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Activist, relational, and embodied: rethinking sexual citizenship in neoliberal capitalism

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ABSTRACT

Considering the neoliberal commercialization of sexual politics, this article argues for a reconfiguration of sexual citizenship as *activist*, *relational*, and *embodied*. By doing so it aims to challenge the contemporary de-politicization, individualization, and hegemonic normalization of sexual citizenship. While the *activist* and *relational* dimension consider how the dominant manifestation of sexual politics may be disrupted, the notion of *embodied* sexual citizenship draws attention to the ways in which the ability of doing so is materially conditioned. This article proposes a framework through which sexual citizenship can be re-politicized as a collective and accountable project, moving beyond the need of self-production through consumption.

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Introduction

Within the last decade, aesthetic Pride celebrations have become a central aspect of cosmopolitan LGBTQ+ movements in Western metropolitan cities. Particularly during Pride month, public institutions and corporations tend to adopt LGBTQ+ friendly rhetoric to symbolize progress and acceptance of non-normative sexualities and genders. While this development has significantly increased the awareness for LGBTQ+ related struggles, this type of sexual politics has become increasingly caught up in neoliberal and capitalist expansion (Baez 2019). More and more corporations performatively symbolize their tolerance to boost profits and competitiveness. In 2021 the online coverage of LGBTQ+ related issues was approximately 6 times higher during Pride month in June compared to the yearly average (Fountas 2021). This calculation reflects Pride Month's characterization as a 'branded holiday', promoting performative gestures of support while remaining decoupled from substantial change. Several corporations, while adapting LGBTQ+ friendly rhetoric during Pride month, simultaneously fund anti-LGBTQ+ legislation through donations (Place 2021). The commodification of LGBTQ+ culture has contributed to the construction of sexual citizenship as conditional on market participation. Sexual politics in particularly Western metropolitan centers has been downsized in the name of consumption (Ferguson 2018).

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At the same time, the whiteness of LGBTQ+ movements remains overlooked and normalized (Hinkson 2021; Saleh and Tschalaer 2023). Political minority identities are often treated as mutually exclusive and distinct categories – framing individuals to be affected by, for example, *either racism or homophobia or ableism* (Patel 2019; Hinkson 2021). However, experiences of anti-queer violence and hate crimes are highly racialized (Bassichis and Spade 2014; Meyer 2015; McCown and Platt 2021). ‘Brown’, Muñoz (2018, 396) writes, ‘indexes a certain vulnerability to the violence of property, finance, and capital’s overarching mechanisms of domination’. Indeed, Robinson’s (2000 [1983]) conceptualization of US-American racial capitalism highlights how racist and colonial dispossession was co-constitutive of capitalism through an exploitative racial order in European societies. The privileging of some gay and lesbian relationships not only diverts the attention from, but sustains the marginalization of subjects outside these normative hierarchies.

This article considers the exclusionary nature of commercialized sexual politics as a problematic foundation of sexual citizenship. It argues that the marketization of sexual citizenship has promoted the construction of limited pre-figured identity positions one has to occupy for recognition. Understanding the developments of de-politicization, individualization, and the hegemonic normalization of selected sexual identities as entangled and mutually constitutive, this article asks: what are the ways in which a move beyond contemporary sexual citizenship – based on fixed, exclusive, and de-politicized identity positions – may be theorized?

In exploring this question, this article engages with three bodies of scholarship: queer theory, citizenship studies, and theories of embodiment.¹ Within these strands of literature, past scholarship has discussed the de-politicizing forces of neoliberal capitalism (e.g. Brown 2015; Ferguson 2018; Grewal 2005), the limits of identity-based constructions of the subject (e.g. Butler 2002; Seidman 2001; Warner 1991), the potentials of understanding citizenship as an active and relational activity (e.g. Isin 2008; Nielsen 2008; Stychin 2001), the configuration of citizenship as an inherently embodied quality (e.g. Bacchi and Beasley 2002; Shildrick 2013), as well as the ways in which embodied subjects are positioned and rendered vulnerable in differential ways (e.g. Butler 2016; Sabsay 2016b; Muñoz 2018).

A joint reading of these critiques offers a more nuanced understanding of the pitfalls of contemporary sexual politics and allows for accountable reflections on how they might be overcome. All three bodies of scholarship have brought forward important critiques relevant to the hegemonic manifestation of sexual citizenship. However, a comprehensive reading has yet to be proposed. While Pan et al. (2021) show that understanding sexual citizenship as *activist* is analytically useful, I argue that introducing a *relational* and *embodied* dimension is essential for successfully disrupting the status quo. This paper will show how the conceptualization of political subjectivities as both relational and embodied shapes the transformative capacity of activist sexual citizenship.

