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CHALLENGING NEOLIBERAL NORMATIVITIES: MAKING THE SPACE FOR QUEER URBAN THEORY AND RADICAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

Challenging neoliberal normativities: making the space for queer urban theory and radical practices

The essay explores the political and theoretical possibility offered by a conscious use of queer radical approaches in the analysis of urban space, reflecting on convergences and distrust between queer theory and critical urban studies. Reflections on the idea of the «inclusive» city and LGBT assimilationism highlight the contradictions that arise not only for sexual and gender minorities, but for a whole range of subjects who inhabit the symbolic and material margins of our cities. Finally, a model of the not-yet-here city is proposed, based on bell hooks' conceptualisation of the margin as a space of radical openness.

Keywords

Queer urban theory, urban neoliberalism, inclusion, bell hooks

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1. INTRODUCTION

This theoretical work explores the points of contact and friction between two critical theoretical positionings, namely critical urban theory and queer theories, reasoning about the causes of the formal absence of a queer urban theory and the potential of this union of gazes. These reflections arise from the curiosity inherent in any queer posture about the way the world is constructed, and from the desire to constantly question, disarticulate and fluidify established positions. The invitation is to consider the arbitrariness of power inherent in any relationship of production: of gender and sexuality, of theoretical knowledge, of academic positioning. Among the practices common to feminist and queer writing but not to urban theorists is that of situating oneself, and from this practice, to begin the contamination at the center of this paper, I also begin.

I am precariously part of the academic world as a PhD candidate in Italy, in a national context in which today there is open warfare on universities and explicitly on those who deal with gender, LGBT and queer studies[1]. I am pursuing a PhD in Urban Studies in Milan, in a city where it is impossible to live on a monthly stipend due to very high rents, and so I live elsewhere. Inside the academy I experience the fatigue, shared by many others, of being a queer person and of bringing this personal and political experience into my research: talking about queer among urban sociologists is not easy, especially in the resistant terms that this word embodies for me and which I will clarify while writing.

What I have found to unite queer theory and critical urban theory is a radical and politicised stance in the production of knowledge and a very practical, transformative desire to change things. The theory/practice question is essential to our discourse because understanding the ways in which knowledge is conceptualised, legitimised and used requires reflection on the epistemological assumptions that underpin it and its implications, which often need to be problematised. These certainly include the implicit hierarchy whereby theoretical production is seen as superior, more universal and abstract, while action is relegated to a secondary or instrumental role. This binary understanding reproduces power logics that devalue experiential and contextual knowledge (which is often the

[1] The current right-wing government has announced a manoeuvre of cuts that will reinforce university jobs' insecurity and endanger the very existence of some universities. In the same months, professors who deal explicitly with queer theories have received attacks from extreme conservative parties including formal investigations, as in the case of the gender and queer theories course held at the University of Sassari.

valuable knowledge of the margins) and the arbitrariness with which «theory» and «practice» are defined in opposition to each other.

Contemporary cities, containers of the complexities and contradictions of our world system, are and have been a privileged observation space for the existences and resistances of the LGBT+ population, which, looking at the West, has been able to proliferate and create communities in cities since the birth of the first homosexual movements (Hubbard, 2012). Nevertheless, adopting a queer gaze on the city today means, first of all, reflecting deeply on the fluctuating meaning (Bernini, 2015) that this term carries. It then means to understand it as a mode of "critique without subject" (Eng e Puar, 2020) capable of grasping those contradictions that today elude a binary understanding of space based on oppositions such as homo/heterosexual, oppression/resistance, urban/rural and theory/practice.

To date, despite consistent efforts by scholars to connect the respective fields of study (queer and urban), it would be improper to speak of queer urban theory as a coherent or systematised whole (Oswin, 2022). Indeed, queer and LGBT+ perspectives and research have remained marginal to the interests of the so-called new urban sociology. This discipline, in contrast to the dominant paradigms of mainstream urban knowledge - heavily dependent on the passive acceptance of state power and control, technocracy and market-driven urban development and planning - has, since the 1960s, enabled a vision of urban space as a product of power relations.

The possibility of space truly shaped on inhabitants' needs and desires, as in Lefebvrian descriptions of the right to the city, remains in this view something to struggle for, especially starting from the vindication of the less powerful actors that inhabit these neoliberal spaces. Dissident bodies such as non-heterosexual, trans, poor, migrant, racialized, disabled ones face everyday city conformations that do not meet their needs and desires and nevertheless have the possibility to form alliances and create creative forms of resistance. Even though the conflicted and layered nature of the urban has remained a staple of urban theorists, the question of sexualities, from which our reflection will start, continues to be overlooked. According to Seitz (2015) the main reason lays in the understanding of gender as sexuality as attribute of individual personality rather than the materialisation of a power structures.

Critical urban theory moves from the observation of social and economic inequalities and oppressions/exclusions in the context of neoliberal cities. What I am interested in emphasising is that critical urban theory is rooted in an analytical economic perspective of Marxist derivation;

although it evolves over time to include other dimensions (cultural, political, social) that reflect the complexities of the contemporary city, these fail to seriously take into account the discourse on power-systems governing gender and sexuality (Halberstam, 2005). Acknowledging the close interdependence of these oppressions, none of which are merely cultural or personal attributes, allows for the development of more precise analysis and the possibility of contestation from empowered critical positions.

