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When the Body of the Queer Researcher Is "Trouble"

"WE ARE HERE", the first part of the famous queer nation slogan, "We are here, we are queer: Get used to it" and the instigating sentence of this issue, made me plunge back in time to those late 1980s and early 1990s in search of clues about what are the urgent, relevant issues of queer theory and queer studies now as opposed to what was urgent then, taking inspiration from the Italian situation. The late 1980s and early 1990s in USA, as expressed by Rand (2014) in his recent book, were a defining historical moment for both queer activism and queer theory. LGBT communities, in reaction to the violence and homophobia of the AIDS crisis, often responded with angry, militant, and performative forms of activism designed not only to promote acceptance or tolerance, but to forge strength from victimization and assert loudly and force-fully their rights to safety and humanity. The activist reclamation of the word "queer" is one marker of this shift and it was mirrored in academic circles by the concurrent emergence of the new field of "queer theory." That is, as queer activists were mobilizing in the streets, queer theorists were producing a similar ferment in academia, questioning regulatory categories of gender and sexuality. The narrative of queer theory's devel-opment in the USA thus describes it as arising from or being inspired by queer activism and performance. With this intervention I would like

to redirect the attention to the Italian scenario (although the French one will be mentioned too), focusing on the concept of the body and its relation to performance and space: first because queer theory has always given importance to the these notions, and second because they constitute a significant facet of queer activism in Italy. The questions I ask are the following: What is the role of space and performance in the production of queer bodies, and what makes queer bodies out of place?

In light of recent events and discussions on queer spaces in Italy, it is worth considering how space produces knowledge and how "queer," and more specifically queer bodies, are produced in academic spaces as opposed to activist spaces. This is a question that touches on the, more or less fictitious, divides between academia and activism, which I will try to elaborate in this intervention.

Italy, in the last months, has witnessed a series of threats of evacuation of queer, transfeminist, and lesbian spaces such as Atlantide in Bologna, Zam in Milano, Teatro Valle occupato, Volturno occupato, and spazio 22[1] in Rome. As stated by Zappino in an article co-written with Olivia Fiorilli (Zappino and Fiorilli 2014), appearing on the Italian blog "Quaderni di San Precario", these queer spaces have for many years represented centers of resistance and redefinition of dominant discourses on which various forms of categorizations between livable and non-livable lives have depended. They have illegally occupied not only material, but also immaterial places within the official, orderly discourses in order to denounce, reveal, and challenge, from within, exclusions and violence. Their evacuation has been justified by the town council institutions, at least in some instances, with the need to save them from a state of neglect and abandonment, willfully ignoring that they have represented instead, as many believe, spaces of "care," where various people had the opportunity to develop emotional and corporeal bonds and share knowledge on alternative sexualities and genders. These affective/political networks of mutual support, to quote Fiorilli (Zappino and Fiorilli 2014), which have been fundamental for their participants in order to survive, materially and mentally, in the current climate of austerity and deprivation, have shown the importance of cooperation,

encounters, non-reproductive life styles, failures turned into art, as ways to counteract the exploitation of queers by neoliberals institutions (Busi and de Simoni 2014). The evacuation of these spaces represent, thus, a serious danger for queer activism in Italy, as they often constitute the only places where one can talk about and do "queer," since there is a general lack of courses and programs on gender and sexuality studies in Italian universities.[2]

Given these premises I would like to focus my discussion on the importance of queer politics of the bodies and of spaces of activism (outside but, most of all, inside academia) in line with the focus given to these concepts by Di Feliciantonio in this special issue. An illustrative case is that of the queer Italian academic performer Zarra Bonheur a.k.a. Rachele Borghi. Rachele was a precarious researcher in geography in some Italian universities until she was hired as an assistant professor at the Sorbonne University in Paris in 2013, following the pathway of many other Italian academics, unemployed or in between contracts, who left Italy in search of a job, including the author of this intervention.

