



## Opening the Boundaries of Citizenship

*Citizenship and Autonomy*

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I am Leticia Sabsay, and I joined the Open University as a Research Associate of the European Research Council Project, Oecumene Citizenship after Orientalism.

My contribution to this project is focused on the emergence and further development of what has come to be understood as “sexual citizenship”. Sexual citizenship is not a clear-cut concept; broadly speaking, it refers to the articulation of principles of gender and sexual freedom and equality in terms of sexual rights. Depending on the context, these rights might include reproductive rights; the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex people not to be discriminated on the basis of their sexuality, or their gender identifications and expressions, and the access of LGBTQI people to equal rights as those to which heterosexual and gender conforming people have been long entitled. This is the case, for instance, of so-called same-sex marriage and the right to self-determination in regards to our ways of living gender and sexuality more broadly: from the right of not being harassed, to the right to be recognised through the gender with which we identify, regardless of the gender we have been assigned at birth. This has been put at stake, for example, in international campaigns for the de-pathologisation of trans people, and also points to gender identity laws.

The proliferation of primarily ‘Western’ developments of sexual citizenship to global politics are associated with antidiscrimination ideals, the respect for human rights, principles of tolerance, a growing consensus about the need to achieve gender and sexual equality, and to expand key liberties. These are all valuable ideals, and yet the collectives involved in sexual politics, along with the scholars concerned with sexual matters, have not been unanimous in welcoming the translation of sexual freedom and justice principles, or standards, from ‘Western’ into non-Western societies. The politics of sexual citizenship has, from the start, been a controversial issue, with unconditional advocates and fierce critics on each side of the spectrum and many positions in between.

One central area of debate has been associated with the fact that the field of sexual citizenship has been shaped by the globalization of sexual identities. Under the guise of the language of rights, or even human rights, sexual citizenship has raised particular concerns in relation to the cultural violence involved in processes of universalization. Here, the tension between those who understand sexual rights and the identities they presuppose are universal and, as such, should be extended to everybody regardless of their cultural background, on

the one hand, and those who see this process of expansion of the discourse of sexual rights as a form of cultural imperialism on the other, is paramount.

The other relevant controversy develops around the ways in which sexual democratic principles have assumed a key role in mobilizing current Western civilizational discourses, enabling the re-articulation of an orientalist approach that divides “civilization” from its “other”; an imaginary and oversimplified, even stereotypical map whose borders would be, on the one hand, a supposedly sexually progressive, democratic and tolerant society, and on the other, cultures that are allegedly sexually conservative, authoritarian, and intolerant. This is the context in which the debates about the instrumentalization of sexual politics for the promotion of Islamophobia and neo-colonial projects have been taking place.

These are the two areas of contention that my research is concerned with. Now, the way in which I address these controversies is not a direct one. My understanding is that these debates along with the discourses about sexual citizenship that go with it, mobilize sometimes unquestioned, and more often than not very much contested ideas about the entanglement between subjectivity, sexuality and politics. Therefore, my study analyses this particular entanglement. More concretely, I am trying to account for the emergence of the “sexual-rights bearing subject”, for whom a specific relation between subjectivity, sexuality and politics, has been naturalised. And I do so by paying attention to those practices that call the universality and naturalness of this “sexual-rights bearing subject” into question.

The idea that there is a subject who is entitled to have a sexuality, objectified as a set of rights is, in fact, a recent idea that developed in the past few decades. From the history of sexual liberation movements and sexual emancipation, to the struggles for the recognition of sexual rights, we have witnessed significant transformations in the way we conceive sexual freedom and justice. So, it is these changing views about what sexual freedom and justice might be and how they may reinforce old or institute new divisions in the world that I am trying to understand.

Taking this history into account might inform current forms of transnational activism that challenge the normalizing and universalist guise in which sexual citizenship has become hegemonic. And in so doing, maybe contribute to the reformulation of sexual citizenship beyond its mainly Western (and liberal) conceptions.