Queer and Creation

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Abstract:

The creativity displayed by queer feminist activists in their self-designation and in the denominations they choose for their collectives shows us the full measure of the potential of language. Playing with phonetics and spelling, using neologisms, inventing new meanings, hybridizing concepts and displacing meaning are all the processes used in these linguistic creations. Their presentation is an opportunity to give an overview of queer feminism in France, a movement of critical thinking and activism, as well as a subculture.

> "We ascribe an agency to language, a power to injure, and position ourselves as the objects of its injurious trajectory. We claim that language acts, and acts against us [...] Thus, we exercise the force of language even as we seek to counter its force, caught up in a bind that no act of censorship can undo." (Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, p. 12.)

Talking about 'creation' to define feminist practices in general is not easy. Including in the restrictive sense of aesthetics, the term carries a set of representations, such as genius, individualism, progress, etc., concepts of which many artists and feminist collectives have tried to get rid of with more or less success. Similarly, one should avoid the excess of a gendered application of this term, as illustrated by the concept of 'feminine creation,' in order to avoid any naturalizing downward spiral. As part of the analysis of linguistic practices in queer feminist collectives, we will consider the concepts of creation and creativity (understood as the power of creation) in a much broader - and more general - perspective, in a sense taking into consideration at the same time the ideas of innovation, novelty and invention, as well as change, transformation and experimentation. Thus, linguistic and political creations must be considered as two sides of the same coin, jointly developing feminist action where feminist political issues are formed and invented through these creative processes of self-designation.

The term 'queer' does not resonate in the same way in its original language - the English speaking context from which it emerged – as it does in French, the country on which we focus here [1]. With the emergence in France, in the mid-1990s of queer issues, the issue of the translation of the term (Bourcier, 1998) was raised among activists and academics. Should it be kept as it is, without making any attempt at translation, at the risk of losing the political and radical weight attached to it: from the insulting original meaning to the subsequent positive reappropriation? Because beyond the single linguistic translation, the phenomena of reception and appropriation of queer feminism in the French context: both a critical thinking movement (queer theory), but also activism and subculture emerged in the mid-1980s in the United States, are to be understood in all their dimensions: cultural, political, academic, artistic, etc. Thus, the issue of the self-designation of queer feminist activists in France makes these translation processes particularly prominent, and their analysis will be an opportunity for us to highlight the blurred outline of queer feminism in France.

While there is no doubt that queer feminist activists have been inspired by the slogan "My body is a battlefield," they have not neglected to address language either, as a symbolic battlefield. As observed by Monique Wittig "each of us is the 'sum' of the transformations brought about by words. We are such social beings that even our physique is transformed (or rather formed) by the discourse – the sum of words that accumulate in us" (2007, p. 108.). And based on the principle that language is political, queer feminist activists are reclaiming language in a subversive manner. The creativity deployed in their self-designations and the denominations of their collectives is proof of it. The work on language, in linguistic and writing practices, takes several forms: playing with phonetics and spelling, using neologisms, inventing new meanings, hybridizing concepts and displacing meaning, etc.

Following the principle of empowerment [2], collectives such as G.A.R.Ç.E.S, Les Dures à Queer, La Barbe, Djendeur Terrorista, Panik Qulture, Urban Porn, Pink Bloc! and Les DépravéEs have understood that it was

critical to act on the grounds of designation in order to participate in their own enunciation to counter the phenomenon of name-calling. These strategies of self-definition must be understood through the dynamics of the situated discourse initiated by feminist theorists in the United States. From the first generation of epistemological theories about the standpoint and in a perspective largely influenced by Marxism, Nancy Hartsock places experience, specifically the issue of perception based on the material conditions of existence, at the centre of her thoughts on the feminist 'standpoint' (1983).

Contradicting the modernist tradition of the omniscient subject and pseudo objectivity of scientific knowledge, the situated standpoint should no longer be perceived as a means but as an added value, an 'epistemic privilege' to quote Sandra Harding (1986). From these attempts of re-evaluating scientific criteria the need emerges to take into account the context of enunciation in the production of knowledge (Harding, 1986 and Haraway, 2007) [3]. These arguments have introduced the positioning (necessarily contingent and contextual) of individuals in the social space as an essential principle, which helps queer feminist collectives build their own discourse.

