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Thematic Section:

The Performative Power of Cultural  
Products in the Making of Gender,  
Sexualities, and Transnational  
Communities

Edited by

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***Thematic Section: The Performative Power of Cultural Products in the Making of Gender, Sexualities, and Transnational Communities***

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# Cultural Products in Flux

## Introduction to *The Performative Power of Cultural Products in the Making of Gender, Sexualities, and Transnational Communities*

by Erika Alm, Pia Laskar & Cathrin Wasshede

Normative notions of gender and sexuality, and the way they are contested, (re)-constructed, interpreted and articulated in practice, have been studied within the Humanities and Social sciences at both macro and micro level. Studies of social movements, resistance, organising and community building have been essential in regard to the expansion of this diverse field of knowledge. When scholars have explored communities that emerge as norms of gender and sexuality cross national borders and impact upon transnational spaces, they have often focused on human subjects, organisations, political groups, etcetera (Yuval Davies 2011). However, if we are interested in understanding the complex and dynamic processes behind the formations of communities of belonging in a transnational and digitalised world, we also need new starting points and innovative methodological tools.

This special issue of *Culture Unbound* sets out to explore the function of cultural products in the negotiation and consolidation of transnational communities of belonging, gathering articles that are theoretically and methodologically based on an understanding of cultural products as performative, as boundary objects, floating signifiers, and as actants. The articles follow cultural products like the rainbow flag, the veil, manga, and elongated labia across local and transnational borders and contexts, paying attention to what such a methodological move can tell us about communities of belonging. The authors featured in this special issue acknowledge that cultural products can be used as tools for marketisation and neoliberalism, for religious and secularist purposes, as well as for political strategies, struggles and policies. Through following cultural products transnationally, the authors move in unpredictable directions, uncovering new perspectives and narratives.

Cultural products come into being in complex entanglements with other materialities and discourses such as technologies, artefacts, subjects, norms, desires

and power structures (Barad 2007, Alaimo & Hekman 2008, Hird 2009, Black 2014). Inspired by theorists like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987, 1988), feminist scholars have shown how these connections are rhizomatic and erratic, and how paying particular attention to both the materiality and the discursivity of these entanglements points towards a continuation of and a critical intervention into feminist writing troubling with dualism since Simone de Beauvoir (Hinton & van der Tuin 2014).

This special issue focuses on cultural products' agency in relation to transnational communities of belonging, and is thus interwoven with decolonial and postcolonial feminist studies. Cultural notions and practices of femininities, masculinities and sexualities undergo deep transformations globally, as they move between and within the local and the transnational in multiple and messy ways. Feminist decolonial and postcolonial scholars argue that researchers involved in studying these changes tend to move within narrow developmental paradigms that understand gendered progress and progress in relation to sexual rights within the binary frame of traditional versus modern societies. In these types of paradigms, European modernity and secularism are framed as the centre of and the condition for progress. Critics have argued that European civil society, in a modernist/colonial tradition, takes on the "burden" of changing and reorganising issues on gender and sexualities in other parts of the world (Lugones 2010; Quijano 2000; Mohanty 2003; Puar 2007; Massad 2007; Asad 2003; Mahmood 2005).

Cultural products can reveal hidden meanings as well as hide other meanings; they are symbols with the ability to sharply address "hot spots" in society. They can accomplish things, they can tear down boundaries or create new boundaries. They do things to us, move us, make us move in different directions and move us emotionally (Ahmed 2004, 2007; Colbert & Courchesne 2012; Grewal 2005). The rainbow flag is an excellent example. Analysing the rainbow flag as a boundary object, a floating signifier or actant makes it ambiguous and open to different meanings, as decided by the signifiers. Through a decolonial following of the rainbow flag in three case studies, Pia Laskar, Anna Johansson and Diana Mulinari show how the flag plays a role in marking boundaries between those who belong to accepted and desirable communities, and those who are excluded from them. Drawing on the rainbow flag as a boundary object in three different contexts – and in several communities of belonging – enables the authors to follow constructions of Swedishness in the small town of Södertälje, pinkwashing in the shadow of an Israeli apartheid wall in Palestine, and globalised queer tourism excluding local queer communities in Argentina. Central to their analysis is how the rainbow flag is given a multitude of original and radically different meanings that may challenge the colonial/Eurocentric notions that to a certain extent are embedded in it.

Erika Alm and Lena Martinsson discuss the frictions that the rainbow flag

creates between transnational, national and translocal discourses. Through analysing their own encounters with the rainbow flag in conversations with activists in Pakistan, they reveal the ambivalent role that a transnational rainbow space plays for community building for lesbian, gay, bi, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) activists in the Pakistani context. The rainbow flag can mobilise an imagined transnational community of belonging, enabling people to politicise their experiences of discrimination as a demand of recognition directed at the state. But it can also enable homonationalism and transnational middle-class formations that exclude groups of people, for example illiterates and people perceived as “traditional”, such as Khwaja Siras. Alm’s and Martinsson’s article is also a contribution to a critical discussion about the problem of feeling too comfortable as white, Western, middle-class researchers in some of the Pakistani settings, disclosing imperial narratives that dominate the feminist and LGBTQ activist transnational imagined community of belonging.

David Drissel highlights how the rainbow flag actually transforms and/or neutralises the potential sectarian militancy of the Irish and/or British nationalist flags when the two kinds of flags are combined in the Pride parade in Belfast. The rainbow flag acts both as a transnational symbol, making LGBTQ people all over the world feel connected to one another and as parts of a community of belonging, and, in its locality in Belfast, as a transforming power that recontextualises and reimagines nationalist and unionist symbols. Drissel shows how a heteronormative urban space can be momentarily queered through the use of bodies, rainbow flags, music and other socio-spatial performances, and how this may challenge dominant notions about gender and sexuality in a homophobic context.

Linda Berg and Mikela Lundahl analyse two cases of (un)veiling in France: artwork by Princess Hijab in the Parisian metro and the burkini ban in some towns along the French coast in 2016. The two cases differ from one another, but Berg and Lundahl show how both these hijabising phenomena negotiate how and where Muslim female bodies can inhabit public space. They point to how Western norms around nakedness and clothes (covering skin) have changed over time, and how today the (almost) naked woman is normalised, and even imposed, in public space. Princess Hijab’s veiling of the naked models in advertisements in the metro is an unveiling of the white, patriarchal commercial industry as well as a (re)instating of the Muslim female body as the dangerous Other. By contextualising veils and veiling in a discussion about the religious-secular divide the authors problematise questions about integration and freedom.

Although cultural products as material objects are transitory, and sometimes only exist in physical form lasting an hour or so, as in the examples of Princess Hijab’s artistic interventions in the Parisian metro, they may have a long life on the Internet and hence contribute to the production of different communities of

belonging. This emphasises the digital aspect of the social world and how the Internet is of special interest for cultural products and their role for communities of belonging (Craig 2013; Colbert & Courchesne 2012; Davies 2007). The online rhizomatic circulation involves a constant change of meanings (Davies 2007), a feature that is discussed and explored in Mona Lilja's and Cathrin Wasshede's text about Boys' Love/Yaoi in manga.

Using interviews with Swedish followers of Boys' Love/Yaoi, Lilja and Wasshede study the performativity of manga, focusing on how Boys' Love/Yaoi generates alternative subject positions and practices regarding gender and sexuality. Arguing that Swedish manga users create their own images of Japan that help consolidate their notions of Sweden and Swedishness, Lilja and Wasshede contribute to the growing knowledge of how processes like cultural appropriation, othering and exotisation are part of the construction of national imagined communities. Through coupling feminist theorisations of the inseparability of materiality and signification with Baudrillard's understanding of hyperreality, Lilja and Wasshede also challenge the notion that hyperreality is a surface phenomenon, arguing that cultural products do indeed create new subjectivities and desires.

Hellen Venganai's article "Negotiating identities through the 'cultural practice' of labia elongation among urban Shona women and men in contemporary Zimbabwe" thematises the role of cultural products for communities of belonging by way of looking at the role of the cultural practice of labia elongation in urban Zimbabwe. Venganai shows that modified labia are entangled in transnational, national and local contexts, and can hence be understood in the tradition of body modifications as cultural products (Bordo 1993; Pugliese & Stryker 2009). Taking as her point of departure material that shows that both women that favour labia prolongation and those opposing it position themselves as modern, urban and middle-class, she is challenging and critiquing the notion, expressed in society at large and in some research, of the cultural practice as traditional, rural and backward. Venganai analyses the complex processes of subjectivation by also pointing to inconsistencies in the informants' narratives of creating dynamic identities in plural. In doing so she contributes to decolonial scholarly work on dismantling dominant Eurocentric discourses on African traditional cultural practices linked to sexuality as retrogressive for women.

We regard this special issue as a point of departure for further exploration and theoretical discussions about cultural products and their relevance for communities of belonging, in transnational, national and local settings. In a world where borders can be transgressed by a privileged few and we witness a backlash against social movements that struggle to level the playing field for unprivileged people due to growing nationalism, fascism and racism, it is easy to rely on the notions of unifying, radical and transgressive transnational communities of belonging.

Without losing this hope and trust in political futurity, we need to critically engage in decolonial deconstructions of communities of belonging and the performative power of their supposed floating signifiers or boundary objects: who are those who belong and who are those who do not? How are those boundaries within communities of belonging produced? How are cultural products used in boundary-making processes? What do cultural products do to us and what do we do to them?

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# Decolonising the Rainbow Flag

By Pia Laskar, Anna Johansson & Diana Mulinari

## Abstract

The aim of the article is to explore the location and the meaning given to the rainbow flag in places outside the hegemonic centre. Through three case studies in the global North and South, held together by a multi-ethnographic approach, as well as a certain theoretical tension between the rainbow flag as a boundary object and/or a floating signifier, we seek to study where the flag belongs, to whom it belongs, with particular focus on how. The three case studies, which are situated in a city in the Global South (Buenos Aires), in a conflict war zone in the Middle East (the West Bank) and in a racialised neighbourhood in the Global North (Sweden), share despite their diversity a peripheral location to hegemonic forms of knowledge production regimes. Central to our analysis is how the rainbow flag is given a multitude of original and radical different meanings that may challenge the colonial/Eurocentric notions which up to a certain extent are embedded in the rainbow flag.

**Keywords:** rainbow flags, multi-ethnographic approach, homonationalism, decolonial practices, communities of belonging.

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## Introduction

The rainbow flag was gaining ground, challenging local flags and older symbols in Europe via Pride festivals during the 1990s, and has eventually developed into a symbol that seems to bring people historically excluded together in imagined transnational communities of belonging (Klapeer & Laskar, forthcoming). The flag is today used in the global North and South – and appears as a challenge to oppressive heteronormative gender and sexual norms, and as a symbol for sexual possibilities, freedom and rights. Contrariwise, critical voices within the queer globalised community have challenged the European universalising gaze (Wallerstein 2006) central to the subtext of the rainbow flag and its connotations with Western Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersexual and Queer (LGBTIQ) understandings of rights and obligations. Furthermore, as neither the West nor the Western queer communities are monoliths, the connotation of the rainbow flag differs also within these localities.

In the following we will sometimes use *queer/s* as an umbrella term to describe the concrete material, political, social, cultural position of people who are and have often been perceived as sexual deviants or as non-normative in terms of gender. When we use the term LGBTIQ or GLTTTBI,<sup>1</sup> it is related to a specific historical and political context or movement that uses the social categories of – and/or identifications with – these acronyms or versions of them. As we are taking our point of departure in critical queer theory, we also engage with *queer* as a verb (to *queer*, *queering*) which points to our intention to deconstruct, destroy, question, destabilise, and displace certain norms related to sexuality and gender from a critical theoretical perspective (Warner 1993).

Contemporary scholars would contend that flags function as boundary objects (Star and Griesemer 1989), and that boundary objects facilitate interactions, translations, and coherence, but also stir conflicts over meaning across diverse social worlds. Flags as boundary objects are never fixed, they are multifocal and multivalent.

The rainbow flag, both scholars and activists argue, shadows the diversity of queer subjectivities that are always already mediated and affected by social position, race, access to economical means, geopolitical localisation, gender, age, etc. Moreover, the rainbow flag plays a central role in boundary-making between the construction of Europeanness coded as progressive and its others, defined by their supposed lack of tolerance towards sexual minorities, inscribing the flag within colonial and racist discourses. Finally, the rainbow flag, other critical voices argue, is used as a fundamental symbol for marketing cities, and branding strategies in a context where sexual and cultural diversity is instrumentalised as an index of a city's financial success (Brenner et al 2012).

The aim of the article is to explore the location and the meaning given to the

rainbow flag in three peripheries. While the postcolonial and the decolonial fields take a point of departure in different traditions, for the purpose of this article, we focus on their shared epistemological frame, particularly in their shared understanding of the relationship between colonialism and power (Bhambra 2014). Through a decolonial reading of the flag, we attempt to make visible some of the diversity and complexity of the connotations of the rainbow flag which are produced in places outside the hegemonic centre. Theoretically, we take our point of departure in decolonial thinking: the focus lies on the complex, diverse and contradictory ways through which the flag is acted upon in spaces outside the hegemonic centre. The aim of the article is to highlight connotations that have been made invisible or marginalised in the dominant Western discourse/s. We want to identify where the flag is represented as belonging to a specific community, who may embody this belonging, with a particular focus on how. The article takes its point of departure from queer- inspired postcolonial and decolonial scholars and activists.

Methodologically we have been inspired by a multi-sited ethnographical approach (Marcus 1995), following people, ideas, conflicts, movements, and in this case, a cultural product. This approach allows us to treat our research object – the rainbow flag – as fluid and contiguous, and to follow it as it travels in different contexts, creating new connections, relationships and meanings. Moreover, we have been guided by the suggestion made by Nadai and Maeder (2005: 3) that the “fuzziness” of fields, that is fields with no clear boundaries, can be counteracted by a “theoretical clarification of the object of study... such a theoretical framework can then serve as a compass for research”. Thus, the connections between the sites in this study are made through our theoretical framework.

The article consists of three case studies, each one of them researched and written separately by the three different authors. The case studies differ in several ways. First, in the methods used to collect the empirical material (participant observation, social media, secondary material, etc.); second, in the space emphasised in the analysis (bodies, frontier/walls, municipal nexus); third, in how the rainbow flag is inscribed as a symbol and how the ‘doing’ of the flag shapes and regulates communities of belonging.

However, the three case studies share a similar location within the global relations of power identified by cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall as “The West and the Rest” (1992): the three of them can be conceptualised as belonging to “the Rest”, i.e. peripheries to hegemonic forms of knowledge-truth production regimes. One of them is in a global city in the Global South (Buenos Aires); another in a conflict war zone in the Middle East (the West Bank) and the third in a racialised neighbourhood in the Global North (Sweden). In the analysis they also share a specific event through which the rainbow flag’s meanings are explored. To grasp

the complexity of meanings and stories produced by “the Rest” we use multiple entries and perspectives, enabling us to demonstrate various usages and interpretations outside the hegemonic centre.

As Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2007) respective Richard Jenkins (2007) note, even though the political and symbolic significance of flags is acknowledged in social science studies of nationalism, flags and their ubiquity and emotional power are seldom treated in a systematic way. In a similar way, we note that while the rainbow flag has been highlighted in its role of creating queer spaces (Mera-bet 2014), empirical investigations with the rainbow flag in focus are still rare. Through the decolonial reading of the role and significance of the rainbow flag in three different contexts, we hope to contribute to such a body of work by asking what discourses of colonialism and racialisation processes are deployed and what forms and strategies of resistance are put into play by the rainbow flag.

### **What is a Flag?**

The flag (or rather the everyday presence of the flag) in Western societies embodies forms of what sociologist Michael Billig (1995) names as banal nationalism: The nation, the author asserts, is indicated or “flagged” in the daily lives of citizens. Feminist scholars (Hyndman 2003) have identified how the (national) flag is often connected to an affective economy of patriotism that regulates gender and sexuality regimes through the construction of men as soldiers and protectors of the nation and women as mothers central to biological and cultural reproduction. National flags, gender scholars argue, evoke not only forms of belonging that create boundaries between those that officially belong to the nation and those that are excluded from this community, but also evoke forms of togetherness that deny the fundamental social conflicts within nations as both imagined and fractured communities. Feminist scholars have introduced the notion of politics of belonging to grasp what Adrian Favell (1999) defined as “the dirty work of boundary maintenance”. For Yuval Davis (2006), the politics of belonging is both about the boundary-making that creates and reproduces communities but also the struggle around the meaning of what and who is involved in belonging.

Located within this critical theory tradition, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe speak in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* about the floating signifiers that can be discursively constructed within a political field because as such they are not articulated to a discourse chain (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 113). For Laclau, the floating signifier is the signifier which “results from the unfixity introduced by the plurality of discourse” (Butler et al 2000: 305). The flag could be read as a floating signifier, a boundary object that links communities of belonging together and is plastic enough towards different meanings and interpretations.

## **The Fluid Meanings of the Rainbow Flag: Swedish Residentialism in a Small Town.**

In 2009, Tage Gripenstam, a local councillor from the Centre Party in Södertälje (a town of some 100.000 inhabitants about 50 km from the capital Stockholm), introduced a bill to the municipal council to enable the hoisting of rainbow flags on the municipal official flagpoles during Pride festivals (Sandin 2009). The local councillor was concerned with the vulnerability of LGBT<sup>2</sup> people in town – if open about their sexual identities; they were neither safe nor secure. To hoist the rainbow flag on official flagpoles should therefore be an important symbolic act showing that the municipality stood openly behind the rights of all LGBT individuals. In the eyes of this local councillor, the rainbow flag symbolised diversity and had a different width and relevance than other (political) flags. (Hoisting political flags should be avoided according to Swedish municipalities' flag regulations.) Even though the bill was rejected, the rainbow flag would continue to be a contested object. During the years to come, the local councillor would be interviewed in the media when anything occurred related to rainbow flags or Pride events in Södertälje. In an interview in Swedish public television 2015, Gripenstam identified the fact that residents in Södertälje had different cultural backgrounds and values as one of the factors as to why one might be vulnerable as a LGBT person. Many newcomers arrive from areas where LGBTQ persons are not accepted and obviously some of them make it difficult for others to be open, according to Gripenstam (Klintbo Skilje 2015).

To understand the implications of this comment, it is important to bear in mind that Södertälje has since long had the largest population of Syrian and Assyrian migrants per capita in Sweden: 25-30,000 out of 100,000 inhabitants 2014 (Mack 2014:156), and that the Syrian and Assyrian communities is highly visible in the municipality.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, Södertälje had five Syrian and Assyrian Orthodox churches, a TV channel that broadcasted in Neo-Aramaic, Arabic and English to eighty countries, and two professional football teams (one Syrian and one Assyrian). Strains between the ethnic Swedish majority population and the Syrian and Assyrian communities are not uncommon.<sup>4</sup>

The two largest Pride festivals in Sweden present their aims as supporting an open and tolerant society, and working against prejudice and discrimination (West Pride Gothenburg 2016), and as working for liberation of the society from oppressive norms, for equality and LGBTIQ rights (Stockholm Pride 2016). In the following case, some of these values are connected with hoisting the rainbow flag and this acts role in the construction of what here will be called "Swedishness", coded as progressive and pro-diversity, and contrasted with its binary Otherness, defined by a closed society, intolerance, prejudice, inequality, discriminating and oppressive norms towards sexual minorities.

Drawing on white hegemony studies (Dyer 1997, Hughey 2010, Hübinette & Lundström 2014), the concept “Swedishness” will in this case be used to study seemingly disparate national identity formations and unpack their constitution and presumed hierarchies by references to the rainbow flag. The concept makes it possible to analyse if – and in that case how – reproductions of and appeals to essentialist cultural distinctions operate in constructions of a binary Other in the online space for reader’s comments in *Länstidningen*, the local newspaper of Södertälje.

### *Relocating the rainbow flag*

In 2013, four years after the above-mentioned local councillor’s bill, people from Club Molto, an assemblage of self-identified LGBTIQ people in Södertälje, one night hoisted the rainbow flag at one of the municipality’s flagpoles, outside the municipal council building. Club Molto’s direct action fuelled the debate on hoisting rainbow flags further, in particular in the social media, but also in the local daily paper where Club Molto published an article explaining their action.

We hoisted it also to show that we stand up for the human rights of all citizens, regardless of ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation. But above all, we did it to highlight our support for the residents in Södertälje who identify as lesbians, gays, transpersons or queer, but don’t dare call themselves that because of fear for their lives or of being excluded from society. (Molto 2013)

In the year after Club Molto’s civil obedience, a sufficient number of municipal politicians from different political parties formed a representative majority united around the suggestion to allow for flags of assorted organisations/societies to be hoisted on the municipality’s flagpoles, at special events and under certain conditions: “If the event takes place in Södertälje and if it is deemed to be of importance for the municipality and represents the municipality’s policies and values” (quoted from Leitner 2014). The Pride rainbow flag was regarded as a flag of an organisation/society. The discussion in the municipal council also led the politicians to put extra focus on LGBTIQ vulnerability, by guaranteeing a sum of money to be used to help inform the public about queer issues, since the symbolic value of flagging was not viewed as sufficient enough to combat local prejudices (Holgersson 2014). However, when different journalists in the local media covered the new flag policy, they also provoked numerous readers’ responses. The online responses were published in the commentators’ space directly following the articles in question. The space was public and anonymous comments were accepted.<sup>5</sup> Two main arguments can be detected in the comments to the article. One pertains to exclusion and inclusion of minority groups in general: why only hoisting the flag for the

LGBT category? It excludes and discriminates against other categories in Sweden (mentioned were Sámi and Roma people, retirees, children, heterosexual people, and the disabled). It was argued that the municipality should be neutral and not support only one group.

The other thread was introduced by a suggestion that the Syrian flag should be hoisted instead of celebrating the rainbow flag, in memory of Seyfo/Sayfo – the genocide of Assyrians by and in the Ottoman Empire (1914-1920). One commentator answered stressing that neither Pride nor Sayfo should be the focus of a flag: “We live in Sweden. Accept that!” Yet another commentator in this thread wrote: “Syrians can also hoist the rainbow flag. It encompasses more than Pride [for LGBTIQ people]. Welcome to Södertälje, where we respect everybody’s rights”. Another commentator stressed “Swedish values” without contrasting this against minorities: “To hoist the rainbow flag is in line with the open society we [Södertälje] try to obtain. To hoist the flag signals support for a community that has been excluded and exposed for many years”. Against the backdrop described above regarding the tensions between the Syrian community and the Swedish ethnic majority population, it is not difficult to interpret the comments following the suggestion to remember Seyfo/Sayfo, such as “We live in Sweden. Accept that”, and “Welcome to Södertälje, where we respect everybody’s rights”, as addressing the Syrian Assyrian Others.<sup>6</sup> The tensions between Syrians and other immigrants, as well as with the majority population in Södertälje, have been described by Andersson (2009) and Mack (2014), but clearly more research is needed.

Certainly Club Molto and perhaps other self-identified queers in Södertälje felt empowered by the municipality’s decision to hoist the rainbow flag. However, they did not participate with comments online in the debates in the newspapers. That arena quickly filled up with other agents. Some of them regarded the rainbow flag as a symbol for what can be described as hegemonic Swedish values, such as the respect for everybody’s rights, an open society, support for vulnerable LGBTIQ-people, etc. – but hoisting the flag was also regarded as an act of excluding other groups from the municipality’s sphere of concern. Furthermore, several commentators in the debate juxtaposed so-called Swedish values against values of the Others, thereby suggesting that the Others took a stand against equal rights, everybody’s equal values, and an open society, etc., while Swedishness implicitly stood to represent the opposite, which corresponds to previous research (HübINETTE & Lundström 2014).

### *The rainbow flag as a symbol for inclusion and exclusion*

The first comment referred to above demands neutrality by arguing that by supporting one vulnerable category, the municipality is excluding other discriminated categories such as Roma people, retirees, children, heterosexual people, and

the disabled. Since the municipality had decided to open up its space for the hoisting of flags to a range of assorted unions and organisations, this argument kicked in, so to speak, an already open door. It can be added that the commentator focuses on categories that are protected against discrimination according to Swedish law (*Diskrimineringslagen*), i.e. ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability. This commentator leaves out the other three categories protected by the law: gender, gender expression and religious beliefs.

The argument in behalf of commemorating the genocide of Assyrians is yet another critique of the municipality's choosing to focus on just one vulnerable group. In this commentary, however, there is no appeal to include more categories than that reflected by the Syrian flag – which of course could encompass people of different ages, ethnicities, religious beliefs, sexualities, gender, gender expression and abilities. The comment by one reader that neither the rainbow flag nor the Syrian flag should be hoisted adds: "We live in Sweden. Accept that!" This implicitly rules out diversity and the possibility to encompass a diverse multitude by juxtaposing two national belongings as totally different and sets them against each other. The message seems to be: assimilate or leave.

