INTERCULTURALITY AND SEXUAL-GENDER DISSIDENCES: CONNECTIONS BETWEEN AGENCY AND ACADEMY

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SUMMARY
This paper presents the policies and affirmative actions that have been developed at the Universidad de Costa Rica regarding LGBT issues. It is a partial result of the investigation for my master’s degree dissertation. The theoretical basis which I discuss is Interculturality (Intercultural Philosophy). With it, I propose sexual and gender dissidences as a topic that gives a new perspective for research in such framework, due to the existence of connections between them, that bring new gazes to both interculturality, as well as sexual and gender dissidences.

KEYWORDS
Interculturality; LGBT, University; public policy; affirmative actions.

I am a Costa Rican feminist and bisexual activist. In my country, I used to work at a public university. Currently I am studying in a postgraduate program in Brazil (a Master Degree in Education, from the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul), due to a scholarship I obtained from the Organization of American States (OAS).

Through my research, I study and question sexual and gender dissidences in the Universidad de Costa Rica as my context. This means that I analyze the reality of lesbians, gay, bisexual and trans people (LGBT), who belongs to this specific university, regarding discrimination and affirmative actions in the academic space. With such purpose, Interculturality is one of the theoretical basis I choose to look at this reality in that particular context. So, I present connections between Interculturality and Sexual and Gender Dissidences (SGD), in order to establish a new bond between these theoretical corpus and the “sexual minorities”, which brings new gazes to both fields.

Studying the LGBT topic from Interculturality open a new perspective on the subject, since SGD has been examined little in such a field. Therefore, I introduce my theoretical reflections with a general view about the university and its agency policies for SGD population (students, professors and staff). I want to clarify that in Costa Rica, the most used terms for referring to SGD are: diversidad sexual; personas sexualmente diversas; orientaciones sexuales e identidades de género; LGBT.

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3 Among “trans” people we include transgender, transexual, trasvesti, and drag queen/king.

4 I use these categories because they are the most representative and used terms in the political movement (activism) for sexual and gender dissidences. Also, because it is the most common denomination used in my country. Nevertheless, I am aware that those categories classify and limit the fluency we found in the queer and sexual/gender identities.
First of all, I must refer to my university. The Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) is a public institution for higher education, the largest and oldest in my country. The main campus is located in the capital, San José, but it also has campuses all over the national territory (12 campuses spread in different regions). It has juridical autonomy; it is a democratic organization, with representative and collective decision-making bodies (the main one is the Consejo Universitario). For a general outlook, I bring some information that the university itself diffuses: 240 academic options (undergraduate programs), with more than 38,000 students; 486 post-graduate programs, with over 3,000 students; 257 agreements with international universities; 1700 research projects and activities; 480 extension projects; 109 artistic and cultural projects (UCR, 2015).

At this point, allow me to explain that I understand the university (as an institution), and specifically the Universidad de Costa Rica, as a state. Every university is a world in itself, with its own structure and organization, with a specific legal system, with exclusive ways of functioning, and with an own form of government suitable for its reality. Thus, some actions developed inside it are public policies because we are talking about a public institution (one of the State’s universities). In addition, the UCR enjoys great prestige nationally, it is well acknowledged by the population, and is one of the best qualified public institutions; its contributions and bonds with the Costa Rican society are immeasurable. The importance that UCR has in the country is truly visible, which is present even in the social imaginary; this university constitutes an important reference in many subjects and fields.

The university is part of the society. Inside the society, there are groups which hold power and hegemony over people (groups and individuals), establishing patterns for them, as well as for their ways of living and thinking. In such manner, models are created, and everything that is apart from it is seen as different. However, it also exists resistance from individuals and groups who do not “fulfill” the imposed patterns, and because of that they rebel against the system in order to show their presence. This is the case of sexually diverse people, which means, individual who conform the sexual and gender dissidence.

There are also new ways of thinking, such as the Interculturality proposal (here, it will be understood from the Intercultural Philosophy’s perspective). It was not conceived for analyzing the SGD, but brings new possibilities and challenges to think about this subject. Beginning with the definition for interculturality itself, defining the intercultural represents a dilemma due to several reasons stated by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt (2004):

• asking for a definition is an occidental Eurocentric logic, based on a need to define and classify, which could carry some violence for whom doesn’t need a definition;
• to define is to set; involves defining, fragmenting and parceling (reduces to an “object” of study);
• definitions objectify what is defined, and this is how dualism works and distinguishes between the knowing-individual from the object-to-know, leaving that object away, in “the other side”.

