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“Drawing the line” and other small-scale resistances: exploring agency and ambiguity in transnational feminist and queer NGOs

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the discourses, actors, and cross-border exchanges that shape the broader landscape of contemporary transnational feminist and queer non-governmental organizations (NGOs). While several studies have pointed to the co-opted role of NGOs, fewer have explored the potential for NGOs to influence the conditions under which they operate. That is what this article sets out to do, with the goal of highlighting the potential for feminist and queer NGOs to engage in oppositional politics within contexts of neoliberalism. Based on material collected during ethnographic fieldwork with transnational feminist and queer NGOs, this article examines how NGOs position themselves in relation to the political and financial structures that condition their work; how and to what effect the emerging professional class of NGO activists navigate the contradictory landscapes within which they are located; and the ambiguities of cross-border exchanges among NGOs. The article shows examples of agency and small-scale resistance, but also illuminates the palpable risks of existing neoliberal tendencies among funders and NGOs. I conclude that transnational feminist and queer NGOs have much to gain from intervening more decisively in such ambiguities as those examined in this article.

KEYWORDS Feminism; queer; NGOs; transnational; neoliberalism

Introduction

Based on material collected during 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork with four transnational feminist and queer non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in a European context, this article aims to explore the contradictory space of the NGO sector in contemporary struggles for gender and sexual justice. While several studies have pointed to the co-opted role of NGOs (INCITE! 2007; Spade 2015; Moore and Moyo 2018), less attention has been

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directed to the potential for NGOs to influence the conditions under which they operate. Although NGOs today constitute a “favored institutional form” of the neoliberal state (Ismail and Kamat 2018, 569), they have the capacity to build coalitions against neoliberalism. In this article, I focus on this ambiguous character of NGOs. However, although I pay attention to NGO agency, I avoid reinstating a dichotomy between co-optation and resistance (Eschle and Maiguashca 2018) by attending to the ambiguities, the “slips and slides,” of struggles for gender and sexual justice in neoliberal times (Newman 2014, 3292; see also Rose 1999). I use Newman’s (2014) notion of “landscapes of antagonism” to highlight that NGO actors are not simply “either agents of or resisters to neoliberalism” but ambiguously positioned in contexts of resistance cut across by multiple political projects (Newman 2014, 3300).

Building further on postcolonial feminist and queer scholarship, I situate my discussion within the frames of a broader debate in feminist and queer theory around the nature of transnational NGOs, neoliberal governmentality, and the emergence of the cosmopolitan elite as an agent of social justice (Alvarez 2009; Dhawan 2013; Bernal and Grewal 2014; Spade 2015). My approach is inspired by scholars who have revealed the hybrid identity of feminist and queer NGOs (Hement 2007; Sharma 2008; Alvarez 2009; Roy 2015) and published contributions moving beyond the co-optation/resistance dichotomy (Hodzic 2014; Bornstein and Sharma 2016; Lashaw, Vannier, and Sampson 2017). From these starting points, I explore the discourses, actors, and cross-border exchanges that shape the broader landscape of transnational feminist and queer NGOs, with the goal of highlighting the potential of feminist and queer NGOs to build coalitions and engage in oppositional politics within contexts of neoliberalism.

I begin my analysis by illuminating the unpredictable consequences of the different positionings of transnational feminist and queer NGOs in relation to the financial and political conditions that structure their work. Next, I illuminate how and to what effect an emerging professional class of NGO activists navigate the contradictory landscapes of NGO work. Finally, I examine the ambiguities of cross-border exchanges among NGOs, bringing to light how differently situated actors are involved in contesting or re-enacting homonationalist agendas across borders. The article shows examples of agency and small-scale resistance, but also highlights existing neoliberal tendencies among funders and NGOs to produce elite feminist and queer activists, to romanticize the local, and to see transnational exchanges as inherently more emancipatory than exchanges among diverse actors in a national context. I conclude that transnational feminist and queer NGOs have much to gain from intervening more decisively in such ambiguities as those examined in this article.

The NGOization paradigm and beyond

Within the conceptual frame of “NGOization” – described as a “shorthand for neoliberal processes of professionalization and managerialism” (Roy 2014, 630) – feminist and queer scholarship has detailed the transition from social movements to NGOs (Lang 1997; Alvarez 1999, 2009; Ghodsee 2006). As broad-based discussions became replaced with a stronger issue-specific focus, scholars identified new forms of professionalization and a shift from horizontal to more hierarchical structures (Einhorn 2005; Wilson 2007; Guenther 2011). Accompanying the introduction of the so-called “new policy agenda,” this NGOization was situated in a wider context of shifting boundaries between civil society and the state, as the former was “championed ... as an antidote to the rollback of the responsibilities of the state” (McIlwaine 2009, 136; see also Ismail and Kamat 2018). These neoliberal changes were anchored in discourses in which the state was seen as “inefficient and unresponsive to particular, contextually specific and localized user needs” and civil society, by contrast, was framed as “individually liberating and inherently responsive” (Birch and Siemiatycki 2016, 13). A resignification of social movement claims for equality and justice took place, to “fit within expanding consumerist logics or incorporated into notions of the ‘worker-citizen’” (Newman 2014, 3300). These transformations involved not only changes in feminist and queer agendas, but also a redistribution of resources from the state to the market, or state funding based on market logics, such as competition and contractual arrangements. In feminist and queer theory, these changes have given rise to several points of discussion.