Alongside this epistemological point of view, the approach of queer feminist collectives in terms of linguistic creations is in line with Foucault's conception of discourse. In his book on the work of Michel Foucault on the issues of sexuality, David Halperin asks himself:

> "Now, if power is everywhere, according to Foucault (1976), and if freedom – along with the possibilities for resisting power – is contained within power itself, then where shall we locate the pressure points, the fault lines, the most advantageous sites within the political economy of heterosexist/homophobic discourse for disrupting and resisting it?" (p. 48).

In response, Halperin suggests three possible strategies to create discursive counter-practices, two of them being, 'creative appropriation and resignification' and 'appropriation and theatricalization' (ibid, p. 48-49), which resonate with the creative processes involved in the self-designation of queer feminist collectives. In her work on the acts of language and the discourses of hate, Judith Butler affirms that the appropriation and resignification of language "requires that we open new contexts, that we speak using modes that have not yet been legitimized, and that we therefore produce new and future forms of legitimation" (Butler, 2004, p. 65, underlined by the author). Thus, the field of creation must be appropriated as it provides fertile ground for understanding the world, developing an intelligible and safe common space, and building oneself as a subject.

1. Creating communities

"Queers, migrantEs, trans, sans-papièrEs, gouines, indigènes, putes, femmes voilées, pédés, racailles, biEs, roms, séropos, banlieusardEs, travelos, freaks, squatteuSEs, folles, coloniséEs..." such is the list of groups mentioned on the call to protest by Pink Bloc!, encouraging them to join the ranks of the anti-colonial and anti-racist march in Paris on 2nd March 2013. A strategy of resistance rather than a homogeneous and unitary collective, Pink Bloc! demonstrates, through this non-exhaustive list, their interest in articulating different types of struggle and their commitment to promoting an open and multiple political subject.

Both protest and enunciation, social assignation and identity for oneself, this accumulation of denominations shows how appropriating language is key to creating an identity (individual or collective), as well as producing images, representations and symbols and a 'style' of one's own. The 'sub-cultural style' such as formulated by Dick Hebdige, can "communicate a difference and express a collective identity" (2008, p. 108). As a sub-culture, queer feminism is manifested through 'visual and discursive configurations,' witnessing the development of a community.

Among the self-definitions of activists and the denominations of collectives, here are some examples showing their work with language. An inventiveness that shows their creativity and plays with:

- Phonetics: the word 'queer' being close the sound of the French word 'cuire', 'cuir' and 'qu'ouïr' offers opportunities to play with language, especially with the invention of puns, for example: Les Dures à Queer [4], the name of a collective of Nantes feminists, active since 2008.
- Blend words: the self-definition of 'transpédégouine' [5] (a term to which we will return) or the annual 'Existrans' march for the rights of 'trans' people.
- Acronyms: GLOSS for Groupement de Lopettes Organiquement Sexuelles et Subversives (literally, Group of Organically Sexual and Subversive Pussies), STRASS for Syndicat du travail sexuel (Union of Sex workers), GARÇES for Groupe d'Action et de Réflexion Contre l'Environnement Sexiste (Action and Reflection Group Against Sexist Environment), the feminist collective of the Paris Institute of Political Studies. The lexicalization of acronyms adds an additional layer to playing with meaning.
- Spelling: the group Panik Qulture is an example. When asked about the meaning of their name, members explain: "Because right now culture is really crap and without PQ it's a real mess." [6] By retaining the initials PQ, a new meaning appears. It is almost a paragram, a 'mis-spelling or mis-print substituting one letter for another,' almost belonging to cryptography (DUPRIEZ, 1984, p. 319-20).
- Quirky references: with collective names such as 'La Licorne déviante' (The Deviant Unicorn), ' Les Flamands Roses' (The Pink Flamingos), or 'Les Panthères Roses' (The Pink Panthers).
- Polysemic words: 'La Barbe collective' plays on the multiple meanings of the word 'barbe' (beard) which refers to the French interjection 'La barbe !' in other words 'Enough is enough!' and a typically male attribute, the beard, which is also the main object of their actions. Activists wear false beards and protest in places of power to denounce the over-representation of men. This is a synecdoche, as the beard metonymically refers to man. There is also the project Gender Shoot, whose name is based on multiple meanings of the English verb 'to shoot.' There is a resonance between the approach chosen: to be photographed in order to show the diversity of sexual identities and genders, and the intention: breaking down gender norms.

