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TRANSNATIONALIZING HOMONATIONALISM

Edited by AV Verheaghe



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Cover Image

Collection of some Contemporary Pagan & Male Nude Sculptures created by Malcolm Lidbury

Malcolm Lidbury

A collection of Contemporary Cornish Pagan, Male Nude Art & Homoerotic Gay Sculptures created in Cornwall (UK) by LGBT British Artist Sculptor Malcolm Lidbury. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.



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Introduction: Transnationalizing Homonationalism

AV Verhaeghe

While the politics of race and sexuality often play out in national contexts, these operations are connected to transnational dynamics. During the Parliamentary debates about the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada in 2005, then Leader of the Opposition Party, Stephen Harper, pronounced to a Sikh congregation in Toronto that legalizing same-sex marriage “is a threat to any Canadian who supports multiculturalism. ... It is a threat to a genuinely multicultural country” (Laghi 2005). The next month, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation published an article describing how Giani Joginder Singh Vedanti, the Akal Takhat and highest authority in the Sikh faith, lectured six Sikh Canadian Members of Parliament (MPs) who had travelled to India with Prime Minister Paul Martin about the importance of voting against the legalization of same-sex marriage, using anti-gay language and implying that legalizing same-sex marriage could cause Sikhs in Canada to “fall prey to this practice” (CBC News 2005). One of the MPs, Navdeep Bains, argued with Vedanti and, in Parliament, publicly condemned Harper’s comments about same-sex marriage threatening multiculturalism, while the article reports the other five MPs “listened respectfully”; this discussion of the MPs’ responses to Vedanti comes at the end of the article titled “World Sikh Group Against Gay Marriage Bill” and after paragraphs describing Vedanti’s remarks, an organization of content that could leave readers with an overly simplistic understanding of Sikhism as homophobic (CBC News 2005; House of Commons Debates 2005).

Then in 2007, controversy erupted when the *Vancouver Sun* published an article called “Canada’s Changing Moral Landscape: Are Immigrants to the Country Changing the Face of What’s Considered Right or Wrong?” that opened with a quote from Sikh leader Balwant Singh Gill saying “I hate homosexuality” and implied “that immigrants are changing the moral landscape of Canada” and “‘Canadian values’ are under threat by new immigrants” (Lenon 2008). Vancouver-based LGBT activists led by Jamie Lee Hamilton, a prominent white trans activist, called for Gill to step down from his position, for every gurdwara associated with Gill to issue a formal apology, and for the Vancouver police and RCMP to launch an investigation into Gill for inciting hate (Barsotti 2008). Fatima Jaffer, a member of the Vancouver-based queer South Asian organization Trikone Vancouver condemned such responses as “playing into [a] reactionary kind of politics” (Barsotti 2008). No One Is Illegal-Vancouver, along with other organizations composed of queer people of colour, published an open letter in response that spoke back to the racist portrayal of one man’s comments as representative of all Sikhs while also critiquing homophobia (Walia 2013, 228). After the groups published the open letter, they were “accused of dividing the queer community in the fight against homophobia and muddying the waters by speaking of racism” (Walia 2013, 228). Jaffer (2012) situates the *Vancouver Sun* story in the context of broader anti-Sikh sentiments in the mainstream media at the time; just five days before the *Vancouver Sun* published the article, two thousand protesters, mostly Punjabi Sikhs, gathered at the Vancouver International Airport and successfully stopped the Canadian Border Services’ deportation of the disabled refugee claimant Laibar Singh to India. Jaffer (2012) argues that the mainstream media portrayal of the protesters’ actions as “illegal” and “violent” is connected to their subsequent portrayal of Sikhs as homophobic.



These representations of Sikhs in Canada as homophobic point to how the transnational dynamics of race and sexuality manifest within national borders. Despite MPs' ambivalent or resistive responses to Vedanti's anti-gay comments in India, mainstream Canadian media presented Vedanti as representative of Sikh Canadians' values. Later, the mainstream media again presented Sikhs as monolithically homophobic because of one leader's comments, this time, following Jaffer's argument, to demonize Sikh communities for their resistance to Canada's racist system of deportations. In theorizing the dynamics of race, colonialism, and sexuality in Canada, Rinaldo Walcott (2015) argues

that these dynamics, although nation-bound, are never just that ... even though it remains useful to read how these practices play out in a national context, it is always necessary to remember that the national—despite the various violences that it enacts in order to appear singular and contained—is never just singular. The national always leaks elsewhere. (viii)

Understandings of race in the global North are informed by transnational dynamics, and the politics of sexuality are increasingly called on to justify the racism of states in the global North, like Canada, as they vilify, surveil, detain, and deport racialized people. Thus, it is imperative to account for the transnational within the politics of race and sexuality even though they may appear to be nationally contained.