First, with the concept of the “shadow state,” scholars have highlighted the increased responsibility devolved to NGOs to deliver social services as the result of the neoliberal retraction of the welfare state (Wolch 1990; Suchland 2015). This shadow state function, scholars have argued, has transformed previously voluntary organizations into highly professionalized operations and issues to be addressed have been narrowed down to program-specific categories (Gilmore 2007, 46).

Second, scholars have identified a cultural shift toward corporatization and “funder-driven elitism” (Spade 2015, 100; see also Bernstein 2014; Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014, 125). In responding to the expectations of funders and stakeholders, scholars have argued, NGOs have become more “business-like,” seeking to maximize efficiencies, brand value, and investment returns. The use of business models in social justice organizations has also been criticized by scholars who disagree with the very idea of social movement activism as a career track (INCITE! 2007; Spade 2015).

Third, the emergence of the “global citizen” and the cosmopolitan elite as an agent of global justice has been met with scepticism by scholars who have pointed to the reproduction of “liberal conceptions of an abstract, dislocated

and sovereign subject” (Gressgård 2015; Klapeer and Schönpflug 2015, 164). In addition, scholars have held that social justice cosmopolitanism leaves the privileges of the global elite intact, as it avoids engaging with the continuities between “cosmopolitanism, neocolonialism and economic globalization” (Dhawan 2013, 140; see also Kapoor 2012).

Fourth, researchers have addressed understandings of neoliberal co-optation and complicity in feminist and queer organizing and scholarship. While some scholars have taken issue with what they understand as a dichotomous understanding of feminist politics as either co-opted by or resistant to neoliberalism (Eschle and Maiguashca 2018), others have highlighted the complicities that characterize feminist and queer engagements transregionally (Alvarez 2009; de Jong 2017; de Jong and Kimm 2017) and across multiple scales (local, national, transnational) (Roy 2014).

These discussions have contributed important insights to feminist and queer understandings and informed my reflections around the contradictory role of NGOs and of scholarly engagements with them. While several studies have discussed the co-opted role of NGOs, fewer have sought to explore the potential for transnational NGOs to negotiate or affect the conditions under which they work.¹ That is what the present analysis sets out to do.

Methodology and material

Located within a tradition of feminist transnationalism, this article recognizes that we inhabit a world that is interconnected but still divided with asymmetries of power and privilege (Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Carty and Mohanty 2015). Influenced by this tradition of thought, I problematize the common binary of the global versus the national and focus instead on relations and processes across sites, influenced by George Marcus’ (1998) multi-sited ethnography.

Overall, my data consists of material collected during 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in 2017–2018 with 11 local, national, and transnational feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) organizations and groups in a European context. It includes fieldwork diaries from participant observation at more than 15 events, seminars, courses, and get-togethers arranged by these organizations. The duration of participant observations varied depending on the event in question, from two hours to a full day, or stretched across several days at workshops, pride festivals, or conferences. Most observations were at seminars and meetings, lasting approximately two to three hours. I also conducted 20 in-depth interviews with staff and members of the organizations. Each interview lasted approximately one to two hours. My research was supplemented by documents describing projects and campaigns, public statements, and consultative reports published by the organizations. In this article, I conduct a

contrastive analysis of fieldwork data collected in encounters with four transnational organizations: ILGA-Europe; the Ulex project, in collaboration with StreetGäris; the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Rights (RFSL); and the Norwegian Helsinki Committee (NHC). Contrastive analysis involves a close reading of the material, with the aim of identifying similarities and differences (Johansson 2007). I read each example with attention to the other examples and highlight overlaps and variation. The four organizations discussed here were the total number of transnational NGOs included in my research and they were chosen because they represent a variety in terms of focus areas, activities, and goals.² For the discussions in this article, I do not rely on data collected with other organizations, but the wider context of data collection has been informative for the questions explored. Below, I give a brief outline of the transnational NGOs:

- *ILGA-Europe* is an umbrella organization founded in 1978 that brings together almost 600 organizations from 54 countries in Europe and Central Asia. It advocates for human rights and equality for LGBTI people at a pan-European level and works to strengthen the LGBTI movement through training, advocacy, fundraising, organizational development, and strategic communication.
- *The Ulex project* is a hub of collaboration, run by a non-profit collective in Catalonia. Since 2008, it has offered training for NGOs and movements working for social justice and ecological integrity, seeking to strengthen pan-European solidarity. In my encounter with Ulex, it collaborated with the Swedish-based feminist organization *StreetGäris*, an online intersectional movement for women and non-binary persons, with a focus on feminism and anti-racism. *StreetGäris* was founded in 2013 and provides training and inspiration through empowerment, solidarity, and community.
- *RFSL* is a non-profit organization founded in 1950 and driven by the goal that LGBTI people should have the same rights, opportunities, and obligations as anyone else in society. For this article, I followed one of its transnational projects, “Eastern Coalition for LGBTQ Equality: Moving Forward,” in which RFSL is involved in partnership with LGBTI organizations from countries in Eastern Europe, aiming to create better living conditions for LGBTI people in the region and to act against repressive LGBTI legislation.
- The *NHC* was founded in 1977 and has worked to strengthen human rights through monitoring, writing reports, education, and supporting democratic initiatives. LGBTI is an integrated focus area across all of its work, which focuses on countries in Europe, Central Asia, and North America.

