

Queer Berlin and the Covid-19 crisis: a politics of contact and ethics of care

Ben Trott (16th June 2020)

In his 1989 essay “Mourning and Militancy”, the critic and curator Douglas Crimp (1989, 11) wrote about how, with the onset of the AIDS crisis, gay men not only came to mourn the loss of friends and lovers but also the loss of pleasures, specifically of “uninhibited and unprotected sex”. He noted that to state this openly would “hardly solicit solidarity, even tolerance”; with tolerance itself, he argued, just another albeit more refined form of condemnation, and “[o]ur pleasures were never tolerated anyway; we took them. And now we must mourn them” (Crimp 1989, 11). The current Covid-19 pandemic is not an equivalent to HIV/AIDS, not least, as João Florêncio (2020) reminds us, in terms of the social stigma attached nor the time it has taken governments and scientific bodies to respond. But for many queer and LGBT people, mixed up with a mourning of lives lost to Covid-19 – and a fearful anticipation of those that may still yet be lost to the virus – there is once more a kind of sadness at the loss of certain queer forms of sociality; and a growing anxiety about when, perhaps even whether, they might return. This is not necessarily related to the loss of queer sexual pleasures (at least, not exclusively), but rather to the looming threat of losing ways of encountering others that emerged out of how intolerable their absence was.

Contemporary queer socialities – including the friendship networks and the alternative modes of community and kin-making that can form in and around bars, clubs and other spaces – are partly the product of histories of banishment from the family (and from the social and political institution of the family), shared experiences of sexual stigma, a need to escape from the policing of gender, and a desire for sanctuary from threats of homo- and trans-phobic violence.¹ (These are the “safe spaces” that it is so fashionable to mock today, particularly among those who have never needed them.) For those who have never *needed* a gay bar, a queer club, a community of drag and other artists, it is – I imagine – easy to underestimate what it means to lose these things (temporarily, hopefully); and to lose them in a moment of real crisis. My focus in this paper is on queer Berlin, but the fear of permanently losing queer institutions and infrastructure feels well-founded, given the closure already of San Francisco’s oldest gay bar, The Stud (founded in 1966), as a result of revenues lost in the current pandemic (CBS News 2020).

¹ I am drawing here on Donna J. Haraway’s (2016, 102-103) discussion of “making-kin” which attempts “to make ‘kin’ mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy.” She writes: “I was moved in college by Shakespeare’s punning between *kin* and *kind* – the kindest were not necessarily kin as family; making kin and making kind (as category, care, relatives without ties by birth, lateral ties, lots of other echoes) stretch the imagination and can change the story” (Haraway 2016: 103).

To be sure, just as it is not only gay men who have suffered, mourned, and died in the ongoing AIDS epidemic – and it is very much ongoing: 770,000 lives were lost to AIDS-related illnesses worldwide in 2018 (UN AIDS 2019) – it is clearly not queer and LGBT people alone whose lives are currently missing important forms of community and conviviality. Moreover, degrees of isolation from networks of mutual care and kin-making, not to mention levels of exposure to risk of infection, illness and death, are very unevenly distributed; both within and beyond these milieus. Yet there are aspects of the Covid-19 crisis that pose particular challenges and threats to queer and LGBT people.

I will address some of these challenges and threats here, and particularly those posed to *queer infrastructures* and the forms of encounter and unforeseen *contact* that they can facilitate (among a number of other important material, political and aesthetic functions). I will then turn to some of the forms of *care* that have been developed by queer and LGBT (sub-)cultures, institutions and communities in Berlin amidst the current pandemic, before making a case for embedding the urgently needed defence of queer spaces and socialities within broader social movements and struggles for *the right to the (queer) city*.

Gay stigma

Despite important differences, the effects and consequences of the coronavirus cannot be entirely separated from those of earlier (and ongoing) epidemics. If it had not been the Trompete nightclub in Berlin's Mitte district, for instance, but rather one of the many dark rooms and cruising spaces found in the city's gay clubs that had become one of the early infection "hotspots", it is very easy to imagine how queer people could quickly have been again cast as particularly dangerous vectors of transmission – and in ways that did not happen with, say, the police after the *Berliner Zeitung* reported several officers had been infected while on a night out at the club (Schütze 2020).²

Berlin has a deserved reputation for sexual tolerance but, as in the country as a whole, forms of stigma are easy to find, particularly where health is concerned. Germany's comparatively soft lockdown, imposed incrementally throughout the course of mid- to late-March, saw the shutting of schools and other public buildings often used for blood donation, followed by social distancing measures and an encouragement to stay at home. Hospitals quickly expressed concern about blood shortages and by mid-May reserves in Berlin and the surrounding state of Brandenburg had fallen to less than that required for the average day (Kögel 2020 and DPA 2020a). And yet the country's ruling coalition of Social and Christian Democrats (the SPD and the CDU/CSU) have reaffirmed their commitment to regulations preventing men who have sex with men (MSM)

² A spokesperson for the Ministry of Health in South Korea has described the "criticism and hatred" that was directed toward some of those who became infected at gay clubs in Seoul's Itaewon neighborhood after the easing of social distancing regulations in the city in early-May, and following attention to the cluster of infections by conservative and religious media (Ryall 2020).

from donating blood (unless they have abstained from sex for at least 12 months) (Warnecke 2020). Gay sex continues to be defined as risky, then; even when it takes place within monogamous state-sanctioned marriage, and despite the ability to effectively test for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Paradoxes of queer liberalism