These linguistic creations are rich and varied, but there are some constants: the invention of the pun, choosing names that are almost always ironic, using crude words and the lexicon of insult and verbal assault, the use of a foreign language, especially English.

2. Denominations based on insults

During his study of youth subcultures, drawing on the example of the punk movement, Dick Hebdige has observed a 'process of self-deprecating irony,' a typical manifestation of the formation of a subculture. Quoting Charles Winick, he remarks that "the word 'punk' as well as words of American black slang such as 'funk' and 'superbad' all seem to be part of this 'singular language of imagination and alienation [...] and in which values are inverted, the epithet 'bad' becoming for example a mark of excellence" (Hebdige, 2008, p. 119).

As evidenced by the denominations used by activists: 'freaks,' 'torduEs,' 'transpédégouines', 'queer', 'radicalEs', 'déviantEs,' etc. [7], the objective is to create their own language, but not "just a secret, cryptic language, but a way to give free rein to their imagination and express discomfort regarding ordinary language and reality" (Winick, 1959, p. 249). On leaflets and banners, in their manifestos and press releases, queer feminist activists adopt the lexical field of insults, rudeness and impertinence, playing on the injunctive, conative and performative function of discourse. The self-referential appropriation of offensive language is a figure of speech, which is close to antiparastasis, a neologism of meaning "of which the aim is to show that the crime is in fact rather commendable" (Dupriez, p. 55). Antiparastasis has a place of choice in the linguistic creations of collectives; this figure of speech is even at the heart of queer political projects as Judith Butler observed regarding the reappropriation of the term 'queer':

> "I still think that some words are hurtful, that it is very difficult to imagine that to repeat them may be beneficial; However, I must admit that repeating the word 'queer' again and again as part of self-affirmation has allowed it to be extracted from its original context, only offensive, and that it became a matter of reappropriation of language, a matter of courage too, of opening up the word, of the possibility of transforming the stigma into something more valorising" (Butler, 2005, p. 136).

According to Butler, the instability and contingency of the meaning of a word associated with the performative ownership of the discourse contribute to the resignification of the insult, an approach that is also a way of constructing oneself as a subject, of 'existing socially':

> "The name one is called both subordinates and enables, producing a scene of agency from ambivalence, a set of effects that exceed the animated intentions of the call. To take up the name one is called is no simple submission to prior authority, for the name is already unmoored from prior context, and entered into the labor of self-definition. The word that wounds becomes an instrument of resistance in the redeployment that destroys the prior territory of its operation" (Butler, 2004, p. 163).

Appropriating insulting words participates in a strategy of 'politics of shame' as described by Michael Warner, that is to say, to adopt the point of view of the 'stigmaphile', of non-compliance with the norm (Warner, 1999). The ambivalent relationship of the stigmatized with its stigma has already been the subject of a study by Erving Goffman (1963). According to the American sociologist "if he seeks separateness, not assimilation, he may find that he is necessarily presenting his militant efforts in the language and style of his enemies" (Goffman, p. 114). In the case of queer feminist collectives, the point is indeed to operate according to

confrontation - rather than assimilation - strategies. "The dissident ethos therefore calls for also researching dignity, not outside of what is a factor of social shame, but at the very heart of the disqualified identity, thereby making sexualized LGBT culture the base for a rebellious and confrontational political message" (MARCHE, 2008, p. 95). Let's Dyke, G.A.R.Ç.E.S, La Licorne Déviante, Les DépravéEs, Djendeur Terroristas, etc., the names of these collectives illustrate the strategy of reappropriating the lexicon of the deviant gender, of these most grotesque and exaggerated features. This reappropriation of the 'stigma' transforms them into the very subject of their enunciation, going 'From Handicap to Strength' as in the title of the 1962 article by Edward Sagarin, writing under the pseudonym of Donald Webster Cory.