To illustrate the implications of a renewed understanding of sexual citizenship in practice, this article compares two movements that took place in New York City on June 27th, the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots: the Queer Liberation March and NYC Pride. To make this comparison, I reviewed the online coverage by daily newspapers (e.g. the Guardian, the New York Times, NBC News, Financial Times), magazines and news portals (e.g. VICE, Common Dreams, Workers World, CHLP), and prominent LGBTQ+

publications (e.g. Advocate, Them, Gay City News). Only publications that explicitly referred to the March and the Parade were taken into account. Additionally, the organizer's (Reclaim Pride Coalition) take on the Queer Liberation March, documented on their website and discussed in an interview with WBUR radio was included.² Additionally, to capture the days leading up to the events, the day of both events itself, and the immediate aftermath, material published between June 1st and June 30th was collected. The overwhelming majority of coverage was published in the week before and after the Parade and the March.

Based on this selection, the analysis focuses on four key themes that were consistently emphasised as setting the March and the Parade apart: corporate sponsorship, police presence, coalition building, and the underlying sentiment that motivated the attendees to participate and organise. Relating the four themes to queer theory, citizenship studies, and theories of embodiment allows me to entangle the diverging principles of political participation and forms of representation inherent to both movements. It makes for an empirically grounded imagination of radical sexual politics as activist, relational, and embodied.

In proposing this conceptualization of sexual citizenship, I engage with the conceptual location of sexual citizenship loosely – focusing on the similarities of Pride parades in the United States and Western Europe, particularly in urban and metropolitan hubs. By constructing the conceptual framework in this way, applications to local sexual politics are limited and require an account for the ways in which regional, cultural, and social factors impact and shape the respective movement (Peterson, Wahlström, and Wennerhag 2018).

First, this article reviews past scholarship on sexual citizenship to then expand on the identity-based employment of the concept in Western neoliberal capitalism. Second, it proposes the notion of *activist sexual citizenship* as a disruption of depoliticizing forces. Third, *relational* sexual citizenship challenges fixed ideas of the bounded self, instead centering the collective nature of political projects. Fourth, I turn to the ways in which subjects are rendered vulnerable by power structures in shared but differential ways. I make the case for *embodiment* as the locus of sexual citizenship. Only by accounting for the ways in which corporeal realities condition the potentials of enacting sexual citizenship can radical politics be responsibly theorized. I conclude by suggesting that a conceptualization of sexual citizenship based on these three components re-politicizes sexual citizenship by foregrounding coalitional politics that go beyond the normalization of selected identity positions within a single-issue framework.

Sexual citizenship in contemporary times

Taking the increasing co-optation of the LGBTQ+ movement by corporations as an example, this section demonstrates how consumption has become a dominant mode of recognition. I argue that sexual citizenship's liberal dimensions of individualization, depoliticization, and hegemonic normalization have become particularly heightened in neoliberalism.

Conceptualizing sexual citizenship

The field of study on sexual politics, having gained traction in the 90s, has shaped the ways in which complexities of heteronormative belonging are addressed, recognition sought, and citizenship constructed (Evans 1993; Bell 1995; Richardson 1998; Weeks 1999). Considering the range of academic engagements with sexual citizenship, not only oriented towards legislative inclusion, but also symbolic forms of recognition and representation (Seidman 2001), sexual citizenship is best understood as ‘an open and unfinished concept’ (Sabsay 2016a, 88).

While the sexual citizen has been welcomed as a political subjectivity enabling LGBTQ+ communities in particularly Western metropolitan areas to claim collective identities and rights, it has not remained without criticism. Subject to critique has been the insufficient challenge of the public/private divide (Bell and Binnie 2000), the associated overwhelming focus on passive forms of sexual citizenship as status instead of participation and action (Stychin 2001), the maintenance of sexual citizenship as an abstract and universal subjectivity (Sabsay 2016a), as well as the underlying Western focus of the paradigm’s role in imperial constructions of Western sexualities as universal (Puar 2006; El-Tayeb 2011; Sabsay 2012; Luibhéid 2022; Suen 2022). Discussions of sexual citizenship through the lens of colonialism (Alexander 1994; Puri et al. 2014) and racism (Cahill 2010; Ferguson 2018) draw attention to the ways in which normative sexual inscriptions function through the body. Read together, these assessments amount to the wider critique of sexual citizenship as a normative project of assimilation (Berlant 1997; Richardson and Monro 2012).

