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Transgender sexualities: between pleasure and danger

To exist, to have sex, to die: navigating heteronormativity when non-cisgender

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Introduction

Joshua Vallum, 29, a member of the Latin Kings gang, pleaded guilty to fatally beating and stabbing 17-year-old Mercedes Williamson, whom he had dated. Vallum admitted that he killed Williamson because she was transgender and because he feared reprisal from other members of the gang, which forbids homosexual relationships. (Somashekhar, 2021)

Transgender people, in this text, are defined in a negative manner: they are all non-cisgender people, meaning that their sex assigned at birth¹ isn't aligned with their gender². It includes transmen and transwomen, non-binary, genderqueer, and gender-fluid people, and all the people who don't adhere to such categories, nor to the category of cisgender. While I acknowledge it may be problematic to use one term to include such diverse identities and experiences and that it would need further detailing, from now on, I will use trans* or transgender as an umbrella term to try to include as much of the gender variant human diversity as possible in the text.

Heteronormativity³, cisheteronormativity⁴, and cis heteronormativity⁵ are all related concepts closely linked between each other as gender and sexuality are never very far away when we speak of norms and power. Norms are commonplace, they are rarely seen by people, except by the ones that transgresses them, or breach them like would Garfinkel say. There are no people so visibly crossing or blurring the lines of gender and the boundaries of heteronormativity than trans* people. This is even more visible when we speak about transgender sexualities. This situation somewhat puzzling to people: Trans* people's sexualities and genitals are raising questions, people wonder whether and how trans* people have sex, with whom and with which body parts: do they even have sex? How? Would I ever?

In this paper, I will see how transgender sexualities are influenced by heteronormativity. In that attempt, I will first expose a few key points about perceptions of transgender sex and sexualities, then present an example of the risks transgender people face regarding heteronormativity. I will then conclude on a few opening notes.

¹ The sex assigned at birth is based on visible genitals at birth, which is then inscribed on administrative documents.

² Gender is understood here as a non-essentialist construct, performed and not exclusively binary.

³ The assumption that heterosexuality is the norm or superior to other sexualities (Warner 1991). It also assumes that gender is only binary (male or female).

⁴ The assumption that cisgender is the norm or superior to other genders (Russo 2014).

⁵ The assumption that heterosexual and cisgender are the defaults, the superior or only "real" possibilities.

(How) Do trans* people even have sex?

To answer in short: yes; in long: yes, but...

Like cisgender people, trans* people have sex, whether it's with men, women, trans*, queer or non-binary people; they can identify as hetero, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, pansexual... or preferring not to have a label (Beaubatie 2021). This plurality is also reflected on sexual interactions: it needs an assemblage of various bodies, objects and subjects of desire and pleasure.

With a heterosexual man I can be their best nightmare fantasy in the shape of a boy hustler. With a heterosexual woman I can be a pretty hetero male; or if I perceive her as a fag hag, I can be a faggot with bi tendencies. With a lesbian top femme I can be a high heel worshipping boy bottom or a third sex butch, a lesbian man. With a gay man I can be a cock worshipping catamite or a fi sting top. With gender ambiguous bi men and women and sexually ambiguous transgendered people maybe I can just be myself. (Nataf, 1996)

When challenging heteronormativity, people usually are faced with sexual/ized attention from others. (Nielsen and al., 2009). But in a paradoxical way, trans* people's sexuality both spark curiosity and repulsion, arousal and violence. Some people (more frequently men, whether hetero, gay, or bisexual) find a special attraction towards trans* people, sometimes fetishizing or reducing them to a sexual object (Weinberg & Williams, 2010).

On the contrary, in a sexual/ized setting, discovering some's trans* status can lead to negative reactions. Heteronormativity is based on a binary and an essentialist assumption of gender, meaning that there are only women, who have vaginas, and men, who have penises. Getting out from these norms provokes at best surprise or confusion, or hatred, disgust, and violence at worst. In the context of a sexual encounter, this can provoke sexual dissonance⁶ (Reback and al., 2016), which can lead to violence, in order to reaffirm one's "true" gender or sexuality.

Heteronormativity also effects relationships. Trans* people are less "desirable" when it comes to dating than cisgender people⁷ (Blair & Hoskin, 2018), with maybe a more nuanced approach, as we saw, when we talk about casual or paid sex (Kulick, 2002; Reback and al, 2016).

⁶ Much like cognitive dissonance, sexual dissonance is a conflict between contradictory sexual elements, such as the conflict between the feminine appearance and the presence of a penis on the body of a woman.

