Lost in Transition? Digital trans activism on Youtube

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Abstract

With this article we intend to contribute to a novel research area - the construction of critical transgender narratives on Youtube - examining how some Spanish trans youtubers shift the focus from the 'fleshy metamorphosis' of the trans body (Barnett, 2015), to becoming trans 'media-bodies' (Raun, 2010). For this purpose, we examine the channel *Lost in Transition,* by Spanish transgender advocate Elsa Ruiz Cómica. Elsa's videos are at the intersection of her personal experiences as a trans woman and the public debate on trans rights in Spain, creating an alternative narrative, in contrast to other trans youtubers who focus almost exclusively on physical changes and *passing* as the ultimate trans achievement.

We will argue that Elsa's practices are inscribed in a process of 'subpolitics' (Beck, 1997): a new political subject is emerging from the margins, disobedient to the legal and biomedical framing of transgenderism as a disorder. Our main conclusion is that Youtube is a site of 'digital trans activism' (Raun, 2016), where non-binary and transfeminist LGBTQ+ youtubers can perform the non-conforming

subaltern body (Bettcher, 2017; Platero & Rosón, 2019) that would otherwise be invisible. This has implications for the public debate on trans rights and transgenderism, as it lifts the issue of transition out of the biological and medical sphere and puts it at the centre of a broader cultural debate on gender identity, cisnormativity and equal rights.

Keywords: Youtube; transgender; subpolitics; LGBTQ+; gender identity; digital activism

Introduction

> "[the word] Trans derives from transit, from travelling […]; each journey must be unique. It's very good that we share our transition stories. But neither my way is the only correct one, neither yours is wrong, or the opposite ... They are different ways of experiencing something".
>
> Elsa Ruiz Cómica, *'Am I Trans Enough?'* (January 22, 2019, min 4.49)

In her video, *Am I Trans Enough?*, Spanish youtuber and stand-up comedian Elsa Ruiz Cómica questions normative transition processes, and the legitimacy to be recognized as a trans woman. In this article we intend to contribute to an innovative research area - vlogging and the construction of critical transgender narratives - examining how some Spanish trans youtubers shift the focus from the 'fleshy metamorphosis' of the trans body (Barnett, 2015), to becoming trans 'media-bodies' (Raun, 2010). According to Horak (2014), transition videos – a series of videos posted over time by a trans individual, showing their gradual transition from one gender into another - are 'the most popular subset of trans videos, but also the most controversial' (p. 573). As powerful visual and performative tools, transition videos can help to unpack gender constructions and support closeted trans people to come out, but trans youth have been reported to feel that their youtuber role models sometimes focus too much on narratives of successful bodily transitions, while issues like daily life and how to deal with difficulties at school or in family relationships are likewise or more important to them (Jenzen, 2017).

Some trans youtubers are trying to shift the focus from the transition of the body to what it means to be trans in a broader sense. Our basic research question is what makes for a transformative discourse, and what does not, analyzing for this purpose Elsa Ruiz Cómica's videos around a number of issues: the gender binary, her relationship with the LGBTQ+ community, resistance to the pressure to conform to gender norms, and how to transition.

Lost in Transition?

In the last decade there has been tremendous global media attention towards the trans collective, resulting in new rights and an increasingly articulated social struggle (Platero, 2011). This trans visibility has only grown since the press picked up Christine Jorgensen as the 'first transsexual woman who changed sex' in the 1950s (Stryker, 2017). The riots at the Compton and Stonewall Inn coffee shops in the United States in the late 1960s, and the demonstration for homosexual liberation of 1977 in Spain are remembered as spaces of homosexual struggle, although it is not always acknowledged that these were led by trans women, some of whom were sex workers (Pineda, 2008; Platero, 2011; Stryker, 2017).

Ever since, media have actively constructed 'transgender' as a form of identity within popular culture (Lovelock, 2017, p. 379), often by spectacularizing their realities. At the same time there has been an increase in trans subjects within 'national discourse and legal frames of recognition' (Puar, 2017, p. 34). In this regard, Spain is not so different: the Francoist dictatorship that prosecuted homosexuality until 1978 - encompassing all 'sexual deviance' - entailed the intersection of cultural contingent norms, discourses and ideals, and produced a particular vision of transgender in Spain, coherent with the historical juncture (Lovelock, 2017, p. 739). A slow process towards legal recognition for non-conforming gender identities began in 1983, when body modification surgeries were legalised, although the judiciary were reluctant to recognize trans women as being women. As late as in 1991 the Spanish Supreme Court defined cases of women who had modified their bodies as 'female fiction'. The label 'gender outlaw' (Bornstein & Bear Bergman, 2010) thus fitted a collective that was perceived as living in the margins (people seen as sinners, criminals, or with illnesses), targeted by the law, the church and the health system. During the 1980s and the 1990s, trans women organised to protect themselves from police abuse and, at the same time, they engaged in broader feminist debate. This brought a

