

Matters of Form: Aesthetics and LGBTQ+ Activism in Brazil's Sexual and Gender Politics

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Abstract:

In *Brazil's Sex Wars: The Aesthetics of Queer Activism in São Paulo*, Joseph Say Sosa analyzes mobilizations over sexuality and gender politics in Brazil. Drawing on over a decade of ethnographic fieldwork and media analysis, Sosa offers a conceptual map for navigating 'sex wars' as a broader sociopolitical phenomenon, framing them as aesthetic disputes over forms of rights rather than ideological content.

Eine Frage der Form: Ästhetik und LGBTQ+-Aktivismus in Brasiliens Sexual- und Geschlechterpolitik

German Abstract:

In *Brazil's Sex Wars: The Aesthetics of Queer Activism in São Paulo* analysiert Joseph Say Sosa Mobilisierungen rund um Sexualität und Geschlechterpolitik in Brasilien. Auf der Grundlage von über einem Jahrzehnt ethnographischer Feldforschung und Medienanalyse bietet Sosa einen konzeptionellen Rahmen für die Betrachtung von ‚Sex Wars‘ als breiteres gesellschaftspolitisches Phänomen, indem er sie als ästhetische Auseinandersetzungen über Formen von Rechten und nicht nur als ideologische Inhalte darstellt.

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Jair Bolsonaro's election to the presidency in 2018 marked a turning point in Brazilian politics, signalling a reversal of the efforts made over the previous three decades to build democratic institutions and human rights protections in Brazil. Bolsonaro's election revealed that many Brazilians from diverse backgrounds had supported a leader who had explicitly rejected the democratic values that Brazil had supposedly been developing since its redemocratization in the 1980s, such as citizenship, human rights, and equality. *Brazil's Sex Wars* addresses Brazil's rightward turn which made Bolsonaro's rise possible by examining sexual and gender rights struggles in São Paulo during the 2000s and 2010s. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with LGBT+ activists in São Paulo and media analysis, Joseph Jay Sosa demonstrates that the sex wars in Brazil are fundamentally aesthetic struggles over the *forms* of rights, as both activists and their opponents deploy rights-based discourses with opposing content. Therefore, Sosa argues that, rather than opposing rights, conservatives capitalize on human rights discourse to promote selective, exclusionary rights, as Bolsonaro's slogan "human rights for the right humans" illustrates.

The book unfolds thematically with each chapter examining a distinct area of sexual politics and specific aesthetic operation. Chapter 1 analyzes the aesthetic of *homofobia* (homophobia) discourse, tracing its circulation in law, media, and soap operas to produce cultural common sense on LGBT+ oppression. Sosa emphasizes debates over framing *homofobia* as analogous to anti-Black racism, which shaped activists' legal campaign that extended Brazil's anti-racism statute to criminalize violence against LGBT+ people. However, given the book's focus on

aesthetic operations, it would be valuable to critically engage with the concept of *homofobia*, as the suffix -phobia conveys an idea of fear toward LGBT+ people and downplays the structural and systematic violence directed at LGBT+ communities. Yet, the circulation of *homofobia* discourse has enabled activists to advance LGBT+ rights by shaping public perception and legal strategies.

In chapter 2, activists are presented as aesthetic agents who strategically present themselves in different ways, mobilize affect, and invite the public and state to interpret, feel, and experience the world from their perspective. Sosa demonstrates how activists mobilize their identities to advance their political agendas by positioning themselves differently depending on context: as citizens demanding respect for their rights, as minorities requiring state protection, or as *militantes* (social movement activists) claiming community expertise and political agency. This malleable self-presentation represents what Sosa calls acts of judgment which foster the creation of shared public sensoria through which activists align society with their political judgment. Through the aesthetic category of judgment, the chapter examines both activists' self-reflexivity about their own positioning and their evaluations of others' political commitments, revealing how these performances of activist subjectivity shape political legitimacy and determine who gets heard in struggles over sexual rights.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the intersections of space, race, and sensory perception. Chapter 3 examines the aesthetics of visibility as a contextual, spatial, and sensory practice, revealing a central paradox: Although Brazil hosts the world's largest Pride Parade, it also experiences some of the highest rates of anti-LGBT+ violence, showing that visibility does not guarantee inclusion. Sosa explains this through the territorialization of sexual politics: In white, middle-class neighborhoods, LGBT+ presence signals cosmopolitanism, progress, and civil rights, often alongside calls for increased policing of those deemed 'dangerous'; in poor and racialized neighborhoods, sexuality is framed through security logics, exposing non-normative bodies to surveillance, criminalization, and violence. Chapter 4 extends this analysis to the aesthetics of protest, showing how bodily performances, gestures, and eroticized chants generate queer praxes of desire and political imagination. However, these protests are largely led by white, middle-class activists, highlighting how territorialization shapes who can publicly embody

