

“What Did You Feel?”: The Embodied and Affective Dimensions of Grey Sexual Experiences

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Abstract

This research explores the affective, embodied and material dimensions of 'grey sex'. The latter is a term that describes ambiguous sexual encounters which are neither fully consensual nor felt as violent. Such encounters are often characterized by a discrepancy between feelings and words; specifically, feeling 'no' but saying 'yes'. These experiences are considered to be a matter of power and gender as they are influenced by gender norms and heteronormative discourses regarding male and female sexualities. Rather than exploring the causes of such experiences or why “yes” was said instead of “no”, this research attempts to move beyond explanations based solely on macro structures and individual agency. Rather than asking "Did you consent or not?", it asks "What did you feel?" Taking a relational approach, new materialisms and affect theories are applied to integrate a transversal method that considers the flows of affect between myriad human and non-human interactions. This method is used to investigate how greyness emerges from these reciprocal, affective relations, going beyond an understanding of individuals as autonomous and separate, and considering them instead as co-constituted by the setting, objects, gestures, and affective atmosphere of an assemblage. The research also examines the gap between what was felt, exploring the visceral, embodied sensations that characterize the ambiguity of these encounters. It considers embodied feelings as valid sources of knowledge, moving beyond verbalization. Theoretical reflections will be presented to enrich the debate on sexual violations in the grey zone, alongside empirical data gathered from body mapping sessions with participants.

Keywords: Affect Theory; Body; Grey Sex; New Materialisms, Relationality