As expressed by Rachele Borghi (Borghi, Bourcier, Prieur forthcoming), she was working on post-porn[3] performances in public spaces and this topic of research was greeted by academia with embarrassment, as it was considered "dirty" and was supposedly falling outside of the discipline of geography. Her research activities had always reflected on academic practices, and on her positioning in relation to research and fieldwork. The contact with Italian, French, and Spanish (mainly) queer groups and collectives had raised in her the urgency to find and to experiment with effective approaches, that could help her to avoid replicating the divide between theory and practice in the dissemination of her research findings within and outside academia. Zarra Bonheur was born as a consequence of these thoughts. As stated in the description found in a website dedicated to her, Zarra Bonheur is a "researcher-activist-queer-feminist-militant-sexual dissident who one day realizes that her creativity does not necessarily have to flow exclusively into scientific articles. She, therefore, decides to free her reflections, theories and research from paper format as the solely and legitimate form

of expression and transform them into collective performances. Zarra Bonheur is the result of a 'do it yourself' pervasive contagion and of her friends widespread love." (Zarra Bonheur 2014, my translation)

Zarra Bonheur is not the alter ego of Rachele Borghi, as Rachele puts it (Borghi, Bourcier, Prieur forthcoming), or the stage name of the academician. It is rather a collective creation and an experimental project, in which bodies and practices meet to form new networks and relationships. Zarra Bonheur aims to turn scientific research into performances, breaking the boundaries between academic and activist contexts by producing spaces of subversion/transgression of the norms. Some of her performances have been staged in the last two years at various queer events in France and in Italy, including some of the spaces mentioned at the beginning of this article, which have now been evacuated or are threaten with evacuation.[4] Zarra Bonheur and her friends translate into Italian key queer academic texts in English, French, and Spanish from various contexts (scientific, philosophical or militant); texts that are deemed revolutionary, but that many people might not have access to, and convey them through the body. In *Degen(d)erated Euphoria* Zarra Bonheur is covered by bandages, which represent the oppressive gender norms on the body. The voices of her friends reciting queer texts attach to Zarra's body, becoming new matter. They free her of her bandages and allow the beginning of a transformation of the collective body endorsed with a new imaginary. *Porno Thrash* is another performance centered on the oppression and liberation of the body, and on the representation and perception of nudity in public spaces. In this performance some queer texts centered on the political and social control of the body are read aloud, followed by texts centered on the reappropriation of the body by means of desires and choices. While reading the texts aloud, the group starts to strip, inviting the public to do the same by throwing their clothes into rubbish bags and dance naked all together in a sort of euphoric collective and contagious play. By stripping the body of thrash preconceptions the performance contributes to the creation of a space of suspension and subversion. These performances reflect on the weight of the norms, but more so on the right to make visible the body

of the researcher. Rachele explains that she wanted to experiment, for example, on the concept of nudity within the academic environment and transform this theorization into performance. Nudity is intended here in a broad sense including concepts such as voyeurism, as in the voyeurism of the researcher, and invisibility, as in legitimate scientific discourses, which make invisible the body of the researcher supposed to be represented only by her/his head. During a conference at the University of Bordeaux in February 2013, where she was invited to talk about her research on post-porn, she undressed while presenting to the audience. The video was put online by the conference organizer and became a major source of problems when she was hired by the University of Sorbonne in June 2013. Not only did it interfere with her hiring process as some staff at the University, who had watched the video, were opposed to her being offered the job (although eventually she was hired): it also gave rise to a string of violent and sexist comments by Catholic and right wing groups which announced the queer colonization of French universities and the moral decadence of the University institution.[5] The fulcrum of the attack on Rachele Borghi seems to be the naked body. Here, like in other performances done by Zarra Bonheur in activist spaces in Italy where she and her friends undress, the naked bodies staged either challenge expectations about gender identification given the presence of transgender bodies, or transgress Italian (or French) aesthetical stereotypical beauty canons, especially in relation to femininity, by being neither thin, nor young, nor shaved. Lots has been written on the misrepresentation, sexualization, and vilification of the female body in the media in Italy in the last forty years, especially in the television inaugurated by former prime minister and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, where naked or semi-naked female bodies complying with specific beauty canons have been appearing in programs sitting next to fully dressed male bodies as means of entertainment, devised for a straight male audience.[6] However, if the reason for the attack on Rachele at the University of Bordeaux might be explained by the performed transgression of gender and beauty norms specific to the Italian context (but also applicable to other western contexts), the major source of anxiety seems

to come from displaying nudity in academic contexts.

