Caring through Frictions
Queer Activism and Prefigurations of Caring Solidarity

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ABSTRACT

Based on activist-collaborative ethnographic research in the organising collective of an alternative Pride in a city in the western part of Germany from March 2024 to May 2025, this article asks how queer activists sustain collective practice under conditions of limited capacity, plural political aims, and precarity. It traces two levels of friction that were brought about by the contraction of the organising group, a conflict over body norms in the programme, and a year-long review process: one between the productive labour of delivering an event and the reproductive labour sustaining those who deliver it, and the other between queer activist aspirations and normative societal structures.

Combining Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's friction as the awkward and unequal quality of interconnection across difference with Paolo Heywood's account of deliberately produced difference in queer activism, the article argues that Olga Shparaga's concept of caring solidarity specifies the conditions under which friction remains workable: it politicises care, which is usually confined to the private sphere, and treats vulnerability as a repertoire moving between injury, agency, and resistance. These practices keep friction negotiable within the structural limits: emotional labour becomes contestable, while time, money, and health remain unequally distributed. Read through José Esteban Muñoz's utopian as potentiality, the arrangements during the alternative Pride appear as a blueprint for an alternative future.

KEYWORDS

Queer activism, caring solidarity, social movements, prefigurations, vulnerability

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I attended the first planning meeting for the alternative Pride of a bigger city in the western part of Germany in March 2024. Alternative Pride events developed as a response to and resistance against the commercialisation and mainstream nature of many Pride events today. Their focus is on highlighting the political roots of the Pride movement and emphasising the original spirit of resistance and social justice associated with the Stonewall riots of 1969. They often oppose the incipient assimilation of LGBTQIA+ communities into established social and gender norms. Alternative Prides feature issues such as anti-racism, anti-capitalism, anti-fascism, and intersectional justice. They often seek to amplify voices that are marginalised within queer communities, such as people of colour, disabled people, trans people, and others who may be less visible at mainstream Pride events (Tietz 2021).
The meeting I attended was one of the group's first meetings and was open to new members. It took place in a space dedicated to intersectional education and activism in a neighbourhood characterised by working-class migrants. There were around 20 people present, seated in a circle of sofas and stools. Everyone stated their name, pronouns, activist background, and, if they wished, how they were feeling at the time in a round of introductions. Additionally, I explained my background as an activist researcher and asked for the group's permission to take notes. The group then set about planning, allocating tasks, and forming working groups. One person wrote a protocol, another, one of the organisers from last year, moderated the meeting. The motivation was to create an opposing event to the main Pride in the city, which attracts several thousand visitors every year and hosts more than one hundred participating groups, including many businesses, the police, the army, and political parties. Alternative Prides aim at a clear rejection of what is often termed ›Corporate Pride‹ or ›rainbow capitalism‹, denouncing the ways in which corporations, the police, the army, and other state or market actors currently profit symbolically and materially from Pride, while leaving the underlying structures of oppression intact (Huber 2013; Smialek/van Vliet 2024). Instead, the organisers framed Pride as a site of »queer liberation without capitalism«, explicitly grounding their event in the protest genealogy of the Stonewall Riots led by Black trans women and other people of colour who resisted police violence and racialised regulation. The organisers called on participants to »come together and unite« in order to connect different struggles, approaches to systemic change, and identities within the queer community, and use the day as a space for learning and mutual exchange rather than consumption. They, thereby, foregrounded values of anti-capitalism, anti-racism, solidarity, as well as intersectional, coalition-based politics, tied to a utopian horizon of »a future that is liveable for everyone« (Fieldnotes, 13.3.2024).
Weekly meetings took place over the next three months, and the subgroups communicated almost daily via Signal groups to organise a queer action week culminating in a street protest event. The aim was to create a programme schedule from Monday to Friday with different workshops, talks, and film screenings, as well as a day festival on Saturday. The festival was to take place at an open space with booths representing different local activist groups, drag and ballroom performances, live music and DJ sets, and food and drinks for almost 400 people.
The group consisted of various local activists who identified as queer and politically left-wing and had further links to queer communities. Some of them had already been involved in planning the first alternative Pride the previous year or helped organise events for the Trans Day of Visibility on 31 March and Trans Day of Remembrance on 20 November, and had joined the group through those events.