In writing I will therefore attempt to inform these two different critical schools of their misunderstandings and the potentialities inherent in their mutual intersection. After exploring the meanings of queer and attributing a specific positioning to it, the link between dissident sexualities and the city will be explored and then a review of the observations made by queer positions on urban theory will be presented. In the concluding section, an original contribution towards a queer urban theory is proposed, discussing on the one hand the models for better cities developed by urban studies, and on the other hand the controversies related to the possible emergence of the «inclusive» city. Through the voice of bell hooks and the numerous spatial and geographical references of her critical/biographical and practical/theoretical works, the potential of the undesiderable and unprofitable model of the Marginal City will be explored.

2. EXPLORATIONS ON THE MEANING OF QUEER

Every time I come across a source that uses the term queer, the first exercise I must carry out is to understand which sense is attributed to the specific context I am facing. When it is not explicitly explained, it may take some time to grasp it, and thus grasp the positioning, or the aim, of the person writing. Publication time, or the geographical context from which one writes, also become precious elements of analysis that help test the water. *Queer* continues to exist in its rich but elusive nature, even for those who deal with it every day, in academic, political, personal ways.

In its present form, it remains a fluid term that requires redefinition with each use, though it is not entirely devoid of meaning or open to any interpretation; both as a theoretical concept and a political practice, queer is indeed firmly connected to a set of political stances. It not only opposes the discrimination of non-heterocisexual individuals (such as homolesbobitransphobia) but also critiques heteronormativity and other power

structures like homonormativity[2] and homonationalism[3], highlighting contradictions and power structures that can emerge even inside LGBT+ communities and politics (Bernini, 2015).

Although often used as a term equivalent to the acronym LGBT+, queer refers then to a set of different concepts and practices that are not targeted when generally speaking of non-heterocisexual people; this difference is found both in the academic field, for example, with respect to the so-called LGBT+ studies or to certain approaches to gender studies, as well as in the activists' environment, where queer movements have pretty different claims compared to mainstream LGBT+ perspective.

To use a queer approach means today to complexifying the gaze, the analysis, the narratives beyond the binary of hetero/homosexuality. It means, for example, denouncing how dynamics of exclusion and hierarchy and normative models are produced even within the communities of sexual minorities, and reflecting on contradictions of the integration of minorized sexualities (and of their desire for assimilation) within unjust societies, with a specific reference to the neoliberal political-economic paradigm.

Looking to Western contexts, European countries are experiencing right-wing forces gaining ground and LGBT+ communities facing heightened repression[4]. In the United States, similar trends are emerging, with state legislatures enacting laws that limit LGBT+ rights, including bans on gender-affirming care for minors, restriction on legal recognition of gender identity, and block on trans people's updated ID documents. These worrying trends go hand in hand with what several scholars describe as a broader depoliticization of LGBT+ subjectivities—a shift that frames these identities and experiences as private matters rather than political ones, severing them from the social struggles and power dynamics in which they are embedded, resulting in conservative forces able to ostracize or manipulate them to their favor. Depoliticization of sexual difference also allowed to frame LGBT+ issues in terms of «inclusion» within existing social structures, which makes them appear less disruptive or threatening to the status quo. A clear example of this shift is seen in

[2] Homonormativity, as defined by Duggan (2002), refers to a neoliberal sexual politics that supports dominant heteronormative norms, promoting a depoliticized, consumerist gay culture centered on domesticity rather than challenging existing power structures.

[3] Homonationalism, as described by Puar (2007), involves using LGBT+ rights to reinforce national identity and project a progressive image, often through a Western lens, while masking underlying racism, xenophobia, or anti-immigrant sentiment.

[4] According to ILGA-Europe's annual review, LGBT+ organizations are increasingly being vilified as agents of foreign influence, and their rights to healthcare, visibility, and freedoms are being severely restricted to advance the political aims of conservative governments.

contemporary Pride events, which several scholars argue have moved away from their origins as radical acts of protest against oppression. Instead, commercialized celebrations take place in progressist urban spaces, reflecting and reinforcing this broader trend of depoliticization within LGBT+ population. Corporate sponsorships dominate many parades, often reducing LGBT+ politics to marketable aesthetics (Ahmed, 2004; Halberstam, 2011), while radical voices—particularly from trans, BIPOC, and working-class communities—are frequently sidelined in favor of more «respectable» representations both in European and non-Western cities (Butler, 1990; Spade, 2015).

When discussing queer, especially in theoretical and academic contexts, it is crucial not to detach it from the lived experiences, bodies, and communities that gave it meaning. Queer thought blurs the line between theory and practice more than other frameworks, due to its revolutionary origins. This connection is rooted in a collective historical memory that cannot be overlooked while engaging with definitions, uses, or intersections with other theories. Before «queer» became a post-identity theoretical category, it was embodied in the 1969 Stonewall riots by trans sex workers, butch lesbians, and racialized subjects with an explicitly anti-police stance. From these events emerged radical movements like STAR and the Gay Liberation Front—though they did not use the word «queer». It was only in 1990 that the activist group Queer Nation reclaimed the term to politicize their refusal of respectability, assimilation, and capitalist norms, echoing the radical spirit of Stonewall.

Today, identifying as queer can still express resistance to the depoliticization that characterizes much of mainstream LGBT+ politics, which often focuses on civil rights within existing institutions (such as marriage, the military, or the market). This tension raises ongoing questions: should «queer» be synonymous with non-normative, socially unacceptable ways of living and thinking? And if so, does this risk reinforcing a binary between «queer» and «mainstream»?