In this dilemma about the need of a definition, I notice the first parallelism and connection between Interculturality and Sexual Diversity. There is always an attempt to define people, to place them into labels, to fit and locate them into binary logics, regarding “traditionalisms” about sex and gender; this becomes very particular with those who break
the hegemonic order. Yet, queer (sexual-gender dissidence) completely undo such binarism. There is a need to name and classify which –as I understand– responds to a need to rationalize: “it clearly exists a sort of obsession for rationality, which doesn’t allow us to see any other possibility, not contrary nor even lateral” (Kusch, 1978, p. 88). In sexuality, this obsession for rationality can be translated as an obsession for gender binary, heterosexuality, and monogamy: as part of the culture and the ways of living that have been imposed, we found gender roles and one single way for love and relationships (which I call the heterosexual-monogamous “combo”). All of this takes form under a core idea: heteronormativity. However, Interculturality consists in breaking traditional visions and betting for new views; here is another connection with SGD. It consists in cultivating “disposition for learning to think again [...] for learning to read the world and our own story” (Fornet-Betancourt, 2004, p. 11), also in building new readings for cultural processes and practices, in order to –at the same time– give a place to those who have been excluded, invisible or denied.

Interculturality could be thought as a deep critic to narrow understandings about reality; using a metaphor, a critic to a window’s perspective: it “allows seeing only through a portion of the open space to which it is targeting” (Fornet-Betancourt, 2004, p. 12). This makes it easier to understand that it exists in a wider complexity of realities (concerning individuals and groups), which include senses that are difficult to comprehend as a whole. Therefore, our approach to realities will always be partial, under a focus that only shows a part of it. What we see through a window is a part of the landscape, but not the complete panorama/scene. It’s with this perspective that we should address SGD: under the premise that we are approaching to a fragment which doesn’t reveal the entire landscape, because it is wider and complex. Also, in a landscape, as we are advancing towards the horizon, it keeps going away, distant. In sexuality, we are in front of an infinite world of discoveries; sexuality is not finished, set, established nor determined; it is totally dynamic, changeable, mobile, flexible, versatile. If this idea functions for heterosexual people, even more for all the sexual and gender identities that conform the ‘dissidence’.

And so, the intercultural journey must be understood in three paths: a methodology, a political project and a cultural project. Those three paths offer new routes for SGD and, in these trails, it is also possible to locate agency. This means:

• **a methodology**, that allows to “study, describe and analyze the interaction dynamics” and that assumes an ethical position “in favor of the coexistence of differences” (Fornet-Betancourt, 2004, p. 13). With this methodology emerges new scientific fields, perspectives and ways of “making science”, which certainly part from difference (this means, where the “base” that we have is the fact of being different). In Costa Rica, research on sexual diversity began in the 70s and has been growing since then, not only in the amount of works, but also in the diversification and depth of researched topics (Jiménez, 2014).

• **a political project**, that points at a reorganization of actual [international] relationships (Fornet-Betancourt, 2004). A political project that publicly makes visible our existence, our live conditions and situations, our needs; a political project that advocates for our citizen rights’ defense and that fights against all types of discrimination.

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5 All the texts from Rodolfo Kusch used in this paper were originally written in Spanish. So, all quotations were freely translated by myself from the original text in our mother language.

6 All the quotations from texts written by Raúl Fornet-Betancourt were also translated by me, from their originals in Spanish.
• a cultural project, that seeks the “recreation of cultures starting by putting into practice the principle of mutual acknowledgement” (Fornet-Betancourt, 2004, p. 13). A cultural project that pretends to obtain acknowledgement, because those who belong to SGD are part of a culture considered different in our country (this means that SGD assumes its own culture), and—at same time—every sexual and gender identity has its own culture.

Consequently, interculturality transcends the idea of tolerance, because instead it proposes coexistence, dialogue, and mutual enrichment among cultures, in theoretical and practical levels, which can lead to cultural transformation processes (Fornet-Betancourt, 2004). These are also ideals for us activists for SGD whether in academy, in “streets”, or in both spaces. Here I must say that, in Intercultural Philosophy, construction processes could take many different forms besides conventional academic production: poems, essays, plays, novels (Zea, 2005). Furthermore, these processes include a very important element: the experiential and biographical level. “We show explicitly that we as people are involved in the intercultural space’s creation”, considering that what is intercultural is not “out of us. We are part of that field” (Fornet-Betancourt, 2004, p. 12).