Others had seen the call for an open plenary meeting via Instagram or other online networks. I heard about the open meeting through other groups that were part of my research field and went there as an activist researcher with the intention of researching at the alternative Pride in a collaborative and engaged manner. I continued to attend meetings regularly from March 2024 to May 2025, and was part of several online chat groups. I formed a working group, together with Violet and Calvin, both non-binary activists in their early 30s, responsible for putting together and co-ordinating the programme.
As we went about planning the event, I repeatedly noticed various sources of conflict, some of which were resolved quickly, whilst others escalated into larger issues. A particular conflict concerning one group's contribution to the programme developed in a pronounced manner and across various dimensions.
In a later interview with Violet and Calvin, Violet sums up the tensions that arose within the group and which they often perceive in queer and left-wing activist contexts as follows:

> »On the one hand, there's this tension between standing up for certain causes together and wanting to bring about change, and, on the other hand, there's fragmentation – where groups draw lines in the sand and can no longer work together, and somehow can't work towards a common goal. This sort of fragmentation then leads to nothing happening at all, because you're left with only very small groups pursuing their own particular interests. […] And the other point I've been thinking about more recently is a similar tension: on the one hand, private individuals drawing boundaries, saying, ›I don't have the capacity for this. I need to prioritise self-care‹; and on the other hand, community work or work for various organisations, institutions, or groups. And I wonder how things can be achieved if everyone just says to themselves, ›I've basically got no capacity left‹, and what that then means for people who might go beyond those boundaries. What, for example, are the boundaries and limitations of an organisation if everyone looks after themselves first?« (Interview with Violet and Calvin, 19.10.2024, author's translation)

I know Violet through various queer activist groups in which we have worked together during my doctoral research on current local queer activism. The interview excerpt shows two areas of concern that are central to the article's argument. Firstly, Violet diagnoses the difficulty of sustaining collective agency under conditions of plural political aims. Different groups pursue diverging aims and strategies, such that political projects risk disintegrating into a landscape of small collectives with particularistic interests that struggle to act together. Secondly, they foreground caring for plural needs in a neoliberal capitalist and unjust society. Individual boundaries, needs for protection and rest, and claims to self-care stand in tension with the collective demands of community and the equal distribution of reproductive labour.
Violet's account, thus, raises several questions which I will be discussing in this article: how, under conditions of limited capacities and widespread precarity, can collective and transformation-oriented practice be sustained without structurally pressuring some individuals to constantly transgress their own limits? How do struggles for diversity and commonality give rise to friction on both an individual

and societal level, and how do the actors address the structural and material inequalities they face? How do queer activists negotiate the tensions between individual needs and collective goals of social justice and solidarity in activist settings, and what prefigurative politics emerge from these negotiations?
I argue in this article[1] that queer activists respond to cis-heteronormativities through experimental practices of caring solidarity that keep friction workable. I use a set of frictions that arise from the example of the alternative Pride to explore these questions: one between individual needs and collective goals, and another between queer activist aims and visions, on the one hand, and everyday life shaped and structured by neoliberal capitalism, on the other. Accordingly, I firstly introduce my research methods as an engaged activist ethnographer. Secondly, I conceptualise friction as the productive but ambivalent mode in which difference generates movement, and caring solidarity as the condition under which friction remains productive. I then trace two intersecting levels of friction through the planning of the alternative Pride: between the productive labour required to deliver the event and the reproductive labour that sustains those delivering it, as well as between the political aspirations of queer activism and the normative societal structures in which activists live. Finally, I examine the material limits of these practices, showing how exhaustion, unequal capacity, and unavoidable exclusion mark the point at which the queer political arrangements reproduce what they set out to contest in the first place.

Researching Pride as a Queer Activist Ethnographer

The article is based on ethnographic material that I have collected through my observations made as part of my involvement in the planning of an alternative Pride from March 2024 to May 2025 and following interviews with two of the organisers. It is part of my dissertation project on queer activism in in the western part of Germany. Using activist-collaborative ethnographic methods (Low/Merry 2010; Kirsch 2018; Binder 2022; Zenker/Vonderau 2023) combined with semi-structured interviews and participant observations, I have examined, since 2022, how queer visions of the future, as a transformative practice, promote new forms of coexistence and counteract conservative, anti-democratic, and dystopian narratives. As a queer researcher and activist, I spent almost three years participating in and observing several queer activist groups in urban regions in the western part of Germany that are organised in tightly interwoven networks as a close-knit community with overlapping friendships, chosen families, and romantic, sexual, and activist relationships. To this end, I participated in the organisation of the alternative Pride event mentioned previously, helped design (non-commercial) queer cultural spaces, such as gatherings and parties, and took part in a queer body care collective. The alternative Pride and body care collectives were organised as loose collectives and charitable organisations, whereas the queer party collective is structured as a private limited company (GmbH) due to financial risks and club cooperation. I interviewed 23 queer participants from urban regions in their early 20s to mid 40s, white and BIPoC,