According to Puar (2007), to put queer into work means analyzing how LGBT+ rights intersect with nationalism, migration, and state power. In Western contexts like the U.S., certain non-heterosexual subjects—mainly white, cisgender, middle-class gay men and lesbians—are incorporated into national ideologies, while others, particularly LGBT+ Muslims, migrants, and people of color, are excluded and marked as threats. A key example is Israel's use of its progressive stance on LGBT+ rights to promote a liberal image—a strategy known as *pinkwashing*—which serves to distract from its occupation of Palestine and ongoing human rights violations.

The term queer can be therefore applied to explore far more than just the experiences of LGBT+ individuals. In this work the word is not used as an all-encompassing word for LGBT+ but as a distinction, a claim to a difference. This perspective mirrors the refusal to adhere to any already given normality (or normativity) both in considering sexuality and its political intersections, and in adopting research positioning and formulating research questions.

2.1 The political in queer: notes on the ambiguity of neutrality

Queer theory has alternately been accused of being too vague and therefore not applicable on analysis of «real» social problems or too explicitly linked to a desire for subversion of existing reality, and therefore ideological. As treated in this paper, queer theory is encompassed into that strand of transformative and positional sociology (De Nardis e Simone, 2023), understood as a social science capable of analyzing the present to determine a critical agenda necessary to imagine an alternative society. The aim is to bring out «contradictions where everyone sees normality and elements of regularity where everyone sees contradictions. In this sense it is, by its very nature, intimately subversive, hence positional»[5] (Ivi: 162). Rejection of this neutral perspective is something communal between queer and critical urban theory; however, the latter, although it moves from similar transformative desires, is not continually asked to legitimize itself within the categories of true knowledge.

More broadly, the positivist paradigm and its aftermath as the norm of scientific production is not only still very much present, but when it is the dominant approach, it produces forms of violence and exclusion of other approaches that refer to critical schools and paradigms. This violence prevents, among other things, «the development of epistemological creativity, aimed at social transformation rather than objectification of social phenomena» (Borghi, Bourcieur, Prieur, 2016: 165). Othered forms of knowledge are continually charged as ideological because they lack neutrality, objectivity, and distance, which are essential conditions for knowledge to be said to be scientific[6].

[5] My translation.

[6] Foucault himself teaches us that the production of knowledge is always a way of reproducing power; therefore, even the reduced space that in an academic context is reserved for theorizing coming from the margins becomes significant. Their possibility of becoming epistemologies, thus different ways of looking at reality, is constantly hindered and on the contrary one is accused of ideology.

In this sense, queer theory arises as a revindication of marginalization and is, as seen in the previous paragraph, inevitably linked to political struggle: it is precisely from the materiality of bodies that have suffered exclusion/violence that arises the urgency of theorizing one's condition and imagining new liberations. Thus, the distance between researcher and object of research becomes shorter than in other fields; nevertheless, as I will deepen in the following sections, the directions taken by contemporary queer theories range far beyond the sexual referent, making it an interesting tool for the investigation of reality capable of power-critique (and of the normativity it generates) in its infinite multiplications.

3. CITIES AND SEXUALITIES

In addressing the relationship between the city and sexuality, it is essential to problematize homogenizing approaches that treat the "city" as a monolithic and universal entity (Massey, 2005; Halberstam, 2005). LGBT+ urban experiences are deeply situated and variable, shaped by geographic, political, economic, and cultural factors that significantly differentiate cities in the Global North from those in the Global South (Oswin, 2014). Moreover, dynamics of marginality, LGBT+ visibility, and access to safe spaces can take on very different forms in peripheral or extra-metropolitan contexts, challenging the notion of the city as the sole site of LGBT+ possibility (Herring, 2010; Halberstam, 2005). It is therefore necessary to continuously question the concept of the city and anchor it in the specific research context, in order to avoid a flattening narrative that risks excluding experiences that do not conform to dominant urban models.

Generally speaking, urban theory has recognized cities as privileged spaces for observing the infinite manifestations of power, as they concentrate the economic, political and social processes that shape both everyday life and global flows. The connection between space and sexuality, and thus between space and power, has been abundantly explored inside the field of geography of sexualities[7]. The focus was especially on gay and lesbian subjects and spatial practices, with attention to urban contexts. The need to briefly retrace its path serves us to explore some of the key concepts and publications that should be kept in mind also in those understanding of space such as bound to economic structures highlighted by urban critical thinkers. Geographers of sexuality have in fact pointed

[7] When generally speaking of sexuality, the referent is both gender and sexual orientation.

out how another structure, heteronormativity, is at stake not only in the production of space itself, but also in that understanding of space that is foundational in much geographical theorizing.

In short, heteronormativity is the idea of mandatory heterosexuality; its strength comes by its naturalization that allows not to needed further explanation in front of something that is just the way it must be. As stated by Valentine,

> heterosexuality is clearly the dominant sexuality in most everyday environments, not just private spaces, with all interactions taking place between sexed actors. However, such is the strength of the assumption of the 'naturalness' of heterosexual hegemony, that most people are oblivious to the way it operates as a process of power relations in all spaces (1993:96).