Rachele's performative talk at the University of Bordeaux made her naked body visible as integral part of the content of her class, which revolved around queer space and sexuality, and the boundaries between public and private, using it as site of intervention/resistance against those heteronormative ideas of sexuality and space that she was attacking. However, her body troubled academia. Why is displaying the body of the queer researcher a disturbing act?

In order to answer this question I would like to start reflecting on the still strong boundaries existing between academia and activism that Zarra Bonheur, as previously said, tries to breach by bringing queer academic texts and queer methodologies into activism, and activism practices into academia. In the last years there has been a bulk of studies on queer activism and academia, which have emphasized, as Chatterton, Hodkinson and Pickerill (2010) state, the need for researchers to bring together their academic work with their political ideals to further social change. Articles have appeared recently on the need for more militant research (see *Militant Research Handbook*, Bookchin et al. 2013[7]) where academia and activism ideally could meet in the search for new ways of acting that can lead to new ways of thinking. Militant research should involve participation by conviction: researchers play a role in actions and share the goals, strategies, and experiences of their comrades because of their own committed beliefs, and not simply because they want to get their data. The outcomes of the research should also serve as a useful tool for the activist group, as we have seen in the case of Zarra Bonheur who transforms her research into performances. Theory should not then be separated by praxis and this seems to be a sensible statement as, after all, pure activists, that is people who act without need for reflection, do not seem to exist (Kramsch 2012, 186). Many studies on the field have stated instead that theory and activism are always in a "symbiotic and in a cyclical relation" (Kramsch 2012, 186), and that "theory is embedded within actors' ideational elements which orient their action" (Pistikos 2012, 171). Other recent studies on self-reflexivity in research, *in primis* a recently published edited collection on auto-ethnography (Adams and

Holman Jones 2013), have started interrogating how it is possible to make sense of our own experiences as researchers while making sense of cultural phenomena, and how it is possible to write on and embody the kinds of people we want and need to be in our research, for ourselves and for others. These are not novelty questions; however, it seems to me and to other scholars, who have analyzed the neoliberal or corporate academia in the UK, to which I belong myself, that the parameters for reflexivity are often bounded by the individual study "leaving the institutional context in which academic knowledge is produced simply as a taken for granted backdrop" (Gill 2010, 229). While reflexivity in academic research is encouraged, it appears that, according to Gill (2010), it is never actually turned upon the academic community in which the researchers are working, or on the labor process itself and the conditions of production.[8] As also confirmed by Chatterton, Hodkinson and Pickerill "there is a collective failure to address the 'university' as a site of production, alienated labour and corporate power" (2010, 250), and academic-activists continue to focus on supporting and writing about the struggles of "others," instead of looking at their own within the university. This is explained by the authors (Chatterton, Hodkinson and Pickerill 2010) with the fact that in our neoliberal climate universities are considered "ivory towers" for the contemplation of the outside worlds, instead of places of struggle (with labor processes which are exploitative, hierarchical, and precarious), and production of knowledge designed to be useful to contemporary capitalism, corporations, and elites. This brings us back to the other subdivides within the academia/activism: the divides between high, expert culture and low culture, and between theory and practice. The case of Zarra Bonheur illustrates for example her attempts to queer her methodology by using material that might not be considered academic, for example militant literature such as fanzines, blogs, and manifestos by collectives. It also shows that academia is very worried about defining what makes a "true activist" respectively a "true scholar," as if an absolute ontology of activism and theory could exist and the liquidity of the boundaries between the two should be ignored (Brambilla 2012, 216). Queer scholars in the French academia, moreover,