When writing that Syrians also can hoist the rainbow flag as it encompasses more than Pride (for LGBTQI-persons), the next commentator sees the flag as a symbol for an expanded compass of diversity. However, it is still the "Syrians" who should honour the rainbow flag and not the other way around. The latter would mean that the flag which includes "more than Pride" would also embrace "Syrians" and their memories of genocide. However, by adding "Welcome to Södertälje, where we respect everybody's rights", the comment seems to turn the flag away from the Assyrian Syrian memory of genocide.

Another commentator promoted values to strive for without setting vulnerable groups against each other: "To hoist the rainbow flag is in line with the open society we [Södertälje] try to achieve. To hoist the flag signals support for a community that has been excluded and vulnerable for many years". However, the comment does not invite the Syrian community (as an excluded and vulnerable category) to be included in this support. On the contrary, it seems to join the chorus setting two vulnerable groups against each other – instead of indeed promoting the openness, tolerance, equality, etc. towards the Others that Swedishness appears to stand for.

### *Using Swedishness in the making of the monolithic Other*

In the interviews with local councillor Tage Gripenstam and in these few examples of comments in online spaces attached to journalists' articles, so-called Swedish values contrasted with values of the Others in the name of the rainbow flag, tending to suggest that the Others opposed equal rights, people's equal values, and an

open society. Concurrently, the category of the Others was constructed as a grey monolith bereft of the colours of what the rainbow flag, according to some of the protagonists, would seem to symbolise and include – an open society, tolerance, equality, and acting to struggle against discriminatory and oppressive norms towards sexual minorities. However, in the shadow of the values inscribed in the rainbow flag in this case, Swedishness emerges simultaneously with the intolerant construction of the binary Syrian Assyrian Other. Swedishness in this case thus occurs via the use of the rainbow flag as a signifier for diversity, and those marked as representatives of it are strongly positioned as different and superior to those marked as “the Others”.

What is at stake in space of commentators’ views as examined in this study is far removed from the self-identified queer people of Club Molto and their wish for acceptance of certain sexually-labelled groups of individuals. Instead the rainbow flagging for LGBTIQ people in Södertälje triggered a debate among commentators that became sites for the construction of a homophobic, essentially monolithic Other, and an imagined Swedish community of belonging. The rainbow flag as a floating signifier was hence in use discursively in defining as well as inscribing Swedishness. Furthermore, the analysis shows that the municipality’s flagging policies as well as a tolerance of the rainbow flag undergoes a process of being incorporated into national imaginaries, framed in binaries such as openness/closeness, and respect for rights/disrespect – i.e. processes that Jasbir Puar (2007) has termed homonationalism.

By contrast, incidents occurred in Södertälje during Pride 2016, when the municipality’s rainbow flags were stolen from their flagpoles and then burned. At first, extreme right winged media eyes were directed towards the Other (Fria Tider 2016), however, the action was filmed and placed on youtube, claimed by Kampgrupp 103, and proudly presented by the right-wing extremist organisation Nordiska motståndsrörelsen – a part of the Swedish white power Nazi milieu (Nordfront 2016; Daham 2016). Within the analytical frame in use in this case study, the right-wing extremists can be described as marginalised representatives of Swedishness, failing to achieve the dominant ideals connoted by the rainbow flag.

Thus, this first case study confirms international scholarship on homonationalism and Swedishness, by utilising new data identifying the role the rainbow flag may play to produce and reinforce a Eurocentric understanding of gender and sexuality. The following case study shares a similar focus on the role of the flag as a code for Western (European) modernity. However, it provides a different perspective in departing from the ways through which the rainbow flag is transformed into an art object, or rather in how the flag enters the field of art (and politics).

## **“Through the Spectrum” – the Rainbow flag as a Symbol of Freedom from Occupation**

On 29 June 2015, the Palestinian visual artist Khaled Jarrar painted a section of Israel’s separation wall (or as the Palestinians call it, “The Apartheid Wall”) – the 425-mile-long West Bank barrier, separating Israel from the Palestinian territories – with the colours of the rainbow flag. He called the mural “Through the Spectrum”. Four hours later the mural was painted over with white paint by some people, self-identified as part of the Palestinian community on the West Bank (Vartanian 2015; *The Guardian* 2015). This incident immediately stirred a debate in the Palestinian community, in the Jewish-Israeli and pro-Israeli community as well as internationally, where issues of LGBTIQ rights and visibility in Palestine, the Israeli occupation and politics of ‘pinkwashing’ were under discursive focus. This analysis explores significances of the rainbow flag as interpreted by different actors within the Israeli/Palestinian context, focusing in the main on how Jarrar’s work was interpreted and used by the international/Israeli press.

### *The representation of a homophobic Palestine versus a gay-friendly Israel*

The day after the incident, a central news piece on it was published by Associated Press and later circulated in various publications and media, such as *The Guardian* and Israeli daily *Haaretz* (Associated Press 2015a; Associated Press 2015b; Daraghmeh & Deitch 2015). Voices of several Palestinians who condemned the mural and who had been part of its whitewashing are presented: “Muhammad, who only gave his first name for fear of repercussions, said he helped whitewash the flag because ‘we cannot promote gay rights’”. The text continues:

Gay Palestinians tend to be secretive about their social lives and some have crossed into Israel to live safely. (...) Israel, meanwhile, has emerged as one of the world’s most gay-friendly travel destinations, in sharp contrast to the rest of the Middle East where gay people are often persecuted and even killed. (Associated Press 2015a; Associated Press 2015b).

Further, Jarrar was cited in *Haaretz* as stating that the whitewashing “reflects the absence of tolerance, and freedoms in the Palestinian society” (Daraghmeh & Deitch 2015).

The texts all painted a picture of a homophobic and backward Palestine juxtaposed to a gay-friendly and modern Israel. Key words used to describe lives for gays in Palestine are “secretive”, while gay lives in Israel are linked to “safety”. The rainbow flag (as well as the suffering Palestinian queer) is in this context being mobilised to create divisions and boundaries between Palestine as associated with

repressive practices in “the Middle East” and Israel as free, tolerant and Western, and incorporated into the assemblage of Israeli homonationalism (Puar 2007; Carson 2013).

### *Freedom versus occupation*

Later, a couple of days after the mural was painted and whitewashed, on 2 July 2015, Jarrar wrote a piece in the *Electric Intifada*, explaining his work “in his own words (Jarrar 2015). He stresses that he feels his intentions have been “hijacked and manipulated” by the international press, for example, being misquoted as speaking of “absence of tolerance, and freedoms in the Palestinian society”. According to Jarrar “Through the Spectrum” is being used in the Israeli ‘pinkwashing’, that is, as a means of defending the Israeli state against potential criticism of its treatment of Palestinians (Puar & Mikdashi 2012). In fact, the work came about as he followed the news about the Supreme Court decision to legalise same-sex marriage in the US and millions of people all over the world used the “celebrate pride” filter provided by Facebook. He then came to think of the use of the rainbow “as a symbol of freedom and equality and what it could represent for other oppressed groups”. To his mind, the rainbow colours are the “freedom colors” and the mural was painted as an expression of support for the freedom of the occupied Palestinian people: “I wanted the world to see that our struggle still exists and I felt there could be no better place to have that dialogue than on the concrete slabs of the most visible icon of our oppression”. And he continues: “My goal is to send out a message to the whole world, which is still celebrating freedom, about the oppressed people living under military occupation (...)” (Vartanian 2015).

Freedom is juxtaposed to the oppression of the Palestinians under Israel’s military occupation. Jarrar mobilises the flag through his art in the struggle for Palestinian nationhood and associates it with freedom from occupation. In a later interview by Al Monitor, Jarrar goes on to more explicitly link the struggle for queer rights and the struggle against the occupation, and defines the US refusal to “do justice to the Palestinian cause” at the same time as they “make a decision allowing gay marriage” as a “double standard on rights and freedoms” (Al-Ghoul 2015).

### *Unity and peace vs. anti-Semitism and hatred*

As Jarrar explicitly explains that his intention is to expand the rainbow flag to include other freedoms and rights than that of sexuality, he is condemned and even accused of using the flag for spreading hatred and anti-Semitism. Esman (2015), a blogger at Blouin Artinfo, an international site covering news, expert commentary and debate on art and artists writes: “It takes a unique combination ofchutzpah and talent to turn the universal symbol of unity and peace into a message of

anti-Semitism and hatred". The "chutzpah" (which means 'audacity', and is used indignantly in Hebrew to describe someone who has overstepped the boundaries of accepted behaviour), is in this context to use the rainbow flag to link the struggle for gay rights with the struggle by the Palestinian community against Israeli racism and occupational power. As pointed out by Ritchie (2014), it is fundamental to Israeli state formation that these struggles and issues are viewed and treated as separate, and that Israeli queers only are included into the nation as long as they do not demand transformation of the relations between Israelis and Palestinians, and as long as they participate in the demonisation of the Palestinian Other.

The argument against Jarrar could be seen as an example of how accusations of anti-Semitism has become a "potent tool" in the dominant discourses on Israeli and Palestinian conflict to silence opposition and delegitimise criticism of Israel (Hallward 2013) – and as part of the strategy of pink-washing. In order to convincingly define the mural in terms of "anti-Semitism and hatred", the first step for the writer is to contest the interpretation of the rainbow flag as a symbol of "freedom", and instead reinterpret it as a symbol of "unity and peace". The next is to discredit Jarrar on basis of his Palestinian-ness and resistance against the Occupation: "But perhaps that's to be expected when a Palestinian artist paints the rainbow on the West Bank Security Wall just as the rest of the (Western) world celebrates the US Supreme Court decision to allow lesbians and gays to marry" (Esman 2015). In this citation Jarrar and the Palestinian cause are excluded from the "unity and peace" of the "Western community" celebrating gay rights. The use of the flag as symbolising freedom from oppression is juxtaposed to the "unity and peace" of the liberal, Western world, in which the Palestinians are positioned as the "Other". Thus, this argument applies the same logic as in the previous case, in which Swedishness is constructed as more tolerant to what is marked as values of Syrian/Assyrian Other.

### *The decolonising of the Palestinian queer*

The situation of and debate concerning "Through the Spectrum" serves as a case of how the rainbow flag as a floating signifier is continuously interpreted and reinterpreted, mobilised and used within the specific context of the Israeli/Palestine conflict. As shown, the media coverage by Associated Press and *Haaretz* does not in any way reflect or acknowledge the broader and alternative significance Jarrar has given the rainbow flag in his work – as a symbol also for freedom from military occupation. Instead they use his work to reiterate the dichotomisation of the Primitive/Arab/the East and the Modern/Jew/the West, fundamental to the Israeli national narrative (Boger 2008), consequently reproducing the discursive silence regarding Palestine rights to nationhood and national rights (McMahon 2010). As Jarrar insists on challenging the colonial logic that Israeli homonationalism

(as well as the US counterpart) is built upon, linking together the struggle for gay rights with the struggle against Israeli occupation and for nationhood, he is accused of anti-Semitism and is demonised as the Palestinian Other.

In his work, Jarrar mobilises the rainbow flag for other purposes than promoting equal rights for LGBTQ people. Thus, the case of “Through the Spectrum” is an example of how the rainbow flag as a global symbol is appropriated not only by the hegemonic power (such as the Israeli state), but also by actors located outside the hegemonic centre. At the same time, the interpretation of the rainbow flag made by Jarrar could be understood as a contribution to “the decolonisation of the Palestinian queer” – an aim that has been articulated by the Palestinian organisation Al-Qaws – for Sexual & Gender Diversity in Palestinian Society – which focuses on sexual and gender oppressions rather than on LGBTIQ rights and homophobia (Alsaafin 2013). Hence, the rainbow flag as read from the particular location of occupied Palestine becomes a symbol for a queer community that is engaged in and part of a wider process of Palestinian decolonisation and liberation. By being painted on the Apartheid Wall as well as painted over, and becoming an object of a heated debate, the rainbow flag has also contributed to the construction of a particular Palestinian queer community, in creating boundaries as well as links between different groups.

As in the previous case, localised in a racialised neighbourhood in the Global North (Sweden) – in which the flag is seen as encompassing “more than Pride” and also would both embrace “Syrians” and their memories of genocide, and exclude them from Swedishness as intolerant “Others” – the rainbow flag in the context of Palestine encompasses not only LGBTIQ rights, but also the struggle against military occupation and for national independence and social justice.

The third case study provides continuity in the exploration of the role of the flag in locations outside the hegemonic Global North. However, it differs in exploring the meaning of the flag from the standpoint of GLTTTBI-identified communities of belonging.

## **Bodies, Politics and Belonging**

### *Our flag, their places*

Buenos Aires. Wednesday, 15 July 2010 (based on fieldwork notes). One of the authors is waiting together with thousands of others outside the Argentinean Congress in Buenos Aires for the parliamentary decision regarding the reform of the Civil Code towards the *matrimonio igualitario* (legalization of same-sex marriage).<sup>7</sup> The group that consists of members of feminists and GLTTTBI networks will not stay until the end of the legislative debate. It is very cold and half past midnight and the debates seem to go on and on. The researcher is hungry and ti-

red. She keeps proposing restaurants and bars and encounter the veto of two of the members of the group. Not here. No, Never. The researcher finds herself hoping that no rainbow flags are visible in any restaurants, because the activists' veto targets the main restaurants with rainbow flags. The group is walking through a privileged neighbourhood where the notion of Buenos Aires as a gay-friendly capital is acted upon through hostels, hotels, queer tango classes and other activities targeting tourists (Puar 2002). Why the avoidance of restaurants displaying the rainbow flag by these two lesbian-identified feminist activists who had been carrying impressively large rainbow flags for hours, who had cried and cried when the votes showed on the screen that "we" were winning and the law allowing same-sex couples to get married was about to be passed? After everybody has ordered the first beer Julia states:

Not one of us could afford a glass of water in those places; places where *café con leche* (in Spanish) is called *café au lait*... I hate them... I really hate them. And stop laughing... Have you asked them to put a poster of one of our activities? They always say no. Not to speak about our comrades who work night shifts and wants to visit the bar... They want the flag but they do not want our bodies. The problem is not the flag; it is the place, the people. The problem is that we cannot defend our flag in this place with these people around. It is an issue of respect. If you respect the flag, you do not put it in a window together with the menu.

The more the fieldwork notes were analysed, remembering the situation with Julia arguing and the rest laughing at her (actually laughing at her long statement), the more the issue of place appears as central as to how the rainbow flag is given meaning – or rather how the rainbow flag is experienced as being under threat (Julia uses the notion of defense). Understanding the flag as a floating signifier illuminates the central role that places have in the creation and conflict over meaning, so radically so as those that have been standing for hours holding the rainbow flag as an expression of community and belonging now strongly endeavor to disidentify themselves from the same flag. Julia makes a clear connection between places, symbols and bodies claiming that those bodies that the flag names are expelled from these fancy queer-friendly restaurants. Her argument could also be understood as a struggle to define when and where and for whom the flag is connected with the visibility of bodies transgressing norms of gender and sexuality. Or rather when and where the flag functions as a boundary object creating collaboration and community over diversified experiences of exclusion and criminalisation. As Amaranta puts it: "These people cannot respect our flag, because they never in the first place understood that the flag protects us, like a shield". Her argument

could be read as suggesting that to respect the flag is to know where and why it should be celebrated, where and why the flag should be visible but maybe most central where and why the right of invisibility must be protected (Berkins 2009). Amaranta's argument can also be understood as a struggle to define the role of the rainbow flag in when and where and for whom the visibility of queer bodies should be enacted. But her argument also illuminates the power and the centrality of the flag as a symbol for the community. A symbol that, according to both Julia and Amaranta, demands respect, and up to a certain extent, reverence.

### *Our bodies, our flag(s)*

Buenos, Aires. 15 October 2015. Rainbow flags everywhere, to help more than 200 persons, family friends and activists who have gathered to mourn trans-activist Diana Sacayan murdered in her home.<sup>8</sup> Diana Sacayán identified herself as belonging to the *transa*, *sudaca* and *originaria*; naming her identities and belonging as a trans-activist, from the Global South and of indigenous background. She was a member of the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association and led the Mal Antidiscrimination Liberation Movement in Argentina. She had participated in the struggles of the 1990s in the *piqueteros*<sup>9</sup> movement and worked very hard for the creation of quotas for trans-persons that are open for stable jobs in the formal labour market, outside prostitution, a kind of work she had experienced and particularly the exposition to the trans-phobic violence that that work entails. Diana also got headlines in 2012 when she was given her ID card with a female gender by Argentina's first female president Cristina Kirchner. This is how Amalia, one of the friends/informants, describes the event:

So there were a lot of flowers... (I put a jasmine for you) and her comrades had these broad rainbow flags that people that were carrying the coffin went through. And we all were shouting "Diana Sacayán, presente. Ahora y siempre" ('Diana Sacayan is Present. Now and Always') and then everybody began to cry. It was beautiful and everybody said, I also said, beautiful. But dearest I am so tired, we are so tired, you know very well how tired we are of beautiful burial rituals.

Queer studies have explored the meaning of burial rituals for a historically discriminated community, particularly regarding family ties and family belonging (Gould 2009; Baron 2011). In many senses, Diana's burial showed very similar patterns regarding the centrality of her family of choice in the ritual. However, there are relevant differences, mirrored in how diverse flags name (and politicise) belonging. The first one is the presence of the Argentinean flag as a clear expression of the rights of trans-persons to be included not only through legal status as

citizens but also underlining their right to belong to the nation. Yet the national flag is not alone. The *whipala*<sup>10</sup> overlaps the Argentinean flag as a sign of Diana's belonging to the Bolivian migrant community and of her identification with their struggles and with their dreams as indigenous peoples, migrants and racialised workers. While both the Argentinean and the whipala covered the coffin, the rainbow flag is not fixed, but carried by her best friends while others bear the coffin through the human bridge constructed by the flags.<sup>11</sup> This passing through the flag enacts community and belonging, a belonging that through the slogan Present Now and Always symbolically naming the disappeared during the military dictatorship (1976-1984),<sup>12</sup> as it does also with Sacayán's own poem connecting machos and fascists (the two groups she as a feminist would not want at her burial).

### *Our flags and their flags*

These practices name desire and politicise sexuality, they are about the economies of bodies, how we are put together (by others) and how through the creation of boundary objects (like the rainbow flag) communities of belonging survive and resist. To locate these experiences as an effect of global queerness is to exclude the powerful role that the cultural traditions of several decades of Latin American leftist-inspired political struggles creatively reorganised and gave new meanings through the presence of the rainbow flag. The emergence of broad forms of collaboration between GLTTTBI and the human rights organisations took place, scholars and activists argue, through the shared experience of struggles against the military dictatorship during the eighties and against neoliberalism and resistance to police violence during the 1990s. In Argentina, sex- and gender-based political movements had long drawn attention to the link between the political economy of sexuality and the repressive practices of the state (Hiller 2010; Gutierrez 2011). In the words of Magdalena, a very experienced trans-activist:

We are not *boludos de barrio Norte* (we are not stupid people from a neighbourhood coded as privileged) wagging a rainbow flag. Many of us fought our space together with the *piqueteros* throwing stones, occupying buildings. We got the support of the Mothers (The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo) when the police was killing us. We all starved to death in the 90s. We were, we are *travas* (transpersons), but most of all, we are *pueblo* (the people) ... If you have a terrorist state that violates every other right.... Everybody here is very well-trained in reading double discourses. Rainbow flags are never enough.

Perhaps this broader understanding of alliance and social justice – situated to a certain extent in the working class/non-white background of many GLTTTBI

activists, their identification with broader communities of struggle – provides a radically different understanding of the rainbow flag in general and of gender and sexual rights in particular, other than the Western/European liberal-coded agenda. Maybe these collective experiences of struggling together with other social movements open up an ability to read power (what Magdalena calls double discourses) that both allows for an identification with the rainbow flag as a figure of community and belonging, and concomitantly a critical disapproval of the same flag when used in the name of neoliberalism and white privilege.

### **Towards a Decolonial Reading of the Rainbow Flag**

While the struggle for citizenship for LGBTIQ people in some ways has gained ground globally, many of its reforms have occurred within an increasingly unequal society, one where commodification of sexuality (Hennessy, 2000) is at the core of the forms of incorporation of LGBTIQ rights. Lisa Duggan uses the concept of “homonormativity” (Duggan 2002: 179) to identify forms of inclusion through politics where LGBTIQ’s domesticity and consumption patterns reinforce heteronormative culture. Eurocentric and US located fantasies about sexual rights going global take a point of departure in Europe (and the West). This process of boundary-making takes place between urban and rural (Halberstam 2005); between majority and minoritised racialised groups in the Global North, and between the Global North and the Global South. Postcolonial-inspired queer scholars have analysed how images of European modernity are at the core of the construction and the instrumentalisation of sexual diversity in the context of global inequalities. A central contribution towards a postcolonial reading of queer theory is the work of Jasbir Puar (2007), which illuminates how homonormativity is always constructed in relation to national recognisable values – ones that can be contrasted with counter-images of the others. Puar convincingly shows how queer discourses are incorporated into the US post-9-11 ethos as a regulatory norm aiming at the racialisation of Muslims as terrorists, dangerous radical individuals belonging to repressive and patriarchal cultures.

These case studies illuminate how the rainbow flag plays a fundamental role in marking boundaries between those who belong to accepted and desirable communities and those who are excluded from them in all three contexts. While presumed homophobic people of Syrian or Assyrian descent in Sweden serve as legitimising figures for homonationalist Swedishness in the first case, the assumed homophobic Palestinians serve Israeli homonational purposes in the second case; finally, the presence of the rainbow flag in the context of globalised queer tourism excludes GLTTTBI local communities in Argentina

Postcolonial scholars provide different readings regarding the impact of a (qu-

eer) colonising Western gaze in the peripheries. Some argue that the universalising Western discourse through the concepts of “gay” and “lesbians” marginalises culturally coded practices of same sex activity; and can be inscribed within a missionary colonial tradition of “liberating” the Other from oppressive cultures and laws (Massad 2007). Other scholars suggest however that these lines of argumentation have serious shortcomings. On the one hand, there is a risk to be in a search of an authentic, pure, non-Western (sexual) culture. As Jarrod Hayes argues, one could make the case that homophobia has also been introduced by colonialism, even if conservative elites in the Third World that challenge LGBTIQ rights as a Western idea never mobilised against it (Hayes 2000). On the other, the binary opposition between Western and non-Western reinforces the (Eurocentric) notion of modernity as European modernity. One of the central contributions of both postcolonial and decolonial thought is their challenge to the parochial character of arguments based on the fantasy of the endogenous origins of European modernity. Fundamental cultural transformations are understood by this tradition. Haritaworn argues (Haritaworn et al. 2008) within a frame in which the Global South (the Other) responds or develops strategies due to the “impact” of modernity (see also Nichols 2012; Laskar 2014).

We are inspired and take our point of departure within a tradition of decolonial scholarship that shifts the focus from the Western (queer) colonial gaze towards emerging forms of (queer) resistance in the Global South. Grewal and Kaplan (2001) in their criticism towards binary oppositions between the local and the global, suggest that the Global South not only produces responses, but also creates selective, original and powerful readings of the potentialities and shortcomings of European modernity from their particular locations.

Central to this article has been to explore the location of the rainbow flag within the postcolonial/decolonial queer forms of resistance. The decolonial reading of the rainbow flag carried out in this work suggests that the flag as a symbol is far from fixed; rather, it is given a multitude of innovative and radical different meanings. Moreover, in the second and third case, it is obvious that rather than passively producing responses, the actors are creatively and collectively producing alternative definitions and politics from their specific locations and positionings – definitions that potentially challenge and destabilise the colonial/ Eurocentric notions embedded in the rainbow flag. In the first case, the rainbow flag is used to construct a homophobic Syrian Assyrian Other as a counter-image to homonationalistic Swedishness. Thus the flag is indeed a floating signifier whose meaning is decided by the signifier. The rainbow mural painted on the Apartheid Wall in Palestine contests the separation between issues of LGTBIQ rights and the military occupation of Palestine, which is fundamental to the national project of Israel. In both contexts of the Global South

(Palestine and Buenos Aires), the symbolic meaning of the rainbow flag is expanded beyond the individual/liberal sexual rights and freedoms focused on by Western LGBTIQ communities, encompassing the struggle against racism, class inequalities, military occupation, and for nationhood, indigenous rights, gender rights and trans-rights, while being engaged for and within an overall dedication to the struggle for social justice.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The acronym GLTTTBI refers to gay, lesbian, transvestite, transsexual, transgender, bisexual and intersex people. Mainstream media and public discourses in Argentina use it for the movement for diversity (el movimiento por la diversidad,) Brown 2002 and Berkins 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Gripenstam used the abbreviation HBT, which translates as LGBT in English.

<sup>3</sup> The term Syrian refers here to all people from the nation Syria, but also to persons who belong to the ethnic group defined by speaking Suryoyo, and/or belonging to the Syrian Orthodox Church, or are transnational descendants from, or identify with these groups. The term Assyrians is commonly used to define Neo-Aramaic-speaking Orthodox- and other Christians of different groupings settled in Iraq, Turkey, Iran, and Lebanon (Mack 2014:156) and in Europe and North-America.

