

TRANS magazine Internship - Analysing Organizational Structure and Colonialism

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Organizations

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-Abstract-

This paper will outline the common ways that Non-governmental and nonprofit organizations replicate colonialism, and how the structure of TRANS magazine counteracts, combats, or struggles with these common issues. Within this topic, I will specifically be discussing how the hierarchy, and organization of how stories are made.

-INTRODUCTION-

Throughout this report I will be addressing the phenomenon of Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) and nonprofits recreating colonialism, and the ways that TRANS magazine functions differently. NGOs and non profit organizations claim their goal is to make positive change, and oftentimes, they end up causing harm rather than achieving their stated goals. I ask through this report, “What are the strengths and what might be improved within the structure of TRANS when compared to typical mistakes of NGOs?” The structure of TRANS I am referring to within this question is the hierarchy, the way that stories are developed, and how communication functions.

Whether intentionally or not, time and again, organizations commonly recreate colonialism, and hold a savior complex and there are many causes for this occurrence. One being the structure and hierarchy within the organization, and/or the power dynamics between the group organizers and those they aim to work with. This power dynamic is created because of differing identities, and positionality of the people involved, which I will explain further when delving into the historical and current background behind my research. Many examples of this can be found within western organizations that aim to work with people in the “global south”. This phenomenon occurs when leaders within NGOs believe they know what is best for those they believe are struggling, and the cause of their struggle, without hearing the voices of those they aim to “help”. There is an uneven power dynamic within these situations that can often show to be problematic. They often lack understanding and in turn reinforce an “us and

them” dynamic that is often seen in neocolonialism. I will detail the importance of acknowledging these power dynamics, and giving reign to those most affected by the issue that an organization is trying to change. I will be discussing how TRANS magazine functions differently than this typical dynamic, and what that looks like in practice. It is my hope that this research will be beneficial for TRANS to reinforce aspects of the magazine that are beneficial, and to further develop others.

-THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE-

During the course of this internship, and my research, I have used a postcolonial theoretical lens to analyse these organizations. Through this lens I will utilize my prior knowledge of the history of colonialism, and provide examples of these dynamics being recreated today within LGBTQ+ organizations. I will also be utilizing queer theory as an alternative lens to these common structures. I will do this by questioning the typical and expected norms of NGOs.

-POSITIONALITY-

Throughout my masters research I have studied the structure of NGOs, and the ways in which many LGBTQIA+ organizations can be problematic. This is helpful in analyzing how TRANS magazine combats many of these common problematic customs. It is important for me to mention that I am from the United States, and this gives me a different perspective as well, as TRANS is based in the Netherlands. My experience with U.S. organizations has been much different than working with TRANS. From my own perspective, Dutch organizations have a much less strict power dynamic in general than

the U.S., and there is more open communication. While I cannot generalize for all of Dutch society, this has been my experience with the magazine compared to my experiences within the U.S.

It is important for me to acknowledge that I am currently questioning my gender identity, and that I am cis presenting. Throughout this internship I have kept this in mind as this is a privilege I hold. It is also important for me to state that I am not a maker within the magazine, therefore I do not have that experience. While I attended meetings and workshops, I did not produce content to be published for TRANS.

I am also a white person, this is important to mention because I will later expand on the intersectionality within the magazine, and it is necessary to know where I'm coming from when writing about this.

During this internship the Covid-19 pandemic still had/has a major impact on the ability to travel, or meet in person. Because of this I am currently still in the United States, and all of our meetings were held over online platforms. We were in different time zones as well as TRANS is based in the Netherlands, and this changes how an internship experience might be under different circumstances.

-RESEARCH METHODOLOGY-

I conducted my research through a series of interviews, my personal experience with the magazine, and analysis of articles/documents. Within the interviews I asked questions that relate to experiences with the magazine, as well as how it functions.

Each interviewee signed a consent form detailing the purpose for the interview, and what the outcome would be. It stated that they can remain anonymous, and that they can choose not to answer any of the questions asked. The documents that I analysed were from workshops done, communication between myself and others (kept anonymous as well), and templates for how articles are put together.

-BACKGROUND-

The colonialism I have referred to within the beginning of this report is apparent within many NGOs and nonprofits, especially when they are transnational organizations. I will explain a few of these phenomenons here, and refer to them when discussing the organization of TRANS magazine within the discussion portion of the paper.

LGBTQIA+ organizations can be problematic when they are being funded and run by groups that might have ulterior motives. These motives can include money, power, image, or a combination of the three. One example of, and a reason for this occurrence is demonstrated in the article *Activism and the Economy of Victimhood: A Close Look into the NGO-ization in Arabic speaking countries*. The authors explain, “NGOs became able to simultaneously secure funding, to claim struggles around gender, sexuality and bodily integrity as their own, and to appropriate local community and individual victories.” (Abu-Assab, Nasser-Eddin, & Seghaier, 2020) They explain that NGOs often use their privilege and power to make money. That often community/grass roots organizations are making positive change for themselves, and the NGOs take credit for this while simultaneously portraying those doing the work as victims. When creating, or taking

control of NGOs, the CEOs make vast amounts of wealth, and claim the benefits of smaller organizations.