I begin the introduction to this issue on "Transnationalizing Homonationalism" with representations of Sikhism and queerness in Canada to clarify the stakes of the transnational politics of race and sexuality. In what follows, I situate this issue within the scholarship on transnational approaches to theorizing homonationalism. I conclude with a summary of the four articles included in this issue and a reflection on their significance to transnational studies of race, sexuality, and homonationalism.

Theorizing Homonationalism Transnationally

United States (U.S.) sexual exceptionalism, along with the ascendancy of whiteness and queerness as regulatory, are central to Jasbir Puar's (2007) formulation of homonationalism. Yet Puar's (2007) conceptualization of U.S. sexual exceptionalism is inherently transnational; she conceptualizes U.S. sexual exceptionalism as a formation that constructs the U.S. as an "exceptional nation-state" which is both unlike and superior to other nation-states while simultaneously facilitating the United States' production of "states of exception" (3). Puar (2007) argues that "deployments of homonationalism ... bolster the nation" by invigorating "a transnational discourse of U.S. sexual exceptionalism vis-à-vis perversely racialized bodies of pathologized sexualities (both inside and outside U.S. borders)" (51). Puar (2007) uses U.S. soldiers' racist and homophobic abuse of people imprisoned at Abu Ghraib to explain how U.S. exceptionalism is constructed in relation to the pathologization, racialization, and sexualization of Muslim people. As such, neither homonationalism nor U.S. exceptionalism is confined to U.S. borders and both are implicated in the reconfigurations of queerness and race as they are mobilized to legitimize racist violence and neoliberal practices both within and outside of the United States.

Paola Bacchetta and Jin Haritaworn (2011) map out a transnational framework for theorizing homonationalism that does not center the United States. They trace the transnational connectivities and processes that enable the construction of "Western civilization" and create the



conditions for queer inclusion. Haritaworn asserts that “[d]isparate histories of colonialism, slavery, genocide and migration are collapsed into a single globalised trope of civilization and modernity, thus enabling the cohering of nations, Europe and a West, who all share the same enemy” (Bacchetta and Haritaworn 2011, 131). This process creates the conditions of possibility for homonormative inclusion within particular Western nation-states by enabling the alignment of homonormativity with the West through queer deployments of civilizational discourse, producing queer collusions with national and transnational regimes of securitization, imprisonment, and war (Bacchetta and Haritaworn 2011). Bacchetta delineates three dimensions of homonalationalism:

One, which I’ll call *homonationalism 1*, is perpetuated by states. A second, *homonationalism 2*, is maintained by subjects within a nation, including feminists and lgbtq subjects. A third, which we could call *homotransnationalism*, is based on homonalationalism 1 and 2, but is differentiated by its transnational scale of circulation. The three are deeply inter-related. They manifest themselves variably in diverse sites. (Bacchetta and Haritaworn 2011, 132)

It is this transnationally deployed homonalationalism that is the primary focus of this issue of *Feral Feminisms*.

In “Rethinking Homonalationalism,” Puar (2013) uses such a transnational framing of homonalationalism to explain “how ‘acceptance’ and ‘tolerance’ for gay and lesbian subjects have become a barometer by which the right to and capacity for national sovereignty is evaluated ... and why a nation’s status as ‘gay-friendly’ has become desirable in the first place” (336). Their self-constructions as gay friendly allows mostly Western states to laud their own human rights protections for LGBTQ citizens, which detracts from other abuses, such as those targeting racialized, undocumented, or poor people, as well as the homophobia that exists within these states. At the same time, gay friendliness functions to mark some Western states as ideal gay tourist destinations, which generates tourism revenues and is used to justify Western intervention in the global South (see, e.g., Mitchell 2016; Montegary 2017). For example, Amar Wahab (2016) examines such a production of Canada as gay friendly in his analysis of the Stop Murder Music (Canada) campaign, which targeted Jamaican dancehall artists. Wahab (2016) explores “the productive potential of homotransnationalism to displace the site of homophobic intolerance (outside national boundaries)” and