LGBT+ politics. Here, Sosa develops the concept of *paulistano exceptionalism*, framing São Paulo as both superior to and exemplary of the Brazilian national identity – i.e. modern, cosmopolitan, and globally connected – while showing how whiteness, middle-class status, and spatial dynamics produce uneven forms of visibility and exclude racialized and poor subjects. Although this framework captures key dynamics, it would benefit from deeper engagement with contemporary Brazilian critical race and decolonial scholarship to show how *mestiçagem* ideology, colorism, and regional differences – particularly in the more conservative south – shape sexual politics and inform census data referenced by the author. Still, the concept offers a powerful lens for understanding how race, class, and space shape visibility, rights, and exclusion in Brazilian sexual politics.

The final analytical chapter examines the aesthetics of debate over same-sex marriage, antidiscrimination protections, secularism, and abortion during the 2010s, showing how LGBT+ movements and Evangelical mobilizations deployed competing versions of minoritarian rights. Sosa approaches debates as spectacles in motion and interprets them as lived events with affective investments, mapping the circulation of debates over LGBT+ rights across two sites: the congressional chamber in Brasília and São Paulo street protests. Tracing Brazil's rightward shift throughout the decade, Sosa reveals how each election cycle (2014, 2016, 2018) deepened ideological polarization between left and right-aligned voters. This rightward drift accelerated dramatically after the 2016 parliamentary coup that removed Dilma Rousseff from the presidency, a moment of profound social and political instability that consolidated Brazil's turn to the right and enabled Bolsonaro's rise to the presidency in 2018. Ultimately, Sosa demonstrates that debates themselves are performative: By taking sides, they generate the opposition they appear only to reflect, shaping which arguments become legible and which remain unthinkable. The book concludes by drawing connections to Bolsonaro's role in the sex wars and moral panics, in Brazil synthesizing how the events and narratives analyzed throughout the book preceded and enabled his election. Together, these chapters reveal how aesthetics operate across discourse, subjectivity, sensation, embodiment, and institutional structures, shaping political possibilities and defining what can be imagined and rendered politically thinkable.

Brazil's Sex Wars is an accessible and engaging study that blends activist and author narratives with sophisticated theoretical analysis. The book's major contribution lies in its aesthetic framework, which reveals a troubling pattern whereby far-right movements often deploy the same discursive forms as activists, such as rights-based language, citizenship claims and minority protection frameworks, filled with exclusionary content. As Sosa notes, "right's different cultural meanings, affective attachments, and strategic deployments show the flexibility of rights as a political form" (p. 154). This provides significant pragmatic insight since, by understanding that both sides use similar discursive structures, activists can recognize when their own forms are being weaponized against them and develop more sophisticated resistance strategies. Yet this analysis also raises uncomfortable questions about the limits of rights-based politics itself. If both progressive and reactionary movements deploy the same forms of rhetoric to advance opposing claims, how can we effectively counter exclusionary narratives while fostering genuine inclusion and advancing human rights? By making these dynamics visible, Sosa challenges scholars and activists to grapple with both the possibilities and constraints of contemporary struggles for sexual rights.

Brazil's recent history offers both warning and hope: Bolsonaro's rise demonstrates the dangers Sosa identifies, while his subsequent electoral defeat in 2022 and ongoing criminal charges mark a victory for democratic processes and human rights. Ultimately, these insights make the book essential reading for scholars, activists, and anyone seeking to understand and resist contemporary right-wing mobilization strategies.