In the introduction, we raised the issue of the translation of the word 'queer' in French. If some collectives and activists have chosen to retain the term 'queer,' the lack of literal translation may have caused some deviations, especially in aestheticized or academic forms of reappropriation far removed from the first political goals. Others, to work around the problem, have cleverly created the term 'transpédégouine.' This concatenation or blend word has the advantage, first to promote an umbrella identity, therefore gathering diverse identities under one single syntagma to meet the need for a coalition of struggles. This creation allows, secondly, to keep the infamous meaning and to showcase the strategy of antiparastasis.

3. Creative reappropriation of the English language

The recurring use of the English language by collectives in their self-definitional process derives from so-called peregrinisms, figures of speech which use "certain linguistic elements borrowed from a foreign language: sounds, spelling, sentence melody as well as grammatical structure, vocabulary or syntax, and even meanings or connotations" (Dupriez, p. 336-338). Examples: The Urban Porn, Pink Bloc!, Djendeur Terroristas and Let's Dyke collectives, the Gendershoot project, the production and distribution platform Wounderground, the Jerk Off festival and the Queer Week, etc. As diverse as the motivation for borrowing this language may be – whether for the sounds or the syntactic forms it offers, or because of its internationalism – it is necessary to analyse its ubiquity and to examine some prejudices.

The dominance of a language is primarily attributable to "the technological, economic and political domination as well as the cultural prestige of the civilization associated with the dominant language" (Picone, 1992, p. 10). Compared to this, linguistic factors are secondary, but must be taken into account. Indeed, "there currently exists in popular opinion a widespread feeling that French is giving way to English because the latter has qualities making it more suitable for lexical creation" (ibid. p. 9). Still according to Michael Picone, efficiency in terms of lexical creation is due to the structure of the English language itself and in particular to its synthetic nature. Unlike French and its so-called analytical morphology, the synthetic nature of English is partly explained by the lack of prepositions (taxemes) between nouns (syntagms). According to Michael Picone, this economy in the syntactic structure is better able to respond to the 'lexicogenetic challenge' that is to say, demonstrating efficiency in terms of formation and renewal of language. The use of English facilitates elliptical or parataxis effects. Parataxis is a figure of speech in which are arranged "side by side two propositions without marking the relation of dependency that unites them" (Dupriez, p. 328), a useful formula with suggestive efficiency, encouraging the creation of new configurations and displacement of meaning.

In parallel to the linguistic explanation, should one consider the pervasiveness of English as a form of imperialism that dares not speak its name? Language as an axis of identity and oppression is almost invariably absent from intersectional analyses, often reduced to the "gender, race, class" trilogy (Baril, 2013). Yet it is necessary to examine this monolingualism so as not maintain any blind spot in the field of academic research. But, applied to the identity-focused policies developed by minorities, the use of the English language must be approached slightly differently. During an interview with Bernard Darras, Marie-Hélène Bourcier explained:

> "The omnipresence of English in the world of science, business and politics makes it the natural target for anti-imperialist vindication. [...] English is also one of the languages most used by minorities across the world, specifically to counter American hegemony (in the ordinary sense of the term). For a long time minorities have learned the lesson of La Malinche. For sexual and gender minorities, for example, the English words queer, genderqueer and gay are not products imported by force or cultural forms of alienation but common and transnational political denominations." (Bourcier, in Darras, p. 8)

To illustrate the use of peregrinisms in the linguistic creations of queer feminist activism, the example of Djendeur Terroristas, a Parisian collective formed recently (January 2014) is particularly interesting. The term 'Djendeur Terroristas' is what one could call a pseudo peregrinism, close to gibberish [8], or even cryptography. 'Terrorists of gender' if one had to translate it, or to be more exact 'the terrorists of the theory of djendeur' as they specify on their website, these translations render obvious the synthetic efficiency of the English language.