[produce] especially white gay men as the new figures of nationalized diversity—entitled to petition the state for inclusion and to act on its behalf as responsabilizing subjects—while the various configurations of its antithesis are projected as threats to difference and therefore categorically intolerant. (916)

This construction of white gay men as the embodiment of diversity, Wahab (2016) argues, facilitates “the disappearance of race as a legitimate object of national concern” and produces Canada “as not only post-homophobic, but also post-race” (922). In this way, Wahab’s work clarifies how sexuality politics can be used against anti-racism efforts, highlighting the importance of approaching the politics of sexuality with an anti-racist lens. Sunera Thobani (2017) outlines a similar dynamic, arguing that “the present challenges to the power of the West are being met on philosophical as well as political grounds by centering the politics of gender/sexuality to extend the onto-epistemological claims to Western civilizational superiority”



(717). Like Wahab, Thobani theorizes how sexuality politics are increasingly being used to bolster whiteness and the West. Thobani explains that

counter-hegemonic narratives of the West that foreground its forms of violence ... are overridden through a turn to queer politics as iteration of the inherently progressive nature of the Western tradition. ... In other words, queer politics are here constitutive of and constituted as advancement of the epistemological project of the West in a moment of political crises. These gender-sexual politics thus become *the* privileged site of authoritative power in philosophical as well as political terms. (717–8)

This produces, Thobani argues, “sexuality/gender as signifier of legitimate vulnerability, unlike the racial violence directed toward Muslims” (727). Wahab and Thobani both position race as central to the transnational dynamics of sexuality politics. The way in which sexuality politics have been racialized allows for what Wahab (2021) calls “the diversification of whiteness” wherein white queer subjects replace racialized subjects as those worthy of concern (868), similar to the legitimization of sexualized/gendered vulnerability Thobani describes. These sexuality politics are not only being used to reconfigure and secure white hegemony within nation-states in the global North, but also provide justifications for imperialist interventions in the global South nation-states that these narratives position as more homophobic than states in the global North. Moreover, using sexuality politics to sideline an attention to race, as Wahab and Thobani describe, obfuscates the intersectional configurations of people’s lives, invisibilizing racialized queer and trans people, and can generate animosity between groups organizing for racial justice and those working towards sexual justice, at both national and transnational levels.

Overview of Articles in “Transnationalizing Homonationalism”: Theorizing Homo(trans)nationalism from Palestinian, Egyptian, Turtle Island, Ukrainian, and Eastern European Perspectives

The pieces in this issue of *Feral Feminisms* take up these racialized dynamics of transnational homonationalism by questioning how whiteness, Islamophobia, anti-Palestinian discourses, anti-Blackness, settler colonialism, anti-Roma sentiments, and ideas about Western European civilizational superiority inform the transnational politics of sexuality. I brought together this issue because of my own interest in how homonationalism plays out outside of the United States and, more specifically, in how transnational dynamics shape Canada’s relationship to homonationalism. Each of the articles in this issue decenters the U.S. in theorizing homonationalism transnationally, creating space to think through homonationalism in ways that are not bound to the nation-state.

The issue begins with Mikki Stelder’s “The Limits of Transnationalizing Homonationalism in/for Palestine.” In this piece, Stelder explores the relationship between homonationalism and pinkwashing. Stelder argues that using a transnationalized framework of homonationalism to understand pinkwashing limits the possibilities for engaging with Palestinian liberation. Because homonationalism, as a framework for thinking through pinkwashing, imposes limits on how injustices in Palestine can be understood, Stelder draws on the work of Palestinian anticolonial-queer thinkers to suggest that pinkwashing should instead be understood “as a Zionist settler-colonial technology embedded in the larger racialized sexual politics and spatio-temporality of Zionist settler colonialism.” Stelder concludes by reflecting on



“how the limits of homonationalism as analytical tool draw attention to the need to theorize from elsewhere.”