The activities of all four NGOs have been funded by public support from national governments (foreign ministries) and the European Union (EU),

private foundations (which, during the period of my research, were based in the US, the UK, Denmark, Norway, and the Netherlands), and individual donors.

The NGO staff members whom I interviewed had all been working in similar organizations previously, on diverse scales, either in local or national LGBTI organizations, transnational organizations for human rights, or global environmental organizations. Two of the interviewees had moved to Northern Europe from a country in Eastern Europe. All of them had a university degree or education. All were White and cis-gendered, and the majority were non-heterosexual. Their age varied from around 25 to approximately 35. Most of the interviewees had a previous, and often long-term, personal involvement in gender, sexualities, human rights, or environmental justice issues.

Theoretical framework

Rather than approaching neoliberalism as a dominant and static structural condition, this article follows Ong's (2007) conceptualization of neoliberalism as a mobile set of practices. Neoliberalism governs populations by installing "economic" logics of calculation," such as discourses of efficiency, managerialism, and individual autonomy, and strategies for "promoting self-governing subjects" (Newman 2014, 3292). Neoliberal forms of governance, scholars highlight, have endorsed social movements as technologies of "empowerment and pleasure" which, facilitated by capitalist consumer cultures, have come to produce new discourses of feminist and LGBTI subjectivity (Grewal 2005, 16, 17; see also Duggan 2003), striving toward "conformity among women, people of color, and homosexuals" (Oswin 2008, 96). As I set out to explore neoliberalism as a technology of governmentality in a transnational arena, I examine how actors respond to the narratives of neoliberal discourse – the extent to which they "refuse, resist or simply fail to hear the summonings to neoliberal subject positions; or enact them in performative repertoires that subvert, rather than support, the status quo" (Newman 2014, 3300).

My approach is informed by everyday conceptualizations of resistance, in which it is seen as being entangled with dynamics of power (Scott 1985; Abu-Lughod 1990). Following Koefoed (2017), I understand such everyday forms of resistance as practices that could be conducted "individually or collectively, take overt and covert forms, occur on macro as well as micro levels ... connected both with action as well as opposition," undertaken "either with the conscious aim to, and/or with the possibility of, undermining dominating forms of power" (Koefoed 2017, 23).

This article is also influenced by the Gramscian idea of the integral state, which sees continuities between political society and civil society (Gramsci 1999; Humphrys 2018). The concept of the integral state implies that coercion alone cannot guarantee state power but requires the construction of a

consensus around a set of values (Thomas 2009). As a hegemonic project, processes of neoliberalism have resulted in new attempts at didactic and cultural domination (Grewal 2005; Kulpa 2014) and new global patterns of poverty, exploitation, and inequality (Newman 2014). These changes motivate a move away from a statist conception of hegemony to a transnational approach to the concept. Emphasizing that hegemony is exercised not by states but by social formations and classes that operate through certain states or other institutions, Robinson (2005) focuses on how national economies and nation-states are transcended by transnational forces that emanate from a global system rather than from an interstate system. Such transnational hegemonies, Robinson holds, do not appear in a uniform manner. Rather, the emerging global order should be described as “unevenly hegemonic” (Robinson 2005, 10).

Transnational NGOs, transnational hegemonies

Funding strategies and neoliberal agendas: financial and political conditions

Funds from states and donors impose material and ideological constraints on NGOs. Yet, NGOs still have agency that they can use to influence the conditions within which they operate. Organizations can, for example, refrain from applying for or accepting certain types of funding for ideological reasons (INCITE! 2007), or they can protest against neoliberal principles (Ismail and Kamat 2018). In this section, I examine how transnational feminist and queer NGOs engage with the financial and political structures that condition their work. I understand these actors as ambiguously positioned in the contexts in which they are active and seek to distinguish if and where the line gets “drawn, how, and by whom” (Sharma 2008, 201 n. 6).

All of the NGOs included in my research found it important to establish trust in their relationships with funders and partners. However, the ways in which the different organizations sought to establish trust varied. Georg, a staff member of ILGA-Europe, described how its fundraising was grounded in “constant needs assessment”:

It's really an exercise of constantly seeing where the needs are and matching these to where we have strengths in shifting capacity. ... We always go back to what the needs are, and we go back to the people who are concerned. Instead of us designing a training program, we create a preparatory group so that it is grounded and resonates with people's needs. Peer learning is something we keep on saying. (Georg)

Georg identified needs assessment as being at the core of the organization's work, shaping the foundation for decisions taken on funding, activities, and

training. Here, the role of staff members was to identify those needs and find matching funds.

Needs assessment was also central to RFSL's project "Eastern Coalition for LGBTQ Equality: Moving Forward," and was conducted at a strategic meeting once a year where everyone participated and activities and needs for the coming year were planned and discussed. In my conversation with Nikolaj, a staff member of the NGO, he explained:

Basically, based on the needs of the community and based on the needs of the organizations, we plan – together with the organizations, of course – a program for the community members and those who have leadership positions in the organizations. (Nikolaj)

Another RFSL staff member, Lenni, said: "This is a very good opportunity for people to build up some skills. It usually covers a wide range of issues, based on the needs assessment of the participants."