mutual influence between feminist and trans movements specific of Spain (Platero, 2011). It was not until 2007 that an important recognition regarding the regulation of official name and sex changes for transsexual individuals took place. Since 2009, eleven Spanish regions have passed trans-specific legislation along with anti-discrimination and trans-specific policies addressing LGTB-phobia. This recognition is partly due to a paradigm shift, where trans people in Spain have started to fight not only for their social acceptance, but also - since the 2000s – for the de-pathologization of trans identities and currently their right to self-determination (Platero, 2011; Missé, 2018; Suess, 2018). However, recent studies indicate that legal transformation has not ended heteronormative pressure (Fernández-Rouco, Carcedo & Yeadon-Lee, 2020), that transphobic bullying is still pervasive in Spanish schools (Ozamiz-Echebarría, Picaza, Jiménez-Etxebarría & Cornelius-White, 2020), and that there remain additional barriers in the labour market for trans adults who find themselves on a crossroad of several inequalities at the same time (Coll-Planas & Missé 2019).

Trans celebrities from the mainstream have been quite visible in international media, and thanks to them, 'transgender identity has become legible as a recognizable subject position within popular culture' (Lovelock 2017, p. 737). However, trans celebrities' narratives often reduce the problems that trans people face worldwide to 'visibility' and 'acceptance' (Jackson, Bailey & Foucault-Welles, 2018), avoiding the discussion on the conservative political environment and the backlash in LGBTQ+ rights, or the situation of vulnerable trans people. In Spain, trans celebrities such as La Veneno or Carmen de Mairena have had difficult positions and were stigmatized through the spectacle of TV culture and class biases, considered as *lumpen* (underclass) and living 'a bad life'. Recently, a TV show on the life of La Veneno (Atresmedia, 2020), one of the first transgender women to become famous in Spain, has reinstated her persona under a slightly more political view. Yet, it poses the problem of why it is only after her death in 2016 that her political potential is now being recognized. Likewise, Bibi Andersen, a remarkable actress and TV presenter, featured in many Pedro Almodóvar's films, has always avoided politicizing her trans experience.

Unlike these examples of politically void transgender experiences in Spain, new generation trans youtubers like Elsa Ruiz Cómica, with their transition videos, life stories, open reflections on feelings and insecurities, and information about medical and legal issues, have created a strong online community of mutual support and empowerment.

Youtube: a place for making sense of one's identity

Within the large LGBTQ+ community, transgender identities are becoming more and more visible, both in mainstream media and on social media (Spencer & Capuzza, 2015). Embodying diverse experiences of divergence from gender assigned at birth can be understood, trans people are claiming their space in the public sphere everywhere, and trans identities and characters have gradually become part of mainstream cultural products, such as TV shows like *Orange is the New Black*, *Transparent* and *Sense8*. In Spain, *Veneno, Vis a Vis* or *La Casa de las Flores* are popular TV shows that are presenting relevant trans characters and scripts.

But where trans identity really flourishes in all its diversity is online. Recent research shows that the Internet offers affirming spaces and relationships for transgender youth (Austin, Craig, Navega & McInroy, 2020), although we acknowledge that the online sphere can also be a space for online bullying and harassment that targets specifically trans people, as we will see below.

Youtube, as one of the main sites of cultural participation (Burgess & Green, 2009) and a reflection of a diverse society, has also become a popular outlet for many non-normative individuals (Raun, 2016). Together with Instagram - and Tumblr in the past - Youtube has become the ultimate space of LGBTQ+ activism (Polo, 2016; Jenzen 2017, p.10), where gay and trans youth take their stances and tell their stories. Young LGBTQ+ youtubers have numerous followers and have built a huge community: they share their claims and day-to-day struggles, such as coming out to family, negotiating a dissident sense of self, sexual preferences, stages of gender transition, etc., to a what Papacharissi called a 'networked public' (Papacharissi, 2015). Being able to

address this online public from the safety of a room, along with a sense of public privacy, is what makes social media a unique channel for LGBTQ+ youth's life narratives, since most often school or adults are absent of their online lives. Thanks to the internet, young people's bedrooms or any location where they could use a smartphone or laptop become spaces of civic and community engagement (Jenzen, 2017), built from the self-awareness of a subordinated position (Warner, 2002), and questioning mainstream heteronormativity (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013). The convergence of the 'bedroom culture' (McRobbie & Garber, 1976), and the ubiquitous connection to mobile devices, allows for LGBTQ+ youth to come out to their networked public first, before coming out to their families. As we will discuss below, these apparently domestic spaces thus take on a political dimension when displayed for a networked public.