When we discuss interculturality, clearly the idea of culture is there. In relation to this, one explanation says that culture assumes “a place where you necessarily inhabit. And to inhabit a place means it is not possible to be indifferent to what happens there” (Kusch, 1976, p. 115. Italics belong to the original). Accordingly, we could talk about culture as a living mode. But, in order to constitute ways of living as such, they need to be acquired by individuals; in other words, practices, symbols, and meanings from certain group need to be incorporated by its members. A culture has its value because it is absorbed by a community, which gives a special significance to it (Kusch, 1976). Culture does not exist without a materiality that is organized according to representative values for some society; and, such materiality and values become real in the everyday ways of living (Vaz e Silva, 2009). This is the reason why we should analyze the day-to-day from a specific context.

In this analysis of everyday experiences, we can realize if agency and the public policy for inclusion and rights guarantees are effective in real life. There is a plurality of cultures where each one has its singularity, which is traduced into “different types of forms for accessing to experience, knowledge, and reality” (Vaz e Silva, 2009, p. 39). Having all these ideas, three levels of culture have been identified in this research, which are present in the context of study:
A country’s culture is probably the most evident, because many times the system itself seeks to build a national culture (a national identity) that in some moments can be homogenizing. Yet, inside this big country-culture, which is general and covers everything concentrated in a territory, there are also other several cultures. I am talking about “regionalisms”, meaning smaller and specific groups, such as the LGBTI, that shows as a culture itself. As a matter of fact, in Costa Rica it is called el mundo de “ambiente” (the “environment” world) or just as “el ambiente” (“the environment”).

Also, if we scrutinize the singularities inside such “ambiente”, we can notice that it has subcultures too, for example: gays, lesbians, the trans group; bisexuals and intersexuals – which are commonly ‘absorbed’ by the other groups. Now, trying to establish a “hierarchy” for those levels of cultures and subcultures, the national-culture is bigger, comprehending the others; in parallel, will be the LGBTI subculture; and, for last, as a micro-world immersed in both, will be the ‘bubble’ of the Universidad de Costa Rica. This could be visualized as in the image.

My research is about the UCR’s culture concerning SGD, being aware that both belong to a wider Costa Rican culture. Allow me to give some context: the UCR is the main crib for intellectuals in the nation, which since 1940 has been making contributions of high significance for the country, in a large variety of fields. Actually, in people’s social imaginary it is considered the most prestigious university. This institution has even been recognized as Beneficiencia de la Educación y la Cultura de Costa Rica (Praiseworthy of Education and Culture of Costa Rica). It contains a great part of the country’s critical thinking (but also, there are people with traditional and conservative ways of thinking and living). Due to dynamics that grow in its interior, it is sensed as a micro-world, also as a bubble. In fact, the main campus (located in the capital city) has as name Ciudad Universitaria (University City).

However, inside a culture, power struggles create guidelines “based on traditions within the groups” (Vaz e Silva, 2009, p. 37). Such traditions inside a culture have their own “symbolic codes, ways of living, belief system” (idem). Hence, in UCR’s culture, actions have emerged that tend to generate favorable changes for SGD population within the university world. Before mentioning them, let me briefly mention two important background elements:

• The university’s aim and tasks are regulated by several institutional principles, established in the Estatuto Orgánico (Organic Statute). One of them praises respect for people’s freedom of expression:

Respect for people and freedom of expression: Guarantee, in the university world, the dialogue and free expression of ideas and opinions, as well as the coexistence of different visions and school of thoughts, without any limitation than mutual respect. (Consejo Universitario, 1974, p. 1. My translation from the Spanish original.)
• In year 2008, the former country’s government promulgated a Decreto Ejecutivo (Executive Order) declaring May 17th as National Day against Homophobia⁷. Later, the next government, in 2012, made a rectification to also include the lesbophobia and the transphobia. Finally, the declaration set “Day May 17 of every year, National Day against Homophobia, Lesbophobia and Transphobia”. This order also establishes that public institutions must spread the aim of such commemoration and to “facilitate, promote and support” actions in order to eradicate homo-lesbo-transphobia.