1 The contribution was part of an all-English panel. To ensure greater accessibility, the following text is, therefore, also written in English, although my research was conducted in a German-speaking context. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the editors, especially Friederike Faust and Beate Binder, for their detailed and thought-provoking feedback. I would also like to thank Fiona Sprack for her careful review.

largely nondisabled, leftleaning, often with a higher or academic education. Most of them identify with labels such as lesbian, gay, bi(sexual), trans, nonbinary, or poly(amorous).
I gained access to the field primarily through personal networks and a researchspecific Instagram account where I introduced the project and shared interim findings[2]. Social media and chat groups functioned as the main infrastructure for announcing events and identifying groups that were otherwise only semipublic. I gained access to several queer activist groups over time that I joined for at least six months, most of which I never left.

Frictional Relations: Difference, Care, and the Conditions of Collective Practice

A set of frictions that run through queer activist practice itself emerge from Violet's reflections. This includes, firstly, the friction between plural political aims and the need for common ground; secondly, between individual boundaries and collective demands; and thirdly, between the productive labour required to realise activist projects and the reproductive labour that sustains those who carry them.
Following the anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (2005), I use the concept of friction as a tool to analyse the productive moment of changing social relationships and modes of action. Cultures, she argues, are continually co-produced in interactions she terms friction, characterised by »the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference« (Tsing 2005, 4). Friction, in this understanding, is what makes movement possible in the first place: »A wheel turns because of its encounter with the surface of the road; spinning in the air it goes nowhere« (ibid., 5). Applied to social processes, this directs attention to how difference itself conditions the direction, speed, and shape that collective action takes. Tsing argues that this process is often messy and surprising. »Coercion and frustration join freedom as motion is socially informed«, she writes, and friction »inflects historical trajectories, enabling, excluding, and particularizing« (ibid., 6). Her image of roads captures this ambivalence, as they create pathways to make motion easier, »but in doing so they limit where we go. The ease of travel they facilitate is also a structure of confinement« (ibid.). Queer movements, too, must continually seek new routes of resistance, achieving considerable successes while remaining accompanied by frustration and repetition. At the same time, newly emerging normative frameworks – for example, through epistemic (re)organisations – also shape these frictions from within. The »contingent encounters« (ibid., 4) of activist practice are the sites at which political possibility is produced and foreclosed.
Paolo Heywood's (2018) ethnographic study of queer activism in Bologna allows us to more precisely define the differences at stake and explain why they exist. He shows that difference, in this context, is actively and deliberately made, and that its production carries an explicit ethical charge. Tensions between group and individual identities, he notes, are common within the sphere of queer activism (ibid., 3). What is decisive for his argument is that this tension itself revolves around the

2 As part of my collaboration, I produced several articles and a podcast episode with research partners: Sistenich, Sascha et al. (2025): *Caring Resistance – Caring Solidarity. Ko-Artikulationen queerer Fürsorge als Text-Podcast-Assemblage*. In: Kuckuck. *Notizen zur Alltagskultur 2*, 21-23; and https://open.spotify.com/episode/06uixdDkiDGxUodzqUcDm5?si=skgjXJq-Q5afUhTgHfm6lA.

notion of difference. Through the everyday transgression of established norms, the production of difference is a daily constant for queer people and in activist contexts, it becomes a precondition for the politicisation of difference.
Heywood's »tensions« and Tsing's »friction«, however, are not synonymous. Heywood names the substantive contradictions at work: between individual and collective claims to identity, between the commitment to (make a) difference and the need for recognition. Tsing describes the mode of interaction through which such contradictions are worked upon and through which something new is generated. Heywood's tensions can be seen as the material and Tsing's friction as the movement produced from it. Read together, they allow strategies such as »agreeing to disagree« (Heywood 2018, 71) to appear as frictional practices that sustain difference and keep disagreement legitimate and even generative. This is also what I observe in my field, where divergent understandings of queer politicisation, body norms, and solidarity produce tensions and, at times, open conflict. Rather than leading to fragmentation, actors repeatedly cultivate frictional relations in which difference becomes a resource.
However, the question of the conditions under which friction becomes productive remains open in both concepts. Awkward engagement can equally entrench exclusions, exhaust those involved, or harden into the fragmentation Violet describes. Adopting Olga Shparaga's (2024) concept of caring solidarity, I show under which conditions frictional practices become workable. Shparaga uses care to specify the empathetic and attentive dimension of solidarity practices that emerged as a response to massive state violence. The recognition of human vulnerability, based on Judith Butler (2004), as the fragility of bodies and lives, which unfolds as a repertoire of situations and actions moving between victimhood and resistance, is central to this form of solidarity. Shparaga describes this repertoire as the transformation of vulnerability into agency, particularly in prisons, where women reshaped their own and shared experiences through embodied care for themselves and others. Caring solidarity crucially politicises practices of care that are usually confined to the »private sphere« and performed as undervalued, unpaid, feminised, and often migrantisised labour (Shparaga 2024, 26). She describes the practices she observed among activist women as

> »psychological, legal and financial mutual aid, […] emotional support, warmer and more trusting relationships, intensified friendship communication, and as a critique of hegemonic masculinity, together with the claim to be allowed to be vulnerable, to need self-care and to ask each other for help and support« (ibid., author's translation.)