The production, distribution and consumption of trans vlogging on Youtube is a growing phenomenon, widely accepted by the LGBTQ+ community itself, which finds these videos empowering and informative (Horak, 2014; Raun, 2010, 2016; Jenzen, 2017). These videos are diverse in quality, degrees of political awareness and how they have an impact on the embodiment of trans youth, ranging from those with a normative perspective of the trans experience, to others who open up spaces for critical discussions on gender. But all of them constitute a dynamic site for reaffirmation of an emerging social identity. Vlogging is a multi-sensorial experience, allowing subjects to create and connect different bodily images on Youtube, acting as a mirror that encourages validation and allows for 'voyages into an authentic and recognizable self, narrating and visualizing transition in a certain way' (Raun, 2015, p. 371). Yet despite these opportunities, we must acknowledge trans vlogging as a practice embedded in an online environment where heteropatriarchal and gender binary norms are still dominant, and where hate speech (Araüna, Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2017; Halberstam, 2018) and commercial exploitation thrive (Andrejevic, 2008).

Trans Subpolitics and the mainstream

Youtube channels of transsexual and transgender people have also emerged in Spain. But not all of these are, by far, 'political'. As we have discussed above, there is no doubt that trans celebrities from the global mainstream have helped raising awareness about what it means to be transgender and claimed equal rights in different media outlets. However, these trans celebrities often lack a feminist and/or intersectional dimension in their narratives, as they put the emphasis on the 'acceptance' of the metamorphosed body, rather than on the problems that face trans people beyond their gender identities or body normativity. What do trans celebrities mean to LGBTQ+ communities if they do not tackle social inequalities in a broader scope?

Our main question here is whether performances of the trans body on Youtube can be political, or only another way of conforming to gender norms and reifying identities. In order to define 'political' we resort to the concept of 'subpolitics' coined by Ulrich Beck (1997). In terms of Beck's subpolitics we see that certain trans youtubers turn places that were traditionally understood as politically void - bedrooms, informal settings or entertainment and fashion topics - into potential or actual political spaces. In the same way that McRobbie and Garber's observation of 'bedroom cultures' (1976) allowed them to unveil the feminist dimension of young women's participation in subcultures, looking at Youtube trans videos reveals a potential political action against gender normativity. According to Beck, a new form of political action precisely originates from subpolitics: society is configured from below thanks to social and political agents. These agents, by practising their freedom of choice and making decisions, acquire a more relevant voice in shaping the organization of society than actual politicians or policy-makers (Beck, 1998). Thus, although Youtube is not the *panacea* and is certainly a place where all sorts of violence can thrive, we will argue that trans subpolitics are practices that must include a discussion on the forging of a collective trans identity coming from below.

In this context, we understand vlogging as a continuous reflection that becomes political, where authenticity and reflexivity extends to the body. For a new generation of trans youth, this sense of agency and becoming political can be articulated online (Cavalcante, 2016), since the discursive and self-knowledge dynamics of vlogging allow the development of a reflective self that may also create a sense of collectivity. In this conversion process, the participation of trans youtubers' publics is essential for circulating alternative trans representations, as shown in earlier research (Barnett, 2015; Tortajada, Caballero-Gálvez & Willem, 2019; Raun, 2016).

Online spaces, then, are not only sites of (re)production of norms, but also a locus of resistance, in which the subaltern is a subject with political agency that uses resources such as humour and theatrical performance to break free from the binary gender gaze (Cavalcante, 2018; Jenzen, 2017; Platero & Rosón, 2019). So, we ask: in addition to the mere recognition of trans identities, when exactly does trans vlogging become political activism? How can we identify practices of 'digital trans activism' as defined by Raun (2016)?