The majority of funds available to ILGA-Europe and RFSL are acquired through competitive grant application processes from the European Commission and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), who identify needs assessment exercises based on the particular participants and the national/regional contexts as a key activity. These funders routinely evaluate whether funded projects are relevant to LGBTI community needs in situated locations (Nilsson and Rothman 2017). The extracts above illuminate how ILGA-Europe and RFSL, rather than negotiating or challenging the conditions that structure their work, instead adjust to these conditions, which furthermore allows them to display themselves as credible actors in an effort to establish trust in the relationship with funders and partners.

In contrast to the open-ended needs assessment strategy, funders can make financial support contingent upon projects meeting more specific requirements. The implications of such requirements were reflected in conversations with Jenny, who was working with Ulex. Jenny described how she was coordinating a course together with the Swedish-based organization StreetGäris. It had little experience of writing applications for funding, whereas Ulex had long-term experience and knew, according to Jenny, what "buttons to push":

In our application, I wrote some parts about StreetGäris, about our needs and capacity. ... Ulex know what buttons to push for Erasmus [the funding program] to support. Well yes, we emphasize that there are many people from migrant communities in this organization, and that we use positive quotas for trans people. They push this in their application ... and I thought, "Wow, amazing that Erasmus thinks this is good."

Addressing the need for more "cohesive and inclusive societies," the Erasmus+ call encourages applications from projects that "promote the inclusion of people with disadvantaged backgrounds, including newly

arrived migrants.” The inclusion of migrants and the support for vulnerable groups, such as trans people, are explicitly mentioned in the Erasmus+ Programme Guide for transnational initiatives with the aim of fostering “social commitment and entrepreneurial spirit, jointly carried out by two or more groups of young people from different countries” (European Commission 2020). Following Ulex’s guidance, StreetGäris had to submit a list of names of participants enclosed with the application, which according to Jenny negatively impacted on its chances of attracting a diverse group of applicants, due to a shortage of time in organizing and planning. Furthermore, Jenny added, StreetGäris was mainly interested in strengthening offline relationships between members of the otherwise online group in Sweden. Ulex, by contrast, was more interested in encouraging participants “to meet with people from different countries.” In our conversation, tensions between these different goals were brought to the fore and Jenny explained that at the start she did not realize that StreetGäris was sidelining some of its own visions for the project when adjusting to the requirements of Ulex and the funder. Later, when this became clear, it was too late to intervene.

The upsides and downsides of project funding were discussed in conversations with Cora of the NHC. On the one hand, Cora said, project funding did not allow for unpredictability and was putting an administrative pressure on the organization. On the other hand, she maintained, “having institutional grants from foreign ministries ... is an ideological question to a certain extent and can make you appear too associated with a government.” Cora had tried to talk with funders to make them understand how important it was that they become more flexible, since “the administrative burden is quite a challenge, especially for smaller organizations.” Small organizations, who often have the strongest trust in the community, do not often have the capacity to reach out for the grants that could give them stability. “In some cases,” Cora said, “we play that intermediary role and do the administration.” Yet, when transnational NGOs like the NHC step in and assist smaller and local organizations, it may risk re-establishing hierarchies in civil society, keeping local organizations at a distance by making them dependent on the skills and time available in transnational organizations. Notably, such implications would run counter to the ambitions of not only NGOs but also the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which funds some of these initiatives with the aim of supporting the “inclusion, democracy and participation” of civil-society actors at local, national, and European levels (NHC n.d.).

In addition to adjusting to the requirements of funders, some NGOs take the role of funding bodies themselves and become involved in re-granting procedures. Through re-granting, ILGA-Europe has become a form of mediator between donors and local organizations, such as when large

institutional funders have difficulties in giving smaller grants due to administrative obstacles, lack of knowledge, or repressive legislations in national contexts. For ILGA-Europe, re-granting was yet another opportunity for people to learn from each other:

We see a lot of opportunity to make thematic calls that focus on new aspects of work. For example, at the moment we are working on a call in which we have eight or nine sub-grantees that receive around three or four thousand euros to write a report. ... There are a lot of learning opportunities, we can bring people together. With a little bit of money, it's a lot of value in that, where people can learn from each other instead of just from us. (Georg)

RFSL also used re-granting, or sub-granting as they called it. When we talked about how they select the projects to fund, both Lenni of RFSL and Georg of ILGA-Europe mentioned that they conducted risk and benefit assessments:

We have questions and go through the projects together because sometimes RFSL is a bit more experienced in the project cycle and kind of know-how ... like this logical framework approach, or results-based management. ... Basically [we say] "We don't really see how these activities will contribute to the idea you have. Can you elaborate on this?" Then the sub-granting part happens. (Lenni)

We do risk assessment, we look at the organization's capacity to be accountable to us and to the communities they serve. What is the strategic thinking of grantees? We are not so interested in projects where organizations publish leaflets. What we care about is the thinking behind. We want to support organizations and activists to think in that direction as well. (Georg)

By re-granting, the organizations were constituted as governing bodies themselves, evaluating whether communities are "accountable" to the funder, to the NGO, and to the communities, and providing advice on the design of projects, content, and goals. In this way, the capacity for norm making and the creation of authority was transferred from the state/donor onto the transnational NGOs. Yet, also in this capacity, the organizations facilitated neo-liberal technologies of governmentality by promoting "opportunities for learning," modes of "accountability," and the development of "skills" and "capabilities."