<sup>4</sup> On strains and racism in segregated Södertälje, see f.ex. Kakissis (2014); Jakobsson & Lagercrantz (2010); Länstidningen (2011); UR Skola (2009); Aftonbladet (2005).

<sup>5</sup> On the significance and validity of online comments on articles in newspapers, see for example Bergström (2008); Reich (2011); Schultz (2000).

<sup>6</sup> Commentaries on how Syrians in Södertälje are highly visible in the public sphere instead of accepting that they live in Sweden (i.e. assimilate) are in line with comments by interviewees in earlier research on how urban design changes from the bottom up (Mack 2014).

<sup>7</sup> The legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2010 was followed by the gender identity law (2013) and made Argentina the first country in Latin America to legally recognise sexual citizenship rights.

<sup>8</sup> The Argentine Homosexual Community counted 14 hate-crime murders in 2014.

<sup>9</sup> The piquetero movement was organised during the 1990s by unemployed workers that blocked central streets in the city demanding their rights. More than 70 percent of the piqueteros and many of its leaders were women.

<sup>10</sup> The *whipala* with its rainbow form of mosaic has evolved as a symbol of the indigenous and anticolonial struggle for the Aymara people in Bolivia and is today recognised as the country's national symbol by the 2008 Constitution. See Pixten et al (2014); See also the debate on indigenous cultural objects <https://www.varldskulturmuseerna.se/files/varldskultur/vkm-forskningsamlingar/e21bc935b861> (retrieved 15 September 2016).

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.telediaridigital.net/2015/10/adios-a-diana-sacayan-ella-dejo-un-legado-hay-que-continuar-su-lucha/> (retrieved 15 September 2016).

<sup>12</sup> From 1976 to 1983, some 30,000 Argentinians were “disappeared” by the governing junta, many tortured and killed in a network of secret prisons, and untold others thrown out of airplanes during infamous death flights where members of the FHS (Homosexual Front for Socialism) were assassinated (Perlongher 1985).

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# The Rainbow Flag as Friction: Transnational, Imagined Communities of Belonging among Pakistani LGBTQ Activists

By Erika Alm & Lena Martinsson

## Abstract

This article analyzes the frictions the rainbow flag creates between transnational, national and translocal discourses and materialities. It focuses on the ambivalent role that the transnational 'rainbow' space plays for community building for LGBTQ activists in Pakistan. The rainbow flag can function as a way to mobilize an imagined transnational community of belonging, enabling people to politicize their experiences of discrimination as a demand of recognition directed at the state. But it can also enable homonationalism and transnational middle class formations that exclude groups of people, for example illiterates and people perceived of as traditional, such as Khwaja Siras. The article is based on auto-ethnographic reflections on encounters with activists in Pakistan, and critically discusses the problem of feeling 'too comfortable', as white, Western, middle-class researchers, exploring 'imperial narratives' dominating the feminist and LGBTQ activist transnational imagined community of belonging. It argues for the importance of recognizing the transnational space as a space in its own right, with different positions, communities and conflicts stretching around the globe.

**Keywords:** rainbow flag, transnational imagined communities, LGBTQ, decolonial activism, Pakistan

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## Introduction

In the autumn of 2016, during the writing of this article,<sup>1</sup> progressive struggles to challenge and change norms on gender and sexuality were articulated and documented worldwide. Some of these struggles were appropriated by various national agencies, others severely threatened by such agencies. Norms on gender and sexuality are important issues for conservative fundamentalist forces in the North and South, West and East, for right wing fascist parties and movements, and for a multi-layered complex civil society with activists around the globe (Puar 2007, Alston 2012, Mulinari 2016). As researchers interested in the struggles in different parts of the world it has become obvious that the struggle for change is taking place on a transnational as well as on a local level. We wanted to study these multidirectional and unpredictable struggles for change from a transnational perspective in order to learn more about the connections as well as the divides. The question was how to do it?

Exploring and deconstructing the work of NGOs (Non Governmental Organisations) has been a dominant way of studying civil societies for decades (Lilja & Åberg 2012, Bernal & Grewal 2014). Our ambition is to generate knowledge about more dynamic, messy expressions of civil society, paying attention not only to the material conditions for organizing, but to the frictions in the connections and relations between organizations and to alternative communities and struggles going on outside the organizations. Another, even more important ambition is to find approaches and methods that do not reproduce one-directional narratives (Law & Lin 2015). Postcolonial scholars have criticized NGOs and feminist scholars from the North and West for reiterating Western colonial meta-narratives, for example the notion that women's rights, gender equality and sexual rights has its origin in the West and is then diffused out into the world, from the centre to the periphery (cf. Mohanty 2003, Rofel 2007, Spivak 2008).

In an effort to find other approaches to struggles for social change than the ones consolidated in organizations we decided to explore the function of cultural products in emerging transnational communities connected to struggles against normative gender and sexuality norms. This article follows the rainbow flag as a transnationally recognized cultural product, which points to other processes of community building than that of organizing in NGOs. The rainbow flag points to the existence of global discriminatory practices, but it also signals the possibility of a joint struggle with people you might never be able to meet but who have the same problems as you do.

Our interest in transnational struggles for social change has for over a decade brought us to Pakistan, to activists mobilizing for workers' and women's rights among the subaltern and to trans activists fighting for state recognition. Studying the transformation of norms on gender and sexuality from a transnational point

of view, Pakistan is particularly interesting. It is a country marked by a postcolonial situation, where discussions on gender and sexuality are related to transnational biopolitics (Rouse 2006). Pakistani feminist activists challenge narratives that place the origins of feminist struggle in the West and they claim that there is a need to rewrite the history (Shaheed & Shaheed 2004). In the context of this article it is also important to point out that mainstream Pakistani women's rights and feminist organizations are criticized by scholars like Nighat Khan for not being engaged in the struggle for LGBTQ rights.<sup>2</sup> (Khan 2009). Pakistan is a country with a legislation, stemming from the colonial era, which criminalizes sodomy.<sup>3</sup> But it is also one of few countries in the world that provide its trans citizens with the option of having identification cards that state their trans status. In Pakistan, struggles against hegemonic norms on gender and sexuality are transnational and local and this positions us, as academics from Sweden, in a situation that requires us to reflexively analyse our own positions in the encounters with Pakistani activists, analyzes that can generate knowledge about the transnational communities and spaces we study.

Our aim is to study the emergence and possible impact of transnational communities with a starting point in Pakistan and activist struggles to transform norms on gender and sexuality. We ask what the rainbow flag, along with other artefacts and agents, does and what role it plays in these struggles. What can it teach us about different transnational and translocal situations and communities, about the North/South and West/East divide? What can it tell us about transnational positions of researchers? And, finally, what can it teach us about class and political communities, national, translocal or transnational?

## **Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives and Practices**

The overall premise of this article is that cultural products like the rainbow flag do not have stable origins that can be traced once and for all. But we argue that the rainbow flag, as a cultural product, has generated the idea that a substantial amount of people that do not conform to normative ideals about gender and sexuality, around the globe, experience similar exposure to discrimination and violence, and that they can be united, i.e. the idea that a transnational community can emerge. As such the rainbow flag can be said to mobilize social change. In this article we argue that the rainbow flag can be understood as an active part of the creation of a community and not merely as a representation of an already existing one. By following the rainbow flag we can highlight the unpredictable function of cultural products in the on-going emergence of communities, and contribute to an understanding of communities that does not stop at human interaction, but also considers other material and non-material objects and processes. Inspired

by feminist theorists like Karen Barad and Donna Haraway we are interested in what the rainbow flag, but also other materialities such as clothes and books, do, how they function, how they make connections and disconnections possible and how they affect us and make us feel (cf. Haraway 1991, Rouse 2006, Barad 2007). Drawing on Judith Butler's discussion on the right to appear (2015) we want to discuss the possibilities for transnational spaces – i.e. spaces that emerge beyond and between nations, but that are still dependent on nations to be alternative public spaces – to appear and be recognized in the absence of legitimacy from the state or in direct opposition towards it.

As stated, our theoretical starting point is that the rainbow flag can be understood through its performative capacity. While it is often described as a symbol that challenges heteronormative hegemonies and contributes to the possibility for individuals and groups to recognize and identify themselves with a transnational movement, its performative agency is hard to predict. For example, it can contribute to problematic constructions of imagined national communities, i.e. the notion that you have a lot in common with people living in the same nation even if you have never met the majority of them (Anderson 1983). The rainbow flag becomes an important cultural product and symbol when nations like the U.S., Israel and Sweden describe themselves as consisting of modern, liberal and tolerant inhabitants, sympathetic towards LGBTQ groups. For example, the rainbow flag was featured on a Swedish stamp in 2016. This continuously formation of a national imagined community, presumed to be superior in relation to other nations when it comes to being supportive of LGBTQ rights, is what Jasbir Puar (2007) defines as an expression of homonationalism. Scholars like Puar and Sara Ahmed have pointed out how such notions of exceptionality – narratives of excellence where national populations come to believe in their own superiority and singularity – orient us not only on an individual level, in terms of our sense of national belonging, but also on national and transnational levels, affecting for example nations' foreign affairs and immigration politics as well as UN's work on human rights, crisis intervention etc. (Ahmed 2004, Puar 2007). These processes of homonationalism are indicative of the postcolonial situation, in which the North and West portrays itself and acts as the leading region telling others what to do.

Though our focus is on the rainbow flag and its conflictual role in transnational politics we are also interested in formations of class and inequality in the communities we study, and in understanding class as a transnational community. Class is not a more fundamental category than for example gender or nationality (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). However, class formations are intimately entangled with formations of race, genders and sexualities.

Taking our departure in previous theories on imagined communities we want to discuss the idea of transnational, imagined communities in relation to the rain-

bow flag and to class. In line with this we are interested in the emotional and affective aspects of community formation. We turn to Nira Yuval Davies' concept of communities of belonging, arguing that belonging is about emotional attachment, feeling at home, maybe also feeling safe (Yuval Davies 2006). Belonging can also generate feelings of being trapped; such affective connections both sustain and put strain on communities. Another inspiration is Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, who uses the concept *friction* to study global connections not as the unfolding of a universal model of cause and effect but as something that gets charged and enacted in the "sticky materiality of practical encounters" (Tsing 2005: 1). Tsing problematizes notions of globality as something that can be reduced to a matter of the free flow of capital, humans and discourses and emphasizes the productive character of friction, pointing out that "heterogeneous and unequal encounters can lead to new arrangements of culture and power" (Tsing 2005: 5). Our approach is that the rainbow flag can be followed in its rhizomatic emergences, i.e. in how it materializes in decentralized connections and frictional relations with norms and other artefacts, in multi-directional and far from predictable ways (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

### *Following the flag*

Methodologically, what does it mean to follow the rainbow flag? For sake of concretization a couple of clarifications need to be made. First off: our understanding of the rainbow flag is based on dynamic definition of what constitutes a rainbow flag. The rainbow flag is often described as having its origin in the gay community of late 1970s San Francisco, when Gilbert Baker designed what is considered to be the original rainbow flag.<sup>4</sup> This narrative of origin conceals the power of the rainbow symbol, which has broader and deeper genealogies, traceable in both religious and profane textual and visual sources. While these other genealogies might be part of what makes the rainbow flag so easy to recognize and acknowledge, they are often overshadowed by the connotations to sexual rights. In other words, the rainbow flag, as a cultural product, is coloured by a hegemonic, postcolonial narrative of how sexual liberation, as part of liberal and modern values, spreads from the North and West to other parts of the world, a type of narrative that has been problematized by postcolonial scholars (Massad 2007, Shah 2014).

Secondly, and connected to the dynamic definition of the rainbow flag, what is important to our analysis is how the rainbow theme is connected to the struggles of changing norms on gender and sexualities. We follow the rainbow colours regardless of the shape they appear in, whether as a rainbow on a poster, or on a bracelet etc., and treat them as variants of the rainbow flag.

Thirdly, to concretize following as an ethnographic method, we have found inspiration in cultural theorist Inderpal Grewal's iconic study of Barbie as a travel-

ling cultural product. Grewal follows Barbie as the doll, and all that comes with it, is launched in India. Through following Barbie Grewal shows how constructions of communities of belonging, identities and subject formations are entangled in transnational, national and local discourses of gender, class, race, religion and consumerism, often resulting in contradictory subject formations (Grewal 2005).

In line with Grewal and Tsing we are wary of the limitations of the nation as an analytical framework, i.e. methodological nationalism (Winner & Glick Schiller 2002). Following the rainbow flag has given us possibilities to explore the specifics of the transnational sphere, which is imperative for studies on community building. We understand the transnational sphere as a space in its own right. It is full of frictions, a space in which subject positions are formed in relation to one another in normative inclusions and exclusions. This transnational space both conditioned and made the meetings and interviews this article is based on possible. It situated our writing and oriented us in our following of the rainbow flag (Ahmed 2007, Barad 2007). With this said we want to emphasize that local and transnational discourses are conditioned by one another, and both have an impact on the emergences of imagined communities of belonging. The term *translocality* captures both this co-constitutional relationship between the transnational and the local, and the moments when the local and the transnational merge in often unpredictable ways (Brickell & Datta 2011, Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013).

### *Material*

The method of following meant using a variety of different channels to search for potential materials. In addition to using search engines like Google we have scouted Pakistani media (news papers and blogs connected to them, publishing in English) and used our contacts with feminist and trans activists to spread the word, and then followed these leads.

The rainbow flag brought us to loosely organized communities, public meetings, to meetings with individuals, and to international NGOs. For this article we have chosen to focus on three of these encounters. The selection has been made with several aspects in mind, the most important one being that these particular encounters, in an intensified way, sparked rich conversations on community and community building. A second aspect is contrast; we have chosen encounters that are complementary in relation to one another, to show the reader the breadth of the material. The different encounters speak to the variations in how the rainbow flag is part of context specific entanglements. Sometimes the rainbow flag is held back, sometimes it becomes part of a public performance. We also weighed in the fact that we wanted the encounters to express moments where norms on gender and sexuality were either reiterated or challenged. Since we consider our role in these encounters to be part of these entanglements where the rainbow flag plays a

part, auto-ethnographic reflections became part of our material and method. The focus of these reflections is an analysis of our own participation in the creation of communities of belonging. Our point of departure is informed by our previous conversations with Pakistani activists and intellectuals and by postcolonial and decolonial descriptions of the hegemonic frames of transnational conversations, on what counts as legitimate knowledge production and how certain knowledge claims are subjugated. Following Gayatri Spivak, we have asked the question: who does the theorizing and who is the material? (Spivak 2008, cf. Mohanty 2003).

### **The Bookstore: a Transnational Room**

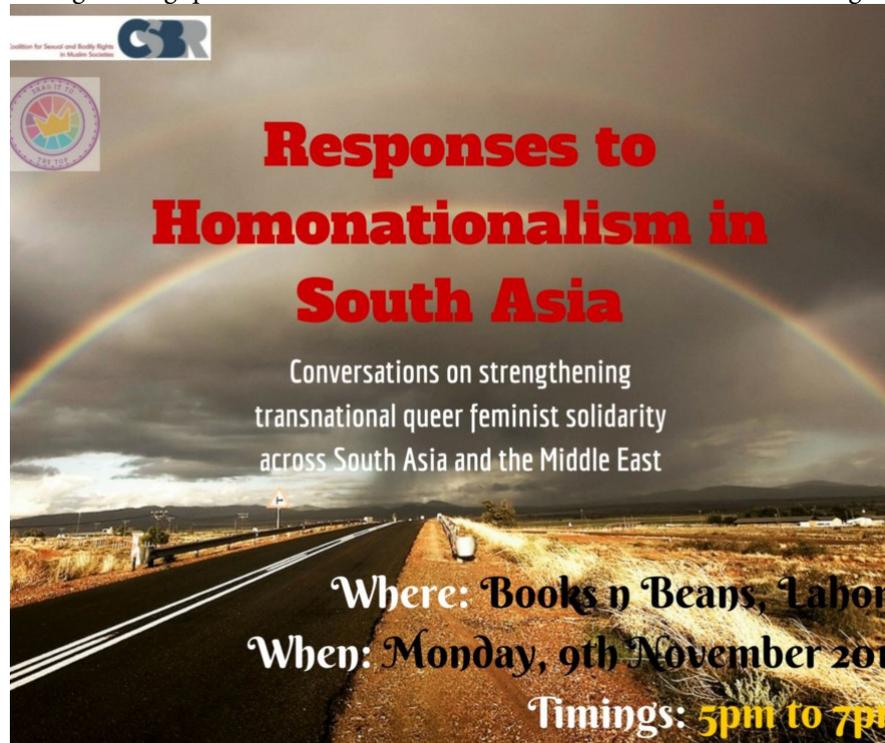
In the autumn of 2015 we attended an event in Lahore arranged by CSBR (Coalition of Sexual and Bodily Rights in Muslim Societies) and *Drag it to the top*.<sup>5</sup> The poster for the event, published online and distributed on paper, featured a large rainbow over a wasteland with an empty road running across it. The *Drag it to the top* logo, located in the top left corner of the poster, featured a rainbow-coloured ornament. The rainbow worked as an affective bounding sign, interpellating us this evening. The poster was published in English and therefore spoke to us in a very literal way. And so did the title of the seminar: “Responses to Homonationalism in South Asia: Conversations on strengthening transnational queer feminist solidarity across South Asia and the Middle East”. The academic terms, familiar to us through the works of Puar and others, simultaneously drew us near, making us interested in the seminar, and made us want to take a step back; they had us questioning if this really was a conversation in which we should participate, despite being invited by the organizers. Puar coined the term homonationalism as a way to conceptualize the fact that some nations in the global North and West construct themselves as modern, tolerant and progressive through a rhetoric of gay rights, thereby framing other nations, often situated in the global South and East, as homophobic, backward and conservative in need to learn from countries in West. Puar points to the imperial effects and colonial roots of these processes, but also to the tension between official celebrations of gay rights and bureaucratic systems that condone and reinstate homophobia and transphobia as material effects of heteronormative and cisnormative discourses (Puar 2007, 2013). Homonationalism shapes national imagined communities and national identities. At the time of writing this article Swedish newspapers ran an advertisement (or infomercial) for the Swedish national defence in the form of a photograph. The photograph depicts a facade of a house with a balcony from which a rainbow flag is hoisted, with a text reading:

Sweden, a country to fall in love with. The freedom to live as one wishes, with whom one wishes, is far from irrefutable in the world. But it is ir-

refutable to us. And it is worth defending. For an overview on how and why we stand up for Sweden, here and now, visit [forsvarsmakten.se](http://forsvarsmakten.se). For you new, you free [a reference to the Swedish national anthem, which begins “Thou ancient, thou free”].<sup>6</sup>

While this ad is a very crude version of how a nation is portrayed as the home of the free through the projection of homophobia, misogyny and so called traditional values onto other nations, it is only a more explicit version of often implicit processes that result in the constructions of national imagined communities, and in this case postulations on how to identify as a Swede (Ahmed 2004, Puar 2007). The poster of the seminar we planned to attend signalled something more than a critique of these processes, processes we were highly entangled in. The subtitle suggested that there are other transnational connections than those that centre on the North and West, stating: “Conversations on strengthening transnational queer feminist solidarity across South Asia and the Middle East”. The centre of the post-colonial narrative, the North and West, is displaced, and potentially provincialized.

The event was held at the bookstore Books n Beans, in many ways a transnational setting sharing qualities with other bookstores around the world. We recogni-



Poster for event “Responses to Homonationalism in South Asia”. November 2015.

zed similarities with bookstores in Stockholm, Berlin, New York and San Francisco; the bookshelves in wood, the literature and the ways to categorize it, the display of pens of all colours and sizes placed at the counter like candy for the eye. The coffee and tea bar with soft armchairs and sofas located in a corner of the store contributed to a familiar and cosy atmosphere. Having a chat or discussing books, or to simply read, over a cup of coffee or tea is a worldwide phenomenon, and as such it is both emerging from but also influencing many different old and local traditions. While waiting for the event to start we walked around among the bookshelves, knowing very well what to look for and how to act in a bookstore like this. The seminar and its poster brought the rainbow flag into the store, and the rainbow flag was hence connected to intellectualism, to reading and reflection; and vice versa, through its connection with the rainbow flag, the bookstore could be identified as a radical space, standing up for tolerance and modernity. This fusion also created a sense of familiarity for us, so despite the hesitations we'd had about our own presence as academics from homonationalistic Sweden, the bookstore put us at ease, and we felt comfortable and well oriented. When people started to arrive to the seminar it became obvious that we were taking part in an on-going formation of an imagined transnational middle class community. The connections between the bookstore, books, literary conversations in English, the academic theme of the evening, and the rainbow flag itself, made up a sphere that differentiated between those that had access through literacy, education and those who did not. Although formal education and literacy are not in themselves necessary in order for someone to be a knowledgeable, reflective subject – in fact, non-formal training is and has been very important for social justice struggles among poor and illiterate people<sup>7</sup> (Martinsson 2016) – the ability to read and take part in governing transnational and national discussions about politics can be pivotal in the formation of critical and political subjectivities and the mobilising of political alternatives (Spivak 2008, Hussein 2012). In a Pakistani context, class-differentiating practices are very efficient in subjecting certain parts of the population to conditions that make literacy a hard won struggle. Pakistan is a country with millions of illiterate children;<sup>8</sup> where government schools are heavily criticized for only providing non-critical teaching with very limited possibilities to imagine other ways of organizing society, of understanding oneself, or of taking part in literary spheres. Access to transnational connections, books, the English language and discussions about the rainbow flag is stratified. The exclusion of the subaltern groups, is, as Gayatri Spivak underlines, a reproduction of class society (Spivak 2008, 2012, Hussain 2012, Siddiqui 2012). The recreation of a classed transnational imagined community of belonging, exemplified here with the evening at the bookstore, is the other side of this process, making the middle class feel comfortable, modern and tolerant and more or less united over the globe

(cf. Ahmed 2004).

It is as important to scrutinize this banal and mundane normalization of an on-going transnational middle class formation, as it is to recognize the bodily different positions connected to homonationalism. The West/East and North/South divide became very visible and unavoidable this night. It was impossible not to recognize the two of us as coming from the North-West. Apart from two men, one dressed in Western clothes and the other in Pakistani, all of us had hybrid styles of dressing, wearing kameez over jeans and dupattas over our shoulders. But we, two Swedish academics, still did not pass as Pakistani women. The colour of our skin, and the fact that people had to address us in English, connected us to the West, to colonial discourses and to the colonizing countries of the past and the present.

*A frictional 'national symbol'*

One of the conversations during the evening revolved around the necessity of using regional identity categories and indigenous vocabulary (Massad 2007, Spivak 2008). Questions were posed on what could be considered indigenous or local categories for non-heteronormative and gender non-conformative identities and expressions in Pakistan, followed by a rather heated discussion on how terminology often becomes heavily conditioned by transnational discourses and about the travelling of terms and concepts in a globalized world. One of the participants resented the notion, expressed by some of the others, that the term gay is imperialistic in itself simply because it stems from an Anglo Saxon linguistic context. He argued that no one has the right to dictate the terminology he chooses for himself. The discussion on terminology also uncovered other frictions within the transnational imagined community of belonging mobilized by the rainbow flag. The term *Khwaja Sira* was identified as an indigenous term used by people who do not conform to a Western binary model of sex and gender (to explain the term *Khwaja Sira* the Anglo Saxon term transgender was used, which indicates not only how conditioned by a Western language the general understanding of *Khwaja Sira* is, but also the complexity of translating terminology in a transnational setting). Some of the participants talked at length about the role of *Khwaja Sira* communities in Pakistani society and we recognized the narrative not only from conversations we had had with informants during previous fieldwork but also from media and official documents (for example in documentation of litigation in court cases and in government policy documents). You could sum it up in the following way: *Khwaja Sira* communities used to be highly respected but now they live their lives at the fringes of society due to the rapid changes of the modern world order (cf. *The Express Tribune* 2010, Human Rights Case NOS.63 of 2009). It is said that the role the *Khwaja Siras* used to have in maintaining the average citizen's good life – blessing new-born sons, cursing those who had faulted in society's eyes, and

performing at weddings and other occasions – has been rationalized to a minimum and that sex work and begging are common strategies for survival in a harsh and stigmatizing cultural climate.<sup>9</sup> In the context of the conversation at Books n Beans the reiteration of this type of narratives about the conditions for Khwaja Siras seemed to function as a way to constitute Khwaja Siras as a “national” symbol, representing a national past of unity that has been compromised (cf. Bacchetta 2002). This figuration generated at least three, partially conflictual projections onto the Khwaja Sira community. On the one hand, Khwaja Siras were described as indigenous to a geographically rooted culture in a way that signalled cultural authenticity in a conversation that revolved around the historical effects of colonialism and the acidic alliance of postcolonialism, capitalism and neoliberalism. That Khwaja Siras were positioned as indigenous seemed to assume that they were untainted by colonial and postcolonial malformations. On the other hand Khwaja Siras were also described as tainted by conservative values in their view on homosexuality. Some described Khwaja Siras as playing into the hands of those Pakistani religious and political leaders that condemn homosexuality. Thirdly, Khwaja Siras are described by others – researchers, journalists, advocacy activists, government officials, and Pakistani intellectuals – as an impoverished and discriminated community, lacking both economical means and education (Chaudhary & Shah 2009, Rehan 2009, Rehan 2011, Redding 2015).