Materials and methods

As per November 2019, Elsa Ruiz Cómica's *Lost in Transition* channel had 87 videos, with more than a million views, 20K+ followers, and her most popular video was *¿Por qué no me hormono?* with 125K+ views. In Instagram she had 22K+ followers. Elsa Ruiz (see Figure 1) has jumped from being a microcelebrity on Youtube to a media personality appearing on several TV shows, such as La Resistencia/*The Resistance* on Movistar+, and is a regular contributor to Todo es mentira/*It's all a lie*, conducted by Risto Mejide. Elsa is now becoming an influential public personality in Spain who is being heard, not only by a trans selective public online, but also by a much broader audience. In February 2020 Irene Montero, the new Spanish minister of Equality, chose Elsa as one of the activist influencers with whom she met to discuss how to build a fairer society. Our choice to focus on Elsa Ruiz Cómica, rather than on other Spanish LGTBQ+ youtubers such as Dulceida

(2M+ subscribers), Xavi Marruenda (Mundo FTM, 25K+ subscribers) or Alejandro P.E. (65K subscribers), has to do with her videos being funny and critical at the same time, questioning the normative sense of what it means to be trans, as well as discussing transfeminist topics. In fact, unlike other trans youtubers, Elsa usually defines herself as a feminist woman, adding that 'feminism is always present in my life' (see Asensio, 2019) and thus ascribing herself to the current mass mobilization of feminism in Spain (Araüna, Tortajada & Willem, 2019; Campillo, 2018).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

(screen shot is a preview):

Figure 1. Elsa Ruiz. *Courtesy of Elsa Ruiz Cómica*.

Elsa Ruiz Cómica's channel, from a subpolitics point of view, makes a public space a into 'public sphere' (Papacharissi, 2002; Travers, 2003). In this sense, we chose to select the sample on the basis of public relevance (instead of, for example, number of views). Elsa's channel *Lost in Transition* lists dozens of videos where she talks about her experience as a trans woman. She creates a 'trans' space of her own, makes her channel a place of trust where she can speak freely and discuss trans issues far from the social, legal and medical pressure that trans people face in their daily lives. The place created by Elsa

for her counterpublic thus allows for interaction and the articulation of critical perspectives (Kellner & Kim, 2010; Tortajada, Caballero-Gálvez & Willem, 2019), that may seem almost impossible when looking at the legal and medical framework in Spain for trans individuals. It is precisely Elsa's ability to successfully pull off an unlikely and non-conforming transness that interests us for this study.

After reviewing all videos on the Elsa Ruiz Cómica channel, we performed an in-depth qualitative content analysis of a convenience sample of nine videos posted between May 2018 and January 2019. The pieces were chosen in function of their topics, explicitly reflecting and focusing on 'being trans', introducing numerous political and philosophical debates, including the recognition of trans identity, prejudices and the transitioning process itself (see Table 1).

Title	Views	Duration
1. ¿Soy lo suficientemente trans? *Am I trans enough?*	4032	12.07
2. ¿Por qué no me hormono? *Why do I not take any hormones?*	124,937	10.22
3. ¿Es bueno el 'cispassing'? *Is 'cispassing' good?*	8224	10.46
4. ¿Hay que diferenciar transexual y transgénero? *Should we differentiate between transsexual and transgender?*	11,426	10.01
6. ¿Los juguetes te hacen trans? *Do toys make you trans?*	4076	10.07
7. ¿Publicar fotos de antes de tu transición? *Should you post pictures from before your transition?*	7164	9.52
8. ¿Pansexual o bisexual? *Pan-sexual or bi-sexual?*	22,030	7.49
9. Sí, tengo novia. *Yes, I have a girlfriend.*	69,131	10.33

Table 1. Corpus of selected videos (2018-2019)

Our analysis was carried out following a critical feminist approach (Van Zoonen, 1994; Gill & Orgad, 2017; Gill, 2008), and in accordance, the videos are considered to be multisensorial experiences and reflective spaces for the development of agency. We are aware that our task as cultural studies researchers implies engaging with the 'lived' experience of trans people, while acknowledging institutional power and structural inequalities with regards to cissexist knowledge claims (Johnson, 2015, p. 24-25). Our goal is to dismantle the power dynamics underlying most academic research and common narratives on trans experiences. Therefore, this is a transfeminist piece of research, rooted in earlier transgender scholarship, and it intends to be useful for trans people's wellbeing in the long run.

Finally, for this study we have not only engaged with trans studies literature and trans scholars, but we have also been able to get Elsa's direct feedback and validation of our results before submitting the manuscript. Some of her comments to earlier drafts of the article have been taken into account for the final version and have enriched the discussion and conclusion section accordingly.