With such facts as a background, and although still is a lot of work to do, in the UCR have been developed affirmative initiatives in favor of sexual-gender dissidences, which deserve to be shared.

• Pronouncement as discrimination free space. In year 2011, the Consejo Universitario (University Council) issued a disposition declaring the UCR as a “space free from all discrimination and of respect for difference”, emphasizing that it includes “sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination” (Consejo Universitario, 2011, p. 2). Within the agreements, this declaration states (Consejo Universitario, 2011):

- insist on the university’s commitment towards Human Rights’ and respect;
- request the UCR’s administration (government) to declare as ‘institutional interest’ the activities developed on campus for commemorating the National Day against Homophobia;
- urge to the administration to formulate researches in order to identify discrimination practices inside the UCR;
- urge the academic units and the research units⁸ to create reflective processes that promote a culture of respect to sexual diversity.

Considering the agency in favor of SGD within the university, this pronouncement is the most important public policy of affirmative action, because it establishes the framework and guidelines regarding this matter.

• Sexual Diversity Inter-university Festival. As a response to the Executive Order which declares a day against homo-lesbo-transphobia (May 17th), since the year 2009, to commemorate this date, in the UCR (and other public universities) academic and cultural-artistic activities are carried out. At the beginning, they were small actions, with little assistance; yet, every year the festival grows, gaining visibility and diversifying the type of activities: lectures, roundtables, cineforum, performances, music shows and stands with information. I want to highlight here that the LGBT flag has been hung in some of the university’s main buildings, for example: the Escuela de Estudios Generales (School of General Studies) and the library

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⁷ In the international context, on May 17th 1990, the World Health Organization eliminated homosexuality as a mental disorder.
⁸ The academic units are all the university departments responsible for developing programs (educational projects) that lead to obtain an academic degree (diploma). The names they receive in the UCR are: Escuela (School), Facultad (Faculty), Sede Regional (Regional Office), or Recinto Universitario (University Premises). The research units are all the centers, institutes, departments or any other type of section-belonging to the university-where research is developed.
Carlos Monge Alfaro. Even though, last year 2015, the university Administration by itself, painted with the flag’s colors pedestrian crossings near the UCR’s main entrance at the central campus. These festivals have become real politicization moments in the university space. And, the best fact is that they not only occur in the UCR, but also in other two public universities: the Instituto Tecnológico and the Universidad Nacional.

- **Comisión de Diversidad y Género**, FEUCR. The Federación de Estudiantes de la UCR (called FEUCR) is the main student body in the institution; it is democratically elected by all students for representing them in several university entities. In 2009 a special commission was created to look after gender and sexual diversity issues, concerning the student population. However, actions developed by this commission depend on the directory on duty, which changes every year.

- **Specific actions from certain departments.** Clarifying that I haven’t completely searched the agency and efforts on behalf of SGD (because this will be part of my field-work), I do want to mention some initiatives that I know and consider important.

The Centro de Investigación en Estudios de la Mujer (CIEM) is the research institute on gender studies; it exists since 1999, with an antecessor from 1987. This center is explicitly feminist and has several research and extension projects (usually together); the majority of professionals that work there are also professors in the university (in different programs). It has a specialized documentation center and an informative bulletin. Among its projects, some of them are about violence and sexual harassment, which includes situations related to SGD. The CIEM works with prevention, as well as take of action regarding accusations it receives.

**Acknowledgement and acceptance of LGBT professors.** In the university, there are teachers ‘out of closet’, this means that in their schools or faculties, their colleagues and chiefs know about their sexual or gender identity. For example, there are “cases” in the schools of Psychology, Philosophy, Modern Languages, and Musical Arts. This has particular relevance when these professors are trans. If a professor publically identifies as trans, this is a public acknowledgement which is particularly relevant due to the symbolic meaning this has.

**Extension projects.** As a part of the social action exercised from the university (which is part of its bond with society), stands out an area that reunites projects about Human Rights. One form of extension is the Trabajo Comunal Universitario (University Community Work), where every student graduating from the UCR with a bachelor’s degree must complete 300 hours of community service. There are two projects that address directly and explicitly the SGD subject: one is called “Apoyo a asociaciones de derechos sexuales, reproductivos y diversidad sexual”\(^{11}\), which pertains to the Escuela de Ciencias Políticas (School of Political Sciences); the other one is called “Arte, Identidades y Género” (Art, Identities, and Gender), subscript to the Escuela de Filosofía (School of Philosophy), in which gender is problematized, undoing notions regarding femininity, masculinity, and transgenderism, through artistic expressions.