It is worth mentioning that in our interviews with members of Khwaja Sira led organizations (conducted during previous fieldwork) they have described themselves as marginalized from transnational communities by way of language and lack of education. We have heard testimonies of how transnational contacts in general and donors in particular tend to turn to organizations fronted by people who speak fluent English. At the same time Khwaja Sira leaders have, in interviews, refuted claims that they lack international networks and contacts. In the words of an influential community leader in Karachi (as translated to us by our translator) on the subject of transnational contacts: “You can google me, and find me directly, people know me, I am an ambassador; people recognize me and say ‘we have read about you’. The international community knows me”. As she saw it, the problem was not that she and other Khwaja Sira leaders are not visible or approachable, but rather that donors tended to favour people who were fluent in English, and hence the issue of education and experiences of international mobility became pivotal. Despite her extensive experience in community based work and her contacts with local government, the Karachi based leader and her organization were often overlooked, and she was questioning the rationale behind the situation. “If I do not speak English, does this mean that I do not know how to work with projects?”. It seems as if the frictions between transnational and trans-local discourses and practices play out in a particular way in the experiences of

this Khwaja Sira leader, and others with her. They explicitly address transnational imagined communities such as human rights activists, trans rights activists, and donors investing in poverty relief, education and community building, using social media and national and international press. But they also interpellate the Pakistani state as a failing welfare state with an unfulfilled responsibility towards its citizens. They use transnational discourses of human rights to position themselves as recognizable citizens of Pakistan, who have been misrecognized and discriminated against, but they also use translocal discourses on the respectable subject of the state to construct themselves as accountable citizens (Khan 2016). Given the narratives about Khwaja Siras as isolated and not transnationally mobile, conveyed in our encounters with Pakistani cosmopolitical intellectuals mobilized by the rainbow flag, these frictions are important to point out. The fact that the participants at the seminar at Books n Beans reiterated narratives about the Khwaja Sira community, and hence brought us back to our previous encounters with Khwaja Sira leaders, is an example of how following the rainbow flag brought us to people and communities who did not themselves necessarily use the rainbow flag.

### **The Messiness of Community Building**

In the outskirts of one of the larger cities in Pakistan, in an upper class neighbourhood, we were invited into the home of one of the founders of an activist organization dedicated to, as they express it on their web site, “the protection of the rights of sexual minorities, specifically LGBTQI people”.<sup>10</sup> We had noticed how they used the rainbow colors in the logo on their homepage. The two activists, S. and K., were self-identified lesbians, out to friends and family, and Pakistani citizens, now pursuing doctoral degrees in the U.S. The conversation flowed smoothly in English. S., one of the activists, commented on the ease of the dialogue, “It is so easy for us to communicate right now. You know it is because we have attended institutions, we have been trained in that way ...”. The importance of language – in advocacy work, in the constitution of communities of belonging, and of course in academic work – was something that was discussed explicitly, at length. S. reflected upon how she was able to shift between different languages so smoothly, nearly without thinking about it. As a group we reflected on our common intellectual references, the majority of them from U.S. and U.K. scholarships. We were all borrowing concepts and theories from Judith Butler, Audre Lorde, Jasbir Puar and Sara Ahmed. We belong to a transnational imagined community of middle class, Gender Studies scholars, feminist academics, all part of the same, stratified, imagined community of belonging. Our sense of belonging became so strong during that particular meeting that we started to talk about it as a problem. There were differences between the imagined community of belonging that we ended up ar-

ticulating among ourselves at S.'s house, and the one we were called into at Books n Beans. Both were examples of on-going, discursive and material formations of middle and upper class privileged milieus. Both were translocal in the sense that they were formations of transnational discourses on LGBTQ advocacy and critiques of postcoloniality with direct references to how imperial narratives from the global North and West have conditioned local organization and advocacy work. However, while we were called into an imagined community of belonging at the bookstore in our capacity as scholars studying transnational discourses of LGBTQ advocacy we were also identified as other to the community, as scholars from the global North and West. With S. and K. the connections were more persistent than the disconnections, perhaps because we explicitly articulated our different positions, discussed our privileges and connected in our scholarly analysis of heteronormativity, cisnormativity, postcoloniality and neoliberalism. The critique of capitalism, of global neoliberal processes, and their relations to local feudal principles enabling, for example, bonded labour and forced marriage, connected us, perhaps precisely because we were talking about how that very same neoliberal normativity (cf. Brown 2015) enabled us to meet, to travel, to study and to make transnational connections. The transnational space we inhabited was full of frictions, reminding us of our privileges and the need to subvert them. For example, the notion of Sweden as a nation with a tolerant attitude towards gender non-normative expressions and queer sexualities, and a country shaped by state feminism and mainstreamed gender equality, oriented our discussions. S. and K. asked us questions about the state of the nation; we were understood as representatives of a utopian country, despite our efforts to deconstruct this Swedish exceptionalism in our conversation (Habel 2012, Martinsson, Griffin & Giritli Nygren 2016).

The conversation about language also addressed the travelling terminology of LGBTQ advocacy. When K. and S. founded the organization one of the pressing issues was to define terms in the local languages and modify some of the Urdu terminology to rid it of pathologizing connotations. When asked if they had had any hesitations about using Anglo Saxon terminology on the website and in advocacy work they both laughed:

Yes! We had a long conversation about that. Because, I mean, LGBT, at the end of the words there are identities. [...] They have a certain meaning and investment point. Now that same meaning is virtually untranslatable. So when we use LGBT we use it vaguely, loosely.

S. and K. described how the locally used terminology deals with other parameters than the transnationally used terminology. They used the spectrum of trans identities as an example, explaining how terms like Khwaja Sira, zanana and hijra

connote historically forged identities with their own traditions and historically specific identities, and how these terms, and the experiences of marginalization that they connote, are hard to translate into transnationally comprehensive terms. The very situatedness of them gets lost in translation.

### *Staying under the radar*

Our first contact with K. and S. was, as already mentioned, through the website for their organization. The website features texts on the issue of LGBTQ rights and advocacy, in both English and Urdu. The texts are informative, they talk about homosexuality, trans experiences, homophobia and desire in a straightforward way. The organization's logo, placed in the top left corner of the website, is a stylized composition of several filled circles of rainbow colors overlapping each other. We asked about the logo and ended up in a conversation about the art of weighing the desire to use the rainbow flag, as an established symbol for LGBTQ rights, with the risk of being targeted by homophobic and transphobic hate mongers. So while the texts are to the point and contain no meta-phrasing, the logo seeks to remind visitors to the website, metaphorically, of an on-going transnational struggle, but it is also discrete in its connotations to the rainbow flag. *It is held back*. The potential of the flag is not utilized. It is like K. and S. wanted to stay under the radar, something that they also expressed, explicitly. When asked if the average Pakistani citizen would recognize the rainbow flag as connoting LGBTQ rights or queerness, they described how the awareness of these connotations have come fairly recently, and quite suddenly. The Facebook campaign with a rainbow coloured profile filter, celebrating the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overrule state bans on gay marriage, was pivotal, according to K. and S. However, they also said that in Pakistan the rainbow flag is almost exclusively utilized by people that are mobile and have travelled abroad, i.e. people who belong to what they call "the transnational circuit". For K. and S. the rainbow flag seems to be generating friction in itself; it might call people in – functioning as binding an imagined community together – but is also a symbol of how questions of social justice have become commercialized and reduced to liberal rights rhetoric. The fact that it took a Facebook campaign celebrating gay U.S. citizens' right to marry for a larger group of the Pakistani population to acknowledge the rainbow flag as a symbol for LGBTQ rights is, if you ask K. and S., in itself problematic since, once again, it puts the U.S. in the centre and neglects other local struggles.

The discrete use of the rainbow flag was not the only friction discussed during the meeting. When discussing the forms of organizing, a complex picture of the conditions for mobilizing social justice work without falling into the obvious traps of becoming dependent on funding from international donors or having one's work monitored by government intelligence, was painted. K. and S. described how

they have worked out ways to avoid being identified by the government as an advocacy organization, since such a classification severely conditions the possibilities of working with the issues they want to address. S. characterized the Pakistani state as a combination of a failed welfare state, a successful violent state, and a completely negligent state, adding that she and K. try to fit themselves “into the pocket of negligence”, trying to not engage with the state at all, and not expect anything from it. The only reason they registered the organization at all was to be able to receive money from donors, but since all money that comes in is being scrutinized by the state, it has only led to problems. Their experiences with receiving funding for a community based study of violence, through a research project funded by an international donor, have left them with the feeling that money can complicate the delicate processes of community building since it creates bad blood in the community with accusations of who was hired to do the work, and how the money was spent: “Money fucks everything up”.

Throughout the conversation it became clear that S. and K. experienced frictions between LGBT politics, which they described as identity politics, focused on representation and state protection in the form of legislation around for example hate speech but also the right to marriage, and queer politics. They claimed that LGBT politics is what orients the type of advocacy that gets funded in Pakistan; it attracts interest from international donors, follows a transnationally dominated understanding of what is needed and is not guided by local imperatives. HIV/AIDS prevention programs targeting sex workers is high on the agenda, community building and poverty alleviation is not. S. and K. expressed concern over the fact that dependency on international, and national, funding has come to orient activist work in a way that they see as problematic. Their story points towards the friction between state surveillance and state recognition, but also to the friction between being included in a transnational imagined community of LGBTQ advocacy and the potential problems with such an imagined community, in the form of neocolonial effects of having a Western and Northern master narrative of LGBTQ rights being the dominant *modus operandi*. They concluded that perhaps radical social justice work is incompatible with the economic form of organizing that has become so dominant, the NGO. “Movement building can not be funded, movement building has to have activists who are committed to that movement [...] because that is their politics.”

### **The flag, the state and the activist**

The third encounter, led by the rainbow flag, came about through our contact with *NAZ Male Health Alliance*, an organization that describes itself as working for men who have sex with men and for the transgender community.<sup>11</sup> We inter-

viewed one of its coordinators, Kami, who identify as a transgender woman. She is a well-known activist for the LGBTQ community. K. and S. had raised the question of which bodies have the possibility to appear and assemble in public, and which ones do not, that need to stay under the radar (Butler 2015). Kami reminded us of the same thing. She is very aware of the fact that she, as a transgender woman, inhabits an exposed position. Despite this she is highly visible, and together with other activists she appears in transnational as well as translocal public spaces. For example, she has been part of arranging IDAHOT (International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia), an annual event where the role of the rainbow flag is very important as a visible cultural product that connects transnational communities of belonging around the globe. When IDAHOT is celebrated in Pakistan its translocal conditions are articulated in a way that stresses the gravity of the situation:

Despite the threat of violence present in Pakistan's current climate, national campaigners from Naz Pakistan bravely held an event to mark IDAHOT 2016. On May 15 the group hosted a drag show and panel discussion on trans and LGB discrimination in the country, specifically focusing on the psychological impact of homophobia, transphobia and biphobia. The event featured performances from members of the local LGBT community and also saw the crowning of 'Miss Naz Pakistan 2016'<sup>12</sup>

To be visible as an assembly of bodies, exercising one's right to appear, is a performative act, what Butler calls a "bodily demand for a more liveable set of lives" (2015: 25). Kami doesn't hide her name, face or body. She is highly visible. Some years ago, she and her boyfriend were featured in the BBC documentary *How Gay is Pakistan?* as advocates for the gay community.<sup>13</sup> When Kami came to our meeting she wore a bracelet in rainbow colors. We asked her about it:

I wear this, some ask: Why do you wear this bracelet, I say, I love these colour. Maybe I like purple, yellow, red. I feel myself very lucky and I am very proud to be part of this community, even if I am a trans, lesbian whatever. I am very happy, and if you are happy, no one can beat you, no one can fight with you.

Compared to the ambivalent attitudes towards the rainbow flag we encountered in the bookstore and at S and K's place, Kami's relationship with it was more unequivocal. For her, the colours of the rainbow is an expression of her own happiness and the community. It is the bringing together of the two that makes her

strong. The interview ended up focusing on her and her activism rather than the organization she works for. Kami talked about her activism as reaching out to the transgender community, and she underlined that she is a transgender woman, not a Khwaja Sira. She told us that Khwaja Sira is a description of a kinship structure with a long history. Kami neither wants to, nor can, identify exclusively with this “family”. She described herself as an activist who fights together with others for change, rather than as part of a family with a specific culture. In her story the idea of the Khwaja Sira community as a kinship structure stand in sharp contrast to the idea of the individual activist as an agent of change in collaboration with other activists. She came back to the role of the individual on several occasions and criticized the common narrative, often displayed in media, that the nation state is



Kami with Pakistani flag and rainbow flag, Aks film festival event in 2016.  
Kami Sid©

responsible for the problems transgender people have. She argued that it is a personal responsibility to be respectable in order to be respected: “To me it is not fair [...] to blame society every time, because there have been a lot of possibilities for our community, [...] I think so now that it is up to every persons how they look like.”

She told us that there have been no obstacles for her to go to university, no one bothers her as long as she is respectable. “If you will play another positive role in society they will accept you, so it is not fair to blame society”. In this discussion Kami did not interpellate the state to act. She seems to approach the state from a liberal point of view. The state is not the subject for change and responsibility. Instead, at this occasion, she urged transgender people to behave and dress in accordance with what is perceived of as respectable.

Kami did not address the state but, but she challenged the notions of who can be counted as citizens. Some months after the interview, Kami published a photo of herself on Facebook. She holds the Pakistani flag and the rainbow flag close together. They melt into each other and create the illusion that they are part of the same flag. One might think that the Pakistani national flag would be in a very frictional relation with the rainbow flag, given the legislation, which criminalizes sodomy. One of her friends commented that it was a courageous act to publish such a photo. Kami wrote us and explained her thoughts regarding this image:

For me journey of life is full of rainbow colour, without this rainbow flag I believe with Pakistani flag [it] is just a flag for me. Independence means [that] everyone live there lives in their own way whether they are [from] any of the LGBTI spectrum or from heterosexual society. This picture means a lot for me. I carry my country flag with my own community flag...

If we understand Kami correctly, the rainbow flag does something to the Pakistani flag. Without the rainbow flag it is “just a flag”, and here Kami’s dismissal of the Pakistani flag can be understood as a political stance. It is only together with the rainbow flag that the Pakistani flag achieves a meaning she can embrace and thus becomes politically important to her. In Kami’s fusion of the two flags, and her description of what this means to her, something happens with the notion of citizenship as well; it becomes associated with every citizen’s right to live their lives in their own way. Another, but related, way of understanding this photo is to see it as an interpellation to the state; the fusion of the two flags forms a political vision. The fusion between the two pieces of cloth might challenge what is thought of as politically possible to recognize and strive for, and challenge the notions of which bodies count as citizens (cf. Butler 2015). It is a necessary fantasy about the future. To refuse to understand the flags as contradictory, inherently incommensurable, is a performative act (cf. Laclau & Mouffe 1985).

## **The Rainbow Flag as Friction: a Conclusion**

Even if the material in this article primarily comes from Pakistan and from very physical rooms like a bookstore and a house in an upper class area, the focus has been on a transnational space, a space, we argue, in need of being recognized as a space in its own right. This space consists of different communities stretching around the globe, but is also connected to national imagined communities of belonging that emerge in frictional relation to other nations and communities.

Inspired by Anderson (1983), we have discerned not only national but also transnational imagined communities; alternative imagined communities like those connected through the rainbow flag, or that of an educated critical political middle class. We have also given examples of how people, like ourselves, have different positions in this transnational space, and in the many communities that together constitute this space due to formations of national belonging, gender, sexualities and class. In a world shaped by globalization, it is also important to pay attention to the way nations work as entities in the transnational sphere. The rainbow flag is part of the on-going emergence of Sweden as an imagined homonationalistic community worth protection from the military. When Kami fuses the rainbow flag with the Pakistani national flag, she connects a transnational community with a national one. The encounter at the bookstore shows the dynamics of the affective processes of community building; the set up that made us feel at home in the transnational community – the homonationalistic theme – was also a factor generating friction in the community. The examples show that the transnational space is politically important, and that it is a space for struggle as well as a space of resources. It offers possibilities to find alternative communities when the state turns you down. Together these examples show the contradictory roles of the transnational space and of the rainbow flag. We find these contradictions politically important in themselves, because they make it obvious that there are different ways to organize life (Mouffe 2013). However, the access to this transnational political space is stratified and not equal. Our three cases have shown how large groups of people, such as subaltern illiterates, are not invited into these transnational settings, and not given the chance to politically take part in the activities there. Groups with limited knowledge in English, for example, are marginalized as traditional and risk being stopped and more or less excluded from the transnational space.

We have argued for the need to understand the rainbow flag as part of affective entanglements that both conserve and challenge societal norms. The rainbow flag is an example of non-verbal performative enactments that bring about frictions and exclusions, but also generate situations in which it is possible for otherwise non-visible, or at least not representable, bodies to appear in public spaces. The rainbow flag makes transnational communities visible and reachable; it connects

not only people to each other, but also connects people to the ideas and practices of universal rights beyond nations and nation states. It can be understood as a sign of political recognition in itself, but it also generates conversations and practices that bolster the emergence of political subjectivity and make political claims aimed at the state possible. We argue that the frictions generated by the rainbow flag create transnational and translocal positions that make it possible to politicize state misrecognition, but also misrecognition within other imagined communities of belonging, whether these be national, transnational or translocal.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is the result of a truly cooperative working process; the collection of the material, the analyses and the writing have been done together, on equal terms.

<sup>2</sup> We use LGBTQ (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer), as an umbrella term for the transnational movement of activists struggling to change normative notions of gender and sexuality. The reason for this is pragmatic; it is the term most of the activists that we have interviewed use themselves. When the activists use other ways of referring to their struggle, or when they discuss the acronym LGBTQ itself as loaded with postcolonial problems, these discussions become part of our material, and discussed as such.

<sup>3</sup> Pakistan Penal code article 377.

<sup>4</sup> For example: <http://www.sftravel.com/article/brief-history-rainbow-flag>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.csbronline.org/?p=1156>

<sup>6</sup> "Sverige, ett land att förälska sig i. Friheten att få leva som man vill, med vem man vill, är långt ifrån självklar här i världen. Men den är självklar för oss. Och självklart värd att försvara. På forsvarsmakten.se kan du se hur och varför vi står upp för Sverige, här och nu. För du nya, du fria." October 2016.

<sup>7</sup> For example, [www.ektaparishad.com](http://www.ektaparishad.com)

<sup>8</sup> According to Human Rights Commission Pakistan (HRCP 2014), over 5 million children do not go to school. Alif Ailaan's corresponding figures are 25 million children out of school (<http://www.alifailaan.pk/>).

<sup>9</sup> Depending on context and who is telling the story, what gets constructed as "the past" differs. For example, some locate this past in the period before the region was parted from India, others in the period before British imperial rule.

<sup>10</sup> The inclusion of the I (for intersex) in the acronym was something we discussed during the interview, but not at length. The activists argued that intersex issues ought to be part of the mobilizing for equal rights, locally and globally.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.apcom.org/2013/05/13/spotlight-naz-male-health-alliance-pakistan/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://dayagainsthomophobia.org/idahot-report-2016-pakistan/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3ao4g6>

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# Rainbows of Resistance

## LGBTQ Pride Parades Contesting Space in Post-Conflict Belfast

By David Drissel

### Abstract

The article seeks to demonstrate how marchers in the annual LGBTQ Pride Parade strategically contest and reclaim heteronormative public spaces in Belfast, Northern Ireland. There is an exploration of participants adapting transnational symbolic representations and discourses to the distinct national-local cultural milieu in which they are scripted and performed. The discursive frames, symbols, and performances of Belfast Pride are compared to those of sectarian parades in the city. The subaltern spatial performances and symbolic representations of Belfast Pride are depicted as confronting a universalized set of heteronormative discourses involving sexuality and gender identity, while at the same time contesting a particularized set of dominant local-national discourses related to both ethno-national sectarianism and religious fundamentalism in Northern Ireland.

**Keywords:** Belfast, Northern Ireland, LGBTQ Pride Parade, Public Space, Heteronormativity, Sectarianism

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## Introduction

In Belfast, Northern Ireland, and numerous other cities across the world, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) pride parades are held annually during the summer months. Such parades can be described as ritualistic, subcultural processions and socio-spatial performances of nonnormative sexual orientations and gender identities, which are largely orchestrated by grassroots activists in a transnational LGBTQ rights movement. Significantly, LGBTQ pride parades often possess social agency, as participants strategically enact and perform their identities en masse to counteract and overcome various social constraints through the creative utilization of public space.<sup>1</sup> Parade participants collectively march, walk, and ride into the spaces of the dominant culture, while holding provocative banners and placards, chanting defiant slogans, and dancing to thunderous music. In effect, they are mounting both direct and indirect challenges to the hegemony of heteronormative norms, values, and discourses in society.

This article explores the phenomenon of LGBTQ pride parades in Belfast – the fragmented, contested capital of the United Kingdom’s province of Northern Ireland. With a population of around 600,000 people (and well over a million in its metropolitan population), Belfast has been engulfed for decades by internecine violence due to an ideologically driven dispute that has fragmented the city along ethnonational-religious lines. Like the rest of Northern Ireland, Belfast was plagued by a *de facto* civil war known as “the Troubles” from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, which pit Irish nationalists (mainly Roman Catholics of “native” Irish descent) against pro-British unionists (mainly Protestants of English and Scottish descent).<sup>2</sup> During the Troubles, Belfast experienced numerous deadly terrorist attacks targeting civilians, orchestrated mainly by paramilitary organizations; coupled with a prolonged military intervention by armed British troops. The Troubles effectively divided Belfast into two “communities” that included numerous garrison-style neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup>

However, Belfast and the rest of Northern Ireland have undergone a dramatic post-conflict political transformation since the signing of the “Good Friday” peace accords in April 1998. Though Northern Ireland has remained a province of the UK, new power-sharing arrangements between Protestants and Catholics have resulted in a relatively stable political system. There has also been a significant reduction of terrorist attacks and sectarian-related homicides since the agreement was ratified. Even so, most residential neighborhoods, schools, community centers, civic organizations, hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, pubs, recreation centers, leisure services, and sports teams remain heavily segregated between Protestants and Catholics (Shirlow 2008:75). Belfast continues to be the most divided city in Northern Ireland (Mitchell 2008:142), with residential working class districts much more homogenous and segregated by sect today than they were in the early 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

Tellingly, homophobia is often described as an “acceptable prejudice” in Northern Ireland (Dugan 2008:33; Toops 2014:71). Several experts claim that Northern Ireland has the highest levels of homophobia of any western country (O’Leary 2009:124), as evidenced by decades of anti-LGBTQ sentiments being openly expressed by fundamentalist Christians in political discourse.<sup>5</sup> Numerous officials in the post-conflict provincial government (especially members of the Protestant-dominated Democratic Unionist Party), for instance, continue to strongly oppose LGBTQ rights, including same-sex marriage. Belfast, in particular, has been described as a “sexually conservative, heterosexist and homophobic society” (Kitchin and Lysaght 2002:11) and the “hate crime capital of Europe” (Duggan 2008:34), due in part to a significant number of homophobic-motivated crimes reported to police since the late 1990s. Though sectarian violent incidents have decreased since the Good Friday agreement was signed, homophobic violent incidents have continued unabated and even increased in some years recently.<sup>6</sup>

In many respects, Belfast Pride is similar to other LGBTQ pride parades around the world that feature rainbow flags, celebratory floats, elaborate costumes, and banners and placards highlighting calls for LGBTQ equality. Like many such parades, Belfast Pride visibly moves through the mostly heteronormative public spaces of the city center. But in contrast to most other pride parades, Belfast Pride occurs in a city that is filled with numerous protective walls (known as “peacelines”), murals, graffiti, flags, and curbside markings, which sharply delineate the spatial boundaries of sectarian neighborhoods. In addition, Belfast features hundreds of sectarian parades per year, sponsored by either Protestant or Catholic associations, which are held to commemorate various historical, cultural, or religious events. These parades frequently involve marchers entering the residential spaces of the other sect, which often spark violent altercations (McQuad 2015; Mitchell and Kelly 2010).