Another reason this occurs can be seen in the article *Other Scenes of Speaking: Listening to Palestinian Anticolonial-Queer Critique*, published by the *Journal of Palestinian Studies* written Mikki Stelder. Stelder explains the term “pink washing” in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict. (Stelder, 2018) The phenomenon in this case is a government, or organization claiming to be supportive of LGBTQ+ rights, while simultaneously, committing genocide/settler colonialism of Palestinians and Palestinian land. They use LGBTQ+ organizing, or laws/policies (like gay marriage), to claim that they are a just society, when Palestinian LGBTQ+ people would not be treated equally within Israel. This facade of claims of equality often overshadows the true Israeli systems and governments that are actually very oppressive. This is once again a dynamic between the “first” and “third” world, with the extremity of ongoing settler colonialism. The use of these laws can be seen throughout the western world to try to prove why the west is more progressive.

The reality of many organizations working transnationally is that there is no attempt to create relationships, or understanding between these oversimplified constructs of the “first” and “third” world. I use this example to illustrate this dynamic, and how it is often recreated within western organizations attempting to “save” those from under the guise that the west is more progressive.

These are two specific examples of ways that organizations use NGOs, specifically gender and sexuality NGOs for their own benefit, but this recreation is sometimes less overt, sometimes intentions may be good, yet there is still harm being caused because of the dynamic created. The foundation of saviourism, usually white saviorism, I am referring to, occurs when people who hold privilege because of colonialism, try to “help” a community that they are not a part of. In turn silencing the voices of those historically unheard. Whether the intentions are “good” or not, the voices of the unheard should be those that are listened to first to make real and sustainable change. The power dynamics and the hierarchies that exist in large NGOs and nonprofits, especially within a capitalist society, silence those they are attempting to “help”. Typical -isms that are a product of colonialism, are racism, sexism, colorism, ect., these are all reinforced power dynamics in these scenarios because of the western world's history with these issues.

There is also an idea within these organizations that the solution to inequality is bringing those outside of neoliberal capitalism into the system for more “opportunity”. This phenomenon is illustrated in The ‘girl effect’: liberalism, empowerment and the contradictions of development. Hickel explains, institutions like the World Bank and IMF partner with corporations, like Nike, to bring young “third world” women into the labor force. They claim that this will stimulate the economy within the “third world” community, and in turn help them. When the reality is that it is bringing them into the global economy only benefits the institutions and corporations in the end. (Hickel, 2014)

It is harmful to attempt to push beliefs, or ideologies, onto another culture in the way that they function in the west, and attempt to make change. Oftentimes, those that attempt to do this are also functioning within the ideology that their culture is more progressive. When people from western cultures enforce themselves on others' cultures to make change, there is an inherent dynamic of saviourism, and colonialism.

This relates to pinkwashing in the way that many western or "first world" countries believe that they are more advanced than others, while ignoring the issues that they have within their own communities. Also similar to the phenomenon explained in *The girl effect*. (Hickel, 2014) A specific example of this occurrence is explained in the journal article *Reconceptualising and contextualising sexual rights in the MENA region: Beyond LGBTQI categories*. The authors explain that many times when western LGBTQ organizations go to other countries, specifically in the MENA region, they assume that the people seeking refuge identify with the labels of LGBTQ. Many times it is unsafe to do so for them within their community, or they don't identify with them because it is not relatable to their own identity, even if they might not be straight or cis-gender. It becomes more problematic when the organizations make these identifiers' qualifiers to gain access to the resources they are providing, or to gain refugee status. It then becomes another form of forced assimilation into western culture, recreating colonialism as well. (Nasser-Eddin, Abu-Assab, & Greatrick, 2018)

These examples of colonialism being recreated through the guise of charity, among many other examples, have a large impact on why I find it important to look for and support alternative structures and organizations that are actively working within

their community, and finding ways to support each other. I will explain how I see the structure of TRANS combating these saviour dynamics, and how they function within a western capitalist society.

-DISCUSSION-

The purpose of TRANS magazine is to promote the storytelling of gender diverse individuals through various forms of media. The goal of TRANS is to change the narrative of gender diversity within mainstream media, which is often negative or inaccurate. Mainstream stories are about tragedy, or faulty portrayals of gender diversity, and a big reason for this being that, majority of the time, is that they are written by cis gender creators. By changing this narrative, they aim to to “make gender diversity the new norm.” And the magazine believes “The binary idea of having just two genders is not the truth, and that’s what we want to work on.” (interview) To change this TRANS puts the power into the hands of transgender creators. The magazine functions to support transgender media makers and the stories they want to create. This structure is already much more focused on the shift in power dynamics that exist within the capitalist, patriarchal society than many of their NGO counterparts.