The name 'Djendeur Terroristas' is constructed from a Frenchified Anglicism, 'Djendeur,' and a Hispanicism, 'Terroristas.' This comical combination owes its invention to several motives. The term 'djendeur' is to mock the opponents of 'gender theory', who have great difficulty in pronouncing the Anglo-Saxon word 'gender'. These opponents refuse to translate the term, as if there were no French equivalent to this concept, and this despite the proven use of the concept of gender in the field of research in human and social sciences.

Keeping the English term is also a way of highlighting the supposed American provenance of the concept, an origin that is considered as a stigma and from which the French should protect themselves... As for the choice of 'Terroristas,' it is a reference to Kate Bornstein who has described her work in terms of 'gender terrorism,' although she later had some reservations about the relevance of this antiparastasis:

> "For a while, I thought it would be fun to call what I do in life gender terrorism. [...] But I've come to see it a bit differently now – gender terrorists are not the drag queens, the butch dykes [...], back-seat Betties [...]. Gender terrorists are not the female to male transsexual who's learning to look people in the eye while he walks down the street [...] the terrorists are those who [...] bang their head against a gender system which is real and natural, and who then use gender to terrorize the rest of us. Those are the real terrorists: the Gender defenders" (Bornstein, 1995, p. 71-72).

Using the Hispanic translation of 'terrorists' also shows the desire of Djendeur Terroristas to show their support to Spanish women and their struggle against the abortion bill (early 2014).

4. Creating a demasculinized language

Appropriating the language, feminizing it, or rather demasculinizing it, is a real challenge. To linguistic policies deconstructing the supposed neutrality of language, they oppose the argument of the generic masculine, a feature of the French language, which is difficult to do without. Indeed, the French language, by opposition to English "has the reputation of being a language strongly influenced by gender." (Wittig, p. 103). One must however highlight the fact that the 'mark of gender,' to borrow the title of Monique Wittig's article, applies only to the feminine gender. This follows semantic shifts, made in grammar and language, making the masculine gender neutral, undefined and generic, "leaning towards the universal and abstract" (ibid., p. 106) . Wittig sees it as a 'measure for power and control,' the 'criminal act' of one class against another (ibid., p. 107).

There is no doubt that there is 'sexism in the French language' as has been observed by Eliane Viennot in her historical study on the imposition of the masculine over the feminine gender (2014). However, this discrimination is not intrinsic to the language, but the result "of the interventions performed on the language since the 17th century by intellectuals and institutions who oppose gender equality" (ibid. p. 9-10.). However it is possible to act on the language. Facing this imposition, some alternatives are possible, such as creating a non-gendered language, or a highly gendered language.

To counter this discrimination, queer feminist collectives adopt a series of measures to demasculinize language, challenging, for example, the rules on agreement, in order to counter the principle of the masculine outweighing the feminine [9]:

- Showing the two grammatical genders in the same word by creating a new spelling: adding brackets 'militant(e)', hyphens 'militant-e', midpoints 'militant·e', or capitals 'militantE'. It seems that the latter solution is favoured by queer activists, which can cause legibility and comprehension issues for the uninitiated. [10]
- Using gender-neutral nouns and adjectives, that is to say, whose form does not vary according to gender: for example the use of the word 'personne' instead of the generic term 'homme' or the term 'activiste' rather than 'militant, militante.' The point is sometimes also to ironically feminize gender-neutral words, such as 'une collective' rather than 'un collectif.'
- Inventing terms that meet the demands in terms of attention and respect raised by the issues of denominations and designations. This process mainly concerns personal pronouns in the third person and demonstrative pronouns for example 'ceulles' instead of 'celles' and/or 'ceux,' 'ielle' instead of 'il' and/or 'elle' or 'eulles' instead of 'elles' and/or 'eux,' etc.
- Going beyond the rigidity of language, marked by bigenderism, by inventing new spelling forms encouraging the recognition of identities exceeding the bipartition of the sexes. For example, to escape transsexual and transgender categorization, the graphic creations of trans' or trans* are mostly used. Alternatively, the LGBT acronym does not sufficiently cover the broad spectrum of gender identities, sexual identities and sexual orientations, so it is sometimes replaced by 'LGBT+'.