The main goal of this article is to demonstrate how Belfast Pride participants strategically contest and reclaim heteronormative public spaces. In particular, the article explores how participants adapt transnational symbolic representations and identity-laden political discourses to the distinct national-local cultural milieu in which they are scripted and performed. In discursive terms, this article suggests that Belfast Pride is positioned within and between the intersecting sociocultural realms of the universal and the particular, thereby effectively hybridizing various transnational and national-local discursive spheres of the LGBTQ rights movement. The subaltern spatial performances and symbolic representations of relevant actors in Belfast Pride are depicted as confronting a universalized set of heteronormative discourses involving sexuality and gender, while at the same time contesting a particularized set of dominant local-national discourses related to both ethnonational sectarianism and religious fundamentalism in Northern Ireland.

The strategic role of Belfast Pride in negotiating, contesting, and transcending various sociocultural boundaries in the social spaces of Belfast is explored in this article. Accordingly, the discursive frames, symbols, and performances of Belfast Pride are compared with those of sectarian parades in the city. The ways in which Pride participants seemingly subvert the ethnonational status quo are examined. The existence of hegemonic-sectarian and heteronormative spaces on the one hand, and shared spaces that are constructed in the heart of the city (at least temporarily) by Belfast Pride on the other, are investigated; based on the hypothesis that sustained socio-spatial interaction between LGBTQ people (and their straight allies) of diverse ethno-religious backgrounds effectively blurs sectarian boundaries and diminishes the salience of traditional identification categories; thereby challenging the sectarian status quo and strengthening the potential for peacebuilding throughout the city.

This article begins by exploring both sectarian and nonsectarian parades in Belfast, along with a socio-historical discussion of the ideological linkages between sectarianism and homophobia. Next, the article focuses on the contemporary reality of socio-spatial contestations involving LGBTQ people in Belfast, including the strategic “queering” of heteronormative spaces during Belfast Pride. The article then proceeds to examine the counterhegemonic role of the rainbow flag as a minority-memory symbol of resistance; subsequently focusing on the hybridization of various local and global discourses, counterhegemonic performances, collective identity assertions, and camp-related performative approaches, which have been observed in recent Belfast Pride parades.

## **Research Methods**

This article utilizes a social constructivist approach for examining public space and place in Belfast, thereby seeking to provide subjective insights into the ways that various social actors interact in a highly contested socio-spatial environment. Such an approach emphasizes the diversity of overlapping urban interests and unequal power relations, all of which are linked to various social spaces and collective identities. Rather than depicting spatially marginalized groups as being contained in fixed ghettoized stasis, they are said to possess social agency. Thus, various groups act to ameliorate or even overcome social constraints through the productive use of space (Gotham 2003).

In preparing to write this article, I conducted ethnographic and participant observations, and other forms of qualitative research, within Belfast’s LGBTQ community for two weeks in the summer of 2010. During my time in Belfast, I observed the entirety of the annual Pride Parade that was performed in a processional format on the main thoroughfares of the city center, which began and ended at the same location – Custom House Square. During the majority of the parade,

I watched the procession of floats, automobiles, and marchers from the sidelines, though I also marched in the street as an unofficial parade participant for approximately an hour. In the immediate aftermath of the parade, I attended the official pride festival, held outdoors at Custom House Square, which included several live musical performances and other stage acts.

While attending the festival, I conducted mostly informal, relatively short interviews (five to fifteen minutes per person) with two-dozen parade participants, focusing on their collective identities and personal assessments of the parade. Respondents were asked about their sexual orientation, gender identity, and ethnonational (religious sectarian) background. They were queried about their attitudes and feelings towards the two major ethnonational groups in Northern Ireland (Protestants and Catholics), and how they perceive the role of sectarian identities in the parade. They were also asked about their perceptions of homophobia in Belfast and Northern Ireland, and the potential role of the parade in ameliorating both anti-LGBTQ prejudice and sectarian bigotry.

My research mainly centered on various types of socio-spatial strategies, symbolic representations, discursive scripts, and performances that were observed in the Belfast Pride Parade of July 2010. I also observed two sectarian Protestant-loyalist parades during the same timeframe, which were held in segregated neighborhoods and interface zones of Belfast, for the purpose of comparing such marches with those of Belfast Pride. To supplement my observations, I examined several hours of amateur video footage posted on YouTube of both Belfast Pride and sectarian parades, recorded in 2015 and 2016. Subsequently, a qualitative content analysis was conducted by examining various subcultural artifacts, including flags, banners, placards, costumes, floats, marching bands, and musical selections, observed in such parades. In addition, various promotional flyers, websites, and social media pages, sponsored by Belfast Pride, were examined.

Belfast's hybridized-transnational Pride Parade is compared in style and substance to its sectarian-localized equivalents, as informed by ethnographic observations that were conducted within the contested spatial-habitus of post-conflict Belfast. This article offers an analytical examination of the performative power of Belfast Pride in confronting salient exclusionary boundaries of social space and identity, whilst at the same time investigating the accompanying counterhegemonic discourses of inclusion that address the dilemmas of identity and belonging.

## **Sectarian and Nonsectarian Parades**

Each year, there are over four thousand parades occurring in the cities and towns of Northern Ireland, with Belfast featuring the largest number of parades. The vast majority of parades on the streets of Belfast are sectarian parades, many of which

are highly contested, polarizing events. Such sectarian parades are “expressions of culture, displays of faith and acts of domination; and they are intimately linked to the wider political domain” (Jarman 1997). Northern Ireland has had a long history of sectarian parades, dating back to the 18th century; though the number of such parades has increased dramatically since the late 1990s. In contrast, there are only a small handful of notable nonsectarian parades in the city each year, such as the annual Belfast May Day Parade and the Belfast LGBTQ Pride Parade. Unlike many sectarian parades, the Belfast May Day Parade, for instance, provides a relatively “safe space” for working people of all ethnic-religious backgrounds to come together in the city center.<sup>7</sup>

Various ethnonational-religious associations sponsor sectarian parades, with the majority being held during the annual “marching season” that runs roughly from April to August. In particular, Protestant fraternal organizations sponsor numerous parades during marching season to commemorate various historic events. The vast majority of sectarian parades in Belfast and other cities are organized by “loyalist” (i.e., avid pro-British unionist/Protestant) fraternal organizations, though Irish republican (i.e., avid nationalist/Catholic) parades also occur during marching season.<sup>8</sup> The much larger number of loyalist-unionist parades symbolically reflects the historic dominance of the Protestant majority population of Northern Ireland, which were thereby allowed to become well established decades ago; while minority nationalist-republican events were tightly restricted since they were considered officially to be a threat to public order – especially during the Troubles. Throughout most of the history of Northern Ireland, “the legal regulation of parades in Northern Ireland has generally favored those in power – in other words, unionists” (Bryan 2004:238).

Sectarian parades in Belfast tend to focus on an “inter-communal competition for the domination of urban space” (McQuad 2015); most obviously exemplified by Protestant loyalist parades intruding into many of the predominantly Catholic neighborhoods of Belfast. There are also a much smaller number of parades sponsored by “dissident republicans” (i.e., militant nationalists who refuse to accept the Good Friday Agreement) that sometimes intrude into Protestant-majority areas. Such spatial incursions by sectarian marchers often spark violent counterprotests. In particular, “recreational rioting” has become “the extracurricular activity of choice for youths” (Mitchell and Kelly 2010:16), especially for those living in the relatively impoverished ethnonational enclaves of Belfast. Though alcohol, drugs, and boredom often fuel such riots, the underlying motivation is mainly sectarian. Such riots involve young people gathered in large crowds at neighborhood interfaces throwing rocks, makeshift pipe bombs, and hurling spiteful slurs at one another. Due to such recurring problems, a Parades Commission was established in 1997 to ensure “the adherence to the rules and regulations governing the app-

roval and undertaking of parades” (Duggan 2010:168).

Several researchers have linked such violent sectarianism to the hegemonic prevalence of heteronormativity in Northern Ireland. Walshe (1996), for instance, notes that the British colonizer was traditionally depicted as masculine and dominant, while the colonized Irish were cast as feminine and passive. Irish nationalists have long been aware of the detrimental association between “Irish femininity” and subservience to “British masculinity,” and have responded discursively by endeavoring to accentuate and underscore the reputed masculine aspects of the Irish national character (Cairns and Richards 1988). Consequently, Irish cultural discourse has sought for decades to silence sexual difference from the heteronorm, which “became an imperative for consolidating a postcolonial identity because of a supposed link between homosexuality and enfeebled, ‘feminized’ masculinity” (Walshe 1996:90).

This type of reflexive heteronormativity has reportedly fueled a hypermasculine culture of homophobia, more so in Northern Ireland than the Republic of Ireland. In contrast to the Republic, Northern Ireland’s heterosexism “is supplemented by religious, postcolonial, and political discourses that create particular sexual productions of space, ones that are often crosscut by sectarianism” (Kitchin and Lysaght 2003:493). Religious and political doctrines that have sustained sectarianism in Northern Ireland have also vilified LGBTQ people as having an “objective disorder” (Kitchin 2002:215). In effect, the intersectionality of religion, nationality, and ethnicity has effectively bifurcated the province into two adversarial communities, thus resulting in a highly conformist environment on both “sides” of the divide, which tends to marginalize and demean dissident sexualities. Homophobia in Northern Ireland therefore stems from deep-seated fears of sexual dissidence acting to disrupt entrenched notions of “ethnonational purity” (Nagle 2012:85).

Furthermore, the modern history of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland apparently contributes to the widespread incidence of homophobia. Decades of sectarian violence have apparently engendered a cultural environment that both “celebrates” and “conditions” intolerance in the form of widespread prejudice against LGBTQ people (Toops 2014:38). “Paramilitary organizations on both sides foster what might be termed hyper (hetero) masculinity,” Kitchin and Lysaght (2003) explain. Many paramilitaries even police their own neighborhoods for what they view as “antisocial behavior, which often includes sexual dissidence” (483). This “suspicion of difference,” articulated by paramilitaries and visibly personified by their parades, has led many people in the wider society to tolerate violence and reject LGBTQ persons (O’Leary 2009:127).

In sum, sectarian parades in Northern Ireland not only contest social space, but also perpetuate ethnonational-inspired forms of heteronormativity. However,

there are also nonsectarian social movement mobilizations occurring within public space, including those that articulate oppositional identities and dissident discourses; which are symbolically expressed, for instance, by parade participants in Belfast Pride. In effect, individual bodies in the parade have become the collective carriers of a relatively new movement in Northern Ireland – LGBTQ rights. Parade participants effectively “imprint” their political convictions upon the spatial environment in which they march (Rossol 2010:13). Thus, Belfast Pride provides a more peaceful alternative to the hegemonic culture of sectarian/homophobic violence that has been traditionally dominant in Northern Ireland; though Pride marchers nonetheless engage in spatial practices that are similar in some respects to those found in sectarian parades.

### **Queering Space in Belfast**

Parades paradoxically can be either a symbolic representation of hegemonic (dominant) or counterhegemonic (subordinate) discourses. As a counterhegemonic cultural event, Belfast Pride effectively seeks to subvert power by disputing the heteronormative dominance of public space. This stands in sharp contrast to the way in which public spaces are routinely expected to be “authentically heterosexual” (Bell et al. 1994). Indeed, institutional forms of heterosexism and related social sanctions regulate the sexual behavior of people in most public spaces (Duggan 2016:1), operating through a discursive regime that portrays heterosexuality positively and homosexuality negatively (Kitchin and Lysaght 2003:491). In effect, public spaces in Belfast are sexually marked in a variety of ways, even though such markings are largely invisible to heterosexuals. Same-sex couples do not normally express affection in most public spaces of Belfast, for instance, without expecting hostile or even violent reactions from others.

Over the past several decades, Belfast has exhibited “very little visible gay space” compared to other major cities in the UK (Kitchin and Lysaght 2003:507). Institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism are particularly evident in the modern political-legal realm, as evidenced by the fact that Northern Ireland has considerably lagged behind the rest of the UK in liberalizing laws concerning homosexuality. Consensual homosexual behavior (“sodomy”), for instance, was not legalized in Northern Ireland until 1982; fifteen years after this had been accomplished in the rest of the UK. In fact, legalization did not occur until the European Court of Human Rights intervened, putting pressure on the British government to extend their legal coverage to Northern Ireland. In addition, police surveillance of LGBTQ people and related crackdowns on their pubs were commonplace during the Troubles, much more so than in Britain during the same period (Toops 2014).

More recently, Northern Ireland’s provincial government refused to enact

civil partnerships for same-sex couples, even though the rest of the UK had already done so in 2004. The right to a civil partnership was finally implemented in Northern Ireland only after the British parliament issued a nationwide mandate in 2005. Similarly, the provincial government continues to block the introduction of any legislation that would legalize same-sex marriage, even though England and Wales approved marriage equality in 2013 and Scotland did so in 2014.

It was within this relatively repressive environment that the first annual Belfast Pride Parade was held in June 1991, coinciding with the 22<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising in New York City.<sup>9</sup> This seminal march occurred at the height of the Troubles when sectarian paramilitary groups were actively engaged in guerrilla warfare and terrorism, though it was a relatively low-key event in comparison to more recent pride parades. As Nagle (2012) observes, “Belfast Pride has developed from just over 50 participants singing ‘gay rights anthems’ in 1991 (the first LGBT parade in the province) to over 15,000 participants in 2010” (85). For the first several years of its existence, Belfast Pride was centered in the vicinity of Cathedral Square, located on the fringe of the relatively nonsectarian city center. This district has included a relatively small number of LGBTQ bars and related establishments for decades. It first emerged as a liminal queer space during the 1970s, when the city center was largely abandoned at night, due to fears of sectarian violence. LGBTQ people had effectively “carved out an area of society in which they could be completely themselves” (Toops 2014:52).

In recent years, Custom House Square has become the main focal point for Belfast Pride, which is much closer to the heart of the city center than is Cathedral Quarter. It includes some of Belfast’s oldest landmarks, such as the Albert Clock, the Northern Bank, and Scottish Amicable. This location provides local historical significance, existing within a space that largely transcends ethnonational identities in the contemporary era. Even though the Square is routinely a heteronormative space, it becomes a highly inclusive space for LGBTQ people and their straight allies to congregate during Pride. One factor that likely facilitates this temporary spatial transformation is the fact that the Square has been a popular, unofficial spot for skateboarding for several years, attracting young people from both major ethnonational groups throughout the city.<sup>10</sup> In effect, the Square provides a cosmopolitan space that regularly features peaceful subcultural interactions of Protestant and Catholic youths; thus marking it as a relatively safe spatial terrain for Belfast Pride.

Custom House Square serves as both the starting and ending point of the parade, and also the main venue for the music festival that follows. The parade dramatically enhances the visibility of the local LGBTQ community, due to thousands of participants marching collectively in a circuitous route through various spaces of the city center. The parade reaches a heteronormative spatial-zenith of sorts

when it passes directly in front of Belfast City Hall in Donegall Square. It then proceeds to wind its way through the informal LGBTQ vicinity of the Cathedral Quarter, which contains the largest and best known LGBTQ nightclub, the Kremlin, along with various other LGBTQ-oriented bars, saunas, and organizational offices. At this juncture, symbolic artifacts of a decades-old LGBTQ space evoke the collective memories of parade participants, at least tacitly. But once the parade exits the Cathedral Quarter, it again “leaves the safety of unofficially demarcated ‘gay space’, and proceeds through areas that are primarily, albeit invisibly, ‘heterosexual’” (Duggan 2010:167).

In effect, Belfast Pride disrupts heteronormativity by occupying public spaces in the heart of the city and expressing collective identities in non-traditional ways. Parade participants tacitly produce non-heterosexual spaces, thereby “queering streets” in the process, whether in a more permanent or transitory fashion. As Enguix (2009) explains, “Pride parades do not simply (or uncontestedly) inscribe streets as queer, but they actively produce queer streets” (16). But to “queer” streets does not necessarily mean to dominate streets; such spaces become fluid zones of inclusion rather than rigid spaces of tacit exclusion, which are subject to nonnormative sexualities and gender identities acting upon them. This stands in stark contrast to most sectarian parades, which seek to assert an exclusionary dominance of the streets on which they march, including those located in neighborhoods of the other major sect.

## Rainbow Flags of Resistance

Patriotic symbols have been a common feature of municipal parades for centuries, including the conspicuous display of national flags and related ethnocentric emblems that are evocative of territorial domination by a national hegemon or imperial colonizer. In this respect, parades are “performances of the nation,” (Rossol 2010), providing an opportunity for a regime to monopolize public space. Such parades are utilized to perform a particular propagandistic vision of history, culture, and national belonging. Conversely, nonnormative parades such as Belfast Pride tend to represent subordinated groups, thereby illustrating “minority memory positions” rather than “majority memory traditions” (McQuaid 2015). Such minority parades often articulate dissident discourses that foment socio-spatial strategies of resistance, thereby frequently encroaching into the public spaces of hegemonic social actors.

The most common symbol observed in Belfast Pride is the rainbow flag – which is displayed in various sizes and shapes. This is not surprising, considering that the rainbow flag has become the most important minority-memory symbol of LGBTQ pride in the world, since the renowned gay American artist-activist,

Gilbert Baker, first designed it in 1978. Consequently, the rainbow flag and its colors adorn numerous floats, placards, and banners in Belfast Pride. In addition, numerous parade participants march with rainbow flags draped over their shoulders; whilst others wear rainbow sashes. Paradoxically, the emphasis on the rainbow flag is similar in some respects to the brandishing of national flags commonly found in sectarian marches – whether Protestant-loyalists flying the British Union Jack, or Catholic-republicans displaying the Irish Tricolor. But in contrast to such ethnonational-sectarian imagery, the rainbow flag functions as a transnational, multicultural emblem that normally transcends ethnicity, nationality, and religion.

Nevertheless, there are many hybrid versions of the rainbow flag that were observed at Belfast Pride, including some that were combined with ethnonational imagery. Several marchers affiliated with Irish nationalist-republican party, *Sein Fein*, for instance, were observed carrying a banner adorned with a rainbow-colored map of Ireland, captioned by the phrase, “*Sein Fein Proud to Support Pride.*” A few marchers even carried the flag of the British Union Jack, though displayed in rainbow colors or hues of pink and white, thereby recontextualizing the most important unionist-loyalist majoritarian image for a minority LGBTQ audience. Revealingly, there was a conspicuous absence of the two main sectarian colors, orange (for Protestants) and green (for Catholics), in the parade; thus apparently purposively avoiding the most obvious symbols of sectarianism. Instead, marchers wore various other colors, including purple, pink, lavender, yellow, blue, red, black, and white.

In effect, Belfast Pride participants have strategically sought to recontextualize majority-memory traditions into new minority-memory positions in the contestation of the heteronormative status quo. Akin to national flags displayed in majority parades, rainbow flags flown in Belfast Pride symbolize the political demands of the LGBTQ minority in Northern Ireland. Belfast Pride tacitly promotes the acquisition of “full citizenship” for LGBTQ people, including the right to marry and the freedom to safely express their sexual and gender identities in public spaces.<sup>11</sup> LGBTQ people become visible in the parade “as a community that not only claims citizenship rights, but also claims to leave its own mark on the public space, questioning its self-evident yet often violently enforced heterosexuality” (Igrutinovic et al. 2015:4). Thus, the annual parade promotes the acquisition of full citizenship for LGBTQ people by acting in response to the myriad of limitations that have been placed on the social, cultural, political, and civil rights and activities of dissident sexual/gender identities in the locale of public space.

## **Glocal Discourses and Resistance**

Belfast Pride is currently held annually in July, even though it was originally scheduled in June to coincide with the legendary Stonewall Inn Uprising. Ironically, the month of July is the zenith of the sectarian marching season, which is a likely factor in the scheduling of Belfast Pride. The parade generally attracts an estimated 15,000–40,000 participants per year, vastly outnumbering the participation rates of many sectarian parades in the city. In some respects, Belfast Pride is a tacit nonsectarian entry in a broadly defined marching season. But in contrast to sectarian parades that often prompt extreme socio-spatial discord and rioting, Belfast Pride is enveloped in a mostly peaceful aesthetic. Thus, the timing of the parade seems to be a local-global (or “glocal”) synthesis, combining the North American LGBTQ marching season of Stonewall with the national-sectarian marching season of Northern Ireland.

Rather than being held in the sectarian spaces of segregated neighborhoods and interface zones, Belfast Pride occurs instead in the largely nonsectarian city center; thus, it is spatially disconnected from the main spatial terrain of sectarian parades. However, spatial contestations invariably occur in reaction to Belfast Pride. Most notably, a contingent of conservative Christians that is composed primarily of evangelical Presbyterians shows up annually to protest at Belfast Pride. They have even established an official political coalition that sought unsuccessfully to ban the parade between 2005 and 2008, operating under the banner of “Stop the Parade.” During this period, Northern Ireland faced yet another marching controversy over contested space. But in contrast to previous contestations involving sectarian parades, which had pit Orange (pro-British) marchers against Green (pro-Irish) marchers, the latest controversy centered on Pink (LGBTQ) marchers (O’Leary 2009).

Since 2008, anti-LGBTQ activists have been largely content to protest mostly in silence at the event. During my observations of Belfast Pride in 2010, I witnessed the presence of around 50-60 anti-LGBTQ protestors, who were completely relegated to the sidelines of the parade route in front of City Hall – several blocks away from Custom House Square. Most of the counterdemonstrators were holding placards and banners featuring Bible verses and related anti-LGBTQ political-religious slogans. Such discursive scripts were similar to those of Christian fundamentalist movements around the world, though often including symbolic references to Northern Ireland. There was very little direct interaction between the LGBTQ marchers and counterdemonstrators; given the relatively strong police presence in the immediate vicinity and barricades placed in front of the counterdemonstrators; coupled with new rules restricting interaction between the two groups, issued by the Parade Commission.

In sum, Belfast Pride encapsulates the hybridized convergence of transnation-

al and national discourses of resistance, which occurs within the overwhelmingly heteronormative spaces of the city center. The annual parade is a highly contentious event featuring rainbow flags and other counterhegemonic symbols, which directly challenges the status quo of nationalist-flag waving sectarian events held elsewhere in Belfast during the same marching season. Belfast Pride tends to elicit highly visible (though relatively small) counterdemonstrations in public spaces of the city center, in the form of nonviolent protests orchestrated by a religious movement, rather than the often-riotous behavior that frequently materializes on sectarian parade routes. Ironically, Belfast Pride and the fundamentalist Christian reaction to it are both syncretistic products of globalizing sociopolitical forces, which have become concretized in opposition to one another within the local spaces of central Belfast.

## **Performances in Public Space**

In dramaturgical terms, Belfast Pride participants are analogous to actors performing on a mobile stage that includes various roles, scripts, wardrobes, choreographies, props, and audiences, which are developed by individuals and groups to create particular impressions in the minds of others. Thus, the Pride Parade is a theatrical event that reflects real-life social concerns, positioned on the transitory front-stage of the street. As a socio-spatial performance designed for an audience of onlookers, such a parade provides “visual images, acoustical impressions as well as physical movements through public spaces” (Rossol 2010:13).

One of the most obvious differences between sectarian parades and Belfast Pride is the type of physical performance that occurs on the street. Protestant-loyalist parades, for instance, tend to be based on a highly militaristic, hypermasculine performance, which features mainly or exclusively young men wearing matching military-style uniforms, engaging in regimented marching band performances. They usually play repetitious, instrumental flute and drum songs that have historical significance and evoke collective memories. In such loyalist parades, older men often walk separately in adjacent small groups, usually wearing British insignias on their lapels or orange-colored regalia draped across their shoulders. The staging of such strictly controlled performances epitomizes conformity to dominant norms and values, while emphasizing monocultural fidelity rather than multicultural diversity.

In contrast, Belfast Pride features marchers from a wide array of gender identities, sexual orientations, ethnicities, religious sects, and generations. The parade features an all-female lesbian percussion band wearing rainbow sashes, for instance, and a mostly female LGBTQ roller-derby group (“The Rockets”), skating under the banner, “Rockets Roll with Pride.” The parade also includes a group

procession of muscled, shirtless young men, sponsored by a local nightclub. This particular performance ironically reflects a homoeroticized version of masculinity. Compared to sectarian events, parade participants were dressed in a much wider variety of clothing styles and costumes (including numerous drag queens and kings), while mostly avoiding militaristic marching formations. Thus, there is a great deal of gender fluidity in Belfast Pride, which spans the spectrum from social constructions of femininity to masculinity, along with androgynous displays.

Belfast Pride marchers tend to be less disciplined and more spontaneous in their street performance, compared to their sectarian counterparts. Indeed, the invisible spatial barrier separating marchers on the street from spectators on the sidelines is very fluid and transformational. Many onlookers (including myself) joined the parade spontaneously and sporadically. In place of the regimentation of sectarian parades, there is a substantial amount of nonconformist improvisation on display at Belfast Pride. For instance, one group conducted a call and response routine while marching together. The leader loudly queries, "What do we want?" Other marchers in the group respond with an immediate collective refrain, "Equality!" In addition, a group of college students recontextualizes a children's song, "If You're Happy and You Know It," for an LGBTQ performance. While marching in the parade, they repeatedly sing the modified lyric: "If you want equal marriage, clap your hands!" The participants sing the song enthusiastically with playful, though intense, spiritual fervor, as if they are members of an ecumenical gospel choir responding to their Christian fundamentalist critics.