Recent years have seen a significant growth in LGBT cultural visibility and representation in Germany, with 2019 seeing the launch of television shows from *Queens of Drag* (inspired by *RuPaul's Drag Race*), *Prince Charming* (a gay version of *The Bachelor*), and *Queer 4 You* (based on *Queer Eye*). Greater legal equality has also been achieved, with both adoption and marriage rights granted to same-sex couples in 2017. And yet, as has been the case elsewhere in world, increased visibility and more formal equality have coincided with a rise in homo- and trans-phobic violence (or at least in their reporting), including in Berlin (DPA 2020b). It has also coincided with an international rise of far-right groups and parties like the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD).³

The shutting down of much public and commercial life in response to Covid-19 had the desired (and in many ways desirable) effect of drastically reducing the number of people out and about in the city, particularly in late-March and April. However, even before the streets temporarily emptied of many of those who *might* be able to help deter or prevent homo- and trans-phobic violence and harassment, a survey by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) (2020, 50) had found that in Germany, 24% of respondents “often” or “always” “avoid certain places or locations for fear of being assaulted, threatened or harassed due to being LGBTI”. 36% reported having been harassed in the previous 12-months (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020, 44). The streets and public life can be more dangerous for queer and trans people, then. But not everyone has the “luxury” of being able to stay safe at home either. This is most obviously the case, first, for those working in essential jobs (namely, those professions suddenly recognized as “*systemrelevant*”, even if they are often highly precarious and poorly paid) and second, the homeless, of whom there were at least 1,976 in Berlin as of January 2020 (ZEIT ONLINE 2020a). Official statistics about queer and trans homelessness are not gathered in Germany, but it seems safe to assume that, as in those places like the UK where data is collected, they are over-represented among this group.⁴ The safety of staying at home is also contingent for queer and trans people living in shared accommodation, as well as those too young or without the financial means to leave their family homes. There are accounts of LGBTI refugees in shared accommodation being subjected to homo- and trans-

³ For a critique of forms of “queer liberalism” which merge increased legal protections for gay and lesbian domesticity with (mediatic celebrations of) depoliticised queer consumer lifestyles, and of the related phenomenon of “homo-normativity” in a context of ascendant nationalism, see David Eng with Jack Halberstam and José Esteban Muñoz (2005, 10-15).

⁴ On LGBT homelessness in the UK, see the Albert Kennedy Trust: www.akt.org.uk

phobic violence, including by those employed there; as well as suggestions that, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become more difficult to access non-Covid related medication and medical treatment (LSVD 2020). While schools and other environments can often be inhospitable to young queer and trans people, so can the family home. Across the EU, among those who understand themselves as LGBTI, only 5% of 15- to 17-year-olds describe themselves as being “very open” (and only 12% of 18- to 24-year-olds) (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020, 23).

Even many of those living in stable and secure housing, and free from immediate threats of violence and harassment, have found themselves more cut off from important forms of support, solidarity and sociality. While many organisations have made very impressive efforts to continue providing counselling, advice and other services amidst the pandemic, some of these have had to be restricted.⁵ And accessing some in-person support has become more difficult, particularly for those especially at risk from Covid-19, including older people, the immunocompromised, and the chronically ill. In Berlin, a number of queer and LGBT initiatives have formed to support those unable to easily leave their homes. By 19 March, only 17 days after the first known coronavirus case in Berlin, 800 people had already signed up to support “an ad hoc relief line for queers, womxn and otherwise marginalized people in Berlin” established by Karada House, a queer art space.⁶ Its aim has been to run errands and shopping trips, pre-cook and deliver meals, offer financial support, and match people with others to talk with. A neighbourhood support project for older lesbians, lesbians with disabilities, those living alone, and others in need of support has also been set up by Rad und Tat (RuT), an organisation based in the city’s Neukölln district.⁷

The home itself is also in the process of undergoing a series of transformations amidst the pandemic, as Paul B. Preciado (2020) has recently argued. Isolation, alienation, and processes of de-collectivization are all at stake when the home is not just turned into a space of confinement, as Michel Foucault showed was the case with the plague of the 18th century, but also when it becomes – as is increasingly the case for many – a site of “tele-consumption and tele-

⁵ To cite just two examples of projects that have continued to deliver important services: Checkpoint BLN (<https://checkpoint-bln.de/>) has been providing sexual health support for gay and bisexual men as well as for trans and intersex people and GLADT (www.gladt.de), an LGBTIQ black, indigenous and person of color organisation, has been providing counselling and other services via telephone, online chat and video.

⁶ See the Karada House website: <https://karada-house.de/2020/03/28/queer-relief-for-corvid-19/>

⁷ The 16 April, 2020, the Queerspiegel e-newsletter published by the daily *Tagesspiegel* newspaper included an interview by Nadine Lange interview with Gabriele Michalak of RuT. For more, see: <https://rut-berlin.de/nachbarschaftshilfe/>

production” as well as a “surveillance pod” (Preciado 2020).⁸ Just as Preciado (2020) suggests, some social and political forces will no doubt attempt to instrumentalise Covid-19 as a means of intensifying individualization, refining techniques for the distance management of immaterial forms of labour, and continuing to distribute vulnerability to premature death along racialized, gendered and class lines. As such, he is surely right to argue that our times of (relative) confinement could be well-spent learning “to de-alienate ourselves”, not least by studying “the tradition of struggle and resistance among racial and sexual minority cultures that have helped us survive until now” (Preciado 2020). It is also crucial, of course, to study and invest ourselves in those forms of collectivity and de-individualisation that persist, or which are emerging from within the current crisis.