Queer, poststructural, and postmodern scholarship has taken seriously the ways in which normative recognition of sexual citizenship is conditional on legible identity categories (Warner 1991; Butler 2002). Sexual citizenship, configured within the liberal paradigm as centered on homogeneous identities, has been interpreted as a barrier to liberation by ‘deconstructionist politics’ (Casey 2011, 282). In challenging the organizing principle of normative sexuality, it has been argued that instead of basing political claims on coherent identities, more fluid conceptions of multiple identifications and affinities should be centered (Butler 1993a; Phelan 1995; Hall 1996). This body of scholarship has argued for more careful engagements with identity not as fixed and stable, but fluid and disjointed.

While the bulk of work on the theoretical and conceptual questions of sexual politics and LGBTQ+ movements was published in the early 90s and 2000s, more recent scholarship continues to grapple with similar sets of questions (e.g. Johnson 2017; Payne and Davies 2012; Rao 2014). However, generally speaking, research on sexual politics and citizenship has moved away from theoretical considerations and has turned its focus to the ways in which rights claims are made and strategically deployed at the local, regional, and transnational level (Richardson 2015). Considering this trend, this article recenters conceptual questions, proposing a re-politicized notion of sexual citizenship that promotes considerations of the ways in which political subjectivities actively emerge, solidarities are formed, and radical sexual politics enacted.

Sexual citizenship in neoliberal capitalism

Tracing modern LGBTQ+ policies in the United States and Western Europe has most prominently been linked to the 1969 Stonewall Riots as a moment of resistance against marginalizations of non-normative sexuality and gender expressions, racist oppression, and policy brutality.³ Accordingly, the Stonewall Riots did not only consist of the struggle for sexual freedom, but targeted multiple oppressions (Ferguson 2018, 32). Threatening hegemonic and normative power structures, the riots figured as a break with previous assimilationist politics (Evans 1993; Casey 2011). The ensuing construction of the homosexual identity contributed to the de-pathologization of homosexuality and the rejection of stigma in Western Europe and the United States.

The history of Euro-North-American sexual politics shows how identity-based politics are a useful tool of self-determination. Occupying a minority identity position in this way can be understood as a 'basic source of social significance' (Nascimento 2007, 14), providing the subject with a framework to explicitly resist normative categories.⁴ Indeed, Castells (2010) provides an account of the varying purposes claiming one's identity can serve. While *resistance* identities are ascribed to agents of marginalized social groups and *project* identities constitute the means for challenging normative structures, *legitimizing* identities are shored up by mainstream institutions. The Stonewall Riots exemplify the meaning of resistance identity as marginalized individuals openly fought against discrimination and violence. As the movement gained visibility and momentum, Pride started to become an important means for shaping societal perceptions and promoting a positive narrative of LGBTQ+ individuals. Alongside this shift, there has been an emergence of legitimizing forces by mainstream institutions that recognize the economic and social value of LGBTQ+ communities.

I argue that one prevalent modality through which the normative and legitimizing project of identity formation has been made possible is the rise of capitalism and the material construction of sexuality (d'Emilio 1983; Evans 1993). The expansion of capitalism has pushed Western sexual politics towards performative forms of identity-based politics that legitimize the dominance of corporations and figure as a form of neoliberal governmentality. The annual Pride month in many Western metropolitan cities illustrates this, where liberatory politics become transformed into marketing campaigns 'propagated by a neoliberal market' (Kapur 2018, 70). The politically charged roots of Pride gave way to the depoliticized and commercialized events of today (Chisholm 2016). The conceptual lens of pinkwashing, coined by Schulman (2011), exposes the strategic positioning of corporations, countries, and institutions as LGBTQ+ friendly that 'drape the imperial capitalist forces [...] in rainbows' (Baez 2019, 23). The circulation of particular imaginaries through the marketization of particularly gay and lesbian ways of living contributes to fixed identities as 'socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility' (Butler 1990, 17).

The expectation of individual self-creation is promoted by the segmentation of consumer groups, ultimately taking the form of self-regulation (Grewal 2005, 16). This manifestation of individualized entrepreneurship of the self, figures as an antithesis to relational solidarity (Long 2018). The heightened individualization and formulation of political agency as consumer choice operates in tandem with self-responsibilizing

processes that construct individual actors as their own fortune's architects (Madhok and Rai 2012, 648).