These variegated positionings in relation to funds and the funding of projects illuminate the different degrees to which NGOs facilitate, reproduce, and negotiate the conditions of funding. Georg of ILGA-Europe and Lenni of RFSL both described how they were grounded in needs assessment procedures. Such procedures helped to give the NGOs credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the funders. RFSL acknowledged Sida's human rights-based approach as more horizontal and partnership oriented, trying to make "the life of your partner organization less miserable ... with the paperwork, at least." Nonetheless, as a result of power dynamics in LGBTI communities, needs-based

procedures also raised challenges for NGOs. For example, Georg mentioned that growing right-wing populism in Europe also emerged in the LGBTI community and that it was not always easy to bring up questions of intersectionality since it opened up other “huge conversations” about privilege, decision making, and representation in the LGBTI community. The tensions raised in these conversations challenged the tendency to romanticize the local as being less oppressive, violent, or hierarchical. Yet, the NGOs did not address this as a matter of concern in relation to funders or partners. Similar to RFSL and ILGA-Europe, StreetGäris and Ulex adjusted to the expectations of the funder, despite the fact that some of these requirements ran counter to the ambitions of StreetGäris, such as the requirement to include a mixture of people from a variety of countries. These dynamics enabled all NGOs to present themselves as inclusive and responsible, and by so doing increase their chances of getting funding. However, none of them were involved in attempts to undermine or challenge the conditions for funding, and they did not critically address the assumptions that the local is inherently more equal or just or that transnational relations have more potential for creating inclusive societies than relations between actors within a particular country. As a result, the positionings of ILGA-Europe, RFSL, and Ulex facilitated and reproduced a neoliberal promotion of self-governing, empowered communities within the frames of economic logics of efficacy and managerialism. By contrast, the NHC explicitly problematized the conditions for funding, seeking to negotiate these neoliberal logics through several small-scale moves. For example, by taking care of the administrative part of applications, it bypassed the results-driven expectations of capacity building and skills development, as a small-scale form of resistance to neoliberal rationalities. Nonetheless, this approach risked to reinstall hierarchies in civil society, between transnational organizations with skills and time, and local organizations. Simultaneously, the re-granting procedures of ILGA-Europe and RFSL functioned to facilitate neoliberal technologies of governmentality in their assessments of projects carried out in local contexts.

According to Georg, the latest needs assessment exercises in ILGA-Europe called for the shift of emphasis, from advocacy to a more pronounced focus on providing services:

[T]he marriage debate has been dominating the LGBT agenda for many years, but this is irrelevant for many in the LGBT community. ... Many don't care about marriage, or they are in countries where marriage won't become a reality, or they are not in an economic circumstance to leave home, to finish school, to get a job. ... We need to start prioritizing. ... That links back to allies, that [prioritizing] is not always most successful through politicians. But when working directly with doctors or teachers, we see change can start to happen bottom up as opposed to top down. (Georg)

In RFSL, Lenni also saw a need to rethink the type of activism that was being done, from her perspective, especially in the light of conservative, corrupt states in the eastern parts of Europe:

[T]he understanding today is that the state is the main service provider. Yes, ideally, that is how it should be. ... But you have states where the political elites are very homophobic, sexist, xenophobic. They will always find groups to favor, they will always find a way of saying "This is not an issue," "This demography is not big enough" or whatever, so you have a smaller number of communities that are left without service if the NGOs are not able to provide assistance in terms of mental help, etc. These communities remain completely without help. (Lenni)

Today, NGOs do indeed fulfill an important role in providing services that people need. According to the interviewees above, services provided through NGOs were seen as both more reliable than services from neoliberal or authoritarian states, and more efficient in bringing about change. Notably, from different positions, both interviewees expressed an overarching anti-state ideology in their valorization of the local. In these quotations, providing services through NGOs emerged as the favored trajectory, as it could bring about change from the "bottom up" and also provide help to small LGBTI demographies. Yet, in my conversations with staff members of ILGA-Europe and RFSL, there was a simultaneous lack of engagement with the broader political conditions that structure their work. Rather, as the quotations above illuminate, neoliberalism was promoted as a means of addressing vulnerabilities shaped by neoliberalism itself, as well as by neoconservatism.

An alternative approach to the issue was presented by Cora of the NHC. Instead of talking about "needs" in the local communities, Cora talked about the development of "strategies" and "actions." Based on friendship and long-term relationships, coalitions were formed, which offered insights into the material contexts of everyday life and struggle. "We spend a lot of time together with our partners," Cora explained. "We know their families, their private life, their friends. We go to the places they go." However, she highlighted that there was a distinct difference between herself and her partners. This had to do with the material conditions of existence, and the fact that she "always will be able to go back to [her] safe spot" while her partners cannot:

I am a lesbian and take the same risk when I go to a gay club in Moscow but I can go home. In that way, I can always, you know, be an open lesbian. ... I think it increases the trust [since] I know at least *some* of the issues they struggle with. ... But it is very, very different that I don't have to stay there, that I can go home. (Cora)

Cora went on to describe the differences between herself, coming from Norway, and her partners in post-Soviet contexts, addressing deep-seated structures of inequality and injustice:

When you work with identity politics, which LGBTI is part of ... , it becomes almost a dominant thing about you. ... But when you look closer, most activists, regardless of their struggle, feel frustration connected to corruption, to the political climate, to financial instability. There are so many factors that compose their activism. But LGBTI in [post-Soviet countries] is so controversial so they are reduced to only that component. ... [W]hen you engage with people in post-Soviet countries, [there are] differences not connected to LGBTI but to the financial and political situation that are the most apparent, much more apparent than differences connected to how you identify. (Cora)