Many of the political messages observed on placards and banners in Belfast Pride do not refer directly to LGBTQ identities or issues. Parade participants and especially "straight" onlookers could easily interpret some of these scripts as having a broader meaning, thereby acting as a critique not only of homophobia, but also sectarianism. Examples include messages such as, "No Spite, Just Human Rights," "All are Equal under the Law," and "Students Driving Change." Several pro-LGBTQ equality statements in the parade were apparent in meaning to those in subculture, but relatively subtle nonetheless, such as "It's Time," "Changing Attitudes," and "Out in Unison." One banner contained the phrase, "Peace Equals Equality and Diversity," and an accompanying explanation: "If people can get along and respect one another, then we can have peace." There was also a rainbow banner featuring with the word "Peace," which was basically a hybrid amalgamation of the classic rainbow-colored anti-war flag<sup>12</sup> with the contemporary LGBTQ rainbow flag. The implicit message was that peace in Northern Ireland is contingent on ending all forms of prejudice, whether homophobic or sectarian in form.

Thus, Belfast Pride is a collective socio-spatial event aimed at influencing and mobilizing "multiple publics" – not simply the LGBTQ community (Conrad 2006:600). Parade participants effectively constitute a subaltern *counterpublic* – a

parallel discursive arena in which “members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, so as to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1993:14).

### **Collective Identity Assertions**

Generally speaking, parades involve collective identity assertions and related enactments of nationality, ethnicity, religion, social class, gender, sexual orientation, and other identity-laden social categories. Simply put, parades are a highly visible means of “asserting collective identities and claiming political dominance over territory” (Jarman 1997:79). The visible presence of individuals in public space can transform the space itself, through identity-laden contestations or assertions of “previous identity claims to the space” (Hinze 2013:31). But Belfast Pride “purposely crosses and contests the saliency of ethnonational cleavages” (Nagle 2013:85), and is situated in the nonsectarian spaces of the city center that are not currently marked by any conspicuous ethnonational political divisions. Thus, Belfast Pride “is not exclusionary on the basis of identity politics” (Duggan 2010:168).

What distinguishes Belfast Pride from most other parades in the city is that it “draws in both sections of the Catholic/Protestant communal divide” (O’Leary 2009:135). The relative inclusivity of the parade is due to many possible factors, including the strong likelihood that the LGBTQ community in Northern Ireland is “less sectarian than the wider society” (O’Leary 2009:126). Indeed, the LGBTQ community has largely eschewed the labels of “Protestant” and “Catholic” for decades, even prior to the first Pride Parade in 1991. As a 1980 report indicated about the gay social scene of Belfast, “The band of common sexuality is far stronger than adherence to sectarian differences” (Toops 2014:63).

In my interviews of Belfast Pride participants, I found that such inclusive sentiments remain widespread, with an LGBTQ collective identity largely trumping any ethnonational-religious identities. Indeed, all twenty-four of my respondents (ten Protestants and fourteen Catholics) claim that their sectarian backgrounds are largely or mostly irrelevant at Pride. As several respondents noted, the annual parade is open to anyone – no matter their ethnicity or religion. “We don’t really care if a person is Catholic or Protestant or atheist or whatever, as long as they support us,” a 24-year old gay male respondent observes. A 19-year old bisexual woman agrees, noting, “My best friend grew up in a Protestant neighborhood, and we’re both here today. Even though I was raised a Catholic, we have a lot in common.” Similarly, a 30-year old gay man exclaims, “We don’t dwell on what divides us at Pride; instead we think about what unites us.” His 28-year old transgendered friend observes, “Most of us don’t really fit in very well with religious types, you know. Some of those folks couldn’t care less if we live or die.” In addition, an in-

clusive message was evident in the yearly themes of Belfast Pride, such as “We Are One” and “Diverse Equals Proud.”

Four of the respondents claimed to be “fighting” for equal rights for everyone; which is a major factor that brought them out to Belfast Pride. Such sentiments were apparent in several of the banners and placards observed in the parade, featuring such messages as “Out, Proud, and Fighting for Liberation,” “Fighting for Your Rights,” “Fighting for our Future,” and “Fight 4 Unity.” There were also several signs observed in the parade that made more specific assertions, such as “Enough is Enough – Action Against Homophobia,” “Love is a Human Right,” “Marching for Equality Today,” “Homophobia is a Social Disease,” “Transphobia is a Political Disease,” “Christians Enjoying Gay Pride,” “Gay Blood is Good Blood,” and “Help LGBT People Feel Safe at Work.” In addition, a common theme in many of the parade banners and placards was an emotional appeal based on relatively nonpolitical terminology such as unity, community, love, and respect. Examples of such slogans observed include “Show me Love,” “Love isn’t Political,” and “Love is Human Experience, not a Political Statement.”

Along these lines, nine respondents indicated that the primary motivating factor that prompted their participation in the parade was a collective feeling of “family” or “friends.” As a 17-year old lesbian observes, “Lots of us have gay and straight friends who are here at the parade and festival too. We’ve formed our own community, and that’s what really matters.” In addition, at least seventeen respondents indicated that they felt a stronger sense of camaraderie and community with other marchers, as a result of Belfast Pride; thus indicating a greater fortification of associational network ties between participants.

Therefore, Belfast Pride is a ritualized celebration of an LGBTQ collective identity, which largely transcends ethnonational identities and sectarian differences. Rather than simply consisting of an annual processional existing in social stasis, Belfast Pride implicitly endeavors to transform identities from mere thoughts into action by visibly asserting dissident sexualities. The collective identities of parade participants are given meaning and relevancy through the *ecology of encounters* (i.e., multiple interactions with like-minded others), which are experienced in intense, concentrated socio-spatial situations (Heikkila 2001:266). Participation in the parade, often encouraged by friends and acquaintances, stirs up primary emotions and creates an enduring “sense of we-ness,” thereby reminding participants of their individual and collective moral commitments. As Nagle (2013) observes, “Ritualistic activity – even if only performed on a yearly basis – often involves intense emotional moments of solidarity that can help bind participants together” (86).

## Camp Performances

Belfast Pride is not simply an identity-laden sociopolitical event, but also an entertaining spectacle that features a *carnavalesque* atmosphere in public spaces normally reserved for heteronormative commerce and recreation. In sharp contrast to sectarian parades, Belfast Pride effectively combines serious political assertions with melodramatic theatrics, humorous antics, and a cacophony of amplified musical selections emanating from floats and other vehicles. Even the timing of Belfast Pride seems to be a parody of sectarian parades, occurring during the same timeframe as the annual sectarian marching season. Though Pride contains many similar features as sectarian parades – such as drum corps, colorful flags, and marchers performing for crowds, while entering contested social spaces that have historic significance, many of these performances have a comedic flair that is lacking in most sectarian events.

In particular, popular music plays an important role in forging collective identities in Belfast Pride – both among parade participants and onlookers. Brucher et al. (2013) explains that parade music acts as a “primary catalyst in promoting collective sentiment in a processional environment” (19). Though some Belfast Pride entries feature live percussion routines or whistles being blown, the vast majority of musical selections in the parade observed are dubbed “gay anthems.” Such songs tend to be highly popular with LGBTQ audiences around the world, featuring lyrical themes of acceptance, pride, perseverance, inner strength, and unity. Examples of such songs played at Belfast Pride include, “I’m Coming Out” by Diana Ross, “Dancing Queen” by Abba, “I Will Survive” by Gloria Gaynor, “Born This Way” by Lady Gaga, “Show Me Love” by Robin S, “YMCA” by the Village People, “We Are Family” by Sister Sledge, “I Love It” by Icona Pop, and “I’m So Excited” by the Pointer Sisters.

Many of these gay anthems qualify as *camp* – an excessive seriousness that is unconvincing in its delivery, yet nonetheless provides comic relief to a shrewd audience (Sontag 1999:59). Put simply, camp is an over-the-top “performance by a knowing agent” involving melodramatic parody (Conrad 2009:28). For decades, camp has been connected to various forms of LGBTQ entertainment in bars and nightclubs; most obviously, drag performances. Accordingly, drag is described as a subversive type of “gender parody” that deconstructs the ostensible universality of rigid heterosexual gender norms (Butler 1999). Camp is even often labeled a “queer phenomenon,” and has become a major component of pride parades and their cunning discursive critique of heteronormativity in many national-local spaces. As Conrad (2009) observes, “Those who practice camp within the parade are double-voiced, echoing the structures of the majority culture(s), while at the same time providing a comic commentary on them through parody” (26).

The destabilizing discourse of camp is evident in many of the street perfor-

mances of Belfast Pride observed in this project. Numerous drag queens and kings, for instance, were festooned in elaborate gender-bending costumes, while waving to passersby with exaggerated facial expressions. Making a subtle political point with campy zeal, several drag queens were bedecked in white-wedding dresses and veils. One group named “Queer Space” featured drag performers and others in outrageous costumes riding scooters – including a man dressed as a Catholic bishop. Another man nearby was wearing cowboy attire, though farcically carrying a pink-hued Union Jack. The Kremlin float featured the signature red star of communism – a normally serious symbol that is parodied in its camp performance. The same float also features an androgynous man dressed in flowing black robes, similar to a mystical wizard-king, waving to the crowd. Next to him is a drag queen with neon-red hair, dressed in a silver miniskirt, staring at onlookers with an expression of tepid bemusement.

Moreover, several placards and banners observed display messages with camp sensibilities. One large sign sponsored by the group, Historic Royal Palaces, for instance, includes a rainbow-colored castle with an ostensibly serious but amusing caption: “1,000 Years of Kings, Queens, and In-Betweens.” Additionally, a rainbow flag, held aloft by two gay men dressed in astronaut suits, contains the tongue-in-cheek phrase, “One Small Step for Man, One Giant Mence for Mankind.” The word “mence” implies homosexuality in Northern Ireland; thus, the statement is both a sarcastic meme and a serious statement promoting LGBTQ equality.

Belfast Pride participants have endeavored to disrupt heteronormativity in public space by expressing an LGBTQ identity in often provocative, campy ways. In effect, many marchers are utilizing the subversive discourse of camp to both garner attention and facilitate positive social change, thereby mixing the profane and the religious with the political, and combining melodramatic sarcasm with the quest for social justice.

## **Conclusion**

The annual Belfast Pride Parade has grown exponentially since its marchers took their first collective steps in 1991. Over the decades, the parade has become an annual municipal and national event that attracts countless thousands of marchers and onlookers of all ethnicities, religions, ages, sexual orientations, and gender identities. Indeed, Belfast Pride has become the most visible socio-spatial affirmation of LGBTQ rights in all of Northern Ireland. The parade is a compelling series of socio-spatial performances that effectively elicits participation from marchers and onlookers alike, as it moves on the street past City Hall, eventually culminating in a massive throng of thousands of people attending a

music festival at Custom House Square.

By marching beyond the liminal spaces of the traditional LGBTQ ghetto of Cathedral Square, Pride participants are conspicuously entering the central heteronormative-spatial realm of Belfast. In essence, the ritualistic experience of marching in the same parade for a common purpose has facilitated an associational network-based connection between participants, which strengthens assertions of a common collective identity. Belfast Pride marchers are engaging in collective resistance to the heterosexist status quo by dramatically expanding the visible presence of LGBTQ people in both the city and the province. Parade participants are tacitly reclaiming heteronormative spaces by “queering” streets, albeit in a temporary fashion on an annual basis.

In sharp contrast to sectarian parades, Belfast Pride focuses on the relatively nonsectarian spaces of the city center, thereby providing a decidedly less regimented, more inclusive, multicultural street performance. In the case of sectarian parades (especially of the Protestant-loyalist variety), there is a hegemonic, hyper-masculine assertion of ethnonational dominance by marchers. Among sectarian parades, provocative spatial incursions into rival sectarian neighborhoods have often prompted violent riots. But in the case of Belfast Pride, there is a counter-hegemonic gender-diverse performance enacted in opposition to the dominance of heteronormativity, which largely transcends ethnonational identities. Even though the social activism of Belfast Pride has elicited heated rhetoric from counterdemonstrators, there have not been any violent altercations on the parade route.

In many respects, Belfast Pride includes the symbolic representations, minority-memory positions, and related argot of the transnational LGBTQ movement, as reflected in the pageantry of banners, placards, floats, and people adorned with rainbow flags and colors. Many such symbolic representations are drawn from other LGBTQ pride parades around the world. But Belfast Pride is also framed in the symbolic representations of cultural syncretism that effectively hybridizes the global with the local. Rainbow imagery (or pink hues), for instance, are sometimes combined with Irish nationalist or British unionist symbolism, though in reputedly non-sectarian ways. The subversive, often campy combination of such disparate imagery, effectively neutralizes the sectarian militancy that otherwise exists in such symbols. The contours and colours of the rainbow flag recontextualizes such national symbols into emblems of LGBTQ pride, thereby redirecting the particularistic ideologies of Irish nationalism and Protestant unionism implicitly towards the new common goal of human rights and peaceful coexistence.

There is an overwhelming opposition expressed to both homophobia and sectarianism among Belfast Pride participants interviewed for this article. In many respects, respondents have depicted homophobia and sectarianism as two sides of the same prejudicial coin. But respondents generally have claimed that ethno-

national-religious identities are largely rendered irrelevant within the spaces of Belfast Pride. Similarly, discursive scripts displayed on the placards and banners of Belfast Pride are often framed in the language of unity, peace, and equality, which can be interpreted broadly as a critique of all forms of prejudice. Even when “fighting” metaphors are employed, the phraseology tends to be positive rather than negative, thereby focusing on constructive social goals rather than an implicit denigration of other cultures.

In the counterhegemonic-spatial practices of Belfast Pride, irreverent humor, melodramatic camp, and delirious drag have become the new weapons of the weak; thereby successfully empowering the sexually oppressed as they commemorate their collective memories of the past, while promoting their shared hopes for the future. Thus, the streets of central Belfast are queered at least once per year, as the spatial habitus of heteronormativity and the related ethos of sectarianism implicitly yield to the conspicuous presence of a subaltern counterpublic that has gone fully public.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Gotham (2003), for more on the strategic use of space by oppressed groups.

<sup>2</sup> According to recent figures, Protestants account for 48 percent and Roman Catholics comprise 45 percent of the population in Northern Ireland.

<sup>3</sup> Belfast is more evenly divided by sect than the rest of the province, with 48.6 percent identifying as Protestant, 47.2 percent as Catholic, and 4.2 percent indicating that they are either non-religious or affiliated with a non-Christian faith. Significantly, Belfast is a “young city” with 19.5 percent of the population under 16 years of age (Belfast City Council 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Recent studies indicate that around 80 percent of Belfast residents live in neighborhoods that are populated by more than 60 percent of the same religious sect (Shirlow 2006:102). Approximately two-thirds of Catholics (67.3 percent) and almost three-quarters of Protestants (73 percent) live in neighborhoods in which at least 81 percent of the residents are from the same ethno-sectarian background (Shirlow 2008:78).

<sup>5</sup> There appears to have been some improvement in homophobic attitudes in recent years. For instance, a Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (2012) found that a majority of people polled claim that they are not prejudiced against gay men (73 percent) and lesbians (76 percent). The number of respondents who said that same-sex relationships were "always wrong" declined from 76 percent in 1989 to 28 percent in 2012. Even so, the rates were found to differ sharply by age, religion, and gender. Older respondents (especially over 65) were much more likely to express homophobic sentiments than were younger respondents. Also, the study found that Protestants were more likely than Catholics to express homophobic prejudices, as were men and regular churchgoers in both major sects. In turn, nonreligious people were the least likely to hold such sentiments.

<sup>6</sup> A Rainbow Project study in 2009 found that one in five (21 percent) of LGBTQ people in Northern Ireland have been the victims of a homophobic hate crime in the past three years, and one in ten have experienced such an attack in the past year. According to the Police Service for Northern Ireland, there were a higher number of homophobic-motivated crimes reported in 2012-13 than at any time since 2004-05 (Gray et al. 2013). In addition, a Rainbow Project and Age (2011) study revealed that homophobic language and bullying are common in Northern Ireland's schools. 98 percent of LGBT young people have reported hearing such language from other pupils, teachers, and nonteaching staff members in school.

<sup>7</sup> Even during the Troubles, the organizers of the May Day Parade sought to proscribe nationalist or unionist groups from participating; thereby framing the event as emblematic of working class unity. Thus, the May Day Parade involves "a form of mobilization that embraces ethnic diversity within the broad unity of a class-based movement" (Nagle 2013:84).

<sup>8</sup> According to the Northern Ireland Parades Commission (2013), 60 percent of the applications received annually for parades were Protestant (or unionist/loyalist); while most of the remaining 40 percent were Catholic (or nationalists/republican) (8).

<sup>9</sup> The Stonewall Inn riots and demonstrations that occurred in New York City's Greenwich Village in June 1969 are regarded as "the emblematic beginning" of the modern gay rights movement in the U.S." (Enguix 2009:16).

<sup>10</sup> For more on skateboarding and other subcultures of youth in Belfast, see Drissel (2007) and Drissel (2012).

<sup>11</sup> For more on the concept of "full citizenship" for LGBTQ people and other "sexual citizens," see Kitchin and Lysaght (2004).

<sup>12</sup> More commonly known as the "peace flag," it was first used in an Italian anti-war march in 1961.

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# Un/veiling the West Burkini-gate, Princess Hijab and Dressing as Struggle for Postsecular Integration

By Linda Berg & Mikela Lundahl

## Abstract

The ban of the burkini in the summer of 2016 in France is the latest stage in a long political history, where the French depreciation or fear of the veil, and of Islam, has come to play a more significant role since the end of the cold war. Unveiling female bodies at the beach in Nice expose conditioned values of the French republic. In this context, drawing black veils on public advertisements becomes a performative act commenting on consumerism, religion, secularity, and the imagined Muslim woman. In this article we discuss freedom and integration in “third spaces” via an analysis of “hijabisation” in street art and the official reactions against certain types of beachwear. In line with Talal Asad (2006) we want to raise the issue on how the secular state addresses the pain of people who are obliged to give up part of their religious identity to become acceptable. Race-thinking was once an explicit part of celebrated values like modernity, secularity, democracy and human rights. However, the fact that the idea of races has been erased from articulations of Western nations and international bodies does not mean that traces of race-thinking in the heritage from the enlightenment are gone. By following Princess Hijab and the “Burkini-gate” a nationalist fantasy intertwined with the idea of the secular state reveals itself and acts of un/dressing emerge as signs of integration revealing a challenged imperialist paradigm.

**Keywords:** Veils, Un/veiling, France, Secularity, Burkini-gate, Princess Hijab, Integration, Freedom

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## Garment of fear

From 2006 and onwards a graffiti artist called Princess Hijab has been drawing black hijabs and niqabs on advertisements in the Paris Metro. It can be seen as a form of ad busting in which capitalism and white Eurocentric heteronormativity are exposed and commented on through what has been labelled *hijabisation*.<sup>1</sup> By using veiling as a symbol of otherness, as something foreign and threatening, this work highlights the normalised set of commercialised bodies within public advertising. Princess Hijab is a character presented by an anonymous artist through a persona as a veiled young girl.<sup>2</sup> The artwork of Princess Hijab garnered international attention in media outlets such as *The Guardian*, *Al Jazeera* and *The Independent*. After the burqa-ban in France, the work gained new relevance.

When Nice, along with a number of towns along the French coast, banned the use of the burkini as beachwear in the summer of 2016, after the attack in Nice where a truck drove into the public who celebrated the 14th of July and killed 86 people, it was argued that burkinis are upsetting to the public and that the burkini is an expression of extreme terrorism. Much of the argumentation for the bans was in accordance with the discourse on the war on terror, which has been prominent in France since the attacks in Paris during 2015.

Here we aim to take a closer look on in what respect these two hijabising phenomena may effect how Muslim female bodies can inhabit public space in a French context.<sup>3</sup> What reactions does the everyday use of burkini and street art painting on bodies in commercials evoke, relating to the dichotomies religion/secularity, tradition/modernity and oppression/autonomy? Through postcolonial and border thinking, we are deconstructing narratives about the two phenomena, in order to destabilize the order of things they are placed in (Anzaldúa 2012; Mignolo 2011; Bhabha 1994; Foucault 1966). Our primary material is media sources such as news papers, online archives, interviews, digital galleries, social media and blogs about Princess Hijab and what we label as “burkini-gate”, that we analyse as scholars grounded in postcolonial, queer, and gender theory (Spivak 1988; Trinh 1989; Anderson 1991; Butler 2015; Brown 2005), experienced in research on racism, gender politics and culture. These two different, yet connected, examples in a French context, both highlight a challenged secular condition in the post-colonial state. Critique has been directed towards the use of postcolonial theory and left legalism in understanding burqa-bans (Fournier 2013), and hence we see the importance of rethinking issues with a broader postcolonial perspective (Fournier 2013:12). We do not tackle this field of study as scholars on the French Muslim context but rather, as Afsaneh Najmabadi formulates it, acknowledge the need to understand that “the current controversy is in part defined by a historical legacy not of French making alone” (Najmabadi 2006: 240). It therefore needs to be addressed as a translocal issue that cannot be explained only from within, since it

is the “result from a multitude of circulations and transfers” (Greiner & Sakdapolrak 2013: 375). What happens in the French context has its parallels also in other European countries, since they all in different senses are home to a growing Euro Muslim population (Amer 2014: 97).

Our examples unfold in France, where veiling has been highly debated for a long time, and where the most radical measures against it, in the European context, have been taken (Fernando 2014). They are both part of an on-going negotiation between – and on – the Muslim world and “the West”, even if it all unfolds in the actual west, since Muslims are otherized and framed as non-western, and situated in what Homi K. Bhabha has labelled a third space or In-Between (Bhabha 1994, 1996). This in-between can shortly be defined as an ambiguous space where hybridising “identities” can be negotiated and created (Bhabha 1994: 36-39). The examples raise wider issues about the right to appear in and the right to be defined as a legitimate inhabitant of public space (Butler 2015). We saw a connection between the two different practices of hijabisation – in street art and what we call the burkini gate – which both addressed current crucial concepts such as freedom and integration in third spaces. In this article we aim to undertake an analysis of them with analytical support from postcolonial, feminist and postsecular theories (Butler 2015; Spivak 1988; Mahmood 2001, 2005; Asad 2003; West 1989; Latour 1993). More specifically we are interested in what we can learn from interventions – both everyday actions as the use of burkini and the more intentional covering art – that reveal and criticise contemporary secular paradigms, in this case within a French context but relevant to other parts of Europe as well (Cady & Hurd 2010; Berg, Lundahl, & Martinsson 2016).

In the Western orientalisering imagination the veil has remained quite intact and is seen as a never changing garment and a symbol of otherness, oppression, backwardness and in need of development. But veils and their uses are undergoing immense transformations globally. With growing migration veils become present and visible in contexts where they have not been frequent for a long time. For scholars it is not a new thing that veils and veiling practices are in constant flux and have many and changing meanings (Amer 2014). Nevertheless, the common discourse tends to homogenise them again and again. There is a tendency to accept that veiling is changing and has shifting meanings in Western contexts, but not in more “traditional” societies. It reflects a chrono-political thinking (Fabian 2002), where a self-defined “West” imagines itself as contemporary or even as belonging to the future, and cultural expressions of the other is placed in an imaginary, ahistorical past. The homogenising process continues, and heterogenising stories have to be produced over and over to show other stories. In what follows we will contextualise and analyse what veiling do and what reactions it causes and in the end we aim to discuss the effects in terms of integration and seg-

regation that both veiling and counteractions has. Through a short introduction of French state secularism and how the burkini became a loaded symbol, we unfold the material through two central themes safety and freedom, followed by a call for rethinking integration.

### **In the name of neutrality and unity**

In order to understand the layers of France's relation to hijabising one has to put it in the context of secularism and the foundational status it has for the French republic, and for Frenchness. It can be traced back to the late 18th century and the French revolution, as an ideal of a liberation of public institutions, especially primary schools, from the influence of the Catholic Church, in line with ideas from the enlightenment. French state secularism, *laïcité*, is defended by the political leadership as the foundation of freedom of thought as well as freedom of religion. The actual law separating State and Church, however, was not officially adopted until December 9, 1905 and reflects the secularist and republican values of France. The secular laws of France prohibit the wearing of religious symbols of any nature in schools and certain public buildings. The principle of secularity has been a corner stone in the French Constitution, reinforcing state neutrality and guaranteeing national unity. It is argued that *laïcité* is exceptional and foundational for France, but secularity is always localised, and in the case of France it is tightly knit with the republic and the idea of universalism (Amer 2014: 98; Selby 2012: 70ff).

The principle of secular schools was challenged in 1989, when three young Muslim French girls of North African descent, came veiled to their school in Creil, a poor suburb north of Paris, and refused to unveil. After first being expelled by the director, the girls were finally allowed to attend school on the condition that they would not veil inside the classroom (Amer 2014: 97).