The hierarchy within the magazine is a good indicator of this power dynamic shift. There are two official editors, and those with more experience are expected to, in a way, guide newcomers. Those more experienced sometimes take the lead, but this is to create an easier space to learn, and have discussions. This can sometimes make newcomers feel a little out of place, when there are multiple people that have more experience, who already know each other, but this can also be a product

of the online platform due to the current pandemic. (interview) These aspects can “slow down the team building process”. Yet, through the interviews, I found that the laid back hierarchy creates a much stronger sense of community among the makers of the magazine. Especially when compared to other organizations they have worked with. TRANS creates an environment that makers feel their opinions are valued. (interview) The fact that it is necessary for the meetings to be conducted online is not currently in control of TRANS magazine as well.

Within the interviews I found that, with organizations that some interviewees have worked with in the past, there was a much higher turnover rate because of the stronger hierarchical structure. This has been an issue because many don't feel their voice is valued, and that they are not accomplishing what they hoped. Compared to past work with nonprofits, TRANS supports much more individual freedom, and that “you won't offend someone because you aren't going through the wrong system”. The downfall to this lack of firm structure, I've found, is that it can be more difficult to create material efficiently. I will say again that I believe the pandemic also plays a large role in this. But when there isn't one person delegating tasks, and the deadlines are loose, things might not be done in a timely manner. Yet, having this form of hierarchy would take away from the freedom that makers feel within TRANS, and that there wouldn't be the same “space for everyone”. It is a difficult balancing act, but still much different from the structure of large business like, transnational NGOs.

The meeting styles reflect this philosophy of freedom and openness as well. There are weekly editorial meetings that are held with the makers and they serve as a check-in

to discuss projects, ideas, and questions about makers' work. These meetings are all discussion based, and disagreement or honest/straightforward discussion, is encouraged. These meetings also serve as a way to build community, and collaboration within the magazine. Makers can discuss what they are working on and get to know one another further. Overall, it seems, that this creates a sense of everyone being valued. The editors are also open to one on one meetings which further enforces this dynamic. (interview)

Additionally, there are workshops available for those who would like to attend that focus on different kinds of storytelling. Over the course of my internship there were workshops on podcasting and written storytelling. Both of these were inspiring and informative and a way for “participants to discover new talents”. (interview)

The funding of TRANS magazine comes from different sources. The majority of their funding, which is still a relatively small amount, comes from the Amsterdam municipality “money for diversity”. This is money that the government provides to grassroots organizations, who prove and report they are beneficial in some way. That being said, because the money is less than 5,000 euros, the magazine doesn’t “have to report as much” as they would if it were more. In this way, the magazine “doesn’t feel limited” by the government. (interview) In the same way that there is a balance between freedom and structure within the hierarchy to function within capitalism, is a balance between lack of funding and freedom from answering to a funder outside of the magazine.

Another important function of the magazine to mention is that all of the makers are all volunteers. There is diversity within the ages of the creators, yet the fact it is

volunteer based can be limiting when it comes to other demographics of makers of the magazine. It can be restricting for people that may not have the time to volunteer, making it easier for upper or middle class people to get involved, and because of the history of colonialism, this may create racial disparity as well. (interview)

This lack of diversity could also be because involvement is spread “by word of mouth”, so often people invite others from their own bubbles. (interview) There is not a lack of effort to have a more diverse team, the magazine makes an effort to recruit internationally and they do believe that this is an important aspect to the magazine. I believe finding ways to have a more racially intersectional group could be a beneficial next step for the magazine, and I know this is important to them as well. If there was funding available, it could be an interesting idea to create a small scholarship or grant to get people involved.

I think it is important to mention that TRANS is a Dutch organization, and the goal is not to be transnational, much different from NGOs that aim to work outside of their own communities. This is not to say that diversity is not important, or that this is not a goal of TRANS, but this is an important signifier from the previous organizations mentioned. That they operate locally, and find diversity from this place.

Within the articles published there are a variety of topics addressed. Stories about transitioning, gender identity, culture, relationships, sexuality, and visibility. There are articles written about seeking refugee status within the Netherlands as a transgender person. (Ortiz, 2020) To articles written about transphobia in Europe, (Kain, 2020) to “10 Reasons to Envy Trans People”(Broekhuizen, 2020), and so much more. The diversity in

the articles within TRANS represents the openness and support that the makers have to really create what they are interested in and passionate about. I think this will only become more true as the magazine grows. The magazine can also be read in Dutch and English, broadening their audience as well, and encouraging those who might not speak Dutch, like myself, to want to be a participant, or a reader of the magazine.

-CONCLUSION-

My biggest takeaways from working with TRANS and coming from a perspective of analyzing the organization through a postcolonial lens, is that there is a delicate balance when combating these typical structures. The balance lies in working within the system for productivity and the ability to obtain the money, and the freedom and openness of attempting to work outside of the system to avoid these colonial structures. This can be a hard line to walk, but I think because of this, and especially with TRANS, an environment is created that it is always changing and evolving. For this reason there can always be discussion on how to create a magazine that is inclusive and changemaking. The goal of the magazine is a long one, but there is so much positive output with story making and community building, as well as continuous evolution. These are tangible results accomplished, even when combating the typical structures of colonialism. It was so encouraging to work with TRANS and I'm so thankful to have had this opportunity. I hope that this report can be beneficial to the magazine. It was empowering to witness the ways the makers of TRANS support one another, and is so important when creating a new narrative of gender diversity.

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