

## Intersectionality and Activism - Chilean Fanzines

(by Mario Faust-Scalisi)

In my paper today, I want to introduce you to Chile, more specifically to Chilean fanzines. Chile has an evolving comic culture, that is marked by independent and small-scale publications. And being trained in history and believing that history and memory matter, I wish to indicate that there are a number of direct links between small-scale independent and at times underground publications and the experience of the long years of the Pinochet dictatorship. Resistance then meant to counteract the streamlined media, which was only possible organized in small groups, underground and by private printing – here the links between activism and fanzines come into view.

This backdrop will contribute to better understand the role of independent publishing in Chile and of fanzines there. Most of these comics are circulating in limited numbers. Them being independent of any peer-review, any bigger distribution network, etc., and by this any major external controlling influences, allows to use fanzines to discuss “hot” topics, that are seldom discussed in the wider public or not in such frankness. This is directly linked not only to the idea of giving and getting a voice – a topic inter alia discussed with links to feminism or other countermovements to intersectional discriminations –, but the concept of “personalized politics” in the sense of starting political activity from personal experiences. My focus here will be on fanzines openly framed as activist media, dealing with personal intersectional challenges and linking them to society issues as a fight for general social justice. By raising awareness, “personalized politics” here allow to get a foothold on society challenges along questions of intersectional discrimination. At the same time the personal approach gives credibility and urgency to the issues raised. The aim of these fanzines is at least a double one – fanzines are made to influence society debates, by being handed from hand to hand, but they also allow for personal reflection or even offer a way of doing therapeutic work.

In my presentation, I want to focus on one female Chilean artist – as she characterizes herself – and a “hardcore feminist”, as she is labelled in Chilean media at times. She calls herself Katherine Supnem. Her last name is made of the Spanish translation of a text line of the U2 song “One” – “We're one, but we're not the same”, or in Spanish “Somos uno, pero no el mismo” – Supnem. Katherine Supnem explained, that she liked the idea of these lines – we are all humans but each of us in a different way – but not U2 “so much” anymore. Her idea of a lived difference, while we are all humans, translated into her pen name, could be stressed as

one of her most important topics. She wants to use comics – for her a male media, dominated by male artists and male topics – to empower herself, but also to empower feminism, and to tackle several forms of intersectional discrimination. But this is not done with her fanzines alone, alone with drawing and writing comics, but with an activist approach in presentation and distribution, too. For this she connects with other artists, mostly female, mostly self-declared feminist – all of them using comics for activism. The label they share is “tetas tristes” – loosely translated to “sad breasts” or “sad tits”. The label is to refer to multiple modes of sexist and sexual discrimination of women in Chile. And it is used to publish – as stated by them – non-sexist feminist comics, mostly in the form of fanzines. Katherine Supnem’s approach is to start from her personal experiences – daily sexism and multiple discriminations in the form of intersectional discrimination she experiences or encounters. But following the concept and aim of empowerment, her fanzines are not only a personal media, but allow on the one hand to empower Katherine Supnem to tackle society discriminations, but on the other hand others, too, directly and indirectly. To give you an impression of the importance of intersectional discriminations in today’s Chile let’s move away from Katherine Supnem and her work for a moment and look at a movement that started in Chile in late 2019 and is having a worldwide impact. That is the protest performance “Un violador en tu camino” – “A Rapist in Your Path” that was started by the group “Lastesis” in Valparaiso, Chile. Directly linked to the performance have been the protests against the Chilean government in 2019 and the various violations of women and sexual identity minorities by the police and army in their course. The performance wants to draw attention to the fact, that rape culture is common in Chile, that macho-ideas keep dominating society. This is what *Lastesis* is fighting against, and this is what Katherine Supnem is problematizing since years, not only in her fanzines, but in workshops, talks and on the street, too – her activism and the activism of her fanzines cannot be separated.

It is important to note, that Katherine Supnem’s topic is not women rights in a binary thinking of gender, it is not feminism in a limited understanding as women fighting for women’s rights – and this is not the topic of *Lastesis* neither. Instead Katherine Supnem is tackling intersectional discrimination, by coming from her personal experiences while understanding herself as an intersectionally positioned woman. This takes various forms – so let’s move to an example. In her series of so far 12 fanzines “La vida cotidiana” – “the daily life” – she discusses problems like having no money, not finding a place to live, while facing pressure from her family, especially from the women of her family, or being overweight. She discusses the links between problems she experiences in her daily life, as not finding a place to live she can afford, problems of society, as a not working market for renting apartments in Santiago de Chile, but

always again also sexism and other forms of intersectional discrimination. Let me give you an impression with an example of La Vida Cotidiana 4 – “sin hogar” – “without home” – the second one here.

On the one page you can see in the presentation, she explains “I started looking for a house / a place and all was horrible.” The first she encounters with an offer on her search explains: “Hello I am handsome, kind, single and rent a piece”. The second: “We are a couple, we like karaoke, renting”. The third: “No woman (it could be translated as wife or married woman, too), no son, no visits, no being in the house”. The fourth, under the label *poverty*: “I rent apartment, one piece and I sleep in the armchair”. The fifth: “Single man leases only to young female university student” And the last is “only for women” – “You cannot enter with couples”. Finally, she decides on the lesser evil: the last option: “Casa de Mujeres” – a women’s refuge. What I want to show here is, that coming from the discussion of daily challenges in an expensive capital, as Santiago de Chile, but it could be as well Buenos Aires or La Ciudad de México, you are faced with several forms of intersectional discrimination. First you are judged as a gendered being, what limits your options. You cannot take option three – she sees you as a woman, that appears to be a criterion of exclusion – but you can take option five, he is only looking for young women. But then you are facing sexism and the danger of sexual violations. You can take the “handsome guy”, but his intent does not seem to be to rent an apartment. And what if you do not want to be put to a place only because you are seen as a woman? These are topics Katherine Supnem is treating in her fanzines again and again, sometimes very open, sometimes more hidden. And by bringing these society challenges out into spotlight – in a personalized manner – they get political; an activist approach to intersectional discriminations via fanzines.