Caring about queer infrastructure

The sadness and anxiety around the threatened loss of queer socialities relates in large part to the danger currently posed to queer infrastructure. Berlin is famous for its nightlife; a nightlife that can famously spill over into daylight, or sprawl out across a whole weekend. But for years now – and despite the significant, well-documented contribution it makes to the city’s economy – it has been placed at risk by gentrification, a housing boom, and property development.⁹ In a 2019 report, the city’s Club Commission (2019, 26), which brings together club, party and event organisers and their supporters, showed that what their members most wanted from politicians – even more than greater financial support and fewer regulations – was protection from the very real threat of being forced to move. Around 100 clubs have had to close in the last 10 years, with 25 more currently under threat (Connolly 2020); many of them hosts to LGBT and queer events. In January of this year, hundreds joined a demonstration after the electronic music club Griessmühle, home to the cult queer CockTail d’Amore party, lost its tenancy in a venue next to the Neukölln Ship Canal (it will be replaced by an office block). Several bars have recently faced the threat of eviction too: from Hafen, an almost 30-year-old institution in the city’s traditional gay neighbourhood of Schöneberg, through to the much newer queer café and beer garden, Südblock at Kottbusser Tor in Kreuzberg (Siegessäule 2019 and Joswig 2020). What was thus already a very precarious situation has been significantly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. In an international survey carried out by the Gay Romeo dating website, it was users

⁸ In describing the shifts in biopolitical techniques addressed to the domestic sphere in the Covid-19 crisis, Preciado (2020) writes: “The domestic space henceforth exists as a point in a zone of cybersurveillance, an identifiable place on a Google map, an image that is recognized by a drone.”

⁹ According to research carried out by the Berlin Club Commission, in 2017 the estimated gross turnover of the city’s club and event scene was €168 million, with an additional €48 million estimated to be generated indirectly, through advertising, gastronomy, the music industry, etc. (Club Commission 2019, 28).

in Germany who expressed most concern (46% of respondents) about the economic impact of Covid-19 on the gay scene.¹⁰ In Berlin, bars are currently reopening, but with – albeit understandable – restrictions that will not only challenge their economic viability but also their capacity to function as spaces of encounter and unforeseen connection and contact.¹¹ Clubs look likely to remain largely closed, at least for much of the rest of the year.

Queer and LGBT bars, clubs and other social spaces serve numerous functions, including but not limited to the facilitation of queer socialities and forms of “contact” (my primary focus here). First, they provide income for queer and LGBT people in a world where many still experience homo- and trans-phobic discrimination at work.¹² The Neukölln-based club SchwuZ (short for *Schwulenzentrum*, or Gay Centre) employs around 100 people as well as 300 freelancers: DJs, technicians, and others.¹³ //about blank, a club located in Friedrichshain, and which hosts various queer, feminist, anti-racist and anti-fascist events, also employs around 100 people; with event organisers, artists, performers and others also reliant on the venue for an income. It is a collectively organised co-operative with what it describes as a “solidary economic and feminist self-conception”.¹⁴ SchwuZ is a registered association (*eingetragener Verein*), rather than a profit-making company owned by a private individual. In total, around 9,000 people are employed by clubs in Berlin (not all of them queer or LGBT of course) (Club Commission 2019, 30).

Second, established queer and LGBT institutions – SchwuZ was set up in 1977 – serve as sites for political debate and for practical solidarity with contemporary social movements, but they can also provide a connection to histories of social and political struggle. The club is Germany’s oldest existing queer cultural institution, set up by those surrounding Homosexuellen Aktion West Berlin (HAW), a gay liberation group. It was created not just as a nightlife space, but as a community and activist centre: it established a “pink telephone” support service, provided space for a gay choir and a youth organisation, and a meeting space for campaigning groups – including, later, those organizing a response to the AIDS crisis (Kraushaar 2017). For several years, it shared a building with the

¹⁰ For details of the survey, see: <https://www.planetromeo.com/en/blog/romeos-in-lockdown-survey-results/>

¹¹ Bars will only be permitted to serve customers seated at tables, rather than standing or sat at the bar.

¹² 23% of survey respondents in Germany reported having felt discriminated against at work in the previous 12 months (2% above the EU average), and 11% felt discriminated against during this period while looking for work (1% above the EU average) (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020, 32-33).

¹³ This information is taken from the SchwuZ website. See: www.schwuz.de

¹⁴ This information is taken from the page raising funds for //about blank. See: https://www.startnext.com/whatever-you-take?fbclid=IwAR3Lhrm_mQy1Wwmltv2-Z7hNYH2fBaUcdv3NIdC4zLz2UDDliRFRm4x8HGQ For more about //about blank, see: <http://aboutparty.net>

city's Schwules Museum* (Gay Museum) and it was the place where in 1984 the city's free gay (now explicitly queer) magazine *Siegessäule* was born.¹⁵ Like other such publications, *Siegessäule* includes an event listing, featuring everything from support group meetings, theatre, dance and opera programming, over political discussions and demonstrations, through to club nights, drag shows and sex parties. The quality and scope of its queer cultural and political commentary and debate marks it out from many other free LGBT city magazines, however. For instance, the April 2020 issue not only included coverage of Covid-19 but also: the "LGBT free zones" being created in Poland; restrictions on blood donation by MSM in Germany; the attitude of gay and lesbian members of the CDU toward the party's current leadership candidates; the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Ravensbrück concentration camp, and a project remembering and commemorating the lesbian women imprisoned and murdered there; the Queer Asia network providing a platform for artistic, intellectual and political work in Berlin; debates around the ownership of the history and symbols of lesbian activism; the history and meaning of leather sub-cultures in the gay scene; transphobia within the queer community; and the Georgian-Swedish film, *And Then We Danced*, about love between two male dancers in Tbilisi's National Georgian Ensemble. Just like many of the venues whose events it lists, the magazine was plunged into crisis by the Covid-19 pandemic, temporarily losing access to many of its distribution points and much of its advertising revenue amidst the lockdown. (A campaign saw over 1,700 people donate almost €150,000, with further funds raised by the 2020 Solidarity campaign, launched by the artist Wolfgang Tillmans and his Between Bridges Foundation. Tillmans and other artists donated limited edition works for sale.)¹⁶