Taking into account that democratic processes have been redefined as consumer choice (Katz 2008, 356), I want to consider the de-politicizing effects the commercialization of Western sexual politics has. While same-sex marriage and military participation have been characterized as de-politicizing (Duggan 2002; Sears 2005), commercial LGBTQ+ representations for the purpose of capital accumulation operate in a similar manner. Duggan (2002, 190) centers the ways in which 'a fixed minority arrayed around state-endorsed heterosexual primacy and prestige' has substituted multi-issue-oriented endeavors. The same can be said for the market-endorsed forms of normative expressions of sexuality and gender. Linking the de-politicization of sexuality to the recasting of the sexual citizen from a liberal to neoliberal subjectivity, Wendy Brown's (2015) work on democratic processes offers insight on how the *homo politicus* as the substance of political action has been increasingly displaced by the *homo oeconomicus*, economizing every aspect of life.

While some subjects continue to benefit by adapting these normalized and de-politicized manifestations of pre-figured identities, others have not (Lorey 2015). They are rendered disposable through criminalization, restricted access to health care, as well as a continuing high number in hate crimes for 'the unassimilable', particularly against people of Color, trans* and intersex communities, as well as disabled and poor individuals. Neoliberal individualism has contributed to techniques of surveillance and regulatory power, but also necropolitical projects of abandonment that speak the language of diversity management (Mbembe 2003; Haritaworn, Kuntsman, and Posocco 2014; Spade 2015). The false ideal of universal freedom and choice strengthen these regulatory forms of control through denying autonomy to those that do not conform with normative ideals (Grewal 2005, 2; Sabsay 2016b, 168).

Activist sexual citizenship

Considering the ways in which the de-politicization of identity-based sexual politics has been operating in tandem with individualizing notions of sexuality, this section bridges theorizations of queer politics with scholarship on active/activist citizenship.

Political agency lies at the heart of the nexus between citizenship as practice and citizenship as status (Dahlgren 2006; Lazar and Nuijten 2013; Lister 2017 [1997]). Based on social movements, active citizenship centers the process of negotiating 'the self' in a web of ambivalent power structures as the process of self-making (Ong et al. 1996, 737), as well as broader formulations of collective and communal engagements that center agentic voices in bottom-up processes of political participation (Lister 2017 [1997], 24). While the differentiation between status and practice is often the basis for conceptualizing the latter as a condition of the former, active citizenship does not necessarily require a particular status and institutional enforcement. Instead, it can be interpreted more loosely as a variety of political engagements with civil society (Bee and Kaya 2017, 305).

Despite the paradigm's success in rethinking how political claims are imagined, Buire and Staeheli (2017, 174) note that the understanding of active forms of citizenship potentially favor individualized behavior, moderately seeking to generate legitimacy instead of enforcing change and transformation. Picking up this cautious engagement

with participatory forms of citizenship, Engin Isin (2008, 42) delineates *active* from *activist* enactments of citizenship. While practice as active citizenship legitimizes the status quo by following a pre-written script, acts as activist citizenship challenge existing structures by re-writing the script.⁵ Becoming a political claimant through the latter involves the breaking of structure and order.

Translating this conceptualization to sexual politics, I am thinking with Butler's (1993b) assertion that the application of the term 'queer' is disruptive in nature. Reclaiming 'queer' as part of a political liberatory project interrupts the term's past as a pathologizing insult, essentially breaking the repetitive cycle of negative connotations. Applying this line of thinking to Isin's (2008) differentiation between practice and act of citizenship draws attention to the ways in which an established routine needs breaking. If repetition creates homogeneous hetero- and homonormative identities and structures, do queer acts of citizenship disrupt these?

Considering the example of commercialized sexual politics, I propose that repetition cannot only be understood in terms of citational practices, as Butler theorizes, but as repetitive practices of consumption and participation in dominant forms of representation and popular culture. The continuous and repeated configuration of consumer groups reproduces and sustains stable identity categories. Dominant sexual politics and de-politicized patterns of consumption, enacted through the occupation of such positions, are thus to be destabilized. Queer acts of sexual citizenship figure as the disruption of assimilationist and normalizing politics. Such an understanding of activist sexual citizenship is reflected in Cathy Cohen's (1997) work on radical queer politics where she, in line with Butler (1993b), understands queerness as a rejection of the status-quo.

To exemplify how queer acts of sexual citizenship can be realistically enacted, I juxtapose the Queer Liberation March with the NYC Pride, where in 2019 the former figures as an interruption of the latter. After NYC Pride has been continuously criticized several years in a row 45,000 marchers took it to the streets of NYC in 2019, following the same route as the Pride Parade and voicing their discontent (Reclaim Pride 2022). Indeed, the criticism focused on its corporate sponsorship, the overwhelming police presence, the lack of intersectional coalition building, and for having become overly celebratory (e.g. Allied Productions 2019; Factora 2019; Fitzsimmons 2019). Indeed Corey Kilgannon (2019) from the New York Times described the two events as a 'clash of values'. Based on this multidimensional critique, the following sections incorporate these four components into their analyses.