Results

After a first reading it already becomes clear that Elsa's main resources to support her arguments are the use of humour and (funny) metaphors: for example, she often refers to herself as 'a pizza with pineapple, very proud of the pineapple' (referring to her penis), or she considers transition as 'a tailored suit'. In her productions Elsa takes up the challenge of representing diverse trans bodies and managing the experience of 'creating a home' for those who feel different (Halberstam, 2018), while having a critical standpoint as a trans woman who does not wish to transition medically. In almost all of the analysed videos Elsa raises issues that she considers relevant in her everyday life, using plain and simple language, in tune with

the bases of the ‘communicative action’ defined by Habermas (1987): intelligibility, truth, integrity and truthfulness.

As we will see below, Elsa's videos address topics that are very much related to the struggles of a generation of Spanish transgender people who have a critical perspective on their experiences, and what kind of social changes they demand. Elsa is contributing to some of the current transfeminist debates (Halberstam, 2018; Platero, 2011), such as the right of trans women to reject genital surgery, combining different perspectives in a down-to-earth way.

In the following sections we organize her main arguments in three clusters: a) the gender binary and ‘passing’, b) the process of transitioning and c) sexual orientation.

a) The gender binary and ‘passing’

Elsa not only breaks with the stereotyped representations of trans people in Spanish mainstream media (Alexander, 2002), but also openly questions the gender binary itself. According to her, the existence of two clear-cut gender positions is a social construction perpetuating the classification of people into either female or male based on biological traits, thus establishing the erroneous idea that a person identifying as ‘trans’ should reject the attributions of the gender assigned at birth (see Garrison, 2018, p. 6), or feel repulsed by their genitals. As a trans woman, Elsa is openly comfortable with her penis, and defines being trans as 'not being satisfied with the gender that was assigned to you at birth' (*Am I trans enough?*, min 2.20), rather than as genital dysphoria. Elsa’s standpoint coincides with one of the pioneers of Trans Studies, Susan Stryker, who defines transness as a ‘departure' from assigned gender, rather than the identification with the opposite sex (2008). Elsa shares her own confusion about this, explaining that she had difficulties when thinking of herself as a trans person in the beginning: 'One of the things that caused me to discard the idea that I could be transgender was a very basic one: that I did not feel

any rejection towards my genitals' (*Why do I not take any hormones?*, min 4.38).

In almost all of her videos, Elsa unpacks the social constructions that perpetuate the gender binary system. One of these constructs is 'passing': the moment when a trans individual has acquired enough gender-specific attributions so as to pass as their desired gender, and thus be 'gender-read' correctly by others (Kessler & McKenna, 1978). Passing is important for many trans people in their process of identification, as not only it provides a better sense of self, but also reduces their risk of facing transphobic violence towards them.

However, passing is also a contextual and uncertain process, as for trans people it is always the question whether they are passable enough. To illustrate the ambiguity of passing, in her video *Is 'cispassing' good?* Elsa talks about how many times people say to her 'it doesn't show that you are trans at all' (min 7:33), as a kind of compliment. Elsa argues that passing thus 'rewards' those who successfully pull off a clear-cut sexual identity for making society 'feel comfortable' about their assigned gender, and punishes those who don't:

I think that cispassing is like a kind of positive discrimination that society gives us trans people as a prize, like 'hey, you're trans but it doesn't show very much, so thank you for making it easier for me, because for me there are only two genders, and only one single set of characteristics associated with each (*Is 'cispassing' good?*, min. 4:20).

Yes, passing takes away a lot of the stress involved in the process of gender attribution, but it also reifies a false binary logic, as if gender can only be one of two fixed positions. Passing can be temporary, contextual, sporadic, and unpredictable (García Fernández, 2017, p. 326; Romero & Platero, 2012); it is about the boundaries between identity categories and the specularity: 'the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen' (Ginsberg, 1996, p. 2). At the end of the line, Elsa argues, passing is a way to make trans people feel accepted by society 'despite' their condition, 'as if

being trans were like being cripple, and passing would then be a crutch to lean on' (min. 8:06).

For Elsa, passing implies forcing trans people to occupy a clear position within the traditional gender binary. This leads to the additional problem that (trans) people who don't identify with any of the two available genders are either invisibilized or dehumanized as the 'impossible' and the 'abject' (Butler, 1990; Spade, 2011). Despite the fact that Elsa definitely identifies as a woman, she highlights the need to make non-binary trans people visible, recognizing them as valid, and 'humanizing' them:

If for society, for the medical system and for the law, 'being trans' means transforming from one thing into something else, from being a man to a woman or a woman to a man, then where is there room for non-binary trans people? (*Should we differentiate between transsexual and transgender?*, min. 3:55).