While many schools continue to accommodate veiled girls, others protest what they view as a violation of the principle of secularity. France's highest administrative court, the Conseil d'État, rules that veils are compatible with the French separation of church and state. (Rémond 1999)

The debate on the Islamic veil in the French public sphere has been on-going ever since, and on March 15, 2004, a new law meant to reinforce the principle of secularity was adopted, whereby it became forbidden to wear conspicuous religious signs in schools (Amer 2014: 94). It's also been framed in terms of size, where religious signs such as a small catholic cross or the star of David are tolerated. This has strengthen the suspicion that the law is directed against Islam, rather than

being pro-*laïcité* (Casanova 2007).

In a speech on June 20, 2009, the sitting president Nicolas Sarkozy declared that the burqa would not be tolerated in France, not because it's a religious issue, but because it's questioning the freedom and dignity of women. A law forbidding covering of the face in public was passed by the French Senate in September 2010 and came into force in April 2011 (Amer 2014: 102f).

The ban of the burkini in the summer of 2016 can be understood as one part in this long history of *laïcité*, where the French depreciation or fear of the veil, and of Islam, has come to play a more significant role since the end of the cold war. The mayors of a number of cities along the Riviera, and on Corsica, individually decided against the use of burkini; decisions that are in violation of the French law from 2011, since it only bans covering of the face in public. The burkini in its common form covers the body and the hair, but not the face, and the law from 2011 is not – according to France's highest administrative court, the Conseil d'État – applicable on the burkini. The ban has no support in the French constitution or legislation, since the law from 2011 only concerns face covering in public. Hence, there are no legal arguments or support, and it seems quite clear that it's the escalating and manicheistic discourse of islamophobia, neo-orientalism and fear of terror that has instigated the bans.

## From veils to burkinis

A pillar of French colonialism in the 19th and 20th centuries has been assimilation. In the French colonial setting it meant that everyone who mastered the French language and culture – people within France and its colonies, regardless of colour it was argued – were considered French. Nationality could be acquired.<sup>4</sup> In reality it was not that easy and there were numerous ways to install new differences, which created a never ending spiral of a Frenchness just out of reach for the non-white colonised other (Bhabha 1994 (1987): 86ff). What this non-essentialist doctrine did not make explicit, but which has been pointed out by its anticolonial critics, was that privileging Frenchness meant erasing the value of all other languages and cultures within the French empire, since the French colonial ideology equated the universal, e.g. civilisation, with modern, French culture (Senghor 1963; Fanon 1952). Since colonial times this idea of the hierarchy of cultures, or even the obscuring of all others, has been the dominant one, although it has been severely criticised by anticolonial activists from the colonies, like the Negritude thinkers and Algerian freedom fighters (Lundahl 2005; Azar 2001).

Contemporary European debates on veils and veiling, with France as an active part, need to be understood within this context of French colonial history (Scott 2007; Camiscioli 2009; Selby 2012). During French colonial rule, veils served as

symbols of both the conservative nature of Algeria, as well as the frustration and humiliation of France (Scott 2007: 66). The veil was identified as “the bone of contention” within the battle between France and Algeria (Fanon 1967: 36f). Since the principle of secularity was challenged in 1989, when the first efforts to restrict the use of veils began in France, it has stirred conflicts and debates, and evoked different kinds of resistance. But as Gillo Pontecorvo shows already in his film from 1966, *The Battle of Algiers*, about the French-Algerian war, veils became weapons (sometimes they hid messages or guns) used by the FLN (*Front de libération nationale*) and the resistance movement played on how the French framed Algerian women as apolitical – either they wore “traditional”, i.e. veils, or “Western”, i.e. “modern feminine” clothes – and they were in both cases assumed to lack political agency (Moruzzi 1993; Najmabadi 2006: 252). Or, from the other side, when Algerian women in 1958 dropped their veils to proclaim their Frenchness, since “a Muslim woman can claim Frenchness only if she is willing to drop her veil in public.” (Najmabadi 2006: 252) Veils in France have become the carriers of the old colonial relationship to Algeria and the colonial wound opens up again whenever veiling is debated. *L'Algérie*, feminine form in French, unveils itself in order to reveal “truths” taken for granted. In “Western”, orientalist conceptions of the veil, it is assumed that it veils something, the thing itself, or its absence, and sometimes the movement of unveiling is inseparable from an understanding of the veil, in that unveiling constitutes the veil as such (Cixous, Derrida, & Bennington 2001: 34). 1989, when the first controversy unfolded, was also the year of the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, and was a breaking point for the emerging conflict between “east” (even if the scene was in France, and most of those concerned, were descending from Algeria, that is “south”) and the “west”, were connections were made between events in Iran, developments in Algeria, Palestine and the Algerian-descending population in suburbs as Creil (Amer 2014: 99).

Even if clothing often is absent in discourses on power, that changes as soon as dress codes – at least if they relate to the female body and/or her sexuality – are broken, or overstepped. Then they become interesting also for the rest of society.<sup>5</sup> In the summer 2016 many Europeans learned a new word: *burkini*. “If a woman goes swimming in a burkini, that could draw a crowd and disrupt public order,” the mayor of Cannes, Mr. Lisnard, explained and continued: “It is precisely to protect these women that I took this decision. The burkini is the uniform of extremist Islamism, not of the Muslim religion.” (Breedon & Blaise 2016) The reaction was not restricted to local politics. The French Prime Minister Manuel Valls also thought it appropriate to explain that the burkini is “not compatible with the values of France and the Republic.” (Dickey 2016) Mayors from some coastal towns banned the veil with reference both to terrorism and to secularism:

Beach wear that ostentatiously presents a religious affiliation while France and places of worship are now the target of terrorist attacks is likely to create the risk of disturbances to public order (mobs, scuffles) that it's necessary to prevent,' said the bylaw. Therefore, access to beaches is prohibited until after Aug. 31 'to any person not properly dressed, respectful of morality and secularism.' (Dickey 2016)

Even if these ordinances were later identified as not supported by French law, men in power apparently saw this type of clothing as threatening, and some of the mayors declared that they would stand by their decisions in opposition to the Conseil d'État. How they came to the conclusion that "the burkini is the uniform of extremist Islamism" is hard to understand given that it was developed in Australia to enable Muslim girls and women to participate on similar conditions in the beach life. During the decade of its existence, the burkini has been seen at beaches or in sports all over the world, and it comes in many forms, covering the whole body, except face and hands, or significant parts of it.

The term burkini is made up of the two words *burqa* and *bikini*. As women's clothing they could be described as the two most extreme outfits women wear in public. The traditional burqa intends to hide as much of a woman's "attributes" as possible, whereas the bikini is designed to cover as little as possible in order to expose the body/skin to nature, sun, and water, and possibly to the gaze of others. The burkini intends to make it easier for women who want to be comfortable at the beach without exposing their bodies to the sun or gazes.<sup>6</sup> As such, it situates itself in between the bikini, which is assumed to give the wearer the ultimate experience of freedom of the body, and the burqa, which obviously not only hides the wearer's features, but also restricts what one can do while wearing it. The introduction of the burkini facilitates the fulfilment of the desire to move freely both on land and in water, and yet protecting the body from unwanted gazes – or for that matter, ultraviolet rays.

If we recall the formulation from one of the ordinances: "access to beaches is prohibited [...] to any person not properly dressed, respectful of morality and secularism" we see that now, in 2016, proper dressing has become synonymous with (at least at beaches) uncovered bodies.<sup>7</sup> Being uncovered has become normal and to cover up has become suspicious, signalling danger. With Sara Ahmed one could say that the covering up has become a token for being a "stranger" and a stranger for her is not the unknown, but that which is known as unknown:

The stranger here is not somebody we do not recognise, but somebody that we recognise as a stranger, somebody we know as not knowing, rather than somebody we simply do not know. The stranger is produced

as an object of knowledge, rather than coming into being in an absence of knowledge. (S. Ahmed 2000: 49)

Women in burkinis are treated as strangers, in the sense Ahmed evokes. But they are not unknown, they are the strangers that we already know, maybe too well.

### Public and safe space?

Who react to veiling? The resistance against veiling is often formulated with references to an idea of the free liberal subject, in a free and at times more or less nude body, or clad in garments supposedly without religious or political connotations – representing the neutral and safe. There is also the desire to describe the veil as an object of hatred and a sign for victimhood (Berg & Carbin 2013), where veils – in colonial discourses – tend to represent symbols of patriarchal oppression in which these women need to be “saved” by Westerners (Spivak 1988).

The ordinance against burkinis states that religious freedom can be curtailed for security reasons and does not explicitly mention any particular faith. The mayor of Cannes, Mr. Lisnard, however, told the newspaper *Nice Matin* that the ban was directed specifically at Muslim attire, even though Cannes officials acknowledge that the number of women who swim in such clothing is “marginal.” (“Nice Matin” 2016)

The ordinance was the latest step taken in the name of *laïcité* targeting Muslim clothing, a regular point of contention in France (Daley & Rubin 2015). Politicians disagree deeply on how to define *laïcité*; some acknowledge that it is increasingly used to justify measures, which single out Muslims, rather than to keep government out of all religion and vice versa, the principle’s original intent (Breedon & Blaise 2016). The uniqueness of French *laïcité* suggests that it has a fixed meaning, but the way it has been used against veiling since the late 1980s indicates that it’s more contingent than the discourse usually acknowledges (Calhoun, Jurgensmeyer, & VanAntwerpen 2011). It might be argued that what is special is its relation to the French state and even to Frenchness in itself and how the French imagined community is constituted (Anderson 1991; Latour 1993).

As the French state initiated the ban against veils in 2004, a normalisation of non-veiling became institutionalised and the public sphere turned into neutral spaces for some bodies but not for others. In this context the persona Princess Hijab was created by an anonymous street artist in France, a persona who intervened in the crossfire of democracy, religion, secularity and consumer capitalism with the veil as subject. In guerrilla art, artists are often anonymous as the art is often illegal and offers alternative visual narratives outside the commercial sphere. The artist behind the character named Princess Hijab is not known and uses this po-

sition for artistic purposes. Several discussions have focused on whether the artist is a woman and/or a Muslim (Esseghaier 2013). By using veiling as a charged act in a French context, the artistic expressions “un-safe” the imagined neutral space. In an interview by Wooster Collective, Princess Hijab relates the expression to fear and safety: “I chose the veil because it does what art should do. It challenges, it frightens, and it re-imagines” (Wooster Collective 2009).

The underground as a crowded place is supposed to be public and secure; hence with guerrilla art, things taken for granted and perceptions of space are made part of a dialogue. The artist points to what the viewer may not have seen, asking for a response. For example, an open place experienced as neutral and safe for some, are alienating and sometimes frightening for others. To cover oneself can be a way to protect yourself from the eyes of others and hence, in a French context covering rather than uncovering can be viewed as demanding rather than modest. Public transport is one possible place where irregular immigrants can be caught, identified as Other via their clothing.

The artist shows an awareness of the many varied connotations of the veil, and perhaps the multiplicity of identities and opinions related to it, and that is what keeps the artist from aligning with any one group or an explicit political message (see video interview in *Al Jazeera*). Hence by the different expressions and interviews she can be defined as an insider or an outsider, but most of all disturbing the public's urge for a clear line between the speaker and spoken.

The hijabisation of “uncovered” bodies can be interpreted as pointing to the paradox that veiled women are viewed as submissive at the same time as female nudity is normalised in and through everyday advertising. In Princess Hijab's manifesto she unpacks the racist message of modern beauty brands as L'Oréal and Dark & Lovely.<sup>8</sup> The two brands in question have strong symbolic value; the former since it has been sued in France for racial discrimination and the latter for its hair-straightening cream, which is becoming increasingly controversial due to its reinforcing the “white” norm of straight hair, and the protests coming from movements that celebrate “natural hair” (Bird 2009). The artist seems to choose objects carefully and uses consumer imagery to create statements about political exclusion and images of normativity, while mirroring the apolitical nature of the imagery in a refusal of explicit politics (Hirdman 2001).

Street art has often been viewed as a movement with a democratic motif; a claim to space, a reminder to people of the possibility of making it theirs (McAuliffe 2012). The streets and squares do not belong to the leaders of this community, country, the world – it belongs to everyone in these spaces (McAuliffe & Iveson 2011). Although street art sometimes has mainly artistic purposes and the reason behind it varies, the street artist often seeks to give meaning to a space and communicate messages. The communication is directed towards the users of the

place in question, with the possibility of turning hegemonic room-making into an alternative public space, or with Jeffrey Hou, professor in architecture and public art, *insurgent public space*.

Because of the scale and the mode of production, the making of this alternative public space is more participatory and spontaneous, and therefore more open and inclusive. The insurgent public space that they have created is therefore both a smaller and a grander public space. (Hou 2010: 15)

Veiling have been used to discuss the bodily rights and, through art, highlight and denaturalise secular norms, something which is also the case with the art of Princess Hijab (Atluri 2017: 182). With a black marker pen the artist included veils in the artwork, starting in 2006 after the ban of headscarves in 2004 and before the following burqa-ban in 2011. The artworks can be read as resistance, which confronts and displays the specific French fear of veils and Islam. In an interview for *the Guardian* she points to Naomi Klein's No Logo (Klein 2000) as one source of inspiration:

I'd been working on veils, making spandex outfits that enveloped bodies, more classic art than fashion. And I'd been drawing veiled women on skate-boards and other graphic pieces, when I felt I wanted to confront the outside world. I'd read Naomi Klein's No Logo and it inspired me to risk intervening in public places, targeting advertising. (Chrisafis 2010)

Metro systems in general tend to be protective about their advertising space, so the work of Princess Hijab usually only stayed up for about an hour before it was torn down again. As a result, very few people have seen the actual interventions, but they are well documented in photographs, which have been widely spread online. Princess Hijab wrote a manifesto on a webpage for the character in question with an archive of pictures. Together with the artist strategies and the extensive and abundant spread, the artistic interventions have a continuing afterlife online. The images have been discussed and Princess Hijab has been called both a feminist and an anti-feminist, racist as well as pro-multiculturalist. In many ways this reflects how the veil has become a symbol that mobilises as well as divide different ideological positions on feminism and racism. Of course this also relates to the speculations on who is behind the artwork. The question of whether or not Princess Hijab belongs to a certain ideological position, raises questions about who has the right to define problems and solutions as well as the on-going homogeni-

sation on what veils really “are”. In interviews the artist says she is interested in the veil since it

has many hidden meanings, it can be as profane as it is sacred, consumerist and sanctimonious. From Arabic Gothicism to the condition of man. The interpretations are numerous and of course it carries great symbolism on race, sexuality and real and imagined geography. (Chrisafis 2010)

Even though she does not explicitly identify with a specific community, she sometimes labels her work as part of a “graffiti of minorities” that reclaims the street. Whether or not these “hijabisations” are directed toward bans against veils, and raise questions on who is considered to be represented and feel safe in public space, these questions inevitably follow as an effect of the interventions. And, as Princess Hijab puts it, the veil “challenges, it frightens, and it re-imagines”. But who reacts by being scared, provoked and maybe even feeling unsafe by veils or street art in public space of Paris?

This evidently raises issues about safety and unsafety. What can be defined as a safe space, and who are included in such a space? The concept is in itself connected to a feminist, antiracist and queer activist tradition where safe spaces sometimes have been called for (Hanhardt 2013). In the case of the burkini ban – for the safety of sunbathers – and public transport with everyday advertising, safe space becomes something urgent. With the threat of terror growing stronger after the terror attacks in Nice and in Paris, it has of course a very literal and direct meaning. But there is also quite specific violence and threats directed towards queer people, veiled women, and racialised people in Europe, which makes the demands for safe spaces very concrete. Hence those who are voicing the demands for safety are usually not the most vulnerable, and freedom of speech becomes the mantra for a certain kind of (liberal) freedom.

## **Boundaries of liberal freedom**

In Princess Hijab’s ad busting art veils are not used mainly to veil, to hide something from the gaze of the public, even if it does that as well. Rather, they are used to uncover and show the world the white, patriarchal commercial industry (Essegheier 2013). Drawing black niqabs on advertisements becomes a performative act commenting on consumerism, religion, secularity, and the imagined Muslim woman. Hijabisation becomes a challenging and political act in the French cultural context, where the burqa and the niqab are seen as symbols of Otherness from the past to the present.

Princess Hijab's art articulates connections between myths of femininity and citizenship in works that mirror global contestations of consumerism, and by working within this specific context, she targets the similarities between secularism and feminism in consumer culture rather than subverting the hypocrisy of global corporations (Humphrey 2012). The veiled body becomes unseen, unreachable and with its mythic connotations of the Orient, it is reiterated as unknown and potentially dangerous. The almost naked models are turned into normalised representations of people – primarily women – in the city, and, thereby the (painted) veiled model turns into the deviant. Hence, as the white body is hijabised it also becomes flesh, a body seen in its bare apparition.

Drawing black veils on fashion advertisements in the Paris metro is not only telling us something about veils. Veils are transformed into tools against a certain type of industry but they also act as symbols for reclaiming *democracy*, and function as a way to politicise the apolitical. All of the works have a clear distinction between what is the ad and what is the intervention. The black ink often runs, and the pen creates a surface that differs significantly from the exclusive fashion prints. The image is obviously made as a personal unique initiative and not as one copy of thousands of images made by someone anonymous for a famous company. Via the quick artistic expression, the de-personalised communication becomes visible. As a contrast to messages from something unknown, Princess Hijab's drawings become a call for attention. The drawings become individualised and uncomfortable; at the same time they point at collective problems, regarding ownership and agency of the female body, the power over public space and burning questions of conviviality.

As a comparison, veiled women on the streets, at beaches – in burkini or other hijabs – hijab in the meaning modest cover (Amer 2014: 13f) become politicised, often reluctantly, even if their choice to veil is often personal. But their reasons to why they hijab, veil cannot be heard (Spivak 1988) and they are forced into belonging to one-dimensional “Muslim” communities, which are not imagined from inside but from the outside (Anderson 1991) and are attributed certain values and ideas, which are difficult to resist or reject, if one does not reject Islam altogether. However, we are not claiming to let the subaltern speak in this text, but rather, in line with the phenomena we are studying – especially the interventions of Princess Hijab – we see an on going need to comment and challenge hegemonic norms and raise questions concerning who has the right to exist and who has the need to learn to unlearn.

The French law prohibiting hiding of the face, safeguards the right for women to appear unveiled and denies the right for women to appear according to religious norms of their choice. In this sense, the act of forcing women to religious disaffiliation installs the public sphere as negating imagined forms of belonging

(Butler 2015: 81). Communities of belonging (whether they are chosen or forced upon its members) based on certain kinds of religious affiliations are in this sense violently denied. The events of the summer of 2016 at the beaches of France demonstrates how the so-called public sphere, in this French context, is constructed on foundational exclusions in line with ostracism. The message about the “freedom to appear” becomes a brutal act to appear according to dominant norms or simply disappear.

The commercial actors are free to invade our space with selected choices, a freedom they purchase. Princess Hijab grabs this freedom, probably at great risk, to show us something else, but her message remains marginal, a marginal comment; it does not claim to be hegemonic or normative. Naked bodies – especially if they are female – are here portrayed as a token of freedom (but whose freedom?), whereas covered, hijabised bodies are assumed to be unfree. Burkini-gate showed us another story. The four policemen who tried to unveil a peacefully resting woman on the beach of Cannes will stay in our memories as a strong reminder of who is forcing whom to what. It shows us that the freedom to be covered is threatened, and nudity is forced. Freedom is conditioned, and needs to be exercised within specific boundaries. Burkini-gate was a negotiation of these boundaries: “can we agree that on beaches everybody must show skin?” For now the Supreme Court says no, but local politicians claim that they will go on. Princess Hijab is also an engagement in similar conversations; her art questions current boundaries of freedom: whose freedom to appear and how? This challenges what we mean when we talk about freedom, and Aheda Zanetti, the designer of the first burkini, argues that: “The burkini stands for freedom, flexibility and confidence, it does not stand for misery, torture and terror” (Dumas 2016).

### **Whose (failed) integration**

Veiling is often seen as a token of otherness, an otherness that cannot be accommodated within a modern Western state. An alternative view, however, would be to see hijabisation as something in between, as an invention from Muslim communities to be able to – on their own conditions, as Muslims – participate in modern life – as themselves, on their own conditions, which is what the burkini aimed to accomplish. According to Aheda Zanetti, the designer of the first burkini, the Muslims felt integrated when the burkini was accepted in the Western world (Dumas 2016). The burkini has had this integrating effect since a number of non-Muslim women have embraced the burkini as well as their chosen beachwear, both before Burkini-gate, but reportedly also during it (Pearlman 2016), which is reflected in Zanetti’s selling rates: “Every time anyone says something bad about the burkini, I get enquires and sales out of it” (Dumas 2016).

The burkini was developed to answer the need for Muslim women to both cover their bodies and to participate in modern beach life. Beaches have been used by people all over the world for different activities, but swimming as a common activity is quite recent, as is Western swimwear. Western swimwear has followed the development of the 20th century to develop clothes less ruled by decorum, and partly formed by the increased sexualising of especially the female body. Not only the sexualised, also the abled body, the fit body, is celebrated by mainstream beachwear. Aspects that might have grown since the actual need of a strong body has declined in the Western middle class, and therefore – just as cultural phenomena that once were important for daily life tend to become displayed at museums when they are not really needed – has become something to demonstrate and show off rather than to actually use.

Judith Butler (2015) talks about mobilising bodies in space, and the importance of seeing the responsiveness of everyone. So what could this be? We see a parallel to making personal expressions in public space, arguing for bodily assemblages, for uncertain efforts to make alliances between different bodies. In line with Butler we want to emphasise the crucial dimension of people always trying to embody and politicise place. When male, secular, Western bodies use their right to speak and be seen in the public there is almost an invisible link, a direct connection between private and public. If women from minority groups use “freedom of speech” and the right to appear, it becomes an overt political action. To demand the right to speech, and to inhabit a public arena depend to a high degree on access to power and possible subject positions. Already in 2006 Afsaneh Najmabadi stated that there is a gap between the loud protests against veils in public and the care for women’s real inclusion:

Muslim women who stay in their “cloistered homes” hardly pose a visible challenge to French [...] secularism. It is, rather, those Muslim women who insist on making their presence seen in public, in educational and professional sites and public spaces, who present a spectacle of strangeness [...] the French state, in effect, has chosen to insist that a Muslim woman’s veil singularly means an undermining of Frenchness and its secular character, and that it singularly means Muslim woman’s oppression. (Najmabadi 2006: 252f)

When minorized people use the classical tools of freedom they are destabilising the safety of the space – that is, their actions demonstrate how conditioned those tools are, that they require users that conform to norms. Or as Princess Hijab describes it:

My art is rooted in a thinking process and posture which fight society's codes and conventions. It's since touched upon more global issues (anti-advertisement campaigns, state-secularism and religion), but my work will always be a game between myself and my city. Princess Hijab has the clothes and the directness of an Adbuster. She reminds us of the excesses and the failures of our consumer society, but there is no attempt at utopianism ... *I am simply aware that a paradigm shift is needed.* (Payne 2009)<sup>9</sup>

The intervention of drawing black hijabs over white bodies by a character named Princess Hijab, call for the spaces in-between given subject positions, a displacement of the hegemonic colonial narration of structure as well as practice (Bhabha 1994, 1996). By contrasting the glossy commercial imagery and the rough painted black ink, with the metaphorical hijab-dressing on pale naked western ideals – a hybrid strategy opens up a third space for rearticulation of negotiation and meaning (Bhabha 1996).

By following different examples of un/veiling, a nationalist fantasy intertwined with the idea of the secular state demonstrates itself (Fernando 2014). Hijabisation and burkini-use ultimately become decolonial interventions and signs of integration revealing an imperialist paradigm; seemingly marginal actions, which can be viewed as examples of negotiations and struggles about public areas and, in the long run, what is and should be the common.

Both our examples confirm that hijabising – through wearing burkinis or performing street art – represent diversity within the community of Muslim women. They both challenge the current French hegemony, which puts secularity in the center as an important tool to secure the common in a modern democratic society while at the same time differences of class, gender, region and race do not fit well into the idea of what the “community of shared values” in France is assumed to be (Asad 2006: 14).

Given France's long and partly violent colonial history, it is disturbing to hear how the French public is still trapped in what one early critic of French colonial power called “superiority complex” (Senghor 1963). We find it important to further discuss the aftermath and continuing effects of “European culture and knowledge” by identifying resistance and transformation of the injustices to which disempowered peoples and societies remain subjected (Young 2001: 68).

In her introduction to *Is Critique Secular?* Wendy Brown points out that if race had been a part of the Danish Muhammad cartoons, they would likely have been illegal in many European contexts (Asad, Brown, Butler, & Mahmood 2013: 11). Her point is that through a different language, described as tacit, silent or implicit race thinking, it becomes possible within the law and the liberal discourse,

to still talk about the “Muslim”. But not about the Arab, for example, or about the Middle East, or other regions’ cultures or about different races and their assumed internal differences. The content from racism has moved to other categories like ethnicity, culture, tradition, and religion. Within the law and the current French hegemony it’s possible to enforce pork meals in school (Fraser 2015), de-veil women on beaches, publish offensive Mohammad cartoons, etcetera, i.e. continue to harass Muslims in the name of culture, yet avoiding explicit racialising.