Cultural institutions like the regular Gayhane party (the name is partly a play on the Turkish and Arabic word for "house", "hane") can also serve as a connection to decades of struggle, not only by but also *within* queer and LGBT movements. Gayhane has been held at SO36 for over 20 years, a club and concert hall named after the former postcode of the area of Kreuzberg it is based. The neighbourhood has long been home to multiple generations of migrants from Turkey and elsewhere, to punks, squatters (and now former squatters), queers, and those who, before the fall of the Berlin Wall, had moved to the demilitarised West Berlin as a way of avoiding national service. In an interview marking Gayhane's 20th anniversary, the organisers explained its origins in the regular Salon Oriental event – a broadly Turkish LGBTQI cabaret that took up questions of racism and migration, sexism, homo- and trans-phobia.¹⁷ In her book, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*, Fatima El-

¹⁵ See: www.siegessaule.de

¹⁶ On the fundraising campaign, see: <https://www.startnext.com/your-siegessaule-needs-you>
On the 2020 Solidarity campaign, see: <https://www.siegessaule.de/magazin/2020solidarity-kuenstlerinnen-fuer-siegessaule/>

¹⁷ See Andreas Hartmann's (2019) interview with three of the Gayhane organisers, Frieda, Sabuha, and DJ Ipek.

Tayeb (2011, 143) argues that Salon Oriental introduced “a minoritarian voice, disrespectful of dominant hierarchies of representation with regard to nationality and ethnicity as well as gender and sexuality” and thus “did not only center the experience of queer minorities but allowed other segments of the audience to relate to and identify with this usually discarded perspective, letting the performances work as a kind of testimonial through interpellation”.

The Gayhane organisers remain invested in addressing questions of queerness, nation, migration and racism, including through donations to social and political projects included in the entrance fee. This is the third key function of many queer and LGBT bars and clubs, then: as fundraising spaces supporting political and other initiatives. For instance, on the first Monday of every month, a different social, political and community group takes over Möbel Olfe, a queer bar located around the corner from SO36, for an event called Solidarität vom Fass (or Solidarity on Tap). Regular “solidarity parties” and fundraising events are held at SchwuZ, Südblock, and ://about blank too, as well as at many other queer venues. In Neukölln, the Silver Future bar plays host to the regular Queerberg party, featuring and raising money to support refugee queer performance artists.

This is the fourth function of LGBT and queer venues and events: showcasing queer and trans performers, artists and musicians. For years now, every Tuesday night at Monster Ronson’s karaoke bar on Warschauerbrücke between Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, Pansy’s House of Presents has provided a stage for drag, queer and trans performance artists from around the world.¹⁸ The show is immediately preceded by Gieza’s Pokehouse, with Gieza Poke – a drag queen who describes herself as “Berlin’s only power-top pan-sexual former-Scottish-daytime-TV-fitness-sensation” – hosting a show that features “new and upcoming drag and drag-adjacent performers.”¹⁹ At its best, queer performance art, including and perhaps especially drag, can serve as a form of cultural critique, a means of interrogating racism and misogyny (including within LGBT milieus), and a mode of producing community and collectivity. This can have effects that ripple out into the world at large. José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, published in 1999, remains one of the most compelling scholarly works in this field. And much of the book would no doubt be of use in any analysis of many of the performances at events like Queerberg at Silver Future – which describes itself as a place for “kings, queens and criminal queers” – at the House of Presents and Gieza’s Pokehouse, as well as at events like Queer*Syria (a series featuring performers from Iraq as well as Syria), Queens Against Borders (which often takes place at SO36 and describes itself as aiming “to build a bridge between drag, trans and queer performance artists who are refugees and those performers who have already established spaces in the city”), and in

¹⁸ See: <https://www.facebook.com/pansypresents/>

¹⁹ See: <https://www.giezapoke.com/bio>

performances and events hosted by the House of Living Colors (a queer and trans of colour drag house).²⁰

Part of what Muñoz (1999, 147) explores is how what he calls “performances of counterpublicity” can challenge the discourses of a majoritarian public sphere, as well as the reproduction of these discourses. The construction of “counterpublics”, he points out, can be particularly important for subordinate and subaltern groups – including women, queers, people of colour, and others – and they can serve as a means of contesting the purported universality of the public sphere, its exclusionary and discriminatory norms (Muñoz 1999, 147-149). Counterpublic performances by drag and other queer (and particularly queer of colour) performers can articulate forms of cultural critique which allow new models of social relations to be imagined – those, for instance, that might escape the “interpellating call of heteronormativity” (Muñoz 1999, 33). The performers that he engages with, like (the now Berlin-based) Vaginal Davis, make use of humour and parody while waging cultural battles to “transform the popular ‘mentality’” and “unsettle the hegemonic order” (Muñoz 1999, 110-111).²¹ And it is in this sense that, for Muñoz, performers like Davis can be understood as organic intellectuals and philosophers in the Gramscian sense of these terms. Moreover, queer and minoritarian performance is shown to contain a capacity for “worldmaking”, or the making of “worlds of transformative politics and possibilities.” (Muñoz 1999, 195). He writes:

“Oppositional counterpublics are enabled by visions, ‘worldviews,’ that reshape as they deconstruct reality. Such counterpublics are the aftermath of minoritarian performance. Such performances *transport* the performer *and* the spectator to a vantage point where transformation and politics are imaginable. Worldmaking performances produce these vantage points by slicing into the facade of the real that is the majoritarian public sphere. Disidentificatory performances opt to do more than simply tear down the majoritarian public sphere. They disassemble that sphere of publicity and use its parts to build an alternative reality. Disidentification uses the majoritarian culture as raw material to make a new world.” (Muñoz 1999, 196)