Accordingly, I ask, does the Queer Liberation March as a counter protest to the mainstream Pride parade figure as a disruptive act of sexual citizenship? To think through this question, I first illustrate how the NYC Pride qualifies as an established practice of active citizenship, to then show how the Queer Liberation March can be interpreted as an act of citizenship. This reflection and characterization of Pride is not universal but geopolitically specific. In Latvia, for example, the first officially organized Pride parade in 2005 has been interpreted as an act of citizenship (Krūma and Indāns 2013), while other Pride parades in Western European cities have already taken shape of active citizenship as legitimizing practice. The empirical engagement is context-specific and its Western and urban application a central limitation.

First, Pride celebrations function as a modality of representation, contributing to greater visibility (Hennessy 2000; Kapur 2018). With the right to visibility and

representation being part of cultural citizenship (Steenbergen 1994), actively participating in the Pride parade can be understood as a practice in the realm of cultural sexual citizenship. More specifically, the Pride parade in NYC can be interpreted as routine as the celebrations predictably occur in the month of June every year and are thus part of a regularly organized structure during Pride Month. I suggest that conceptualizing this form of annual participatory politics as an active form of citizenship can be considered a ‘tool to advance legitimacy but not transformation’ (Buire and Staeheli 2017, 178).

Second, based on this reading, it is possible to differentiate between sexual citizenship in the form of homonormative practice geared towards assimilationist visibility and the form of confrontational queer acts, seeking to disrupt multiple power structures. In interpreting the Pride parade as a repetitive event of consumption- and capital-driven sexual citizenship, the March sought to destabilize the project of occupying homogeneous white gay and lesbian identity positions. This movement of resistance aimed to not only re-politicize queer liberation, as well as destabilize the legible vs. illegible dichotomy of being, but maintained a multi-issue framework while doing so. Accordingly, the March centered the experience of Black trans* women, as well as of migrant children in US detention centers (Caspani and Lavietes 2019). In Isin’s (2008, 10) words the March can be understood as ‘a form of resistance to established patterns and practices’ of consumption and aesthetic celebrations. The expectation to self-create in line with particular consumer groups was actively rejected and challenged.

Relational sexual citizenship

Developing the notion of sexual citizenship in the form of queer acts further, this section expands on the relational aspect of activist sexual citizenship to challenge the individualizing logic of normative sexual politics as reliant on the idea of the bounded self. The potential of political acts is preceded by the ways in which political subjectivities are constituted. As a result, this section will show how understanding sexual citizenship as relational is a critical component of disrupting the status quo.

First, in discussing the destabilization of fixed identity categories through acts of citizenship, Yon Hsu (2008, 257) emphasizes that ‘political subjects are unmade and made at the same time through challenging the given political order’. The basis on which political claims are formulated is continuously rethought and restructured depending on the claim in question. The enactment of relational and activist citizenship by a political claimant can be characterized as the moving in and out of subject positions (Isin 2008). This theorization is in line with Grewal’s (2005) notion of seeing a shifting subject as the locus of citizenship.

Second, it is the intersubjective engagement that configures the subject (Mackenzie and Stoljar 2000, 4). Turning to the relational understanding of the political claimant beyond the self, Amin Ghaziani (2011, 99) brings forward the notion of a ‘post-gay collective identity constructions’. He observes a shift from an ‘us’ *versus* ‘them’ towards an ‘us’ *and* ‘them’ dichotomy. Based on the increasing inclusion of LGBTQ+ allies in activist circles, he characterizes this move as the building of bridges towards the dominant group based on commonalities. While he centers, and rightly so, lost sensibilities in recognizing difference within collective identities, he also points out that ‘the transition to a post-gay era becomes theoretically useful, as it presents an opportunity to re-imagine

the relationship between “us”, “them”, and even “thems inside” (102). This shift offers an opportunity to reconsider the meaning of ‘us’ and ‘them’. I argue that the conceptual framing of relational acts enables a different reading of the *and* as foregrounding the interdependent nature of resisting not only homophobic, but racist, transphobic, and orientalist power structures.

In this spirit, LeMaster and Toyosaki (2023, 93), define queer allyship as ‘a coalitional politic that simultaneously interrogates various normativities and resists oppression across intersections of difference’. They position the ally as an essential component of a network of relational forces that build a sense of belonging and solidarity. Importantly, confronted with multiple power structures and shifting positions within sexual politics, the position of an ally is not fixed. Recognising the fluctuating occupations of multiple political subject positions leads to the impossibility of constructing the stable dichotomy of an in- and out-group. In this way, relational acts of citizenship always entail a range of individuals and collectivities rather than two opposing parties. The essence is always already being with, and in relation to, others.