While it is common opinion that public space is a priori a non-sexual space as sexuality is considered an aspect of life to be confined to the private sphere of existence, this idea can be dismantled with careful observation of our reality and life daily. Here the space seems not to be sexual because the manifestations of heterosexuality that occur there are taken for granted to the point of not being perceived as linked to sex. Heteronormativity is a ubiquitous element (Hubbard, 2008), capable of being simultaneously in every place, regardless of its public or private dimension: in urban areas, despite the development of gay areas or LGBT+ neighborhoods in some of them, and the peculiar role that the city has for non-heterocis people and communities[8], feelings of fear, shame, invisibilization, out-of-place syndrome (Borghi, 2020) continue to be shared experiences between LGBT+ urban population, with significant differences based on geographical positioning.

The exploration of spatialized dimension of sexual subjects was at first conducted around non-heterosexuals lives and desires, namely gay and lesbian ones. The first edited collection explicitly addressing the relationship between sexuality and space, *Mapping Desire*, was published in 1995 edited by Bell and Valentine, bringing geographers into dialogue with those in other disciplines working on LGBT+ identities, queer theory and the cultural politics of sexuality. First analytical attention was given here to physical spaces that inside city-space were characterized by presence of gay and lesbian population, giving birth to a research trend around gay villages[9]. With later growing sophistication of how

[8] See i.g. Ghaziani, (2015).

[9] The fame enjoyed by this research topic has then experienced its relative decline as both an empirical and theoretical concern, due to a queer understanding of sexuality and an increasing sophistication in the way geographers handle place and scale.

geographers handle place and scale and the emergences of prior invisibilized sexualities[10], the focus of research shifted soon to wider aspects regarding LGBT+ population.

Geographers recognized city space as having a peculiar role in the emergence, existence and resistance of sexual minorities, since it offered both the possibility of freedom and anonymity and the one to create communities and organize in large numbers. Cities have therefore represented the privileged place of investigation in research on the geography of sexualities, to the point that it would be possible to speak of *urban geography of sexualities*[11], although research has expanded beyond this binary view of LGBT+ life and contraposition urban/rural, criticizing *metronormativity* and producing some interesting inquiries into life beyond the metropolitan center (e.g. Bain, Podmore, 2020). Urban space is then not only intended as the backdrop against which LGBT+ life and more generally sexual relations develop, but also has an active agent in shaping sexualities, encouraging some expressions and repressing other ones (Hubbard, 2012). This perspective allowed the multiplication of the directions of research on broader discourses on sexuality beyond LGBT+ spaces. According to Oswin and Seitz,

> cities are central sites for the regulation of and resistance to notions of sexual propriety and impropriety, as sexuality is intertwined with numerous aspects of urban life, from reproduction and population growth to security and the separation of zones of ''vice'' from respectable neighborhoods to the emergence of spaces for LGBTQ communities and social movement (2017:21)

For sure geographers of sexualities have attested the mutual influence that space and sexualities have on each other, together with the importance of geographical contextualization, since considering the specificity of different cities (or non-urban environments) allows practices and identities not to be subjected to violent abstraction. In speaking of non-conforming gender and sexualities, geographers have quite often used the word queer as a synonym for LGBT+ referring to groups of population inhabiting spaces in opposition/transgression of the heterosexual one. In the discipline the equation of queer space with gay and lesbian space remained

[10] Dissident sexualities were firstly recognized as gay and lesbian, with the tendency to keep in the closet bisexual and transgender experiences, as well as the non-heterosexual nor cisgender experiences of racialized people, or of LGBT+ people with less acceptable lifestyles.

[11] Rural and small-town LGBT+ life is generally mythologized as sad and lonely, or else rural LGBT+ people might be thought of as "stuck" in a place that they would leave if they only could.

evident: nevertheless, to adopt a queer approach to space can refer to something different (Oswin, 2008).

To explicitly rely on queer theories offers the opportunity to go beyond binary understandings of reality; speaking in terms of heterosexual vs. homosexual or oppression vs. resistance oppositions creates the «sort of mapping that poststructuralist queer theory emerged to write against» (pp.89) and it clarifies how the term queer was often genuinely misused as a generic synonym for non-heterocisexual subjects.

3.1 It is possible to speak about queer urban theory?

Geography of sexualities do not necessary imply a queer approach. The latter is in fact a critical vision, challenging normativities and binary conclusions, focusing on instability of taken-for-granted meanings and resulting power relations. Analyses carried out by critical urban theory also explicitly position themselves in opposition to systems of domination, in particular the capitalist system and its spatialization: in the following, we will outline some of the missing points of contact between these two critical perspectives, tracing the observations of some queer scholars with regard to urban sociology.

To reflect on the (non-)existence of queer urban theory as a formalized field of study, Oswin and Seitz explored within the beginnings of the discipline and then in its contemporary characterizations, firstly by analyzing the visions on homosexuality in the context of the Chicago school, and subsequently investigating the reluctance of the so-called critical urban theory in seriously consider sexuality among its research topics. While, as we examined previously, a queer approach to space do not imply necessarily the centrality of the LGBT+ subject, the oversight of non-normative sexualities in the urban discipline also influenced the possibilities of reception and integration of the queer approach, which had almost no explicit influence within urban studies.

Despite the engagement of different scholars to connect the two fields, is not possible to speak about queer urban theory as a systematized body of theorization (Oswin, 2022). «Queer urban theory is simply not a sanctioned scholarly subfield» (Ivi:1) and not because of its lacking usefulness; instead, the field of sexuality, when considered as an order that give shape to individual and societal ways of living, a dense point where power relations can be observed – understanding on which Foucault has sufficiently elaborated - became a crucial angle from where conducting sociological analysis, with different perspectives from specific geographical contexts and different scales. Different scholars have in fact applicate a

queer, disrupting gaze on urban phenomena, facing the struggle to be recognized in a corpus of theorization that comes from a straight, male cisgender, Western/white perspective that inevitably excluded marginal visions and persistently confined queer one such as an out of place. «A residue, an elision, a shadowy presence» (Ivi:2); nonetheless, queer has remained a resistant presence.