Refusing to reproduce the efforts toward conformity in discourses of universalized LGBTI subjectivity, Cora pointed to both similarities and differences in the conditions of everyday life between herself and the activists. In contrast to a more limited project-driven logic, a process-oriented approach enabled her to identify the broader financial and political conditions that had structured their co-operation. As she directed attention to injustices resulting from these broader financial and political structures, Cora brought to light the uneven hegemonies of the neoliberal global order. By so doing, she was “drawing the line” in relation to the political conditions that had structured their work, in much the same way as she was “drawing the line” in relation to the conditions of funding, discussed above (Sharma 2008). According to Sonia Alvarez, such small-scale forms of resistance have the potential to undermine neoliberalism by moving NGOs away from a “results-driven” logic, toward a more “fluid, open-ended and continuous” approach (Alvarez 2009, 179).

An emergent professional class of feminist and queer NGO activists

In my conversations with NGO staff members, the boundaries of the NGOs appeared porous, since community and staff members had been changing and in flux. Moreover, the boundaries between the private and the public were fluid, with vague distinctions among employment, self-improvement, and social life (Fantone 2007). Indeed, at present, working in the NGO sector brings to light the ambiguities of professionalized social movements. In the NGO sector, old and new forms of job market instability and insecurity intermingle with more creative forms of hybridizing professional and private life (Gilmore 2007). Not only restricted to the people in leadership positions in the NGOs, the training programs of these transnational organizations have given rise to a new class of experts on gender and sexual rights issues, who possess legitimate and marketable professional experience and expertise, which is of interest in diverse national and transnational settings, in both private and public arenas. As a result of these developments, a group of “skilled, organized, and professional middle-class” women, and queer and trans people has emerged (Bernal and Grewal 2014, 306; see also Spade 2015). While some high-ranking NGO activists have relatively secure jobs,

the majority of positions are precarious, short term, and project based. These individuals “get respect and prestige, they feel empowered by their work, and they command a new language” of international gender and LGBTI work (Bernal and Grewal 2014, 307). This class of professionals performs many welfare and educative functions that have traditionally been associated with the state, which has led some scholars to suggest that transnational NGOs are the “outer reaches of a ‘transnational quasi-state’” (Moore and Moyo 2018, 596). Yet, rather than assuming the “affinities and affiliations” of an NGO, I will consider “whether and how exactly they engage in oppositional politics and under what condition” (Ismail and Kamat 2018, 569). I will do so by exploring how and to what effect this emerging professional class of NGO activists navigates the “landscapes of antagonism” of contemporary NGO work (Newman 2014, 3297).

For the feminist and queer activists involved in these NGOs, the opportunity to travel and meet people was seen as an attractive part of the training programs, described as rewarding and encouraging for community members, especially where resources were scarce and the command of English was low. Jenny of Ulex explained that the opportunity to travel had “encouraged people to apply”: “People are very interested in courses when they are also allowed to travel to places and meet activists from the whole world.” From her experience of having been active in a local organization in Eastern Europe, Lenni of RFSL said:

What I always like [with the training programs] is [that they include] people who are not yet in leadership positions. Because these activists don’t really get to travel often, to meet new people, to see what’s happening in the world because obviously the resources are scarce. (Lenni)

In the NHC, Cora highlighted one positive effect of transnational NGO work – that it offered a relief from the pressure of living in “extreme environments”:

Many of our partners experience a lot of personal pressure. ... In this case, [for our partners to attend Oslo Pride] gives some breathing space, it’s a fun thing, a little bit of giving and getting the fighting spirit up. (Cora)

NGOs, scholars note, have become a popular source of precarious employment for women and trans and queer people in a transnational context (Bernal and Grewal 2014). A new global class of NGO professionals has emerged as a result of the irregularization of the labor market and the shift toward neoliberal attitudes and policies within NGOs, shaped by key sectors of global civil society, such as diasporic, feminist, and queer networks (Sassen 2006; Fantone 2007). Linking modes of governance and relations of transnational capitalism with processes of subjectivization, this precarious class has emerged in response to an increased need for service provision in the voluntary sector. As illuminated in the quotations

above, NGO staff members saw working in a transnational NGO as empowering and fulfilling: it provides them with a salary, and it gives them a network and the opportunity to travel and socialize with others in the community. It was seen as a meaningful job, although there are also downsides associated with it, since many roles in NGOs are more or less precarious and insecure. Often, there is only project funding one year at a time, and if the NGO “loses its funding, you lose your job” (Bernal and Grewal 2014, 260).