To be more specific, the multi-issue politics of the March created dialogue in which the roles of listening and speaking constantly shifted – depending on the claims that were made. In one instance Blair Imami, ambassador of the organization ‘Muslims for Progressive Values’, addressed the realities of queer people of faith, emphasising the importance of validating their existence. In another instance, installations at the March were honouring the lost lives of queer indigenous peoples (Factora 2019). Both examples bring the protesters into relation with multiple forces of oppression, challenging the construction of the emblematic homosexual subject as white, Western, and secular in opposition to its ‘Others’ (Said 1979; Massad 2007; Fassin 2011).

This form of queer politics, having created a scene of ‘us’ *and* ‘them’, is enacted without falling into the trap of assimilation to the dominant group, it involves continuing negotiations, destabilizing the fixed form of the dominant and the minority group.⁶ The shifting positionalities of individual actors, as well as their relations to others, lead to the impossibility of clearly delineating homogeneous groups from one another. This notion of queer politics reiterates Dillon’s (2018, 14) discussion of Cohen’s (1997) seminal work in which he locates the potential of queerness in the ‘capacity to act as a force’ – a force channelled by everyone dedicated to radical politics.

I conclude this section by emphasizing that a responsible theorization of citizenship requires attention paid to the risk that comes with acting (Madhok and Rai 2012). Who can (afford to) act and who cannot? Who can afford to safely occupy the position of an outsider? These questions amount to the self-reflexive and critical dimension of queer politics (Butler 1993b), guiding the next section’s considerations in critically scrutinizing the conditions within which political claims are made. How can queer politics accountably engage with the realization that the potentials for activist forms of sexual citizenship are differentially distributed?

Embodied sexual citizenship

Taking seriously the previously raised questions, this section now develops the relational and activist notion of sexual citizenship further to account for the ways in which subjects are differentially positioned. Only by rejecting the notion of

universal relationality can such politics be theorized and put into practice. Bodily matter and embodied difference constitute the locus of sexual citizenship and politics.

Past conceptualizations of political subjectivities and citizenship have been critiqued for relying on the limiting understanding of the rational political mind as independent from corporeal processes and bodily substance (e.g. Bacchi and Beasley 2002; Grosz 1994; Lister 2017 [1997]). However, the potential of claiming sexual citizenship, as well as the ability to socially experience and perform one's sexuality and gender is preceded by the material implications of bodily existence (Meeks 2001). Social relations condition the lived realities of subjectivity that in turn inform individual abilities to become an embodied political being through acts of sexual citizenship (Bacchi and Beasley 2002, 344).

In particular, the conceptual lens of vulnerability draws attention to the fact that a universal and overly romanticized notion of relationality must always already be challenged when brought forward. The re-politicization of sexual politics has to be an anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-capitalist project that recognizes, and works with, the limits of interdependent political acting. This section argues for a two-sided understanding of vulnerability and embodiment.

The concept of vulnerability refers to the 'capacity to affect and be affected' (Sabsay 2016b, 279). Here, the relational understanding of the political subject is further developed and reiterated through relational vulnerabilities that always already consist of exposure to the Other. While vulnerability is based on bodily boundaries of the self, it is the subject's relation to others that defines and enables its positions and actions (Butler 2015, 130; Sabsay 2016b, 177–178). Nevertheless, a relational and collective understanding of shared vulnerability that seeks to challenge the neoliberal position of self-precarization and -responsibilization requires more scrutiny.

Understanding vulnerability as differentially distributed draws attention to the ways in which power structures and regimes of domination render some subjects more vulnerable than others.⁷ The condition of dispossession adversely impacts marginalized subjects' realities, while at the same time forming the subject (Sabsay 2016a, 178). In accordance with this doubled role, I center a two-sided framing of vulnerability as the limit, but also the condition of political action. To be more specific, on the one hand, accounting for how some bodies are more vulnerable than others leads to the realization that political acts of citizenship may not take the same form for every individual. On the other hand, shared embodied vulnerabilities constitute a dimension through which acts of citizenship emerge and can thus be understood as the grounds on which sexual politics are articulated.

Turning to the former framing, the condition of vulnerability is historically and economically contingent, constantly shaping the potentials of liveable lives through contemporary social and geopolitical power structures (Butler 2015, 139). Vulnerability is a dynamic and shifting effect of power instead of an essential feature. Accordingly, thinking through vulnerability and sexual citizenship together calls into question the particular structures of marginalization, shaping who can afford to act, let alone embody the pre-figured identity positions capitalist neoliberalism has provided. How do conditions of vulnerability diverge and how can sexual citizenship account for that?