In the next piece, “The Revolutionary Wonderings of Queer-Feminist Egyptians and Muslims,” Mohamed Abdou explores revolutionary anti-homonationalist thinking through ethnographic research with queer Muslims on Turtle Island and queer Nubian and Sudanese-Egyptians in Egypt. Abdou employs queer Muslim critique as method to unpack how neocolonialism and neoimperialism frame the transnationally circulating relationship between Islam and queerness. Abdou reflects on the participants’ fluid understandings of their sexualities, arguing that they resist the compartmentalization of LGBTIQ identities upon which homonationalism depends. As such, Abdou suggests that participants’ complex negotiations of their identities is “necessary in disrupting the transnational nature of homonationalism.” Abdou notes that the participants resist an explicit focus on sex and sexuality, instead centering compassion and “a politics of responsibility to the Other” that is not “necessarily centred on political reform (*islah*) or a politics of assimilationist rights.” Abdou concludes by arguing for a politics of solidarity and coalition building as a way out of the homonationalist present, suggesting, for example, that feminist-queer movements could learn from the “transnational radical land-based struggles” of the Zapatistas to build new ideas about the future without relying on a romanticized past or homonationalist present.

The next two pieces explore the transnational dynamics of homonationalism between Eastern and Western Europe. First, in “Can We Think Homonationalism in Homophobic Eastern Europe?” Anna Rekhviashvili explores the refusal amongst scholars of Eastern Europe to engage with the concept homonationalism, questioning what critiques homonationalism might make possible in Eastern European contexts as well as why scholars refuse to take up such critiques. Rekhviashvili argues that this scholarly refusal limits understandings of Eastern European homophobias, undermines critiques of modelling LGBTQ activism in Eastern Europe on that of the West, and obfuscates the complicity of such projects with white nationalism in Eastern Europe. Rekhviashvili points out that “LGBTQ activists often claim their space within their national contexts by disidentifying with the nation’s racialized or classed others” and asserts that scholars’ invisibilization of race or claims to racial innocence hide “the potentially problematic nature of the queer desire of belonging within the symbolic boundaries of their nations.” Instead, Rekhviashvili suggests that “we should question how the unarticulated assumptions of belonging to a patriarchal, Christian, and white European modernity inform many of the tensions around sexuality and race within these places.”

The final piece in this issue, Olga Plakhotnik’s “On The Limits of Speakability: Debates on Homonationalism and Sexual Citizenship in Post-Maidan Ukraine,” takes up the transnational dynamics of homonationalism from a Ukrainian perspective. In the piece, Plakhotnik draws on social media narratives and images produced by Kyiv Pride and grassroots Ukrainian activists to explore the national, European, and global permutations of homonationalism that inform sexual citizenship in Ukraine. Plakhotnik traces debates about homonationalism in Ukrainian activist communities and finds that mainstream LGBTQ activists understand some interpretations of homonationalism as debatable while others, particularly grassroots critiques of homonationalism, are beyond the “limits of speakability.” Plakhotnik adds to the scholarly debate about the usefulness or applicability of homonationalism in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) that is the focus also of Rekhviashvili’s piece, and questions who benefits from positioning homonationalism as irrelevant to CEE. In centering the study on Ukrainian grassroots activist critiques of homonationalism within Ukrainian LGBTQ NGOs, Plakhotnik shows how arguments that homonationalism is irrelevant to CEE silence the critical positions



taken by grassroots activists. For example, Plakhotnik describes how state actors like Ukrainian president Petro Poroshenko positioned the allowance of pride parades as demonstrative of Ukraine's progress and European-ness. Grassroots activists, however, connected the police protection of pride (but not other LGBTQ events or spaces) to the police cover up and possible participation in burning down Roma settlements outside Kyiv a week before pride and, in their critique of homonationalism, highlight how the "rhetoric of diversity has been instrumentalized to veil poverty, racism, and multiple social and economic exclusions."

Some pieces in this issue question the utility of homonationalism as an analytic framework, while others challenge the resistance to using homonationalism to theorize the transnational dynamics of sexuality politics. Centering race as an analytic category and drawing on revolutionary and counter-hegemonic thinkers to develop their arguments, the pieces in this issue probe the transnational circulation of homonationalism and question the taken-for-granted meanings of sexuality and sexuality politics in scholarship on homonationalism, ultimately pushing and refining the meaning of the framework.

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