Oswin (2022) critiques early urban sociology from the Chicago School, arguing that the city was not just studied as a «social laboratory» but actively produced as one. In this framework, addressing social issues meant identifying and correcting perceived anomalies, excluding deviant subjectivities—such as women, homosexuals, and other marginalized groups—who were dismissed as «social junk» and denied intellectual or theoretical legitimacy within the liberal urban order. A similar analysis was applied to racialized population. Later, with a not so gentle reappropriation of space, it was from the consciousness of these specific oppressions and exclusion that queer desires and practices arrived to produce knowledge, despite the persistency of asymmetric power distribution. The point became then to enhance the repressed difference and from this specific positionality produce generative ideas and perspectives.

Some decades later, with the birth of the so called new urban sociology, the possibility to think about gender and sexuality expanded inside the field; nevertheless, the preexisting power-relationships, that we can generically refer to as heteronormativity and sexism, were left almost untouched. When speaking of critical urban theory, the reference goes mainly to the writing of Lefebvre, Harvey, Castells, Marcuse and their fellows, that from the late 60s, began to produce a new critical, or radical, way of looking at the city. In the context of political ferment inside the space of knowledge that characterized that period - made of social mass mobilization igniting in schools and universities - the political positioning of the academic body ceased to be a taboo, and indeed took shape as an essential attribute: this new and explicitly politicized perspective also contaminated the way of looking at the urban environment (Rossi, 2018).

Critical urban theory, emerging in contrast to traditional models like the Chicago School and technocratic or neoliberal approaches, challenges dominant urban paradigms that prioritize state control, market efficiency, and bureaucratic rationality (Brenner, 2009). Rejecting fixed disciplinary boundaries and the idea of cities as neutral outcomes of social or economic laws, it instead emphasizes the political, contested, and socially constructed nature of urban spaces, highlighting cities as both products and arenas of power relations and resistance.

A conflictual stance is taken not only toward established urban knowledge but also towards current urban structures; the strong imaginative and generative position held in radical concept such as the right to the city support the possibility of a different, more democratic, socially equitable, and sustainable approach to urban development is realizable and to some extent already existing inside the urban contemporaneity. Despite the prevailing endeavor of institutional systems, practices, and ideologies, critical urban theory is a call for subverting reality: recalling another famous Lefebvre's position, his emphasis on the *possible* and the importance he attached to extending and realizing it through collective struggle. In its essence critical urban theory encompasses the examination of ideology, including socio-scientific ideologies, as well as the analysis of power dynamics, inequality, injustice, and exploitation both within individual cities and across urban areas.

Between the power dynamics considered by past and contemporary critics of urban processes, sexuality discourses were and are not considered as something very significant. The main reason for this neglect can be traced in the lack of recognition of sexuality as a system of power, as the materialization of a structure strongly intertwined with the economic one, very dear to those urban theorists that highlighted the centrality of capital to the politics of the city.

Beyond the economic dimension, seen by urban theorists as the number one driver of oppression and inequality in the urban environment[12], queer approaches invite to look at the mutually constitutive oppressive character of gender, sexuality, class and race structures and at the unexpected results that these intersections can lead to[13].

Seitz (2015) offered an example in analyzing Marcuse (2012) understanding of sexuality in his recent exploration of the right to the city, where he reflects on the question of who we are speaking about when we use this concept. His neat distinction between those that are excluded in a «cultural sense», referring to race, ethnicity, gender and lifestyle but included in an «economic sense» perfectly reflects the lack of an integrated vision, in this case relying on the distinction of the cultural and the material as separate and parallel rather than interdependent and complicit.

[12] The reference eluded the city environment, expanding to all those places that, although not cities, are strongly related and subordinated to these agglomerations of political-economic power with greater evidence since the advent of globalization.

[13] The intersectional approach has been theorized and put into work with specific focuses by different feminist traditions such as materialist feminism (i.g. Silvia Federici, Nancy Fraser), French 1970s lesbian feminism (i.g. Monique Wittig), black and Afro-American feminism (i.g. Angela Davis, Kimberle Crenshaw, bell hooks) and decolonial feminism (i.g. Maria Lugones, Gloria Anzaldùa, Chandra Mohanty).

Trans theorist Jack Halberstam (2005) similarly argued on the deficiency of canonical work on «postmodern geography» (referring to the renowed names of Soja, Jameson, Harvey) in including sexuality as a category of analysis. The motivation lied, according to him, in considering the role of desire and the way in which neo-Marxists have considered it as part of a ludic bodily politics that should be separated from the proper work of activism. This fundamental exclusion, which relegated sexuality to the body/local/personal and framed class/global/political as the central perspective, has made it difficult to integrate questions of sexuality and space into wider debates on globalization and transnational capitalism (pp.16). Apparently, it is «normativity», as it has been theorised within feminist, LGBT+, queer studies, the big concept missing in postmodern geography within the Marxist tradition, although that of capitalist realism is also a suffocating normativity.