However, among some NGO staff members, the stability of permanent employment was seen as a disadvantage because the very idea of being a professional NGO activist is based on what you can give to the community. Jenny, for example, was going to select 20 people from a pool of 130 volunteers who were interested in traveling to the Ulex courses in Catalonia. Jenny and her partners did not want this to become an “elite activist project,” as she put it, so they removed people from the list who had much previous experience of similar activities. They also wanted to build a diverse group: “We wanted people from different cities, not just from Stockholm, for example. We also wanted to mix ... to include people with experiences of different forms of discrimination, in order to really learn from each other.” Jenny found that Ulex had the potential to distribute knowledge through a bottom-up process. In comparison with those that she had previously experienced while employed in a private company working for climate justice, the Ulex courses were different. As a permanent employee in that job, she was sent on a lot of courses, which meant that all knowledge became concentrated on her. After resigning from that position, she felt a need to distribute knowledge more widely and evenly, so that it was not all in the possession of the same small group of people:

I want to give people resources and knowledge to mobilize better. ... Now that I don't have a permanent job anymore, I can be an efficient activist and spread the knowledge among more people. [I think of it as a way] to de-concentrate the knowledge. (Jenny)

As illuminated above, being a temporary, part-time staff member of an NGO appears to be a more desirable (albeit more precarious) position than being permanently employed, because the temporary character of the work gives activists more control over their own time. The focus in much contemporary NGO activism on culture, education, and well-being represents a resistance against a narrow and technical (neoliberal) focus on policy making and advocacy.

Yet, the tensions inherent in Jenny's narrative above illustrate that neoliberalism is not a coherent entity that easily can be supported or resisted. On the one hand, a “de-professionalization” of NGOs through resignation from permanent employment can be interpreted as a response to previous

critiques of NGOization, seen to create distance and negatively affect the ability of feminist NGOs to connect with the grassroots and express radical claims (Lang 1997; Guenther 2011). On the other hand, such a precarization of NGO work is influenced by neoliberal logics of efficacy and promotion of empowered, self-governing subjects. Further, these resistances fuse with other movements whose “orientation to feminism is not always one of acknowledgement” (Alvarez 2009, 181). As described above, Jenny and her partners in StreetGäris explicitly wanted to avoid their courses from becoming an “elite activist project.” Simultaneously, Ulex required the involvement of course participants who had the “capacity to spread the knowledge” upon their return. This requirement encouraged the participation of skilled activists who already had given proof of their capacity to spread knowledge, which ran counter to Jenny’s and StreetGäris’ ambitions of “de-concentrating” knowledge. These kinds of selective criteria are described by Aihwa Ong as neoliberal strategies of optimization, which encourage “white-collar workers to be self-enterprising” (Ong 2007, 6) and support an uneven distribution of strategies of governance and self-governance in a transnational arena. This agenda may reproduce hierarchies in civil society by equipping certain actors who have been selected based on previously demonstrated capabilities with the skills and knowledge to train others. These dynamics illuminate how complex “landscapes of antagonism” influence feminist and queer NGO activism in unpredictable ways, suggesting that resistance to neoliberalism and its reproduction might take place as “two facets of the same activist organization or network” (Alvarez 2009, 180), highlighting the need for a more systemic understanding, among NGOs, of relations of power (Bacchetta 2017).

Ambiguous cross-border exchanges

Scholars have illuminated the problematic effects of “a didactical and cultural hegemonic relation of power” within contexts of transnational NGO work, resulting in a constant concern that transnational solidarity may become a “hegemonic and orientalisating manifestation of power relations between the ‘West and the Rest’” (Kulpa 2014, 432, 443; see also Rao 2014). Within such dynamics, scholars have shown, rescue narratives frame LGBTI people in the Global East and South as object-victims who need to be “‘helped,’ ‘activated’ and ‘trained’ from outside” (Klaapeer 2017, 52), while idealized notions of human rights are frequently promoted “at the expense of real bodies and lives” (Kulpa 2014, 434). This scholarship has contributed critical insights on the role of transnational NGOs in sustaining a “a hegemonic deployment of the Western European [neo]liberal model of rights as the universal one” (Kulpa 2014, 432). Yet, the more contradictory effects of cross-border exchanges in transnational NGOs have received less attention. In what follows, I draw on fieldwork from Oslo Pride to problematize the idea of

didactical and cultural hegemonies of the West as phenomena only moving in one direction, from the West to the East or South, and explore the ambiguous effects of transnational exchanges in NGOs for contesting and re-enacting homonationalism across borders.

At Oslo Pride, the NHC organized a panel to discuss LGBTI struggles and solidarities, with a focus on LGBTI in authoritarian contexts. The panel comprised three panelists: two LGBTI activists and one journalist from Armenia, Belarus, and Russia.³ The chairperson was a journalist from Norway. In the introduction to the panel, the chairperson emphasized the position of Norway as a model country for LGBTI rights, referring to ILGA-Europe's Rainbow Map/Index. She frequently referred to the panelists' countries as those that "ranked the worst" (in other words, those that were located in the bottom of the index). At the start, panel members shared insights about the situation for gay and trans people in their countries, but after a while they began to resist the polarized terms of the conversation. One panelist asked the others, with a tone of irony: "How does it feel to be put in the category of the worst of the worst?" A short while later, the same panelist described a network of LGBT parents in his country and the chairperson asked if there were different tools used by different generations. He responded by directing our attention to Norway: "I know that recently there has been a survey in Norway. Here, every fifth person says that they don't want to have a child who is gay. It's the same situation here [as in my country]." Later, he turned again to the (Norwegian) audience, saying: "You also had a fight. I see many here who belong to the older generation who took the fight years ago.... It's difficult to compare [here and there]." Another panelist joined him, saying: "I would never compare or be in competition with other countries, who are the best or the worst. But you should be proud over what you have." By bringing up contrasting examples, by referring to previous struggles and ongoing conflicts in Norway, and by refusing to join the chairperson in her comparison, the panelists sought to challenge the didactical hegemony of the West exercised by the chairperson.