Shparaga links these practices to values of mutual respect, non-violence, sharing, care, and creativity and reads them as prefigurative attempts to create new spaces of freedom and equality both inside and beyond existing institutions. This solidarity functions dually as lived social practices and normatively driven political projects, bridging affective motivation and critical reflection to affirm universal equality amid persistent inequalities from particular vulnerabilities and interdependencies (Susemichel/Kastner 2021, 32-35; Bojadžijev/Celikates 2025, 37). Unlike asymmetrical compassion or charity, it fosters symmetrical collaboration and engagement by enabling people to recognise their own fate in the fate of others through empathetic resonance, without requiring shared experiences (Jaeggi 2021, 55, 62f.).

Regarding this article, caring solidarity, thus, provides a lens that connects vulnerability and resistance, and allows me to analyse queer activist practices of responsibility-taking, conflict work, and mutual support as political. Together with Tsing's friction as simultaneously enabling, excluding, and particularising (2005, 6), I trace friction on two levels. Firstly, I examine the frictions between production and reproduction that emerge during the planning of the alternative Pride. I understand the level of production as the workload required for the concrete realisation of the event, that is, the planning steps situated within capitalist and neoliberal logics. Concerning the level of reproduction, I refer to care and emotional labour (Hochschild 1983), that is, all work necessary for sustaining the capacity to labour, which is typically located along gendered, racialised, and increasingly neoliberalised dimensions. Secondly, I examine the frictions arising between queer activism and the ideologies it pursues, on the one hand, and normative societal ideologies, on the other.

Produced by a Few for the Many: Frictions of Labour and Capacity

In the following, I approach the frictional moments during the planning of the alternative Pride through situations in which its aspirations became difficult to sustain. Such moments are analytically productive because they show the infrastructural ambivalence of the alternative Pride, especially concerning the unequal distribution of labour and resources, and the normative expectations on which the space rests. One such moment surfaced in a conversation with Violet:

> »It often boils down to a few people completely overworking themselves. That's how it was at last year's event, where, in the end, only a few people were still working on it. We started with a huge group, but many people ended up just ›consuming‹ what is called community and giving very little in return.« (Interview with Violet, 23.7.2025, author's translation)

Violet's report summarises the course the planning cycle took. Initial meetings were well attended and marked by high motivation, but attendance thinned over the following months, until, in the weeks before the event, the core team consisted of some six or seven people. What began as a broad alliance narrowed to a small group carrying an ambitious programme, and frustration accumulated accordingly. On the first level, Violet describes a mismatch between the productive labour required to realise the event and the reproductive labour available to sustain those doing it. This mismatch generated conflicts on both interpersonal and organisational registers. On the second level, the terms in which they describe it are themselves revealing. The assertion that the community is ›consumable‹ encourages a moral economy of contribution, whereby legitimate participation depends on the contributions made. This mobilises a productivist logic of giving and taking within a project that is explicitly committed to challenging capitalist valuations of labour. The same normative resource, namely, the claim »to be allowed to be vulnerable, to need self-care and to be able to ask one another for help and support« (Shparaga

2024, 26), functions differently depending on the position from which it is invoked. Articulated in the first person, it legitimates withdrawal as care; observed from the position of those who remain, the same withdrawal appears as a failure of solidarity. Caring solidarity, in other words, does not resolve the tension between plural needs and plural aims. It shifts the focus, meaning that the conflict over how withdrawal is to be interpreted becomes one of the sites at which this tension is worked out. Therefore, I view the disengagement of participants as friction between activist aspirations and the everyday structures in which people are embedded: wage labour and its schedules, money, health, care obligations, but also fluctuating motivation and conflicting understandings of what solidarity requires.