Other means of pressure at the administrative, medical and societal level also contribute to invisibilizing non-binary trans people, as their identities do not find a space of representation in a social structure that only allows for two genders. Elsa pays tribute to the non-binary trans community:

I respect and deeply value non-binary trans people, who I salute, because if binary trans people already have a pretty complicated life, non-binary trans people have an even more complicated life. So, I'm sending you a very big hug. There are still so many close-minded people, and they are even less tolerant with you than with binary people (*Do toys make you trans?*, min. 2:57).

Unlike other Spanish trans youtubers with more followers, e.g. Penélope Tacones or Alejandro P.E., Elsa thus critiques the normativity of trans bodies and extends the 'trans' category beyond the meritocratic logic of passing and the Spanish medical and legal framework.

Transition as a 'tailored suit'

Despite her critical position regarding passing, Elsa elaborates a conciliatory discourse, based on respect for all trans identity representations, claiming them as equally unique and respectable:

I don't mean to say that people who have a high level of passing are not valid. Of course they are. In the same way that trans people who do not have a very high passing should not be labeled as non-trans. Of course not. Each type of trans person is perfectly valid. What I'm saying is that we shouldn't reward someone for being what they intend to be merely because of dominant beauty standards (*Is 'cispassing' good?,* min. 5:03).

Transition, in Elsa's words, is like a 'tailored suit' and 'each trans person has a different and unique way of being trans' (*Is cispassing good*?). Unlike Elsa, the vast majority of trans youtubers focus the attention on bodily changes during their transition and narrate their metamorphosis in terms of hormone therapy and surgery (Horak, 2014; Barnett, 2015). These narratives generally present the transition of the body as a linear process with specific milestones that every trans person must reach in order to have a 'successful' transition (Horak, 2014). It should be pointed out that current Spanish medical and legal standards are in line with this linear understanding of transition, only challenged by a few trans individuals and medical professionals who acknowledge agency and self-determination in the process.

In this sense, Elsa does not eschew criticism on the trans community itself, where 'trans-normative' discourses are often dominant: according to her, passing is a fixation for many trans people, who feel overwhelmed by the mainstream pressure to conform to gender normativity. In Elsa's view, if a trans person decides to undergo bodily changes in their transition, that decision should be made on an individual basis, and not because of social pressure from either side.

Of course, Elsa acknowledges the impact of the pressure trans people face during their transition, both at the medical and legal level (i.e. requirements for recognition) and at the social level (i.e. gender attribution). This pressure in many cases conditions the transition in terms of bodily changes. For example, at the legal level, Elsa explains that in order for Spanish trans people to change their gender and name on their ID card '(...) unfortunately you need a medical diagnosis [of gender dysphoria] and must spend two years in hormone therapy until you can request these changes and take them to a judge, etc. It is a very long procedure.' (*Why do I not take hormones?*, min. 2:20).

Elsa is radically against considering transitioning as a health problem, as Spanish authorities state: 'Transition is not governed by any medical or psychological or psychiatric protocol. Psychologists, psychiatrists and physicians can only be companions, you don't have to diagnose anything, we are not ill.' (*Why do I not take hormones?,* min. 8:12).

Elsa also rejects the distinction between 'transsexual' and 'transgender' by the trans community; according to her it establishes a hierarchy in which transsexuals are supposed to be 'superior' to transgender people. This division directly derives from the medical criteria regarding transsexuality, which are often reproduced in society and ultimately internalized by trans people themselves:

> Differentiating between transgender and transsexual ... Well, I don't agree. Basically, because it seems to suggest that trans people who have had genital surgery are of a higher category. And trans people like me, who have decided not to, or haven't been able to, or simply don't want to have surgery, are of a lower category. As if trans people who've had genital surgery were like 'premium' and the rest of us were like second class… (*Should we differentiate between transsexual and transgender?*, min. 2:05).

In this sense, Elsa believes it is important for trans people to share different kinds of transition stories publicly, as this allows for collectivizing an experience that is otherwise reduced to the (neoliberal) logic of the individual. By presenting diverse body transits, including unlikely ones, a

space is created for resistance to the norms and for agency to decide your own path.