A politics of contact

And here we arrive at the final function served by queer and LGBT bars, clubs and other spaces, namely, the facilitation of forms of sociality that can be generative of community and kin-making. It is crucial to point out, however,

²⁰ On Queer*Syria, see Eva Tempest’s (2018) interview with one member, Katy. On the House of Living Colors, see (Wiedemann 2019) and: <https://www.facebook.com/houseoflivingcolors/>. On Queens Against Borders, see: www.facebook.com/queensagainstborders

²¹ El-Tayeb (2011, 141) argues that the “mixture of classic drag show, physical comedy, and agitprop” that characterised Salon Oriental’s shows resembled Muñoz’s description of Vaginal Davis’ “queer drag”, “at odds with conventions of academic queer theory as well as those of an increasingly commercialized gay scene.”

that at times such spaces can and do themselves reproduce and reinforce hegemonic norms, existing social hierarchies, and modes of exclusion – including those of race, nation, class, disability, and gender (performance). Many queer and LGBT spaces in Berlin, including some of those discussed here, have long been subject to criticism for doing just that. At the same time, these spaces can – albeit often imperfectly – also serve as sites that enable the kinds of “contact” that Samuel R. Delany (1999) distinguishes from “networking” in his work on the social relations, institutions and functions displaced by the development of New York City’s Times Square. Here, “networking” can be understood as relatively instrumental and as rarely facilitating, say, cross-class interactions. “Contact”, in contrast, “tends to be more broadly social and appears random”, often involving the kind of “interclass encounters” that tend to take place only outside of the domestic sphere (Delany 1999, 129).²² In his book, *One-Dimensional Queer*, Roderick A. Ferguson (2019) draws on Delany’s account of “contact” to describe a multi-dimensional vision of the urban that queer spaces have often facilitated. This is where the city comes to involve “much more than the fulfillment of jobs and wealth”, providing “the possibility to satisfy desires for self-invention and for the invention of new types of community” (Ferguson 2019, 84).

In other words, where the city provides such a function, this is often facilitated by queer spaces that have historically enabled “encounters between communities typically kept apart” (Ferguson 2019, 83). Delany and a number of others, such as Tim Dean (2009), have shown how cruising spaces in particular, and queer spaces of public sex, can facilitate this sort of contact between otherwise relatively separate communities.²³ Although there have also long been those within Queer Studies, like Leo Bersani (1987, 206), who have cautioned against any naïve understanding of these sites as entailing a kind of “Whitmanesque democracy”, emphasizing instead how they tend to be marked by hierarchy, status, and competition.

Contra some sexual liberation discourses, however, sex itself is not *necessarily* particularly central to the production of queer socialities. Nor in fact to queer contestations of social norms or queer efforts towards the reinvention of the self. (Although this is certainly not to say that sex cannot or does not have a role to play here.) Queer and LGBT bars and clubs do indeed facilitate the (often unforeseen) forms of contact that Delany (1999, 111) argues can be generative of some of the most “rewarding, productive, pleasant” aspects of life, and they do frequently provide sanctuary (“safe spaces”, if you like) from forms of anti-gay prohibition. (This is just one reason why the defence of these spaces must be a

²² Delany (1999, 111) opens the second of the two essays in his book, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* by explaining: “The primary thesis underlying my several arguments here is that, given the mode of capitalism under which we live, life is at its most rewarding, productive, and pleasant when large numbers of people understand, appreciate, and seek out interclass contact and communication conducted in a mode of good will.”

²³ Delany (1999, 124-125) also describes non-sexual forms of “contact”, such as those established in queues at supermarkets or in copy shops.

cornerstone of anti-gentrification struggles; as Ferguson (2019, 108) points out, “[t]he story of neoliberal redevelopment is one in which city planners have attempted to gain power over the city’s inhabitants to shape the ‘character’ of urban space.”) But, just as Foucault argued in the 1970s, such forms of prohibition are not necessarily targeted primarily at sexual acts themselves (although again: sex *can* become a target). Rather, they generally tend to be directed towards broader “economies of pleasures”, including those of simply “being together” and the affective and relational development of specifically gay (or queer) modes of life (Foucault, cited in Eribon 2004, 307). In *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, Didier Eribon (2004, 308), addresses at some length the development of Foucault’s thoughts on the “gay mode of life” and “gay culture”, including his repeated insistence that it was the different ways of relating to one another, the forms of public affection among gay men – including the simple holding of hands – that appeared more intolerable for many than the *fact* of sex among men. For instance, despite its continued stigmatisation and association with risk (described above), there certainly seems to be little appetite in liberal societies today for a recriminalization of gay sex. And yet precisely the kinds of affection that Foucault described do still appear to be intolerable for many; with 45% of same-sex couples in Germany “always” or “often” avoiding holding hands in public “for fear of being assaulted, threatened or harassed” (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2020, 26). A crucial function of queer and LGBT spaces, then, is facilitating affection, not just among same-sex couples but also as a means of developing new ways of relating, alternative queer modes of life rooted, as Foucault (1997 [1981], 136) put it, in “tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship”. Indeed, for Foucault, it was the cultivation of these new relational systems (rather than sex itself) that best allowed for the reinvention of oneself and for escape from subjugating social norms.²⁴

An ethics of care

Part of what has emerged in response to the Covid-19 crisis is what the moral and feminist philosopher Joan C. Tronto describes as an ethic of care. Care, understood by Tronto (2009, 104) as “a practice” as well as “a disposition”, is made up of several elements: “caring about” (requiring *attentiveness*; recognizing the need for a particular kind of care, and understanding and that this should be met), “taking care of” (implying the assumption of a degree of *responsibility* for this care), “care-giving” (the meeting of a care need, and the capacity and *competence* to do so), and “care-receiving” (or *responsiveness* on the part of those who, or that which, is cared for) (Tronto 2009, 106-117 and 127). The response to the Covid-19 pandemic by much – although certainly not all – of Berlin’s queer and LGBT (sub-)cultures, institutions, and activist communities could be well understood through this framework: from attention

²⁴ I am drawing here on Eribon’s (2004, 303-309) discussion of Foucault’s reflections on questions of homosexuality, sexual liberation and friendship from around 1976 onwards.

to the needs of those particularly at risk from the virus and the assumption of responsibility for addressing (“taking care of”) these needs, through to the development and deployment of skills and capacities that can help both sustain queer and LGBT infrastructure as well as the affective connections and forms of sociality and “contact” that they can (re-)produce.