Although it is not possible to speak of *queer urban theory*, the reflections collected here highlight that the relationship between hetero-cis-normativity and economic oppression is better understood when analyzed in its complicit and complexity, insisting on how these forms of violence interrelate and mutually shape each (Seitz, 2015).

4. CHALLENGING THE «INCLUSIVE» CITY NARRATIVE

To put into work our theoretical reflection we will now consider some issues linked to contemporary urban environments. Inclusion and diversity, initially understood as tools to promote equity and social justice, are now often co-opted by the neo-liberal model, turning into depoliticised practices functional to market interests. This process, analysed by various scholars and theorists, highlights how neoliberalism has integrated progressive discourses to strengthen its legitimacy, without necessarily challenging the power structures that produce inequalities. Similar processes also take place in the contest of neoliberal cities. Between urban elites, models for better cities emerged, based on generic ideals of progress, development, and well-being; they have often been presented as universal ones and a goal towards which every world city should strive, crystallising in the literature and known to both scholars and the wider public, since they have seen attempts at practical application.

I refer to those models that have appeared since the beginning of the 21st century, such as the sustainable city, the creative city, the slow city, the resilient city and, more recently, the smart city, which promises to optimise urban life through advanced technologies, big data and

automation. The models, although seemingly progressist, are built on assumptions that end up disregarding or even reinforcing inequalities; critiques arises around technocentrism and inacessibility to advanced technologies for the majority of the population, structural differences between rich neighbourhoods and peripheries that are not taken into account, the issue of green capitalism, i.e. an idea of environmental sustainability in which people's needs are always subordinated to economic profits and market dynamics, and so on. The dominant urban models are also anchored in a vision of urban development that insists on an ideal of linear and universal progress. These approaches implicitly assume that the ideal city is a predefined goal, a technical and normative outcome to be pursued through design and management solutions. However, such models often mask structural inequalities, legitimising the city-system as a site of reproduction of injustice, exploitation and control (Vanolo, 2014).

Although it has not emerged as an urban development paradigm with definite contours, the idea of the «inclusive» city does not come as a surprise to those concerned with cities today. Talking about inclusivity immediately recall to mind issues that minorized communities have to face in the context of a given normality: as a lower number of people, characterized by a communal element that is source of discrimination, or exclusion, the need to be treated as a «normal» member of the wider community became the objective. As we saw, queer approach strongly challenges not only the usefulness of being integrated in a disputable normality, but the proper idea of normality and its desirability: it's the revindication of difference, of a specific marginal positionality that base and fuel the desire for socio-political change. In this sense, the idea of inclusion, and in application to urban oppression the one of «inclusive» cities can be strongly questioned, since alignments of liberal LGBT+ political strategies with urban modes of governance are often inseparable from neoliberal, racist, nationalist, and militarist logics (Oswin, 2015).

One of the most famous mainstream ideas around non normative sexualities and their role in the city, namely the *gay index* elaborated by Florida, perfectly highlights this kind of neoliberal contradictions. In *The rise of the creative class* (2002) attributes to LGBT+ people the ability to contribute to developing the cultural economy of the city. The essay revolves around the role that a specific group of people, the creative class, would have in the production of value in cities: this group would have emerged since the 1970s, and would tend to have similar characteristics, attitudes and tastes. The creative class, explicitly identified as a means to increase urban economic growth, would be attracted to cities where the level of talent, tolerance and technology is higher; by tolerance is meant openness

and respect for the resulting sexual diversity in a diverse and progressive environment, measured by the gay index.

This highly influential - but also widely criticized - urban marketing strategy continues to tell us something about the exploitation that urban elites can make of sexual diversity (and diversity in general): more than twenty years after the publication of Florida, the possibility of selling difference has become a reality far beyond urban politics and consists of all those practices that today are encapsulated under the name of rainbow-washing.

Other analysis, such as the theory of «rainbow cities» (Corbisiero, Monaco, 2017) developed within the Italian context are rooted in the model of urban inclusiveness, emphasizing the best practices in city governance. However, while the inclusion indicators predominantly focus on individual aspects of LGBT lives, the challenge remains in capturing complexities of multi-layered identities' urban experiences and not to create city rankings that risk reinforcing the neoliberal drive for urban competitiveness. In this regard, the case of Milan is particularly emblematic. While highly visible in the media and prominent within «rainbow narratives», the city's approach to diversity mainstreaming reflects a strong tendency toward neoliberal inclusion, which prioritizes spaces for consumption, corporate sponsorships, and diversity branding. However, behind this facade of openness, genuinely accessible and politicized spaces for more precarious subjectivities, such as trans people, migrants, or sex workers, are scarce and frequently ostracized from local institutions.

Today, cities have become a crucial battleground for advancing sexual equity with a new strength, since their success and their competitiveness are firmly linked to their ability to be gay-friendly (Oswin, 2002). The cooptation and commodification of historical memories for the LGBT+ communities – now transformed in big events in big cities – like Pride parades, are not only sponsored by big companies that contribute to a depolitization of the celebration but also used by urban government to increase the city attractiveness for tourists and investors (Rottenberg, 2018). From here it became important to investigate the local ways of being «inclusive» cities for sexual minorities and to notice which subjectivities or social groups can instead being erased or damaged from those sexual politics is a queer question, able to go beyond homo/hetero, cultural/material, inclusion/exclusion binaries and to focus our attention beyond the LGBT+ subject, which identity can be often crossed by other experiences of marginalization. Referring again to the Italian context, Bologna stands out as an interesting case of convergence between institutional and grassroots activism. The city is often cited as one of the most

advanced Italian cities in terms of LGBT+ policies, thanks to its strong associative fabric[14] and the interaction between institutions and autonomous spaces, which has allowed for a coexistence of recognition and radical critique, resulting, for example, in the organization of both institutional and radical pride united under the name of Rivolta Pride.