⁷ In this study, findings indicate that on 958 participants, that resided in Canada or the U.S.A, 96.7% of heterosexual men, 98.2% of heterosexual women, 88.5% of gay men, 80% of lesbian women, 56% of bi/queer/non-binary participants excluded trans* people from potential dating partners. Overall, 87.5% did not consider dating trans* people.

Dangers from everywhere

According to the Justice Department, Vallum decided to kill Williamson after learning that a friend had discovered Williamson was transgender. In May 2015, Vallum drove to Williamson's home in Alabama, lured her into his car, and drove her to his father's home in Lucedale, Miss. While Williamson sat in the passenger seat, prosecutors said, Vallum used a stun gun to incapacitate Williamson and then stabbed her repeatedly with a 75th Ranger Regiment pocket knife. Williamson tried to escape, prosecutors said, but Vallum chased her into the woods, where he repeatedly hit her in the head with a hammer. (Somashekhar, 2021)

In a heteronormative world, trans* people face many dangers, coming from all directions. They need to fight what comes from inside⁸, what comes from potential or actual partners⁹ and what threatens from outside the couple¹⁰. But paradoxically, they seem to “threaten” dominance by mere existing.

The case of the murder of Mercedes Williamson, a transgender woman (Somashekhar, 2021) illustrates very clearly, even though we can't generalize based on a single story, what can happen when one threatens the hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. As we saw, trans* people, by their simple existence, are challenging heteronormativity by the fact that their gender does not match a deterministic view that equals sex, genitals, and gender.

Doing gender in a way that does not reflect biological sex can be perceived as a threat to heterosexuality. Cisgender men and women attempt to repair these potential ruptures through the deployment of normatively gendered tactics that reify gender and sexual difference (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009)

Even more than ruptures, the threat to be “penetrated” from masculinity or from gayness, whether real or symbolic, holds its radical power (Schiess, 2005). Trans* women are precisely accused of both masculinity and gayness and by this, dispossessed of femininity. More precisely, they are denied a woman-ness. If they were considered women, then, there would be no need for Joshua Vallum to prove that he wasn't gay by killing Williamson.

We can easily see why the murderer, being a (presumably cisgender) male gang member, reacted in a violent manner to the threat of the revelation of Michelle's trans* status. We don't have the whole story and can only make inferences. But still, we know that hegemonic masculinities are based on a radical exclusion of both homosexuality and femaleness.

[...] l'expression la plus aboutie de la virilité peut donc être caractérisée par l'homophobie, c'est-à-dire le rejet et le dégoût de ce qui pourrait paraître (trop) féminin en soi [...] Révélatrice à cet égard est l'agression des homosexuels qui est souvent le fait d'hommes qui, à plusieurs, s'en vont « casser du pédé », et qui peut dans certains cas prendre la forme du viol. [...] Daniel Welzer-Lang relève fort à propos que cette dernière pratique [...] peut être comprise chez les hommes qui s'y adonnent tout à la fois comme un moyen d'affirmer leur virilité et de satisfaire inconsciemment un désir refoulé, procurant sans doute du plaisir. (Schiess, 2005)

⁸ Such as: internalized trans or homophobia, body dysphoria, fear of one's gender being dismissed for not conforming to sexual gendered expectations, or high suicide risk because of exclusion and marginalization.

⁹ Such as: psychological, physical, or sexual abuse from romantic or sexual partners.

¹⁰ Such as: “corrective rape”, “gender terrorists” (Bornstein, 2006), or medical or structural violence against trans* people.

Conclusion

Trans* people's sexuality is complicated. Not intrinsically, even if it may require some arranging of objects, bodies and body parts, but because sex is ultimately a very social thing, and as such, much influenced by (cis)heteronormativity.

Trans* people, when they are considered, and allowed to exist, also in a sexual manner, are under multiple threats. Danger is coming from inside, in the most extreme form as suicide, but also from outside: the most extreme form also leading to death, but here by murder. No one is really safe. Family, partners, or ex-partners can be the murderer.

A more intersectional approach would immensely help further investigate the subject of the mapping between trans* people, sexuality, and heteronormativity. This intersection could be a whole field of research. I tried to point out a few striking elements that affect the experience of trans* people regarding these elements, but it would really benefit deepening.

In conclusion, instead of a safe and pleasurable sexuality, trans* people are at risk to succumbing to the violence of cis/heteronormativity, whether death comes from the hands of a stranger, a lover, a family member or their own.

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