the interlocking inequalities that shape patterns for (shared forms of) discrimination.

In disability studies, this framework developed a critique of normativity based on deconstructionist and performative theoretical models, relying upon identity politics and minority discourses (Davis, 2002). In this sense, disabled people and disability literature (Clare, 2001; Barnes and Mercer, 2003) have been building, upon subjective responses to the experiences of marginalisation and oppression, an innovative form of disability

¹ “It is multi-layered – recognizing the importance of belonging and the politics of belonging without essentializing this or prioritising any form of naturalized boundaries within the complex glocal realities in which we live; it is transversal, rather than cosmopolitan – transcending borders and boundaries while also recognizing the importance of situated gazes, nevertheless rejecting identity politics and emphasizing the differentiation between social locations, identifications and social values; it is emancipatory, advocating for universal human security, and while recognizing the tremendous importance and value of caring relationships it does not ignore the importance of accounting in these relationships for their contextual power relations”. (Yuval-Davis, 2011: 203)

politics, shifting from the paradigm of disability as “individual medical tragedy to minority activist identity” (Sandahl, 2003: 30).

During the fieldwork (Madrid, Spain, 2018) for my ongoing PhD, I have had the chance of interviewing self-identified LGBT*Q+ activists without and with a disability, and to hear about their efforts into integrated forms of doing politics. For most of the interviewees, feminism was critically depicted as a political strategy to assert the language of vulnerability and resistance, while transfeminism is portrayed, pictured as a response to the oppression directed towards nonnormative bodies and identities through the sign of multiple discrimination. If both definitions complement each other, transfeminism, however, meant not only a political adventure towards the trans bodies and identities (trans practices of the self), or the arrangement of the trans (feminine) presence in feminism. 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, and at the same time to bring different constituencies to a shared space of collective struggle.

Kafer (2013) names the relational/political model of disability as “one that builds on social and minority model frameworks but reads them through feminist and queer critiques of identity” (Kafer, 2013: 4). In this sense, disabled people and disability literature (Clare, 2001; Barnes and Mercer, 2003) have been building, upon subjective responses to the experiences of marginalisation and oppression, an innovative form of disability politics.

People with (and without) disability are constructing the debate about the many intersections (especially within gender and sexuality issues) that are constitutive of disabled people’s bodies and embodiment in an able-bodied society. They are also inquiring about the possible solidarities and mutual recognition between all those who experience one’s way of suffering through bodily utterances.

Following the endeavours carried out by political actors, the notion of ‘crip’, emerging from a queer-disability activist and theoretical alliance, asserts for an intersectional identity membership where the ‘dysfunctional’ becomes a form of resistance against normativity and the regulation of bodies and

subjectivities. In this context, new strategies for coalition arises among transfeminist and disability/independent living activists.

The intersections of trans* and disability studies and activism shape the narratives of the learning self (personal strategies of belonging) and change the landscape of disability and queer theories and politics, inducing to theoretical and methodological changes at the forefront of the debate about discrimination, oppression and identity.

The first steps of LGBT activists during the transition towards democracy in Spain, from clandestine subjectivities to visible bodies occupying the public space of the streets, were marked by the reluctance of part of the gay movement in accepting transgender people as a constituency of the ‘sexual minorities visibility’ narratives for recognition. 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 – in much because of trans movements’ genealogy had been so closely related to the feminist agenda of sexual rights in matters like, for example, the debates on prostitution and support to sex-worker transgender women struggles “to defend themselves from police harassment” (Platero, 2011: 598).

This relationship between trans movements and the feminist agenda of sexual rights, in the late 1980s and 1990s, through the debates on prostitution and the support to sex-worker transgender women struggles against the violence perpetrated by society and by the State, is mesmerising. This Madrilenian (but not only) convergence of the trans movement with feminist agenda at the beginning of its organisation and institutionalisation has been nowadays remembered by transfeminist activists (as well as by non-binary sex workers that assist people with disabilities) in the debates about the regulation, legalisation and unionisation of sex work.

Debates surrounding people’s experiences of sexual repression, sexual autonomy, legal and institutional apparatus that constrains intimacy and sexual rights, still frame the ongoing articulation of desire, sex, and the political struggles that recognises the control of one’s body and sexual agency as part of a culture of resistance in both the disability and the LGBT*Q+ fields of struggles.

These interactions are displaying the notions around the body and sexualities in experimental ways. The innovation and

challenges, in here, seems to be the fact that when people start to address the debate on sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, and affective relationships as an integral part of social inclusion of people with disabilities, the arena of sexual assistance within functional diversity/disability activists begin to expand, penetrating other spaces of transversal struggles as the (transfeminist) movement for the rights of sex workers and their struggles for unionisation, which, for the meantime, have been making visible the sex workers who assist people with disabilities.

To comprehend the incorporation of queer/cuir and feminist repertoire for political action in the logic of social protests (Trujillo, 2016: 4) is fundamental to understand how people connect dissidence to create alliances within autonomous collectives. To understand (trans* and disabled) people's embodiment in relation to (trans/feminist) politics and (disability) activism is to affirm an intersectional praxis that struggles for politics of visibility. The goal is to acknowledge and understand how this situated intersectional praxis that fights for new politics of visibility can expand the repertoires of action and nurture emerging coalitions and agencies stemmed from a variety of hybrid-political subjects.

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