In addition to the crowd-funding in support of *Siegessäule* magazine, funds have also been collected by and for SchwuZ. First to help secure the jobs of those who work there, then to contribute to the income of precarious artists; with a pledge to donate surplus funds to a solidarity campaign in support of LGBTIQ+ refugees on the Greek island of Lesbos.²⁵ A similar online fundraising drive was launched by ://about blank and has received considerable support.²⁶ A Berlin Collective Action Nightlife Emergency Fund has been set up, supported by a number of clubs, party collectives and artists – including Cocktail d’Amore, House of Living Colors, and Lecken (a queer rave collective whose parties are “womxn-to-the-front space[s]” that are open to all)²⁷ – working together with various projects and organisations including GladT e.V. (an LGBTIQ Black and PoC organization working on questions of intersectionality and multiple discrimination), the Berlin Strippers Collective, and Olga (a project providing support for women who use drugs). The Fund raises money for “those most impacted by risk and violence in Berlin during Covid-19”, and particularly “[w]here state support fails”.²⁸ “The fund aims to prioritise those most impacted by COVID-19. Due to the realities of systemic oppression, this generally means womxn, queer, trans and non-binary people, low-income gig workers, people with migratory backgrounds, BIPOC, sex workers, the immunocompromised, the disabled and those who are unsafe in quarantine.”²⁹ The campaign has established “a diverse rotating committee” that distributes the funds it raises to applicants.³⁰ Many of the clubs and venues discussed here have also participated in the United We Stream project that, since the closure of Berlin’s nightlife on 13 March, has livestreamed dozens of live music events, performances, and DJ sets from clubs in the city, with income generated going to support venues and event organisers (8% of funds raised are donated to the Foundation Fund for Civilian Sea Rescue).³¹

²⁵ SchwuZ explain how they will use funds raised here: <https://www.schwuz.de/?lang=en>

²⁶ See: <https://www.startnext.com/whatever-you-take>

²⁷ On Lecken, see: <https://lecken.berlin/about>

²⁸ On the Berlin Collective Action Nightlife Emergency Fund and for a fuller list of supporters, see: <https://www.betterplace.me/berlin-collective-action-nightlife-emergency-fund16>
Donations to the Fund can also be made via this link.

²⁹ See: <https://www.betterplace.me/berlin-collective-action-nightlife-emergency-fund16>

³⁰ See: <https://www.betterplace.me/berlin-collective-action-nightlife-emergency-fund16>

³¹ On United We Stream, see: <https://en.unitedwestream.berlin/info/>

Some of the most politically, aesthetically, and affectively innovative approaches to digital queer performance in the pandemic have been developed by Berlin's drag world. As nightlife was shut down, regular drag events – including Gieza's Pokehouse and Pansy's House of Presents – almost immediately took to streaming drag shows via Twitch.tv, a platform otherwise primarily used for video game streaming.³² Performers and hosts quickly adapted, incorporating elements that would not necessarily have worked in a live stage show, such as animation. In one show, Gieza Poke used greenscreen technology to transform herself into a puppet, with her own head atop a cardboard body made by the visual artist Rory Midhani. The hosts cut to mostly live but occasionally pre-recorded shows (at times featuring music videos that again incorporate effects that would be difficult to simulate live or in-person) by drag and “drag-adjacent” artists, most of them performing in their homes. In early-April, queer performance artists Prens Emrah, The Darvish, Wizzy, and Pansy presented Queerantina, a show featuring drag, belly dancing, song and other performances by the Queer*Syria, Queens Against Borders, and Queerberg collectives. In late-May, the Venus Boys, who describe themselves as “a collective of Berlin based drag performers who paint from the palette of performative masculinity”, put on a König: Digital Girls night, with drag kings performing as queens for one night only.³³ In all these shows, tips and donations are collected to support queer and trans performers, many of whom have lost income amidst the lockdown. Many performances, and many of the hosts of these shows, have explicitly addressed the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic is posing to queer and LGBT individuals and subcultures, as well as many of the ways in which the coronavirus crisis intersects with questions of movement and migration, economic precarity and racism (including in terms of the ways that this is being contested by the Black Lives Matter movement). With a surprising degree of success, many of the shows' hosts have encouraged audiences to use Twitch's chat function to cheer on and support performers, simulating something similar to the feeling of being in a crowd at a live show.

Of course, watching a show streamed online is *not* the same as attending a live show. The possibilities for the production of “counterpublicity”, and particularly for the kinds of “worldmaking”, that Muñoz theorises are, I think it is safe to say, more limited. And there are certainly few opportunities for the forms of encounter and unforeseen “contact” that Delany describes. Notwithstanding Preciado's critique of digital surveillance technologies and the new technologies of (bio-)power that they are caught up with, digital cultures have now long played a role in the development of new relational systems and in sustaining gay and queer cultures and modes of life. But these are also heavily dependent on the physical spaces provided by queer infrastructure. Queer care-giving will, then, need to continue developing a capacity not only (as Tronto might put it) to *care about*, but also to *take care of* and *give care to*, the spaces that sustain

³² See: <https://www.twitch.tv/giezapoke> and: <https://www.twitch.tv/pansypresents>

³³ On Venus Boys, see: <https://www.facebook.com/Venus-Boys-433107937467307/> and: <https://www.twitch.tv/venusboys/>

these modes of life. The forms of solidarity economy that have been developed by queer and LGBT subcultures and communities will certainly have an important role to play. But it will also be crucial that the defence of queer socialities and infrastructures both inform, and become one focus of, broader social movements and struggles to shape the city and urban social life within and beyond the pandemic.