4.1 The marginal city: a decentered perspective for urban future

In this conclusive paragraph I would like to propose a city model that move in the not-yet here queer urban theory direction; the idea of queer as not-yet-here is built upon Muñoz (2009) response to the delusional here and now opposed to the potentiality or concrete possibility for another world (the *queer*). To draw the perimeters of this potential city I will use some of bell hooks' ideas around the margins.

First of all, existing urban and geographical scholarship on the «marginal city» deals with cities (or urban spaces within cities) that are structurally excluded, peripheral, or stigmatized, using the concept to indicate an undesirable condition that needs to be resolved or brought to normality (e.g. Waquant, 2008). Marginality can be spatial, social, economic, and most of the time, these layers intertwine with each other.

While marginality often denotes exclusion, marginal spaces are also spaces of resilience and resistance, and from this perspective, I will continue my discussion. The aim is not to romanticize a difficult condition, as will be seen, but to reclaim dignity, power, and creativity outside of normative frameworks.

Moreover, the choice to contaminate critical urban theorisations with a Black vision of space is meant to be a challenge to a field whose main theorists are heterosexual white men and whose positioning, although critical of oppressive political-economic structures, are unable to integrate perspectives from embodied experiences and «other» epistemologies. Oswin, while referring to the geographical discipline, emphasises the harmful consequences of the erasure of «othered» subjectivities and visions due to «centuries of white supremacist heteropatriarchal grounding and a failure of the collective critical geographical imagination» (2020: 1). She invites us to create solidarities between «othered» subjectivities and continue to build scholarship that inhabits an epistemological elsewhere: so I'm doing.

[14] Between others the MIT (trans identities movement) activist group, the Cassero LGBT+ community and cultural center, the MalaConsilia, a self-organized alternative healthcare center for LGBT+ people.

bell hooks radical Black feminist theorising, while not strictly geographical, or urban, continually seeks to develop its sense of place, and can teach us much - as geographers, as sociologists, as urban theorists, and as queer people embedded in spaces of heteronormativity. For the author, the sense of place is closely linked to identity, belonging and collective memory and is explored in her work not only as a geographical space, but as a terrain of emotional and relational connections. In this interpretation of place, which is anything but romanticising or abstract, hooks makes the capitalist and colonial system responsible of alienating, individualizing and interrupting relationships of care and connection with the land and community[15].

What I want to put into work in my contribution is hooks' image of the margin, which is central to her work, her worldview and her lifelong political struggle. In the essay *CHOOSING THE MARGIN AS A SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS*, she describes margin and marginality as

> a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and way one lives (…) not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose- to give up or surrender as part of moving into the centre – but rather as a site one stays in, clings to even because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds (1989:20).

The margin is thus oppressive when it represents social, economic and cultural exclusion, but becomes radically powerful when it is chosen as a place from which to observe, criticise and imagine alternatives to the dominant centre. In this sense, the margin is not just a condition to be endured but can be transformed into a strategic position of resistance and power. hooks argues that the margin is a place of radical openness, where new perspectives are created, solidarities among the oppressed are developed and narratives are constructed that challenge hegemonic power.

The margin is not an easy space: it is a profoundly complex dimension, and finding a home there is difficult but essential. To navigate it with less struggle, building a community is crucial – a potentially vast community, as power has relegated countless people to the margins. According to bell hooks, understanding marginality as both a position and a site of resistance is vital for the oppressed, exploited, and colonized. This

[15] In the city, in bell hooks' experience as a racialized child and woman, «people (...) often ridiculed the desire to live in a community, because what they loved about the city was precisely the anonymity, not knowing anything about anyone and therefore not feeling responsible for anything» (2023:30)

understanding prevents them from believing there are no alternatives and falling into the trap of absolute skepticism (Ivi: 21).

Within contemporary cities, the margins/centre dichotomy can relate to the materiality of city structure, but especially for subjectivities that cannot take part in the construction of a space tailored to their needs and desires. For them, I imagined a queer and paradoxical alternative: the Marginal City. Here, the point is not to integrate marginality, queerness, divergence, and undesirability into the dominant system, but of reversing the paradigm, making the margin the perspective of urban life, one that is no longer built around profit opportunities nor based on reassuring desires of assimilation.

I have imagined five points that would underpin the Marginal City:

- Urban planning and design start from the needs, desires and knowledges of excluded communities. This means actively involving LGBT+ people, women, migrants, disabled and racialised bodies, precarious workers and other categories traditionally not involved in decision-making processes. The space of the margins is a crowded space and can become a space of intersectional alliances and community based on a plurality of experiences.
- The Marginal City is configured as a decentralised ecosystem that values autonomy and cooperation; space production is based on collective and participatory practices that can go into the directions of management of empty spaces, self-management of resources, alternative economies and the creation of solidarity networks: the city is nourished by narratives, visions and practices that emerge from below.
- Public spaces are designed to encourage encounters, community building and mutual support that privilege human relationships, solidarity and move towards collective autonomy. The Marginal City is not pre-defined by an aesthetic of progress or technological efficiency, but by responding to the concrete needs of marginalized subjectivities and their political creativity. The Marginal City is also a city of desire, which does not reduce marginal subjectivities to mere survival, but enhances their aspirations and potentials: desire is neither individualistic nor consumerist, but collective and transformative. The needs of the inhabitants of the Marginal City - home, affection, creativity - are met through relationships of reciprocity and solidarity.
- Marginal City celebrates marginal cultures, recognising them as sources of innovation, resistance and creativity: here public spaces

become sites of artistic and democratic political expression.
- In contrast to the hustle and bustle of the neoliberal city, Marginal City adopts a temporality that prioritises well-being and long-term sustainability. This implies spaces for slowness, reflection and mutual care.