5. Conclusion

This overview of the self-denominations chosen by queer feminist collectives has allowed us to better understand this activism and in particular the forms it takes in France. In light of the diversity of linguistic creations, interventions and forms of reappropriation of language, these collectives seem to refuse assimilation (reappropriation of insults, stigmaphile appropriation, valorisation of what is different and 'deviant') and be determined to fight against all forms of discrimination globally, giving a decisive role to the production of political alliances and coalitions. These linguistic creations also illustrate the emphasis on humour, irony and jokes, which are all counter-discursive strategies. To this must be added the interest of recognizing 'the temporal life of language' (Butler, 2004, p. 22) and the possibilities it offers in terms of political and identity development. The rhetorical procedures deployed by activists participate actively in the process of subjectivation. However, the objective here is to invent a collective subject that is also built through the creation of a unique world, reinforcing the sense of belonging to a community.

6. Footnotes:

[1] Queer movements and policies and the queer theory have their roots in the United States. They appeared in France in the mid-1990s, providing new weapons to think and practice identity-focused activism (i.e. anti-assimilationist) coupled with a post-identity-focused position (i.e. anti-essentialist). In the United States, the queer movements and the queer theory emerged in response to essentialist positions, particularly those held by feminist and/or homosexual activists and scholars, but also to counter the straight LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender) movement that was assimilationist, white and bourgeois. In contrast, the emergence of the queer movement was quite different in France. Queer policies have promoted a strong identity-focused affirmation (both collectively and individually) and the point was rather to reject integration into the French republican context.

[2] The concept of empowerment is rooted in the social emancipation movements that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s (the struggle for civil rights, feminist movements, etc.). This empowerment is a real-life phenomenon, coming from below, in the sense that the active participation of community members is the main condition for its development and emancipation. Empowerment is based on the principles of self-management, collective action and creativity. More recently, this concept was rediscovered by international institutions and managerial theorists. Emptied of those original goals, it has been corrupted by the ideology of economic liberalism, with the establishment of initiatives that participate in the individualization of empowerment, and the empowerment of minorities; the 'success' of microcredit is a sad example of this. See Bacque, M-H & Biewener, C. (2013). L'empowerment, une pratique émancipatrice. Paris: La découverte.

[3] For a critical analysis of the feminist epistemologies of the 'standpoint', please refer to the excellent article by Artemisa Flores Espinola (2012). «Subjectivité et connaissance: réflexions sur les épistémologies du 'point de vue'.» Les Cahiers du genre, No. 53. p. 99-120.

[4] Translator's note: The direct translation of this would be 'Hard-boiled' with a play on the words 'queer' and 'cuire,' which would be the equivalent of 'boiled' (cooked) in French.

[5] Translator's note: This blend word consists of three words, the last two being particularly derogative: 'trans' (transsexual) + 'pédé' (queer) + 'gouine' (dyke).

[6] Answer given during their appearance on the 'Bistouri-oui-oui' show on Radio Libertaire, February 18th, 2005. In French 'PQ' (Papier Q) is a play-on-words in which 'Q' means 'cul' (arse), i.e. PQ = toilet paper.

[7] I have kept the spelling used by the collectives.

[8] "Deformation, whether phonetic or lexical, used in order to give the text the appearance of a foreign language when it can in fact be understood in French" (Dupriez, p. 80).

[9] These processes are not specific to queer feminism. They are applied in feminist circles to varying degrees.

[10] I chose to adopt midpoints a few years ago, the solution, which, in my opinion, does not affect legibility.

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