The right to the queer city

Berlin is a city animated by creative industries including its sizable club scene (and the numerous services that support and sustain its nightlife), a fashion industry characterized by “vibrant networks of independent designers” (McRobbie, Strutt and Bandineii 2019: 134), and a rapidly growing start-up tech sector.³⁴ Of the €4.6 billion invested in start-ups in Germany in 2018, €2.6 billion were invested in Berlin (Stokel-Walker 2019). Even before the development of “the full-blown creative economy”, however, Berlin had long attracted a young workforce interested in “the arts, and in culture in the broadest sense”, with many employed in “the not-for-profit sector” and in forms of project work that rarely pay high salaries, as Angela McRobbie, Dan Strutt and Carolina Bandinelli (2019, 135) have shown in their recent work on Berlin’s fashion “microenterprises”. Many creative and cultural industries rely on the kinds of labour and the forms of production that increasingly characterize post-Fordism as a whole: with flexible, largely horizontal networks involved in temporary, often small-scale projects requiring specialist skills. In their account of what they call “post-Fordist placemaking” – in relation to city beaches in Berlin and a number of other European cities – Quentin Stevens and Mhairi Ambler (2010, 534) describe how such spaces, like many of the nightlife spaces described here, blur production and consumption; events, parties and venues rely on the contributions and participation of those who attend, so that they co-produce the experiences they consume. (The ways in which many drag performers rely on interactions with their audiences is just one particularly clear example of this.)

There have of course long been efforts – like those famously advanced by Richard Florida (2012 [2002], e.g. 237-239) in his work on “the creative class” – to transform queerness into “a mode of difference that can promote capital’s well-being” while displacing “the forms of queer creativity that [have] exceeded and critiqued market capitalism”, as Roderick A. Ferguson (2019, 101) persuasively puts it.³⁵ In many ways, the increased need, amidst the current

³⁴ The city’s economy is described as follows on the state of Berlin’s official website: “The city has long developed from an industrial location to a modern service centre and international motor of innovation” (my translation). See: <https://www.berlin.de/berlin-im-ueberblick/wirtschaft/>

³⁵ In Florida’s (2012 [2002], 238) work on the creative class, the very presence of gay people in a neighbourhood is in some ways taken as an indication that it would also be welcoming of others

pandemic, to defend the infrastructures that facilitate queer socialities (many of which have long been at threat of displacement, as I have argued) is perhaps best understood as caught up with long-standing demands and discourses around *the right to the city*; a city oriented around the needs of those who (under post-Fordist conditions) produce, shape and live within it.³⁶ I will close this paper, then, by pointing towards three sets of political demands and initiatives that have already been widely discussed, debated and at times advanced by social and political movements – including those well beyond Berlin – which could be of particular use in establishing the right to a city capable of sustaining the sorts of infrastructure required for queer socialities and queer forms of life (broadly conceived).

The first is the demand for a *guaranteed basic income*, an enduring proposal that has gained substantial support amidst the Covid-19 crisis.³⁷ 400,000 people in Germany recently signed a petition demanding it be instated amidst the pandemic and Spain has already seen its accelerated introduction in response to the coronavirus (ZEIT ONLINE 2020b).³⁸ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009, 309-310) have been among those to have long made the case for a basic income, in part “on the basis of economic justice (wealth is produced across a widely dispersed social network, and therefore the wage that compensates it should be equally social) and social welfare (since nothing close to full employment can be achieved in the current economy, income must be provided for those without work).”³⁹ The global Covid-19 pandemic has of

that are often “the source of new ideas”: “egg heads, eccentrics”, “immigrants and ethnic minorities”. (As Ferguson (2019, 104) points out, in Florida’s account, these “migrants and ethnic minorities” represent a separate category to “gays”. In other words, the two do not overlap.)

³⁶ Since the publication of Henri Lefebvre’s influential 1967 essay, *The Right to the City*, the formulation has been taken up by social movements and initiatives around the world (including in Germany). In his own engagement with the notion of the right to the city, the geographer David Harvey (2012, x) describes Lefebvre’s original formulation as “both a cry and a demand. The cry was a response to the existential pain of a withering crisis of everyday life in the city. The demand was really a command to look that crisis clearly in the eye and to create an alternative urban life that is less alienated, more meaningful and playful but, as always with Lefebvre, conflictual and dialectical, open to becoming, to encounters (both fearful and pleasurable), and to the perpetual pursuit of unknowable novelty.”

³⁷ In April 2020, the German network for a basic income, Netzwerk Grundeinkommen, was made up of 134 organisations and 5,391 individuals. See: <https://www.grundeinkommen.de/netzwerk/mitglieder> On the ethics as well as the economics of the basic income, see Widerquist et al. (2005).

³⁸ A basic income had been one of the key pledges in the electoral campaign fought by Unidas Podemos in the autumn of 2019, a party with its roots in the ‘15M’ movement that, a few years after the global economic crisis began in 2008, saw millions occupy squares across the country. Unidas Podemos formed a coalition government with the centre-left Socialist Workers’ party (PSOE) in January 2020.