Western neoliberal forms of self-governance operate in tandem with self-exploitation and -precarization (Lorey 2015); some subjects are privileged as self-governing entrepreneurs, while other livelihoods are continuously rendered disposable and denied access to any form of sexual citizenship. I want to draw attention to Siddhant Issar's (2021, 55) observation that disregarding capitalism's entanglements with racism, imperialism, and colonialism has de-politicizing effects on the ways in which capitalism is understood and challenged. It is thus necessary to trace capitalism's history and its inherent link to racism (Bohrer 2019; Robinson 2000 [2000 [1983]; Issar 2021) and settler colonialism (Lloyd and Wolfe 2016) to better understand the conditions out of which political subjectivities emerge.

The previously discussed individualizing and responsabilizing forces of Brown's notion of the *homo oeconomicus* are fundamentally dependent on a racist formation of neoliberalism (Issar 2021, 54). To be more specific, contemporary neoliberal capitalism continues to rely on not only the exploitation, but exclusion of racialized and migratized populations. In reference to sexual citizenship, Snorton and Haritaworn (2013) emphasize the importance of recognizing how the dominant trajectory of representation, such as assimilationist LGBTQ+ celebrations during Pride month, are complicit in racist and imperialist necropolitical projects of abandonment. The conjunction of racial capitalism and hegemonic sexual citizenship is reflected in the notion of trans* and queer necropolitics which emphasize that the precarization of non-normative sexual and gendered bodies operates in tandem with racialization, migratization, and coloniality (Aizura 2014).

To be more specific, the historically, socially, and economically facilitated condition of disposability and precarity is reflected in explicit acts of violence, such as racist police brutality in the United States (Sweeney 2021; Dillon 2018), being the leading death cause for young men of Color (Edwards, Lee, and Esposito 2019), as well as the greater risk of experiencing violence for racialized and migratized subjects in Western Europe (Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi 2017; De Genova 2018). Moreover, the number of anti-trans* hate crimes in the form of verbal as well as physical assault, particularly targeting trans* Black women, in Western Europe (Godzisz and Viggiani 2019; Bradley 2020) and the United States (Gyamerah et al. 2021) draws attention to the cruel side of normalized LGBTQ+ assimilation (Snorton and Haritaworn 2013). Not everyone can act in the same way, but faces different degrees of aggression, prosecution, and violence. Considering these developments against the backdrop of my example of the Queer Liberation March, I want to reiterate the previously raised questions of whose bodies are most likely to be targeted by law enforcement? Who can take the risk of marching with the protesters? Who cannot afford to act?

To build a bridge between vulnerability as a limit and as a condition within the formulation of radical sexual politics, there needs to be space for forming alliances with particularly vulnerable populations. According to Butler (2016, 66) for sexual politics to be radically democratic, the idea of one collective identity must be deconstructed to make room for diverging structures of precarity. It is possible to understand queer politics as a way of being-with that, instead of romanticizing interrelated ways of being, is grounded in shared vulnerability and precarity (Muñoz 2013, 69). Butler (2015, 151), drawing on Hannah Arendt (1968), refers to vulnerability as a political strategy of mobilization through 'acting in concert'. Care – 'both for oneself and for the good of

others' – is a critical element through which shared vulnerability can enforce solidarity (Kouri-Towe 2020, 192). These accounts of vulnerability as a political project depend on being exposed and sitting with shared precarity.

In my example of the March, the embodied subjects physically participating may be understood as acting out of shared precarity and vulnerability. Moreover, the multi-issue framework of the March illustrates how differentially distributed vulnerabilities can translate into collective projects of solidarity. An example is the March's focus on children in detention centers in the United States (Caspani and Laviertes 2019). While the children's physical isolation impedes their ability to 'act in concert', their vulnerable condition informs the politics of those who can.

Engaging with bodily subjectivity in this way is in line with Braidotti's (2015) notion of affirmative politics, foregrounding the transformative potentials of bodily inhabitation and relationality as the site of actualization. Understanding negative sentiments not only in terms of blockage, apathy, and inaction, but as an awareness for vulnerability, dispossession, and precarity, I want to conclude by cautioning the endeavor of seeking to move beyond negative sentiments through an overly positive reading of political action. To be more specific, characterizing the need to transform negative sentiments, Braidotti (2015, 51) writes, 'it makes all the difference to the patterns of repetition of negative emotions'. I suggest a flipped reading of this theorization. Re-considering the co-optation of Pride parades and the commercialized nature of LGBTQ+ movements, repetitive patterns of aesthetic celebratory and overly positive sentiments of blissful ignorance need breaking. To politicize the meaning of being a sexual citizen, I suggest that the frame of relational, activist, and embodied politics directs the attention towards the ways in which bodily subjects are precariously positioned in differential ways.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has demonstrated the ways in which the commercialization of sexual citizenship and neoliberal co-optation of LGBTQ+ movements has amounted to the de-politicization, individualization, and hegemonic normalization of sexual politics. Synthesizing existing scholarship, it proposed three components of sexual citizenship that challenge the assimilationist nature of sexual politics.