This way, social media such as Youtube become a multisensorial repository containing images, gestures, experiences and vocabulary that can make the diversity in transitions visible, generate a political debate, create community and function as a reference for future generations (Raun, 2016). Elsa is an example of how digital trans activism, with its own tools and conventions, is generating a mentality shift regarding transsexuality and transgenderism that goes beyond individual experiences (Raun, 2015, 2016; Horak, 2014).

Sexual orientation: 'Nobody is born straight by default'

Elsa has two pieces in which she addresses the issue of sexual orientation: *Pan-sexual or bi-sexual?* and *Yes, I have a girlfriend*. She posts both videos as a response to comments and questions from her subscribers, and they both hold a clearly political position based on feminist and queer thought. She starts by commenting on the differences between society's notions of sexual orientation: 'Bi-sexuality is defined as the attraction to people both of your own gender and the opposite gender' (min. 0:56); 'Pan-sexuality is defined as the attraction to people regardless of their gender' (min. 1:02). In her opinion, this difference in definition only perpetuates the negative labels associated with both bi-sexual and pan-sexual orientations and reinforces the internal struggle within the LGBTQ+ collective about these categories. For example, Elsa explains that one of the accusations of pan-sexuals towards bi-sexuals is that they are 'transphobic':

> Bi people are accused of being transphobic because of course, according to the definition of bisexual - and not according to themselves, but according to that definition - you can only feel attraction for your gender or for the opposite. (*Pan-sexual or Bi-sexual?,* min. 3.08).

Elsa identifies as pan-sexual: 'I consider myself to be pan-sexual, but this is because I accept the definition that for me, in order to like a person,

they have to enter in here [points to her head] and in here [points to her heart]' (min. 5:23). Like in almost all her videos, she uses humour and visual metaphors to transmit this idea to her followers: 'As I say in my shows [as a stand-up comedian]: I consider myself a very particular type of pan-sexual because I am white, tender and crust-free, I'm a sandwich-bread pan-sexual!' (min 7:23), making a pun with the word 'pan', Spanish for bread. Elsa emphasizes the importance of breaking with the Western monosexual understanding of sexuality, ruled by the gender binary. As a transgender activist, Elsa claims diverse sexual desire, despite the fact that society imposes rigid categories: 'sexual attraction in non-binary genders are not represented in most recognized sexual orientations (either heterosexual or homosexual)' (min. 6:05).

In the video *Yes, I have a girlfriend*, Elsa reflects on the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity by introducing her current partner. As soon as she starts the video, she makes two points very clear: 'Number one: yes, I have a girlfriend. Number two: this girl, whom I've been dating for quite some time, is lesbian. Lesbian, because when a lesbian girl dates a trans girl, she is still a lesbian' (Min. 0:36). With statements like these Elsa breaks with the 'compulsory heterosexuality' that is expected from trans people (Rich, 1980), including by the Spanish medical protocols until very recently. At the same time, she reclaims non-normative sexuality as a possible option for transgender people, while leaving room for trans corporeality as a site of lesbian desire. By posing her own example with a female and lesbian partner, she makes us aware of how transgenderism is shaped by historical conditions of possibility, by which 'the visible becomes seeable and understandable' (Hennessy, 2000, p. 146).

Later in *Yes, I have a girlfriend* Elsa explains that sexual orientation and gender identity are two different concepts, independent from each other. Here, she breaks with the historical social imaginary of the Franco repression regime, which referred to 'homosexuality' as an umbrella term for sexual deviation, in which biological sex, gender and sexual orientation were intertwined:

> Sexual orientation - sexual attraction towards certain people - is not defined by my genitals. What I have between my legs does not matter. If a woman is dating me, she is a lesbian, or bi-sexual or pan-sexual, but if she is with me, it means she is attracted to women. (*Yes, I have a girlfriend*, min. 2:19)

The questioning of this compulsory heterosexuality for trans people is taking place online, among trans youtubers – some of whom claim a strong heteronormative sexuality – and between youtubers and their counterpublics (see Tortajada, Caballero-Gálvez & Willem, 2019). These online discussions imply the positioning of publics regarding the issue of sexual orientation of trans people outside the mainstream.

Discussion and conclusions

Elsa Ruiz's digital trans activism emerges as an instance of subpolitics, in which people who were so far considered as 'patients with gender identity disorder' now become political subjects through public disobedience to the Spanish legal and medical imperatives of transsexuality. Rather than 'lost in transition', Elsa Ruiz Cómica offers her viewers to 'find' their own transition: her trans audience inhabit bodies that may have been considered as impossible, and through Elsa's narrative and encouragement, can become viable. What starts out as a personal experience of non-conformity with gender assigned at birth, thus turns into a political experience of becoming part of a collective, a movement, without losing one's own specificity. In this regard, Elsa's vlogging is both a project of recovery - a reconciliation with her own image -, and a transfeminist experience of empowerment (Halberstam, 2018; Bettcher, 2017; Platero & Rosón, 2019).

