
Kaciano Barbosa Gadelha (2015)

Virtualização do corpo e sexualidades online: encontros gay, gênero e performatividade

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Digitalization and technological tools and advancements are profoundly de- and reterritorializing urban spaces at a global level. Leading social media and online app platforms have redistributed both the sites of identity production and the circulation of bodies. How do digital communication and new forms of online-offline encounters affect subjectivity as well as the (im)materialities of space? And are traditional social theory concepts able to sufficiently comprehend these changes? Brazilian queer-feminist theorist Kaciano Gadelha faces these challenges, taking Bruno Latour's call for a reassembling of the social seriously (Latour 2005).

In his dissertation, defended at Freie Universität Berlin, he studies the universe of online gay dating and networks by critically reexamining the performativity of sexuality and gender. Gadelha, who is currently working on gender and queer studies at Universidade Federal do Ceará, endeavors to understand how

gay platform users are drawing new sexual cartographies by intra-acting with technologies, humans, non-humans, genders and desires. What emanates from these moving processes, the author concludes, are not simply new hybrids or fragmented bodies in the form of digitalized codes and pixels. Gadelha also observes an intensification of erotic forces that has given rise to virtual-material spaces and non-identitarian subjectivities.

The book is comprised of five chapters along with an introduction and concluding remarks. In its compact introduction, Gadelha emphasizes situated knowledge (Haraway 1991), which echoes his personal experiences of "being gay in a big Brazilian city" that had very restricted spaces for the LGBT community. His participant approach as a user of online gay dating platforms is interpreted as assemblages of connection and social "disconnection from normality" (15). Calling for a "technological perspective of gender" (19), Gadelha's research questions take two directions. On the one hand, he explores which "performativities of

¹ http://www.diss.fu-berlin.de/diss/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/FUDISS_derivate_000000017608/BarbosaGadelhaKdiss.pdf

gender and sexuality are being endorsed" (21) through online sites like Gayromeo. On the other hand, he is engaged with overcoming "constructivist reductionism" (21), thus seeking a symmetric agency of human, as well as non-human, actors and new technologies.

Chapter One outlines the theoretical apparatus essential for a technological perspective on gender. Gadelha's main concern are the flaws of constructivist theory and namely the paradoxical insistence in searching for a "territory of identitarian purity" (60). In the author's opinion, this could be corrected by acknowledging the hybrid conditions in which technological machines and power can produce sexually differentiated bodies.

Chapter Two describes the technological tools, functions and users' interactions on Gayromeo. After a conceptual discussion about online gay communities, Gadelha exposes his participant research methods as a platform user; this included online and offline interviews carried out in Germany, Brazil, Mexico and Austria. A user's looks and virtual navigations turn out to lend to a "digital subjectivity to bodies without faces, for example" (95). Compared to the outcomes of offline meetings, these subjectivities are filed in an online archive – possessing a virtual materiality that can be examined by other users independent of their location (99).

Chapters Three and Four explore the experiences of Gayromeo users through

the analytical keys of archive and repertoire as coined by performance theorist Diana Taylor (2003). Gadelha describes how many users experience the gay dating platform as something that liberates their sexuality in empowering ways. Also, Gadelha focuses on how masculinity and heteronormativity both change and coexist with online gender performativities (148). Several users, for instance, admitted to have changed their real age in their online profiles in order to seem more attractive to other users. Furthermore, the virtual plays articulate social markers of race or nationality, often idealizing "foreign territories" (165). Nevertheless, Gadelha insists that these markers should not to be seen as "identitarian segmentations", but rather as "parodic effects" (175) of performative practices.

This sometimes surprising effort to de- and reconstruct an analytical distinction between online and offline, virtual and real, continues in Chapter Five through a theoretical discussion around processes of virtualization. Drawing upon Deleuze (2007), Gadelha highlights the virtual as a "perceptive realm" different from that of "the actual present, in which things are materialized" (176). The subject of the gay dating platform can chat or flirt with numerous users simultaneously, something that is not visible or known by other users. Furthermore, these virtual interactions take place in moments or spaces not previously defined as gay zones. These "new erotic geographies" and sexualities, Gadelha observes, have left behind static localization in favor

of an “aesthetics of navigation”, where “pulverized excitement” defines the erotic momentum of space (216).

This book is captivating by its theoretical acuteness and refined language. Gadelha skillfully discusses concepts such as performativity or heteronormativity, that have been put forward by queer and feminist studies, relating them to his empirical inquiry. He essentially widens the scope of reflection regarding technology, sexuality and the virtual with the guidance of recent approaches from (feminist) new materialism (see Barad 2003).

One point of criticism is certainly the partially fragile balance between empiric data and theory, as the reader is, at some point, left to speculate as to whether the narratives of Gayromeo users can be matched with the arguments of nonrepresentational analytics. Owing to Gadelha’s strong emphasis on flux and the hybrid, it becomes difficult to grasp the political implications that are so pervasive in the texts of feminist authors discussed. Whether online sexualities enable “affinity politics” (Haraway 1991) remains an open question. Finally, a historical or time-diagnostic contextualization of how the interplay of technological innovations and the articulation of gay identities and gender relations are linked to deep social and political transformations in urban spaces – as for example the works of Ernesto Meccia (2011) show – would have been useful.

Nevertheless, Gadelha’s book is highly inspiring in its efforts to overcome (de)constructivist understandings of (gender) performativity, space and agency. Thus, it presents an essential reading for all those interested in processes of digitalization and sexuality together with new materialist approaches to spatial and cultural effects of digital technologies.

Bibliography

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