The activist dimension of sexual citizenship emphasizes the need to carve out the ways in which mainstream LGBTQ+ movements have amounted to normalized patterns of celebration that lack transformative potential. Moving from practices to acts of sexual citizenship creates a framework through which queer liberation may be conceptualized, analyzed, and actualized. While the former perpetuates the exclusionary configurations of sexual politics through consumption, the latter sets out to challenge the status quo as the assimilation of some white gay and lesbian subjects at the expense of others.

The relational dimension of sexual citizenship foregrounds the notion of multiple subject positions and intersubjective configurations of political acts to destabilize the construction of coherent identities as the basis of sexual politics. Relationality has been identified as an important component of sexual citizenship that captures how within multi-issue frameworks, the position of the political claimant and the ally is never fixed but always shifting. In this way, relationality challenges the existence of a stable and uniform dichotomy of in- and out-group, highlighting the necessity to always already

embedded acts of sexual citizenship in broader anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-imperialist struggles. It urges activist subjects to consider their positionality within a collective struggle that is characterized by heterogenous rather than homogeneous experiences. Only when embedded in multi-issue politics, can the activist notion fulfil its radical potential.

The embodied dimension constitutes the locus of relational and activist sexual citizenship. It further centers the needed account for historical, social, and economic hierarchies of power that condition the sexual citizen's (in)ability to act. Vulnerability is an adequate conceptual lens for understanding the ways in which embodied subjects are positioned in differential ways. It cautions limited accounts of universal relationality while at the same time for grounding solidarity with the ones that cannot afford to act. As a result, the recognition of shared, but differentially distributed vulnerability forms an essential condition of relational acts of sexual citizenship.

Bringing all three dimensions together provides an adequate framework to rethink the modalities of political participation underpinning sexual citizenship. Doing so has proven to be a useful tool for articulating a disruption of the commercialized cycle of single issue politics by foregrounding the necessity of coalition-building informed by historical, social, and economic conditions of precarity. In other words, only when brought together, can the transformative potential of sexual citizenship be accountably theorized and actualized. Importantly, the notion of sexual citizenship presented in this paper can urge privileged subjects to grapple with, and ultimately challenge, the conditions that have awarded them their recognition.

The comparison between the Queer Liberation March and the Pride Parade in New York City has exemplified how this conceptual lens may be applied to the analysis and practice of sexual politics. It serves as an important illustration of what the reality of activist, relational, and embodied citizenship may look like. The March claimed space and interrupted the order and the repetitive practice the corporate Pride parades had generated. Its politics were based on an understanding of how intersecting structures of oppression position bodies in differential ways and a commitment to coalitional politics that challenge neoliberal, colonial, and racial capitalism alike.

Notes

1. This article differentiates between the terminology of LGBTQ+ and queer. While the former is concerned with extending dominant forms of recognition to non-normative identities, the latter is employed in terms of counter-hegemonic positions and in relation to a radical queer politics that aims to challenge the limitations of dominant modes of recognition (Cohen 1997; Halberstam, Eng, and Muñoz 2005; Seidman 2001; Warner 1991).
2. A comprehensive list of the used sources can be provided upon request.
3. For a problematization of an uncritical interpretation of the Stonewall Riots as a global event and universal trajectory see for example Manalansan (1995).
4. Note that identity-based politics are a useful tool of self-determination. Removing labels and deconstructing identity categories can operate in tandem with vanishing possibilities of self-naming. The importance of avoiding relentless deconstruction becomes clear through Lisa

Duggan's (2003, 71) assertion that 'the specific dynamic of identity-based political formations drifting rightward into neoliberalism's embrace, while being denigrated and dismissed on the progressive-left with increasing ferocity, is a self-propelling, self defeating, utterly antiproduktive spiral of political schism'.

5. *Activist* and *acts of citizenship* are used interchangeably.
6. Note that this understanding of relational citizenship, in line with an understanding for epistemic authority, does not imply that everyone can speak to every struggle.
7. Importantly, vulnerability cannot be reduced to the ascription of injury as a passive characteristic (Butler 2016; Sabsay 2016b).

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