Read against the collective's own aspiration to create a deliberately political and inclusive space in which the diversity and struggles of communities are recognised and celebrated, Violet's observation points to a less solidaristic underside of that aspiration. The core team had contracted to six or seven people in the weeks before the event, so that the space was produced by a few for the many, and its realisation rested on forms of self-exploitation extending towards so-called »activist burnout« (Gorski/Chen 2015). The capacity to stay, moreover, was unequally distributed. Most of those who remained had comparatively flexible schedules as students, part-time workers, or jobseekers, or, in my case, participated in the event as part of an ongoing research project. The very autonomy over their own time that enabled them to sustain an anti-capitalist project was itself a product of positions within and at the margins of capitalist labour relations. Commitment, thereby, operates as a de facto criterion of belonging, and the material inequalities the alternative Pride sets out to contest reappear as conditions of participation within it.

The withdrawal of participants is where the second level of friction is most directly legible. Weekly plenaries, daily Signal communication, and a three-month intensification towards a single date presuppose a temporal availability that standard employment does not grant. Those who departed, left a schedule that competed with shift work, commuting, children, therapy appointments, and recovery time. On this level, Violet's perception of a moral failure of contribution is actually the labour market asserting itself within an anti-capitalist collective. Because the group could not address this issue, the inequality reappeared as a matter of individual commitment.

These dynamics are structured by the format itself. The alternative Pride defined itself against an event drawing several thousand visitors and more than a hundred participating groups, including corporations, police, army, and political parties. Yet, in rejecting the political content of the mainstream Pride, the organisers retained its infrastructural template: a fixed date, a stage, a week-long programme, and a crowd of several hundred people. The planning process brought the collective's care-oriented, anti-capitalist values into conflict with the established organisational conventions through which Pride becomes publicly and institutionally recognised. The fixed date, permits, programme, and stage, as well as the expectation of a public gathering, provided an established infrastructure for mobilising participants and gaining visibility. At the same time, this infrastructure directed diverse aims, needs, and capacities towards a single moment of delivery. In this sense, Pride as a protest strategy functioned a lot like Tsing's road: it not only facilitated collective movement but also directed it along particular routes, making alternative paths more difficult. As Tsing puts it, »the ease of travel [it] facilitate[s] is also a structure of confinement« (2005, 6). The format, therefore, shaped the trajectory of the friction between productive and reproductive labour. As the event

approached, completing the programme became increasingly urgent, while care, recovery, and open-ended reflection were easier to defer. This orientation shifted the focus of negotiations towards delivering the event, transferring much of the resulting pressure onto those who remained involved. Consequently, the emerging tensions reveal how efforts to create an anticapitalist, care-oriented space remained entangled with a publicly recognisable repertoire of protest whose temporal, legal, and organisational requirements reproduced some of the productivist pressures that the collective sought to contest.

Whose Queerness? Frictions of Difference and the Work of Conflict

The frictions described so far concerned the distribution of labour and the conditions under which participation was possible. Another set of frictions emerged one week before the event, this time over the content of the programme itself and which understandings of queer politics it would legitimise. The two are connected in practical terms: the conflict arose at the point when the organising team had already contracted to a few people, and was taken on by the same core that was simultaneously completing the remaining planning tasks. Handling it, therefore, required emotional and co-ordinative labour from people who had no additional capacity, and had to be resolved within one week.

After the programme had been finalised, Calvin uploaded the line-up and the descriptions of the groups invited to the organising group's online channel. Among them was a small queer performance group whose shows combine dance and artistic elements and require regular, disciplined training. They had recently gained attention through bookings at several events. Shortly after the programme went online, Calvin and Violet each received separate phone calls from Kuni, another non-binary activist involved in the organisation. Kuni objected to the collective's participation on the following grounds: Kuni felt personally excluded based on their own experience of first participating in open training and then finding the group closed to new members for planning reasons. They interpreted the group's admission practice and its focus on trained, stage-ready bodies as reproducing patriarchal behaviour and normative body images, and, thus, as contradicting the anti-normative, and solidarity-oriented aims of the alternative Pride. From Kuni's perspective, the visibility that the group would have gained through the event amplified precisely those norms around ability, attractiveness, and performance that many marginalised queers experience as exclusionary. On this basis, Kuni demanded that the group be removed from the programme, yet, was unable to pursue this on their own because of their high emotional involvement.

That conflict can be understood as a condensed example of what Tsing calls »zones of awkward engagement« (2005, xi), in which different aims, needs, and imaginaries collide and are mutually transformed rather than simply clashing or harmonising. The subsequent discussion in the organising collective made several overlapping lines of conflict at individual, collective, and structural levels visible. At the individual level, Kuni's sense of hurt and the performers' investment in their project confronted the group with the question of how to take an experience of exclusion

seriously without pre-emptively condemning another queer initiative. At the collective level, the organisers debated how to handle critique in a small scene with dense, overlapping relationships: how to protect anonymity and avoid personalised escalation when ›everyone knows everyone‹, and who should assume the emotional labour of mediating between parties. At the structural level, the conflict foregrounded tensions between aspirations to openness and the practical need for closure and planning and between different queer political projects. On the one side, there was an anti-normative, anti-ableist understanding of representation, and, on the other side, a performance as a form of queer cultural production based on self-determination, pleasure, and bodily visibility as queer political achievements, in a lineage of sex-positive and subcultural politics.