as expressed by Bourcier (Borghi, Bourcier and Prieur forthcoming), are still more than unwelcome in a space that keeps maintaining traditional scientific standards and academic norms inspired by French universalism, which prevent the development of epistemological creativity dedicated to social transformation rather than social observation. As stated by Bourcier, for example (Borghi, Bourcier, and Prieur forthcoming) gender studies, which are taught in the history and sociology departments, rely heavily on gender as norms and ignore the questions of gender as performativity. Yet Zarra Bonheur puts the performative body of the researcher at the center of the picture, as a tool for contesting academic norms, in a way that mirrors queer studies in their focus on the body as a tool of social protest. However, French academia prefers keeping the body of the researcher separated from the research, as otherwise it would impinge on the scientific character of the research.

This divide, yet another to add to the previous list, I believe, is reinforced by an academic culture, and here I refer to the UK again, which is the one most familiar to me, which favors individualism and the isolation of the researcher in order for the corporate university to exploit her/him better. As magisterially written by Gill: "[T]he academic neoliberal subjects are constituted as self-regulating, calculating, conscientious and responsibilised. The 'freedom', 'flexibility' and 'autonomy' of neoliberal forms of governmentality has proved far more effective for extracting 'surplus value' or at least vastly more time spent working." (Gill 2010, 236) What is valued in academia seems to be individual responsibility and freedom, but given the bulimic increase of working hours due to the last year's cuts this has turned out to be a way of isolating the researcher from the wider community instead. The result is that, first, any failure to meet the new standards set by the university are deemed personal (personal shame), instead of public, and second, the researcher has no time to do anything else, let alone activism. This encouraged individualism is associated with a ban on emotions: any personal complaint is considered a moan, instead of legitimate criticism. Therefore the divide between individualism and collective action also invokes another divide, that between private and public. Emotions and affect are banned as be-

longing to the private sphere. Thus, researchers are not supposed to get emotionally involved with their object of research. Yet, according to the autoethnography literature mentioned above, the researcher should turn "the internally somatic into the externally semantic" (Spry 2011, 63), and show the "messy beauty of being with others" (Spry 2011, 27). Teaching and doing queer activism drawing on Spry's ideas on performing auto-ethnography, should instead be embodied, co-performed (constituted in interaction with others), evocative (tied to emotions), and consequential (having transformative possibilities). Queer ethnography puts emphasis on our embodied and emotional collisions and collaborations with others as the only means by which norms and expectations can be transformed (Spry 2011, 101). As Liana Borghi explains in the afterword of *L'amore ai tempi dello tsunami* (quoted in Morini 2014): "[B]odies are performance. They are not one thing and they are not permanent." By saying this she emphasizes the fact that identity is a meeting, an event, an incident, a moment in the becoming of moving bodies. Autoethnography points toward building networks of relationships and making the private public: it talks about making publicly visible the emotional involvement of researchers in their research, an aspect that is usually relegated to the private sphere.

In relation to the importance of building networks of relationships, in the Italian austerity climate, economic insecurity pushes towards the identification of solutions and alternatives to contingent problems, and to investing in relationships. The queer spaces mentioned at the beginning of this article are exactly that: spaces of mutual support and networks of relationships. The job insecurity imposes a look at the proliferation of new relational and affective practices exceeding the monogamous heterosexual family and, as a consequence, at new forms of solidarity that have the potential to produce more fair social relationships. The problem is that there is a push towards relegating to the private sphere and to the individual, the strategies for challenging economical instability and insecurity (Morini 2014).