Even though Katherine Supnem most often starts from her experiences, she also looks at other forms of intersectional discrimination she encounters. One very serious is racial discrimination in Chile, a country that has neglected its indigenous roots for a long time, considering itself more as a European immigration country. Here – partly different to Andean countries like Peru or Ecuador – indigenous traditions and concepts are still judged negatively by many. And this again is a form of intersectional discrimination, bringing together ethnic discriminations, gendered discriminations or socioeconomic discriminations. Katherine Supnem discusses this inter alia as for the question of indigenous medicine, a traditionally female business. Now in the presentation you see an example I am referring to. Male white doctors discriminate all other concepts of healing and health in Chile – because indigenous *doctoras* are judged as not being educated, not following science, and – which is not expressed verbally, but shown in the larger comic composition – not being male. I will not be able to translate all panels here to keep the

presentation short, but most importantly on the left the first person says: “The doctor told me that my medicine is illiterate subculture, that I cannot heal people with herbs”, the other expresses: “He said I should study 8 years of western culture to heal people”. Clear opposing concepts are shown here of western-modern-educated-rational and traditional-indigenous-uneducated-irrational, standing for major lines of intersectional discriminations in deeds and concepts not only in Chile. Making them not only visible, not only giving a voice, or better formulated giving a platform to raise the yet existing voice but following the concept of “personalized politics” empowerment can be gained with the media of activist fanzines.

This approach can be seen further along the question of gender and sexual identities, topics clearly tackled by *Tetas Tristes*. To exemplify this let us have a look at the Katherine Supnem-comic “Lía y sus Líos. Una niña Buena con problemas de identidad de Género.” – “Lía and her mess – a good girl with gender identity problems”. It is a comic published first in 2010 and then again in 2014 with some new, but in total less pages. And there is at least one newer edition I could not get hold on so far. All times it comes only in black-and-white and on most panels without any words. The outline is a biographical journey of Lía finding herself and her own identity – is she someone formed by others, does she have to fit into frames, and is she a woman in the first place? One question on this “journey” is the influence of the church – which means in Chile still the catholic church – on sexual identity and sexual rights, more generally on intersectional discriminations. Some of the panels about – the example I am referring to you can see in the presentation – come without words and end in something that might be marked as an empowering transformation of religious symbols in their use. From the outline the comic is a subjective experience along questions of lust, sexuality, body experience, gender and sexual identity, but of homosexual desire, too. Surely, you may question rightfully my position in interpreting the comic, framing me as ‘male’ and ‘white’, but this allows me to stress the activist approach here. Katherine Supnem’s fanzines are personal and subjective, they are therapeutically at times and follow first her experiences. But they are also open for interpretation and reach out to a wider public, making the topics tackled political topics. And not only challenges of intersectional discrimination are shown; by following an activist approach in distributing and framing the fanzines, “personalized politics” come into being. And this does not mean political personalization – linking politics to one person –, but to approach politics from personal experiences, and by this e.g. allowing to mark topics as urgent and specifically credible.

Her approach allows Katherine Supnem to leave streamlined discussions of sexuality and other framing concepts behind, that are still most powerful in Chile and most other places. Katherine

Supnem moves away from simple pictures and messages in her activist fanzines. And not only sexual identity is presented in them as not something found and kept but as transforming itself always again. Her approach is not to draw special attention to one form of intersectional discrimination or one approach of identity politics but blur borders. Positively turned this empowers you – the reader – to establish and transform your own identities over times, empowers you to not fit into given pictures and concepts. But in the end, this is always in the first place a personal journey – this is the activist approach of the “personalized politics” lined out here. This can be seen in *La Vida Cotidiana* Número 2 “Miedos” – “Fears”. There Katherine Supnem shows all she has been afraid of, in chronological order, from cutting nails to her own vagina, to penises and then men. It follows the fear of being alone – or stay with men she does not want to be with. In the end – ‘now’ – she finally is afraid to find other women pretty. Katherine Supnem – seen here in her comic character – has not one stable sexual identity, she does not want or need to claim clear-cut minority rights. Her claim can be translated more to potentially ‘minority rights’ or better said: protection against any form of intersectional discrimination for all – following her pen name – *somos uno, pero no el mismo* – we are one, but we are not the same. This is no discussion limited to Katherine Supnem, but the work of Katherine Supnem allows to witness these discussions and an artistic approach to not only influence society discourses but that is also a very personal reflection on experiences and encounters. Drawing comics empowers Katherine Supnem personally, and her comics empower others experiencing intersectional discriminations. But this is no simple line to follow. In her fanzines Katherine Supnem shows the struggle between being caught in powerful discourses influencing the own identity, speaking up for others – and/or from a subjective perspective – and stressing the need for empowerment and change. Here the activist approach is key: starting from a subjective perspective put into fanzines and linked activism – “personalized politics” –, but going further on, allowing for discourses and society influences building on it. Not claiming specific personal experiences to count especially – putting her as person in front – but marking them as subjective and at the same time standing for society challenges exemplary leads to the activist potential of Katherine Supnem’s and linked fanzines. Intersectionality and activism can come together in Chilean fanzines, this clearly can be seen looking at the work of Katherine Supnem and *Tetas Tristes* more generally.