Kuni's objection is easily read as an internal dispute over queer aesthetics. The norms they identified, such as trained bodies or desirability, distribute recognition along axes of weight, ability, age, size, and race that precede any queer scene. Kuni's claim was, therefore, that the collective's practice, whatever its intentions, functions as a conduit through which societal body hierarchies enter a space declared free of them. The collective's counterclaim operated on the same terrain from the opposite direction. They reclaim stage visibility as resistant precisely because such visibility has historically been denied to queer bodies, pathologised, or criminalised. Both positions are directed towards the same external factors. The conflict was deemed unresolvable because both parties challenged hegemonic norms using different strategies: one by refusing to engage with them, and the other by embracing them.

In Heywood's terms, the tension revolves around difference itself. Both positions rest on an ethical commitment to producing difference, which is what makes their collision so hard to resolve (Heywood 2018, 95f.). In Tsing's terms, this is a zone of awkward engagement in which the friction is constitutive of the encounter (2005, 4). It can stall collective action, but also generate new arrangements of responsibility and care. These frictions are the very encounters that condition and redirect motion, enabling some trajectories, excluding others, and particularising the paths along which queer politics can move.

The conflict also made the queer scene's density tangible. Several members of the organising team knew members of the collective personally. Kuni, Calvin, and Violet were known to several of them, as friendships, romantic and sexual relationships, and prior collaborations overlapped. Therefore, a personal injury could escalate rapidly into a collective crisis, and any handling of the critique would have consequences beyond the immediate parties.

I was directly involved in responding to this situation as a member of the conflict-management team alongside Calvin and Violet. Rather than deciding whether Kuni's critique was ›objectively right‹ or identifying culprits, our discussions focused on taking responsibility for the process. We clarified how we understood the criticism, acknowledging our own limitations and entanglements, and made the risks we perceived explicit, such as overburdening already precarious friendships in a small scene and our own fatigue given the additional emotional and temporal labour. In this sense, the conflict opened up a contingent encounter in which divergent political commitments and vulnerabilities had to be negotiated. Following Tsing, I approach the ensuing steps of conflict work as moments in which friction, as the awkward, unequal, and unstable qualities of this encounter, became a generative force that made power relations visible and created the conditions for rearticulating

responsibilities, boundaries, and solidarities. The next section traces these processes in detail, focusing on how the team sought to craft a caring, accountable framework for dealing with Kuni's critique and the performance collective's position.

Practices of Collective Responsibility-taking

Calvin, Violet, and I were all taking part in this kind of alternative Pride organisation for the first time and involved in the conflict resolution process. After multiple meetings and drawing on different experiences of activism and social work, the team decided on a step-by-step, multilayered process intended to create various safeguards. Firstly, we clarified our understanding of the criticism and our limitations in this situation internally. During this phase, we shared our concerns, such as the fear of straining friendships within the overlapping groups, and our own exhaustion due to the additional emotional and time investment required. The process was, therefore, aimed at taking collective, shared responsibility for the situation. The conflict management team did not take responsibility for what was ›correct‹, nor did we automatically pass on the criticism. Instead, we reflected on crucial power relations and interdependencies. Disclosing our own insecurities highlighted the group's vulnerability and fallibility, given the relational nature of the conflict. In this way, the group established a foundation for conflict resolution based on transparency. Secondly, we decided that Kuni should remain anonymous and we would convey the criticism on their behalf. This was intended to protect Kuni from direct confrontation and give the performers time to reflect without feeling personally attacked. However, this also meant that we would have to respond to questions that we could not fully answer, as we were representing a position that was not our own. Drawing on the team's professional background in social work and their experience as activists, we then drafted a written moderation guide, modelled on de-escalation formats used in community mediation. This specified an agreed-upon agenda to be communicated at the start, an opening check-in round, and a clear separation between presenting and discussing the criticism. This meant that the collective would initially hear the critique in full before responding. It also included designated speaking roles. We decided that Violet would open and explain why we had come, Calvin would present the substance of the criticism, and I would facilitate the discussion and intervene if the conversation became accusatory. We also agreed on a signal between us for pausing the meeting if any of us felt it was going badly. Planning for gradual de-escalation in this way functions as a strategy for mutual safety, and the guide provided a preventive structure against accusatory dynamics, so that each step remained predictable for all participants. This created a dialogical counter-strategy to both escalation and conflict avoidance (cf. Schweitzer-Martin 2025, 247). Such strategies of community accountability and restorative or transformative justice are long-grown approaches coming from (feminist) Black movements starting to become more visible in the 1960s (cf. Taylor 2017) and having a strong influence on different forms of community activism nowadays (Medina 2013; Medina 2023).

