

Gender, politics and knowledge: an ethnography of the action of trans people and travestis in the university context

Brume Dezembro Iazzetti*

Abstract

Marked by a context known for advances in policies surrounding trans people and travestis, concomitant with the persist of transphobic violence, this research focus in the university context, seeking – through fieldwork in events organized by trans activists – to understand how the university itself is constructed as an opening (or not) to experimentation in terms of gender, articulating three main conceptual keys – gender diversity, political action and knowledge production. I conclude that there are a series of tensions between an “in” and “out” of university, with debates mobilized by these subjects that emphasizes the importance of intersectionality and the need to go beyond the restrict architectural spaces of this environment. The university is here seem as both a productive (and relatively safe) space and a space tensioned by institutionalized violence, “privileges” and a model of knowledge production that often excludes historically marginalized people. These political engagements often emphasizes the dimensions of experience and body.

Key words:

Transsexuality, gender, university

Introduction

The recent national university growth allies itself with a strength of the political groups attached to the debate about gender and sexuality in this context. At the same time, the national movement of travestis and trans men and women gains an increased visibility and political presence of its demands and guidelines. Therefore, this research searches to – through the approximation with people that self-define as trans and/or travestis, allied with the participant observation in groups attached to gender and sexuality diversity within the university context – comprehend how this environment is constructed as an opening (or not) to experimentation in terms of gender. For this, the project searches the articulations of three main conceptual keys: gender diversity, political action and knowledge production within the university context, especially in the University of Campinas (Unicamp), where the ethnography is held.

Results and Discussion

Methodologically, fieldwork was held in events organized by trans activists, including academic events and parties. The research was also marked by the beginning of my own gender transition, in a complex relationship between my personal journey and engage in the fieldwork, that proved to be productive and analytically powerful. Throughout the events, the tensions between the “in” and the “out” of university were clear. University was often described as a space marked by its institutionalized violence and inconsistency. By one side, several narratives were mobilized to show how poorly university deals with trans students. By another side, these same students were described by themselves as “privileged”, representing a small amount of the Brazilian trans persons and/or travestis, especially those who are poor and black. Here, the narrative of one’s own experience and the symbolic value of trans bodies (especially the ones cut by class, race, body type, functionality and other social differences) gain centrality in the political speech.

The political need to go “beyond university” was often remembered in these public speeches, as well as the importance of intersectionality.

The political context involved here is particularly complex. Brazil is marked in the last years by several advances by the trans community. In the university context, the main example is the inclusion of the “social name” in ENEM (high school’s national exam) and in public universities. At the same time, the country is known for its brutal violence through trans people and travestis, as well as the exclusion in schools and workplace.

However, as much as the violence within these spaces were often mobilized, the university was also constructed by these subjects as a relatively safe space. The university, here, shows its potential to the construct of political alliances and networks of mutual support.

Conclusions

In a political context marked with contradictions, trans people and travestis engage with the university in a complex manner. This political engagements both tension the difference between the “in” and the “out” of university, emphasizing the importance of intersectionality and the need to go beyond the restrict architectural spaces of university. The body and the experience of trans people gain centrality within this engagements. Therefore, the relationship with university both shows a “privilege” of a small group of trans people and tensions the roles of university in a larger context – its institutionalized knowledge, its violence and its cuts through gender, sexuality, class, race and other social differences. At the same time, the university shows itself as a productive (and relatively safe) space, forming networks of political mobilization and support.

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