\(^9\) Could be translated as Commission on Diversity and Gender.
\(^10\) In English, the name could be: Student Federation of the University of Costa Rica.
\(^11\) Can be translated as: Support for associations on sexual rights, reproductive rights, and sexual diversity.
• Institutional Policies for the following years. Finally, another regulation that guides the UCR’s actions is the institutional policies, issued every 5 years approximately. For the next quinquennium, 2016-2020, there are two important dispositions that eventually could be used for justifying affirmative actions:

2.2.1. Will encourage the inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary education, updating ideas, and making the curriculum structure flexible and administration both for graduate and postgraduate programs, having a basis on a critical, humanistic, inclusive, human rights and environment preservation vision, according to the Costa Rican society requirements (Consejo Universitario, 2015, p. 2).

7.3.1. Will actively promote the development of an academic and work environment free of all kinds of violence and discrimination, as well as affirmative action strategies in order to overcome conditions of inequality and social exclusion, both of students and professors and administrative staff. (Consejo Universitario, 2015, p. 7)

All these policies and activities generated within the UCR, in great extent are a result of efforts made by activists that work inside the academy and try to make it a space without LGBT-phobia, a safety space for sexual and gender dissident people, guaranteeing their rights (at least in the university world). Facing the denial of the “other” (or its definition), as well as the domination and repression that society and hegemonic groups exercise, it arises the resistance of individuals who incarnate such “issue” that is denied. These individuals create arguments to show their own humanity, where a first step is mental emancipation (Zea, 2005) towards impositions. Another way of understanding this rupture with domination, is the epiphany (Dussel, 1977), in other words, the revelation of the oppressed, of the ‘others’; this is explained as the beginning of the true liberation, where whom “rebels transcend the system, places continuously facts into question” (Dussel, 1977, p. 22. Translation is mine). The epiphany is a birth that inspires a new security and warmth; so, the world goes unfolding since that conception moment (Dussel, 1977).

In the scope of SGD, emancipation and epiphany are important issues before impositions in sexuality, such as: binarisms, monogamy, heterosexuality, and male-dominated thoughts in general. Academy is the main place where this is constituted. In my opinion, if we are or we work as scientists, professors or academic people, it is our duty to take advantage of our position to create changes, with the intention that knowledge is useful and, at the same time, an instrument of criticism and transformation for society. Fortunately, the UCR is like this. Although the path is still incipient, what matters the most is that such path is being built. Is already possible to notice its seminality, as Kusch (1978) says; and seminality is seeds, what germinates, what creates, what grows and gives fruit (Kusch, 1978). This is how social movements are, and this is how the LGBT movement has being. The evolution is slow, but constant. Advances are perceived, felt, and evidenced with the pass of time, from generation to generation. At the end, there are many cultural layers that we need to move.

“Changes have been made by people with the light of their dreams and utopias” (Sarango, 2009, p. 1). Achievements in LGBT issues are an example of this, because we have many dreams and utopias. Also because we have obtained important advances due to our

12 The translation for both quotations was made by me.
13 The translation is mine, from the original quotation in Spanish.
struggles these past decades. Primarily, because we won’t stop fighting. Our fights are in a broad spectrum, so some times we need to focus in specific spaces or contexts, like -in this case- the university. It is evident that inside the UCR there are changes happening; in this paper it was not possible to mention all. My desire is that in the University each time we can build more spaces of respect and ethical conscience (Dussel, 1977), of intercultural dialogue (Vaz e Silva, 2009), and of cultural disobedience (Fornet-Betancourt, 2001), all of them towards a transformation of the country’s reality. The challenge is turning the Universidad de Costa Rica into a space truly free of discrimination, which could be a model for the Costa Rican society. We have started walking in this direction and we will continue to head towards a time that completely complies in being free of discrimination.

In conclusion, I want to say that I tried to demonstrate how the discussion about interculturality, woven by the Intercultural Philosophy, can bring important elements to deepen the reflections and actions for the sexual and gender diversity movement.

References