We met with the group the Sunday before the event, ahead of one of their rehearsals. We started with a check-in round to create a needs-oriented framework: each

person introduced themselves with their name and pronouns and briefly shared how they were feeling at that moment. Many were nervous because they had no idea what the meeting was going to be about. Calvin, Violet, and I also shared our anxiety. Thus, the check-in established emotional articulation as a legitimate form of situated knowledge within the setting, alongside the procedural and argumentative registers provided by the moderation guide. Political philosopher and protest researcher José Medina argues that:

> »Emotions are key for situated learning; and reflecting on our emotional responses is a crucial way of learning from our affective appraisals of situations. Publicly expressed emotions can be a crucial part of collective learning; and, more specifically, the emotional expressivity of public protest is a key component in our collective learning about justice and instrumental in the fight for social justice.« (2023, 304)

Sharing emotions publicly structured both individual self-awareness and the collective regulation of expectations and affects. Despite its emotional intensity, I was struck by how oriented the conversation remained towards workable arrangements. The performers regulated their own responses in order to remain constructive. One of them asked what Kuni needed, as the criticism had come across to them as stemming from a sense of rejection. They then asked what we, as the conflict-management team, needed. This surprised me even more, as we were not at the centre of the conflict. However, this needs-oriented mode of engagement made room for anger, sadness, and helplessness without these hardening into defamatory or violent patterns. It also distributed the emotional labour across everyone present. Following Butler (2015, 218), the sharing of feelings in the group and the open communication of vulnerabilities and uncertainties can be understood as an act of making vulnerability liveable.

Two frictions became tangible in this setting. The first ran between conflicting emotional appraisals of the same situation: Kuni's experience of exclusion and the performers' sense of being singled out both had legitimate grounds, and neither could be resolved by argument alone. The second ran between the emotional register at the level of reproduction, and the register of efficiency at the level of production, in which the meeting was, nevertheless, embedded. The conversation took place before a rehearsal, under time pressure, one week before an event that had to be delivered, and both the collective and the conflict-management team were also managing production deadlines. Making space for feelings meant, at least temporarily, subordinating production to reproduction for the duration of the meeting and suspending the productivist expectation that a single meeting should deliver a decision. These frictions were productive in that they led to moments of reflection and renegotiation. As other public anthropology projects have shown, frictions of this kind allow boundaries and expectations to be renegotiated and open up more accountable ways of working together (cf. Abbas et al. 2025, 203).

After a break, during which the collective conferred and rehearsed internally, we shared sweets we had brought. Then, for my research and for the ongoing process, I took notes before we met again for a closing round. The collective acknowledged that their practice reproduced power structures, taking the criticism seriously. At the same time, they explained that they were not admitting new members at present, since their rehearsal schedule and upcoming bookings required a stable group.

Despite the criticism, they wished to participate in the alternative Pride, and declined Kuni's request to be removed from the programme. They argued that including a content note in the programme was important so that people who did not want to see the performance due to its explicit and sexual nature, would be informed in advance. They also asked why their group in particular was being questioned, when other closed groups were not. We took these counter-arguments seriously, as they indicated that the collective was taking responsibility for its perceived impact. The group committed to internal reflection and expressed openness to a mediated conversation with Kuni. We were also able to have another conversation with Kuni afterwards and clarify the circumstances surrounding the event. Whilst we were unable to offer a proper compromise, we were at least able to provide emotional support, so that the event could go ahead and Kuni could feel safe (Fieldnotes, 2.6.2024).