Elsa uses her own experience to connect to a collective and a wider sense of what it means to be trans, transcending the narcissist reflection of Youtube as a mirror (Raun, 2016). Elsa's trans vlogging, in which

exhibitions of the non-binary subaltern body are performed, is therefore visually materializing the possibility of becoming, a process of self-invention (Platero & Rosón, 2019; Raun, 2015, 2016).

As we've seen above, these critical trans narratives are in tune with the Spanish depathologization movement that aims for self-determination of trans people, creating new narratives that are influential in how policies and protocols are designed. Elsa thus embodies a new trans political subject in Spain, different from previous generations willing to accept the equation [transgenderism=disorder], just aiming for acceptance politics. This generation needs to coin their own concepts, create their own spaces for debate, and is not willing to give up on their sexual rights.

Taking Elsa Ruiz Cómica as a focus of our analysis has allowed us to conclude that much of her discourse on transition, the body and other aspects of identity construction is actually inscribed in current activist and academic debates in feminist, queer and trans theories: passing, cissexism, TERFs , social construction of sexuality, etc…. but also debates and contradictions within the LGBIQ+ activist circles. We have argued that the subpolitical space Elsa has created online expands the static conception of transgenderism in Spain until now. Her radical defense of non-binary identities - despite her own binary identification as a trans woman - points to a change of approach embodied by many young trans people: they no longer want to be 'accepted' at any price, but dare to question the very frameworks of intelligibility about sex, gender, or even monogamy (López-Gómez & Platero, 2018).

We have seen that Elsa notably differentiates herself from other trans youtubers like Alejandro P.E. (FTM) or Penélope Tacones (MTF), who seem to be focused on their bodily metamorphosis as a form of 'compulsory passing' into hypermasculinity and hyperfemininity respectively. In contrast, Elsa tries to avoid 'hyper-isms', demonstrating her capacity of agency and self-determination in online spaces as opposed to social, legal and medical control over the trans body.

As subpolitical practices (Beck, 1997) Elsa's videos constantly invite all of us - cis and trans people - to reflect on our bodies, sexual practices and relationships. These questionings are intrinsically political; they exceed the LGBTQ+ community and introduce alternatives to normative conceptions of trans experiences in a broader scope. Elsa holds a firm transfeminist standpoint with regards to gender equality, male privilege, feminine gender attributions, beauty standards, and male gaze, among others. She resists to the pressure to conform to binary gender norms, both from the cis-community and from within the trans community. She puts her finger on the fact that cisnormativity denies the existence of individuals who question the gender marks that traditionally define bodies as human (Butler, 1990). This poses a great deal of pressure on the trans body, obliged to pass no matter what, depriving trans people of the choice or possibility of not passing at all times.

Trans youtubers like Elsa have created an affective counterpublic in Spain (see Tortajada, Caballero-Gálvez & Willem, 2019): *Lost in transition* is an ongoing space for protest and resistance to normative canons (Cavalcante, 2016; Jenzen, 2017), in which humour and critique, based on embodied experience, are constant expressive resources (Platero & Rosón, 2019). This kind of channels are an exercise of political freedom, committed to transformation and combining selfishness and altruism, personal fulfillment and active empathy (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In a personal interview carried out in December 2019 with Elsa, she pointed out to the interactions with her affective counterpublic: "I feel very lucky to receive so much love and support on social media… I have been told that some people are using my videos to come out. The fact that someone links you to their personal life in such a beautiful way is a damn gift!". When we asked her about haters, Elsa acknowledged the ambivalence of the youtuber experience for trans people and added "I would rather call my haters 'hater', in singular. They are different people attacking me, but in the end, they reproduce the same old rusty stereotypes about trans people". Thus, youtuber activists such as Elsa operate in an environment which is partially hostile, and which demands common strategies to resist these attacks.

In conclusion, by closely following youtubers such as Elsa Ruiz Cómica we see unfold the possibility of generating dissident political spaces, together with the need for normative affirmation and recognition, of a community that still faces great challenges and discrimination in many areas of society. This heterogeneous trans community is now gaining access to current debates in academia, media and ultimately in the public opinion.

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