In relation to this second point about public and private spaces (a fundamental theme in Zarra Bonheur's performances), we can say that

public space plays a dominant role in the construction and legitimation of a never explicit heteronormativity. Ignoring and relegating sexuality and emotions to the private sphere, means ignoring their role in the formation of collective identities. In queer performances the sexuality of the performers exits the private sphere to invade the public one. The body of the performer acquires a central role: it can unmask the assumed neutrality of the public space and its intrinsic violent heteronormativity by breaking the barriers between what is seen and what is not.

Given these premises it seems that the source of irritation about Rachele's performance at the University of Bordeaux stems from the breaking of various barriers: her naked body, by exposing the non-neutrality of the public academic space, breaks the barriers between what should be personal and private (sexuality, nudity) as opposed to what should be public; what is activism as opposed to what is academia (Rachele the researcher should be separate from Zarra the activist); what is high culture as opposed to what is low culture, and what can and can not be done in research and in its transmission. This exposes the contradictions intrinsic in our understanding of queer with its links to performance and activism, and the making of queer (and queer bodies) in spaces, such as the academic ones, which resist the very challenges that queer invokes.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the initial question of how spaces (the academic especially) shape the production of queer studies and queer bodies, by adding these two sub-questions: How can we bridge the gap between queer studies as taught in the academia and queer activism in a way that brings them closer? And finally, how can we queer academia?

I believe that a possible answer to these questions lies in increased questioning of the heteronormativity and (corporate) power of the institutions in which queer is taught, starting from academia. Doing queer in academia should allow a shift of focus from representation to creation and transformation by the use of performance; it should allow into the classroom the messiness of our lived experience as queer researchers, teachers, and activists, our entanglement in relationships and networks which can also constitute ways to resist our isolation in the institutions

in which we work. Eventually, the Italian/French example of Zarra Bonheur, I think, can suggest a way to go about troubling the very institutions we are contesting not only with our ideas, but also with our enmeshed bodies.

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NOTES

1. Atlantide is an occupied space in Bologna, a location where the activist groups NullaOsta (independent and underground group of music production), Antagonismogay/Laboratorio Smaschieramenti (gay and queer group), and Clitoristrix (lesbian-feminist separatist group) have operated in the last seventeen years. Zam is an occupied space in Milano in which the transfeminist queer festival "Ladyfest" took place from the 6th to the 8th of June 2014. Valle occupato is an occupied theatre in Rome where the "Genderotica 2013" festival took place in May and June of 2013, and spazio 22 is a lesbian-feminist occupied space in Rome.

2. In Italian universities there are no specific programs where gender and queer studies are taught. However, some lecturers and researchers might teach "queer studies" within their classes on other subjects. Examples include Marco Pustianaz who teaches English literature at the Università del Piemonte Orientale, Liana Borghi who taught American women's writing at the Università di Firenze, and Lorenzo Bernini who teaches philosophy at the University of Verona and is the founder of the center for queer studies, "Politesse".

3. Post-porn is a political movement born in the 1980s in the USA as an offshoot of pro-sex feminism. The concept "post-porn" was coined by erotic photographer Wink van Kempen and made popular by sexwork-activist and performance artist Annie M. Sprinkle. It claimed a new status of sexual representation: through identifying with critical joy and agency while deconstructing its heteronormative and naturalizing conditions, Sprinkle made the spectators think of sex as a category open for use and appropriation of queer feminist counter-pleasures beyond the victimizing framework of censorship and taboo. Through an intersectional and militant approach, post-porn fights patriarchy and sexism by celebrating and commenting on what can be considered "fringe" aspects of sex and sexuality, seeking to further elevate, explore, and legitimize these practices in order to bring about a dialogue regarding cultural stereotypes, ethics, morality, and desire. Among the various porno-activist and European performers are Diana Pornoterrorista (2013) http://pornoterrorismo.com, Armsidea http://www.ideadestroyingmuros. info, Slavina http://malapecora.noblogs.org. The post-porn scene is active in USA, especially through the work of Annie Sprinkle, http://anniesprinkle.org, and in Latin America through the group La Fulminante, http://www.lafulminante.com. For more information on post-porn movement, see Borghi (2012), Bourcier (2013), and Stüttgen (2009).