On the one hand, these exchanges illuminate how actors can resist being interpellated as "legitimate" subjects of developmental agendas, in need of help or training from the "outside" (Klapeer 2017, 44). While the chairperson insisted on her counter-positioning, the panelists negotiated these attempts by illuminating the existence of homophobia in Norway and by referring to the relevance of cross-generational alliances and the recognition of histories of struggle. On the other hand, their resistance carried an ambiguous message, since this didactical hegemony was not only contested in their narratives but also re-enacted through references to LGBTI struggles in Norway as situated in the past and through descriptions of present-day Norway as a country to feel proud over. In the absence of a more systemic approach to relations of power, their celebratory depiction of Norway addressed sexuality

in isolation from their “ethno-cultural, racial and (neo)colonial investments” (Suchland 2018, 1074) and downplayed the significance of sexuality for exclusionary nationalist agendas in all countries. These dynamics illuminate how the phenomenon of Western didactical hegemony can be reproduced by actors situated in different contexts. These ambiguities illuminate how, rather than being limited to and anchored in one specific context in Norway or the Global West, such didactical hegemony flows in different directions, as it ultimately sustains a reproduction of homonationalism across borders.

Conclusion

This article set out to explore the potential for feminist and queer NGOs to influence the conditions under which they operate. While many studies have addressed the co-opted role of NGOs, less attention has been directed at the ambiguities of struggles for gender and sexual justice in neoliberal times. I began my analysis by illuminating the contradictory effects of the different positionings of NGOs in relation to funders and to the political conditions that structure their work. I showed how NGOs’ adjustment to the requirements of funders enabled them to display themselves as credible actors. Yet, in some cases, I demonstrated, these adjustments ran counter to the aims of the organizations, such as StreetGäris’ ambitions to strengthen relationships among members from a national rather than a transnational context, and to “de-concentrate the knowledge.” It could also leave problematic issues under-addressed, such as the growing right-wing populism among LGBTI communities or the profound challenges to intersectional agendas in such communities, noted by ILGA-Europe. I highlighted that one of the NGOs included in my analysis, the NHC, explicitly problematized the conditions for funding by challenging the results-driven expectations of capacity building and skills development and I understood this as a form of small-scale resistance to neoliberal rationalities. Nevertheless, I also highlighted that this resistance could have unpredictable effects by risking to reinstall hierarchies in civil society. These findings deepen our understandings of the potentials and risks of NGOs’ attempts to influence neoliberalism. While neoliberalism is understood as a phenomenon that cannot be seen as a coherent entity that can be easily supported or resisted, in the first section I argued that the sustained reproduction of neoliberal technologies carried out by transnational NGOs overlaps with an over-arching anti-state ideology among both funders and NGOs, expressed for example in the valorization of the local and rooted in broader political discourses in which services provided by NGOs are seen as more reliable and efficient than services provided by states. I highlighted “drawing the line” as a form of small-scale resistance by which NGOs could refuse to agree on such financial and political conditions of

neoliberal governmentality. In the next section, I suggested the need to develop a more systemic approach to relations of power in neoliberal times, as the selective character of neoliberal strategies of optimization reproduced hierarchies in civil society and promoted an uneven distribution of strategies of governance and self-governance in a transnational arena. The final section illuminated the ambiguous effects of transnational exchanges in NGO activism and I showed how differently situated actors were involved in both contesting and re-enacting homonationalism across borders, as sexuality, in the absence of a more systemic approach to relations of power, was addressed in isolation from ethnic, cultural, racial, and (neo)colonial investments.

Taken together, the ambiguities explored in this article illuminate the conditions of work in transnational, feminist and queer NGOs as contradictory and open to challenge. However, they also draw attention to the palpable risks that existing neoliberal tendencies among states, funders, and NGOs produce elite feminist and queer activists, romanticize the local, and see transnational exchange as inherently more emancipatory than exchanges among diverse actors in a specific national or regional context. In order for NGO actors to provide a more substantial challenge to neoliberal governmentality, I conclude that transnational feminist and queer NGOs have much to gain from intervening more decisively in ambiguous discourses such as those that I have examined in this article, which ultimately can be understood as constitutive of the uneven neoliberal hegemonies of the contemporary global order.

Notes

1. However, see, for example, Alvarez (2009) for several instances of how feminist NGO activists address the material consequences of globalization and express a thorough critique of neoliberalism. See also Sharma (2008), Roy (2015), and de Jong (2017). While these studies explore the hybrid interactions of feminist and queer NGOs in Latin America (Alvarez), India (Roy and Sharma), and Global North–Global South exchanges (de Jong), my analysis contributes insights on such hybridities within a European context.
2. In addition to my fieldwork with these four transnational feminist and queer organizations, I conducted fieldwork with Amnesty International Norway. While it is not an explicitly feminist or queer organization, I included Amnesty International in my fieldwork because they had been involved in organizing Barents Pride. Within the framework of a case study exploring the festival, our conversation focused on the collaboration among Norwegian organizations. We did not discuss any matters relating to the transnational character of the organization, and that was not the aim with the interview; thus it is not appropriate to include our exchange in this article.
3. To preserve the anonymity of the panelists, I do not say who was an activist and who was a journalist but keep it deliberately vague.

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