Following the event, an eight-month review phase, involving Kuni, Calvin, Violet, and myself, took place between June 2024 and February 2025. Contrary to the production-oriented logic of efficiency, this extended time frame allowed for more thorough reflection and a focus on the dimension of reproduction. After the event, the collective withdrew from public appearances and used this time for internal reflection. The four of us met twice to reflect on the situated power relations of the process. We discussed about whose (emotional) labour and responsibilities had been recognised and whose had not, whose voices had dominated, and whose needs for care or recognition had been prioritised or deferred. We concluded that what had been achieved was situated and provisional. The group remained in the programme, a content note was added, and they committed to internal reflection and a possible conversation with Kuni. Kuni's demand for removal was not met, and their position was, in this sense, not accommodated. I view this as an instance of what Tsing describes as friction inflecting trajectories by »enabling, excluding, and particularizing« (2005, 6). Every arrangement that enables collective action also forecloses something. Naming the position was not accommodated, and the cost incurred is what keeps the disagreement available. Dissent remained legible as dissent, which allowed the question of body norms and access to be taken forward into the following year's planning. Regarding the next year, we considered how the organising team could make the groups and their representations more aware of discrimination. An evaluation of the alternative Pride event, along with several debriefing meetings, shaped the reflection and review processes within the planning team. Everyone involved met for a final meeting in May 2025, during the planning of the next alternative Pride. The participants stated that they saw no need, nor capacity, to undertake a further process. This does not mean that the conflict was resolved, but the process achieved the goal of making the issues collectively workable.

Prefigurations of Caring and Solidarity-based Transformation – Conclusion

This article has argued that queer activism does not become transformative by resolving its internal tensions but by developing ways of living with them. I demonstrated how activists maintained collective practice despite limited resources, albeit under significant structural pressure. The event was made possible by a small group

of people who took the responsibility, and their capacity to do so stemmed from both their position on the margins of the paid workforce and a particular political virtue. Therefore, when we ask how transformation-oriented work can be maintained, we must also consider who is structurally available to maintain it. The friction between production and reproduction was temporarily reversed in a meeting that took priority over a rehearsal, and in a review phase that took priority over the productivity. The entire process was a balancing act between individual concerns, collective responsibility, and continuous work on a culture of appreciative communication, whilst constantly considering how queer resistance can be practiced in a society shaped by normative standards. This process unfolded amidst the friction between the capacities available and the aspiration to create the most inclusive space possible. The article showed that this aspiration could not be fully realised. It also illustrated that, even though capacities were finite, participation was unequally affordable, and many arrangements that permitted collective action also foreclosed other movements, this impossibility did not produce the outcome often attributed to left-wing groups: a spiral of recrimination ending in dissolution. Instead, it demonstrated how the group addressed internal and external frictions. Struggles over diversity and commonality generated friction because the positions in conflict were both principled. Heywood's (2018) argument clarifies why no amount of dialogue could have adjudicated between a critique of desirability norms and a claim to reclaimed queer visibility: each rested on a commitment to producing difference against the same hegemonic order, differing only over whether that order is better refused or inhabited. The inequalities the actors faced were addressed unevenly. The group named, distributed, and reflected upon the relation between the emotional labour and time, money, and bodily capacity. The asymmetry between production and reproduction is a boundary condition of activism, and it deserves to be stated as such.

I define practices of caring solidarity as the factor that transformed the frictions described into something productive. Shparaga's concept (2024) identifies the conditions under which an unresolvable disagreement does not destroy those involved. She makes the decisive move of treating vulnerability as a repertoire spanning victimhood and resistance, which is mobilised through practices that are usually dismissed as private. These practices appeared to be small in the alternative Pride: for example, acknowledging one's own fear before criticising someone else, asking for needs before asserting positions, sharing food during a difficult break, and agreeing in advance on how to stop. Their political significance lies in enabling a disagreement to be voiced for long enough to be acted upon. However, Shparaga's framework (2024) also highlights the concept's dual nature. The right to be vulnerable and ask for help legitimates withdrawal as much as commitment. This is why two people can invoke caring solidarity against each other and neither be wrong. Caring solidarity transforms the tension between individual needs and collective goals from a threat into a subject of negotiation, revealing the conflictual nature of the social.

It also shapes relationships so that precariousness becomes sustainable and is negotiated as a collective responsibility. These alternative, convivial ways of life »in the here and now« are what José Esteban Muñoz describes as utopian (2009, 21). These ways of life have not yet been realised, but are to be understood as in the making. I argue that the ambivalences of the conflict illustrate a utopian approach to dealing with the plural, conflicting, and vulnerable positions of the activists. The article illustrates how queer activists develop conflict management practices when dealing

with differences and vulnerability. In doing so, they actualise alternative, more equitable utopias of coexistence based on caring and supportive relationships. It fosters a caring community (Zängl 2023), where activists can rely on shared responsibility and collective care practices.

In summary, friction as relational moments of social transformation unfold where power and labour are unevenly distributed. A willingness to question and shift one's own social position demonstrates the recognition of the interdependencies of the social. This creates moments of vulnerability from which new alliances of care and solidarity can emerge. Furthermore, it reminds us that utopias do not have to be perfect or harmonious. They must be lived and practiced.

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