4. Zarra Bonheur has performed in the last couple of years at various queer events in Rome, Torino, Milano, Barcelona, Nantes, Utrecht, Rennes, and Madrid.

5. See "La décadence enseignée à la Paris-IV-Sorbonne", http://www.diatala.org/article-paris-iv-sorbonne-vous-propose-des-ateliers-de-bondage-de-porno-gender-d-ejaculation-lgtb-de-po-118891234.html; or "Completement tarée", https://www.facebook.com/fideles.sarkozystes.de.l.ump/posts/10152249200904932?stream_ref=5; or "Rachele Borghi: 'Post-porn' et géographie de la sexualité", http://www.agoravox.tv/actualites/societe/article/rachele-borghi-post-porn-et-40039; or "Des militants Queer dans nos universités!", http://www.theoriedugenre.fr/?Des-militantes-Queer-dans-nos; or "Une maitre de conférence se fou à poil...", http://www.koreus.com/modules/newbb/topic113772.html; or "Post Porn: Sodome et Gomorrhe entrent à la Sorbonne!", http://vudefrance.fr/articles/post-porn-pitie-pour-les-etudiants-spectateurs (accessed 2014-10-12).

6. See the article by Pirri (2011) and Hipkins (2011) for an analysis of the phenomenon of the *velina* (the Italian television showgirl). According to Hipkins (2011) the "beauty myth" has been used to keep women in a certain place in Italian society, and it has been further inflected a "beauty trade-off," namely the equation between female beauty, stupidity, and sexual incontinence. See also the documentary on the topic by Lorella Zanardo, *Il corpo delle donne* (Women's body). http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EBcLjf4tD4E (accessed 2014-10-12).

7. *Militant research handbook* contains the contribution of a large group of visual artists on the dialogue between academia and activism.

8. According to Gill, looking back at the researchers' lives would entail looking, for example, at objects such as "the proliferating e-mails, the minutes of meetings, the job applications, the peer reviews, the promotion assessments, the drafts of the RAE narrative, the committee papers, the student feedback forms, even the after-seminar chats" (Gill 2010, 229).

SAMMANFATTNING

Inlägget diskuterar den performativa kroppens betydelse inom queeraktivist-rörelsen i Italien och undersöker rummets och platsens roll i dess artikule-rande. I synnerhet granskas hur queera kroppar skapas i akademiska sfärer i motsats till i aktivistiska sfärer, och vad som gör forskarens queera kropp malplacerad inom akademin, trots att queerteorin enligt den amerikanska historieskrivningen uppstod ur queeraktivism och performanser. Diskussio-nen är inspirerad av Zarra Bonheur, en italiensk kollektiv skapelse, bildad på initiativ av akademikern och performansartisten Rachele Borghi, vars mål är att förvandla vetenskaplig forskning till performanser. Racheles perfor-mativa föreläsning på Bordeaux universitetet, under vilken hon tog av sig kläderna och gjorde sin nakna kropp till en integrerad del av framställningen om queera kroppar och rum, gav upphov till en rad attacker och trubbel i akademin. För att kunna förstå varför, undersöker texten de tydliga gränser som fortfarande finns mellan akademi och aktivism, det vill säga mellan vad som bör vara personligt och privat (sexualitet, nakenhet), i motsats till det som bör vara offentligt, mellan finkultur och populärkultur, samt mellan vad som kan göras och vad som inte kan göras i forskning och forsknings-redovisning. Ett sådant resonemang avslöjar de inre motsägelser som finns i skapandet av queer i akademin och pekar på sätt att ompröva reflexivitet och kroppens plats, och känslor och relationsbaserade nätverk i denna sfär. Slutligen bör vi som queera akademiker inte bara kritiskt syna det yttre utan även det inre, och inte bara med hjälp av våra idéer, utan också med våra involverade kroppar.