³⁹ Hardt and Negri (2009, 310) also point out that “we need to recognize how ensuring that the entire population has a basic minimum for life is in the interests of capital. Granting the

course only increased unemployment. The demand for a guaranteed basic income, or for a “social wage”, would certainly help support those cultural workers and artistic forms of production that sustain and help animate queer and LGBT subcultures. It also represents a means of contesting the precarity that post-Fordism imposes, but without recourse to nostalgia for the Fordist “family wage”, “that fundamental weapon of the sexual division of labor” (Hardt and Negri 2000, 403) and institution of heteronormativity, or of “compulsory heterosexuality”. The basic income demand can also serve as “a provocation”, pointing “toward the future” as Kathi Weeks (2011, 145) argues in *The Problem with Work*. “As a mode of provocation, the collective practice of demanding should be understood also as a constitutive event, the performative force of which inevitably exceeds the scope of the specific reform” (Weeks 2011, 145). This particular demand can function, she argues, as “a provocation to freedom” understood “as the time and space for invention”; creating room for lives less dependent on work (Weeks 2011, 145). The primary goal of any defence of queer forms of sociality, and of the infrastructures that support them, should not be a return to “normal” when the pandemic passes. Instead, the rupture with “normality”, and the forms of care and solidarity that have been developed in the pandemic, can serve as an opportunity to imagine, demand and build different, better, queerer futures.

Many of the queer projects and collectives discussed here – from Salon Oriental and Gayhane through to events like Queerantina (in April of this year) – have been among those to articulate, in various ways, a second key set of demands, namely, for *freedom of movement*, *the right to remain*, and *the right to citizenship*. For many queer and LGBT people, the need and desire to move (to new neighbourhoods, to cities, or across borders) is a familiar experience; even while these experiences vary widely. And those who make up queer socialities in Berlin arrive from many places. The right to the queer city will, then, always need to be the right to a city that is open, where one can remain, and without hierarchies of citizenship. Campaigns like the Seebrücke ‘Cities of Safe Harbours’ initiative play an important role in this regard, demanding that cities and municipalities declare their willingness to welcome greater numbers of refugees. As does the #LeaveNoOneBehind campaign which, amidst the Covid-19 crisis, is demanding the urgent evacuation and granting of asylum to refugees being held at Moria camp on Lesbos.⁴⁰ In recent years, queer and LGBT organisations, projects and networks have also played a role in anti-racist protests and in protests against the far-right. *Siegessäule* and its sister publication *L-Mag* organized a sizable queer block on the 240,000-strong Unteilbar (or, Indivisible) demonstration in October 2019, along with SchwuZ,

multitude autonomy and control over time is essential to foster productivity in the biopolitical economy.”

⁴⁰ On the Seebrücke Cities of Safe Harbour campaign, see: <https://seebruecke.org/en/startpage-2/safe-harbours/> On the #LeaveNoOneBehind campaign, see: <https://leavenoonebehind2020.org>

Adefra e.V. – Schwarze Frauen in Deutschland (or, Adefra – Black Women in German), RuT, the Berlin Leather and Fetish Society (BLF), Lesben gegen Rechts (or, Lesbians Against the Right) and others (Woopen 2018).⁴¹ In May 2018, queer clubs, bars and party collectives including ://about blank, CockTail d'Amore, SO36, Südblock, and Möbel Olfe were among those to take part in a mass Reclaim Club Culture mobilization against a far-right demonstration through the centre of Berlin.⁴²

Finally, defences of (already highly precarious) queer infrastructure amidst the current crisis should be understood as caught up with broader demands in Berlin and beyond for *affordable housing*, for *accommodation that is under public or common ownership* and for *protection from displacement* (particularly through gentrification and urban development projects). One of the most innovative and dynamic efforts to make visible, accessible and concrete the “needs of the many, of the Other, of the marginalized” (Tajeri 2019) in relation to social housing, rents and urban development in particular is the Kotti & Co initiative and their “Gecekondu” protest hut which has been located right next to Südblock at Kottbusser Tor in Kreuzberg since May 2012. Writing for the *The Funambulist*, Niloufar Tajeri (2019) has explained that, “Kotti & Co understood that change has to be systematic, large-scale and needs to intervene in the legal structures of tenancy and social housing laws.”⁴³ And recent years have seen various attempts to do just that; with urgency added by rents in the city beginning to increase faster than anywhere else in the world (by 21% from 2017 to 2018) and apartments becoming increasingly unaffordable for those with an average income in the city (Knight 2019). Following a campaign that successfully collected the required number of signatures to initiate a city-wide referendum, the Berlin senate administration are currently evaluating the legality of a potential poll that, if successful, would result in a form of expropriation: legally transferring the ownership of properties belonging to companies that rent more than 3,000 apartments in the city to a new public body (Schönball 2020). Demands for rent control and affordable living also led to the 2019 introduction of a five-year rent freeze; a move greeted by many campaigners as a step in the right direction, but as insufficient nevertheless (Tagesspiegel 2019). To demand the right to the queer city is certainly to demand it be affordable for all those who live there, and for all those who have yet to arrive. But it could also be made to imply the right to develop and to experiment with new models of common ownership, including those that can

⁴¹ For a full list of participating organisations, see:

<https://www.facebook.com/events/unteilbarqueer-queer-block-auf-der-unteilbar-demo/682490362127753/>

⁴² For the full list of participating clubs, bars and collectives, see:

<https://www.facebook.com/events/187723188713308/>

⁴³ On Kotti & Co, see: www.kottiundco.net and the film *Miete Essen Seele Auf. Der Kampf um das Recht auf Stadt* (or, *Rent Eats the Soul: The Fight for the Right to the City*), available with English subtitles here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=101&v=qS6KrhBcvVU&feature=emb_title

accommodate various forms of kin-making. However, no matter how affordable, accommodating and secure, the domestic sphere and the space of the home can never be sufficient in terms of the production of queer socialities. Queer futures are unthinkable without the infrastructures – including but not limited to bars and clubs – that facilitate unforeseeable encounters and those forms of contact that can help produce new types of community.

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