The Marginal City is a difficult model to define in universalistic terms, as such models are created by theorists, policy makers and urban elites who tend to create homogeneous and thus partial narratives of cities. Those living on the margins are not interested in constructing universal models, but rather in developing local practices of resistance already taking the form of small alternative experience and daily experimentation. These practices, while often invisibilized in academic and political discourses, offer unique visions that challenge dominant structures and propose concrete alternatives to the centralist vision of the city. It is crucial that these experiences, however fragmented, gain more space in the debate, contaminating the collective consciousness and pushing towards a more democratic and complex understanding of urban spaces. In this way, the Marginal City can be not just a theoretical concept, but a practice made up of the many marginalized experiences that already inhabit our cities.

In the Marginal City, there is no room for controversial events like the World Pride, which takes place annually in global cities, with heavy corporate sponsorship and increased policing. These events tend to replicate Western-centric, commodified LGBT+ politics, often sidelining or ignoring local struggles – and in some cases, even penalizing local inhabitants. The aim is not to impose a universal LGBT+ experience, especially one that fails to resonate with cities in the Global South or obscures other forms of state control and violence. For instance, Tel Aviv Pride has increasingly been criticized for pinkwashing and for exploiting LGBT+ rights to project a progressive image that is complicit in the ongoing Israeli genocide against Palestinians. Instead of advancing liberation for every oppressed subject, including the LGBT+ Palestinian population, such events further promote a sanitized, neoliberal LGBT+ image tied to tourism and consumerism, while also attempting to normalize colonization.

Differently, concrete practices of queer resistance in contemporary urban territories move closer to the utopia of the Marginal City, rejecting the idea of inclusion that comes at the expense of other subjectivities.[16] A clear example of this is the Berlin Internationalist Queer Pride, a march deliberately organized as an alternative to the official CSD parade. Unlike

[16] These same queer movements often rejected the use of the term inclusion, conscious of its political ambiguity and its tendency towards neoliberal assimilation.

the mainstream event, it consistently aligns itself with anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles, expressing explicit solidarity with Palestinian, Kurdish, and Iranian liberation movements between others. This urban practice reaffirms – through the occupation of public space – a vision of queerness rooted not in assimilation or visibility alone, but in a global justice consciousness.

Also in the Italian context different queer radical movements such as PRiot Pride in Rome, Free(k) Pride in Torino, Marciona in Milano have been able to show solidarity with local urban struggles, creating small islands of uncompromising intersectionality. Among these struggles is e.g. the opposition to migration detention centers (CPRs), which have violently impacted on the lives of migrant and poor urban subjects, while also producing necropolitical zones within our seemingly pacified cities. Far from being exceptions, CPRs are embedded within the urban fabric of our «pacified» cities, exposing the racialized and classed infrastructures of control that underlie securitized urbanism. In this context, queer and intersectional political practices that align with local struggles - against deportation, racial profiling, and housing precarity -reclaim the city as a space of dissidence rather than assimilation.

It is precisely here that the image of the «rainbow city» or the «inclusive city», often celebrated as a space of diversity and peaceful coexistence, begins to fall apart. In its place emerges the possibility of the Marginal City as a site of genuine solidarity, built not on sanitized symbols of tolerance but on the material needs, struggles, and collective power of the oppressed. Rather than striving for inclusion into existing structures, this city reimagines belonging through resistance, care, and radical reconfiguration of urban life from below.

CONCLUSION

This contribution aimed to reflect on the possibilities offered by the intersection of two critical modes of knowledge production and their way of engaging in transformative practices, moving towards a queer urban theory that is not-yet-here. What is definitely here is capitalism ability to absorb the idea of difference and make it profitable, to call it diversity and make it a variable of attractiveness and competitiveness for our cities, in manifestations that demand our attention and that can be grasped only with the consciousness of the interdependence of systems of power. In this sense, «inclusion» strategies that do not truly challenge injustices and inequalities and that often, when they refer to the LGBT+

population, result in the oppression of other minority subjectivities, have a local urban materialisations.

The lack of attention of these intersected modes of oppression characterized almost all urban theorization, resulting in static modes of analyzing urban life and urban phenomena inside the academic environment. To queer the perspective on urban neoliberalism means then not just to map and consider LGBT+ lives inside the urban space but to exceed the non-heterocis subject experience and target the needs of marginal inhabitants. In this direction the impossible, counter-intuitive «model» developed around bell hooks marginality and imagined as the Marginal City, with a series of foundational principles that revolve around inhabitants' needs, emphasize potentiality for a different world and give spaces to the already-existent alternatives. The Marginal City redefines urban space, not integrating marginality into the mainstream, but making the margin the perspective of urban life, envisioning a place that resists both profit-driven and assimilationist logics.

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