Race thinking might be gone from most explicit discourses but was absolutely normal when most of the thinking that we proudly see as defining us – modernity, secularity, democracy, human rights – was articulated. This makes it not only possible but likely that there are implicit traces of race thinking in most of the heritage from the Enlightenment, and we cannot assume that it is enough to erase the explicit references to race (and sex, class, sexuality, religion, etcetera) to free an idea from this heritage (Eze 1997).

The capacity of secularity to function as a prerequisite for modernity, critique and reason, and the fact that it does not see itself (or is seen) as political, ideological or historical is harmful for a reciprocal integration. We need to see secularism as the particular and local position that it is, and as one of many ways of understanding and framing the world. And it is pertinent for the future that we who are disciplined into the secular paradigm become aware of our own framings, and how they shape our worldview (Casanova 1994; Asad 2003; Calhoun et al. 2011).

One of our times’ challenges is to scrutinise given values for Eurocentric, patriarchal heritage, which includes the idea that religion and secularity are entirely separable, and the idea that the secular should be the most rational way to organise society, and instead begin to build societies where secularism is one of many possible positions, that many still see as the best for them, but not necessarily as the best for everyone. There is a need to rethink the idea of secularity as something that everyone eventually needs to embrace, as well as to stop seeing secularism as the only position that can accommodate critique, modernity, and the existence of a public sphere and an engaged civil society.

These questions emphasize an observation that is becoming increasingly commonplace: the rise of religious ‘fundamentalisms’, the spread of nationalist movements, the redefinitions of claims to race and ethnicity, it is claimed, have returned us to an earlier historical movement, a resurgence or restaging of what historians have called the long nineteenth century. Underlying this claim is a deeper unease, a fear that the engine of social transformation is no longer the aspiration to a democratic common culture. We have entered an anxious age of identity, in which the attempt to memorialize lost time, and to reclaim lost territories, cre-

ates a culture of disparate 'interest groups' or social movements. Here affiliation may be antagonistic and ambivalent; solidarity may be *only* situational and strategic: commonality is often negotiated through the 'contingency' of social interests and political claims. (Bhabha 1996: 58)

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> There is a sura in the Quran often referred to as the "the verse of the hijab", Q 33:53, in which men are asked to only interact with the wives of the prophet from behind a curtain or a screen, in order for everyone to keep their hearts clean. From that idea of a physical border between men and women the practice of hijabising has emerged. There is another sura, Q 33: 59, which urges women to draw their veils closer around them. Other than that there are no specific rules about veils or hijabs in the Quran (Amer 2014: 22ff). From these verses one can talk about hijabisation as the act of veiling rather than being about the veil or hijab itself, which is not mentioned or described in the Quran.

<sup>2</sup> The quotation is taken from an email interview by ethnologist Jenny Gunnarsson Payne (2009). We have also been in contact with the artist called Princess Hijab. In all interviews this female character is in focus and in all public information the gender of this persona is labelled she, therefore we have chosen to use female singular when discussing the artwork by Princess Hijab.

<sup>3</sup> There is a growing body of scholarly work on Muslims, and especially female Muslims, and their place in public France. For example: L. Ahmed 1992; Fernando 2010; Bowen 2007; Deltombe 2005; Silverstein 2004; Keaton 2006.

<sup>4</sup> For a long time the practice of *jus soli*, birth right citizenship, was practiced in France, but it has been restricted since the 1990s (Brubaker 1992: 150f).

<sup>5</sup> Uniforms and suits are although standard requisites in the corridors of power and an important part of constructions of heteronormative (not to say hegemonic) masculinity (Connell 1987: 79ff).

<sup>6</sup> The burkini has been branded as “Muslim”, even though the designer Aheda Zanetti claims that she did not only think of Muslim women when she designed it (Zanetti 2016). The British food celebrity Nigella Lawson made headlines when she wore one in 2011 (Bunting 2011). Apparently many non-Muslim women have bought one after it became a legal issue in France as an act of solidarity (Khan 2016).

<sup>7</sup> Swimming and sunbathing became a part of Western upper classes’ recreational and leisure life during the late 19th and early 20th century, and it was not until the late 1920s that it become fashionable with tanned skin, and the now normative bikini was introduced as late as 1946 (Martin et al. 2009).

<sup>8</sup> In a now erased “manifesto” from her blog she wrote that “Princess Hijab knows that L’Oréal and Dark & Lovely have been killing her little by little,” (Gordon 2009; Cabein 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Italics by authors.

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# The Performative Force of Cultural Products

## Subject Positions and Desires Emerging From Engagement with the Manga *Boys' Love* and *Yaoi*

By Mona Lilja & Cathrin Wasshede

### Abstract

This article deals with questions about the performative power of cultural products that travel the world. The Japanese manga genre Boys' Love and Yaoi has gained a broad readership outside of Japan during recent decades. This has cultivated an image of Japan as sexually radical and 'as more than Japan', something which has produced alternative subject positions and practises regarding gender and sexuality among Swedish Boys' Love/Yaoi followers. With the help of the concept hyperreality and elaborations on materiality within feminist theories, this article discusses: Which images of Japan and Sweden are produced as manga Boys' Love/Yaoi – as cultural products – travel from Japan to Sweden? Which subject positions and forms of desires emerge?

In order to understand how cultural products create new subjectivities, images and desires, we also ask: What can a sharper focus on materiality and the agency of matter add to the understanding of the concept of hyperreality and the construction of new realities? We argue that embodied experiences of certain subject positions and desires challenge the idea of the hyperreal as a surface phenomenon. Further, the article shows how the image of "Japan" is often coloured by the desires that West cultivates about the 'other'.

**Keywords:** Cultural products, Manga/Boys' Love/Yaoi, Subject positions, Desires, Hyperreality, Materiality

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## Introduction

The Japanese manga genres Boys' Love (to be known from now on in this article as BL) and Yaoi are visual or text-based fiction where the storylines revolve around love relationships between beautiful boys. BL and Yaoi are umbrella terms that are often used interchangeably and are referred to as the couplet BL/Yaoi in this article. During recent decades the BL/Yaoi has gained a broad and enthusiastic readership outside of Japan, something which seems to cultivate an image of Japan 'as more than Japan'. BL/Yaoi's connection to homosexuality, gender bending and sexual desires (e.g. Kinsella 1998; Levi et al. 2010; McLelland et al. 2015) has produced images of Japan as ultra-modern, exotic and sexually free (cf. Morley & Robins 1995; Tsai 2016), as well as resulted in performances of alternative queer subject positions and sexual practices. All together, this made us interested in questions about representations of reality and the performative power of cultural products. The texts and pictures about young men in love and having sex with each other in the manga BL/Yaoi are cultural products with performative power, i.e. they do things. Cultural products are material and symbolic products encountered in all strata and sections of society; for example in the form of art, clothing, music, dance, symbols and rituals (e.g. Hall 1980, 1996; Edgar & Sedgwick 2008; Craig 2013). With the help of the concept of hyperreality and elaborations on materiality within feminist theories, as well as interviews with eight Swedish, female manga followers, this article discusses: Which images of Japan and Sweden are produced as manga Boys' Love/Yaoi – as cultural products – travel from Japan to Sweden? Which subject positions and forms of desires emerge?

Departing from theorisations of the material within feminism (e.g. Haraway 1991; Franklin 2003; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Ahmed 2008) we also aim to elaborate on the concept of hyperreality. Jean Baudrillard's theories about hyperreality are interesting, relevant and applicable when studying cultural products, in our case the manga BL/Yaoi which mediate different notions on homosexuality, gender bending and sexual desires. Baudrillard (1981, 1983, 1988) proposes that mass culture and consumer society have contributed to replacing the real with models that are more real than the real and addresses this process in terms of hyperreality. We argue that the hyperreal worlds produced in the manga BL/Yaoi become real when manga followers interact with and relate to them and contextualise them, for example in Swedish manga fandoms and everyday life. In this article, we will explore what a sharper focus on materiality and the agency of matter can add to the understanding of the concept hyperreality and the construction of new realities.

The article is structured as follows: In the next section, we contextualise our study by describing the manga genre BL/Yaoi, the phenomenon 'cool Japan' and the Swedish manga fandom. In section three we elaborate on the theoretical concepts hyperreality, materiality and cultural products. In section four we discuss

our methods and materials. Section five consists of our analysis, focusing on a) the interviewees' imaginations of BL/Yaoi's different meanings in Japan and Sweden (Japaneseness and Swedishness) and how 'Japan' is to be seen as something more than Japan and could be understood in terms of a hyperreal; and b) BL/Yaoi as producing political and sexual desires. In the last section we summarise our conclusions and propose some areas for further research as well as some preliminary elaborations of the concept hyperreality.

### **Manga and the 'Cool Japan'**

Japanese manga – illustrated serial novels combining artwork and text – have moved through cartoon strips, books, films and the internet to various localities internationally. They are part of what has been called 'the cool Japan', which embraces the explosive global export of 'Japan' and Japanese products, such as manga, computer games, technique, cars, food and music, from the 1980s and 1990s, onward (Morley & Robins 1995; Iwabuchi 2002; Allison 2006; Toyoshima 2011). In 1990, the Japanese Ministry of Education officially recognised manga as a Japanese artistic and cultural resource (Sasaki 2013). In an interview, a Japanese Director of a non-governmental organisation pinpointed how powerful manga is as a cultural and political tool: "I think the government tries to export, not only the manga culture, but also the Japanese culture to other countries. Manga is a part of the current Japanese culture. (---) It is a main industry that is promoted by the government." (interview carried out by Mona Lilja in Tokyo 2013)

The global export of 'Japan' and Japanese products is an example of how cultural products are exported and travel from a non-Western context to Western contexts – from the East to the West. These reverse cultural flows can and have been interpreted as a form of resistance to the domination of Western cultural power (Morley & Robins 1995; Berry et al. 2003; Dasgupta 2006). Japan has been characterised by ambiguity, positioned in between 'the West' and 'the Rest', as both a powerful and exploited nation, but as David Morley and Kevin Robins claim, it has become the leading nation of technologies. The futurism of modernity, in which technology has a central position, has positioned Japan as *the* future (Morley & Robins 1995: 149-160). What is significant about this is that Japan has inserted itself into modernity "on its own terms" (Morley & Robins 1995: 171), or as Joseph S. Nye puts it: "It is the first non-Western country that was able to fully modernise to the point of equality with the West in income and technology while showing that it is possible to maintain a unique culture." (Nye 2004: 85) The Japanese massive export of culture has been described in terms of soft power, i.e. the cultural power to influence other countries (Nye 2004; Toyoshima 2011; Tsai 2016), which in turn can – or already has – positioned Japan as a "superpower"

nation (McGray 2002: 49; cf. Morley & Robins 1995).

When discussing manga, there are several sub-genres. As mentioned above, BL and Yaoi are umbrella terms often used interchangeably to refer to homoerotic male romantic genres of manga, animation and text-based fiction (McLelland 2015). Although there is still much debate within the fan community about how to define the terms, BL and Yaoi mainly revolve around love relationships between beautiful boys, also called bishōnen. Yaoi is sometimes described as fan-produced adaptations of commercial visual or text-based fiction, in which fan writers use the strong bond between two male characters – who are pictured as friends or rivals – to reinterpret them as being involved in a homoerotic relationship (cf. Kosofsky Sedgwick 1986). Most studies on fan fiction are interested in how the original texts are reinterpreted and how they deal with traditional gender roles and identities (e.g. Gibbs 2012). BL, on the other hand, often refers to commercially produced original stories that are either visual, e.g. anime, live action drama series and movies, or produced as text, e.g. manga, novels (Santos Fermin 2013; McLelland et al. 2015).

Manga fandoms have, with the help of technology, especially the internet, emerged all over the world (e.g. Ito 2012; Levi et al. 2015; Tsai 2016). Manga fandom is a community that is based on the fans' passion for manga, leading to investments in reading, writing, drawing and interpreting manga, sewing costumes, visiting conventions, collecting commodities related to manga, gaining specialised knowledge and participating in other ways in the community of belonging that the fandom constitutes (Tsai 2016). Due to Sweden's high connectivity, i.e. the citizens' high access to internet, and young people's high English-language proficiency (manga is often translated from Japanese to English), Swedish manga fans are able to engage in a variety of fan activities (Olin-Scheller & Sundqvist 2015). *NärCon*, a convent for cosplay<sup>1</sup>, gaming and East Asian Culture and *ConFusion*, an association/convent for East Asian Culture, are among the biggest fandoms in Sweden, gathering manga followers, gamers, cosplayers and people interested in East Asian popular culture.

## Theoretical Concepts

### *Hyperreality*

Morley and Robins warn about a new form of racism related to “high-tech Orientalism”, in which Japan is portrayed as technological, cold, impersonal and machine-like: “lacking emotional connection to the rest of the world” (Morley & Robins 1995: 169). They also discuss Japan's creation of a new domain of virtual reality in which the line between the real and the electronic becomes blurred, so that the real in the end will be confined to simulation (Morley & Robins 1995: 168–

169). This resembles Baudrillard's (1981, 1983, 1988) discussion of hyperreality in which he suggests that an object, phenomenon, experience or the like, reproduced in mass culture, replaces or is preferred to its original. Signs no longer represent reality but implode in their meaning and simulate their own hyperreality (Baudrillard 1983: 3).

According to Baudrillard, hyperreality could be seen as a copy with no original. A notion fundamental to hyperreality is the concept of representation. Representation, Baudrillard writes, starts from the principle that the sign and the real are correspondent (Baudrillard 1988: 169). However, the relationship between sign and reality is wrenched out of order and the image comes to bear no relation to reality whatsoever:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. (---) It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real. (Baudrillard 1981: 1–2)

According to Baudrillard representation starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent. Even though he thinks that this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom. Simulation, however, starts from the *utopia* of this principle of equivalence. Baudrillard (1983) maps the transformation from representation to simulacrum in four “successive phases of the image”: 1) it is the reflection of a basic reality; 2) it masks and perverts a basic reality; 3) it masks the absence of a basic reality; and 4) it bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard 1983: 5). Baudrillard argues that today's common life is hyperrealist, and that we live in an “aesthetic hallucination” of reality. Or in other words, the hyperreal is “the real retouched in a ‘hallucinatory resemblance’ with itself whereby the real implodes on itself” (Baker 2004: 91). With implosion, Baudrillard describes the process leading to that the boundaries between the real and the simulation collapse. For example, television comes to simulate real-life situations, executing worlds of its own, rather than representing the world (Baker 2004: 91).

Umberto Eco, just like Baudrillard goes “in search of instances where the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake” (Eco 1986: 8). However, Eco distances himself from Baudrillard. Rather than claiming that the real is supplanted or erased, he argues that the imitations – because they are newer and more complete – are preferred to their ancient or unavailable originals (Eco 1986: 30–31). As we will show in this article, many BL/Yaoi followers, at least at first, see the manga images, i.e. the texts and

pictures in the manga, as more real and preferable than the 'real' Japan.

With the help of feminist theories about materiality we will now try to elaborate further on the concept of hyperreal worlds. Thus, focusing on materiality, and granting agency to non-human entities, we want to show how the creations of a hyperreal 'Japan,' become new realities in other contexts – which are no longer to be seen as hyperreal. Here, what we propose differs from Baudrillard, who concludes that reality is nothing more than a fairy tale (Oberly 2003).

### *New Material Feminisms*

Without falling into narratives about feminism as being trapped within the 'linguistic turn'<sup>2</sup>, we embrace the so-called material feminism or new materialism and its focus on the agency of matter and the complex interactions through which the social and the biological emerge, persist, and transform in close juxtaposition (e.g. Haraway 1991; Franklin 2003; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Lilja 2013). The material is embraced as more than a passive social construction, and instead stands out as an agentic force that interacts with, develops and changes discourse (Alaimo & Hekman 2008: 4–7). Not only humans, but also non-human elements – like neurons, animals, artefacts, objects, buildings, technologies, machines and nature – are entangled and involved in the becoming of the world and the construction of a phenomenon (Barad 2008; Åsberg et al. 2012). In the case of BL/Yaoi, non-human actors like the internet, data computers, manga texts, clothes and pictures – as carriers of meaning around gender and sexuality – can change how people live their lives, their bodily practices and how they feel; the cultural, material products have agency (Black 2014) and create realities. As we will see below, manga is a cultural product that informs the processes of becoming. Embodied experiences of performances related to BL/Yaoi produce certain subjectivities, practices and materialities (for example, gay identifications, manga nerds, gender bending, etc.) These embodied experiences challenge the idea of hyperreality as a surface phenomenon (Baudrillard 1983). Instead, cultural products prevail as important artefacts with performative power that construct other realities (cf. Haraway 1991; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Barad 2008; Åsberg et al. 2012; Black 2014).

### *Cultural Products*

Cultural products often manifest values and beliefs of the hegemonic society, but are also important tools in political struggle and resistance in different forms of communities of belonging. When writing about cultural products, such as BL/Yaoi, as tools for resistance, there is a risk of embracing capitalism since cultural products create desires and thrills, and are instrumental in constructing consumers and sustaining the market. However, the capitalist market, like everything else, is not a static or predictable entity, but in the process of becoming. In spite

of its own logic, on an everyday level capitalism can thus enable resistance. This resistance, though, takes place within the idea of free circulation of individuals and goods in the advanced liberal democracy, which aims at sustaining capitalism and hindering unwanted acts of resistance (Osborne & Rose 1999; Lemke 2011). Further, it is important to situate the cultural products studied in relation to other social practices, relationships, political discourses and social hierarchies such as race, class and gender.

Cultural products like BL/Yaoi ought to be discussed in relation to transnational currents and the shrinking world. Inderpal Grewal (1999, 2005), for instance, discusses transnationalism, connectivities, travelling material and/or discursive goods and the formation of new consumer subjects. Inspired by Stuart Hall, she highlights how goods, media and information get transcoded, i.e. are involved in processes of interpretation and localisation, at different sites (Grewal 1999: 801; cf. Davies 2007). Grewal exemplifies her reasoning with the Barbie doll, and how Barbie, as a material and cultural product, enables different subject positions for the consumers, which make the doll marketable in different locations. The same seems to apply to the BL/Yaoi characters, which seemingly come to mean different things in a Swedish or Japanese context respectively – something which make BL/Yaoi highly commercialised and exoticised products (Otmazgin 2008; McLelland et al. 2015).

Cultural products seem to be more dependent on digital distribution than ever before (Morley & Robins 1995; Colbert & Courchesne 2012; Craig 2013; McLelland et al. 2015). Through the internet, and the wide and rapid spread to many different contexts, the meanings of BL/Yaoi are shared and transformed. Digital technology breaks down barriers between creator and spectator due to the formation of virtual communities for geographically dispersed individuals in which virtual collaboration on the creation of cultural products takes place (Colbert & Courchesne 2012; Craig 2013). Further, cultural products can be experiential and, especially when transmitted via digital media, favour emotional involvement (Colbert & Courchesne 2012), something that will be illustrated below.

Japan and manga have been seen as exotic in relation to the West and Western consumers of manga (Ito 2012; Tsai 2016; cf. Morley & Robins 1995). The exoticification of cultural difference have been addressed in terms of 'eating the Other' (hooks 1992; Hall 1993), and of appropriating the Other's culture. Cultural appropriation is the process of practicing/wearing artefacts, customs, rituals and/or dresses, which are connected to another culture but used in a slightly different way than before (in their original societies). Critics argue that cultural appropriation is a power-loaded practice mainly performed by privileged people, who temporarily borrow 'exotic' artefacts from subaltern groups and marginalised settings (cf. Hall 1993). In the case of manga, Japan does not prevail as subaltern, but rather as ex-

exercising soft power, in the form of disseminating manga comics globally (Morley & Robins 1995; Nye 2004; Toyoshima 2011; Tsai 2016). However, when white women from the West consume products portraying Asian men from the East, such as in Swedish young women reading BL/Yaoi, race becomes relevant to discuss. Tobias Hübinette and Carina Tigervall (2009: 11–12) describe representations of the East Asian man in Swedish visual culture as weak, sensitive, unmanly, homoeroticised, ugly and nerdish. In the analysis below, this will be elaborated upon.

## **Methodological Discussion**

We connect to the practice of multisited ethnography (Marcus 1995) of following a phenomenon, an idea, a debate or, as in this case, manga, to enable research on material that moves unpredictably and rhizomatically, rather than linearly and in a structured way. Moreover, this methodology aims to grasp and conceptualise new connections and new articulations since the cultural products are transformative as well as in transformation into new contexts (Deleuze & Guattari 1988; Ringrose & Coleman 2013). The cultural product BL/Yaoi will be analysed as open and fluid with no given or fixed meaning or content, but as a performative force that, for example, enables subject positions and desires, and offers spaces for new realities. It is seen as an active agent that makes things happen.

Manga exists both on and off the internet and it influences what people do and how they view everyday life, as well as how they interact with their surroundings. In line with this, Julia Davies writes: “(---) online spaces provide an arena where collaboration over meanings can be transformative, impacting on how individuals locate themselves within local and global contexts.” (Davies 2007: 3). Images in these new local contexts bring their histories and earlier meanings, but new nuances and associations are added. When objects survive their original contexts it is possible to generate new meanings. The digital context constitutes a sort of material-symbolic transformation; it accrues and accumulates meanings – sometimes obscuring previous meanings and other times developing them (Davies 2007). For our interviewees, machines (computers) and artefacts (books, comics) are different materialities that provide access to BL/Yaoi manga, which interact with the bodies and minds of the interviewees and create a material-symbolic phenomenon that they have to work with and against (cf. Lenz 2011).

This article builds on qualitative data from interviews with eight Swedish young women involved in manga culture that were carried out in 2015. Three of them were interviewed in a focus group (see for example Wilkinson 1999), the others in individual interviews. One participant was interviewed on Skype. We found the interviewees via ConFusion, NärCon, Serieskolan in Malmö (a school for cartoonists) and finally, through snowballing. The interviewees were all female

and between 21 and 34 years of age, except for one that was 15 years of age. Seven of the interviewees had middle-class backgrounds and one working-class background. Seven persons were white and one had an Asian parent. Most of them lived heterosexual lives. Almost all of them had studied Japanese at university and some of them had visited and/or lived in Japan for some period. The group of people that were interviewed is small and the aim is not to tell the truth or to make generalisations. We see the study as a case that sheds light on something bigger – how cultural products can produce subject positions and desires – i.e. the case is transcending the specific experiences of these eight women (Wieviorka 2000: 161).

The interviews were all open-ended, semi-structured and conducted in Swedish. The interviewees were informed of the aim of the project, confidentiality, their right to withdraw and to not answer if they did not feel comfortable with a question. The interviews lasted between one and 2-and-a-half hours, were recorded and later transcribed. During the interviews, the interviewees were given the opportunity to address questions that were relevant to themselves in order to get a broader understanding of the processes at work.

## Hyperreal Images and Desires

Below, we will analyse the interviews focusing on BL/Yaoi as a cultural product with performative force that makes things happen and produces different realities. Firstly, we address different images of Japan, and in connection to this we briefly touch upon images of Sweden and Swedishness. Secondly, we address the different desires that BL/Yaoi gives rise to, i.e. political and sexual desires, which are often deeply entangled with each other.

### *Images of Japan*

Even though the hyperreal image of 'Japan' that emanates from manga seems to bear little resemblance with the real Japan, some of our interviewees describe how for long periods they thought they were performing subject positions created in and corresponding to a Japanese reality. After spending some time in Japan, they realised that this was not the case. One of our interviewees revealed how at first she took the Swedish manga culture to reflect the real Japan, but later realised that the two do not overlap:

When you read manga in Sweden you think that Japan really is full of wonderful things. That it is like in manga. The Internet is full of images of how Japan is. For example, a lot of images are published with the heading "Meanwhile in Japan..." Beneath the heading the image

shows people dressed up in crazy styles or in other ways acting manga. However, when you go to Japan, it is completely different from your expectations.

Several of the other interviewees also talk about an initial romanticisation of Japan. One of them formulated it as follows: “To me, Japan was a fantasy world, an exotic, wonderful, mysterious world. In my teens I longed for Japan. (...) But later on I realised that Japan does not like foreigners and women. Then it became less fun”. Another interviewee stated that Swedish manga followers generally, or at least often, read manga as simulations of real life in Japan. However, according to her, the comics should just be seen as artificial products that do not correspond with real life in Japan, but execute their own worlds:

Here in the West, we misunderstand the whole phenomenon of manga in relation to Japan. What happens in manga does not match the Japanese reality and how people live in Japan. But when reading manga, people get that impression: “So, this is Japan!” (---) The Japanese population distinguishes and separates manga storylines from the Japanese reality. Some people might think that gender and sexuality in Japan are nuanced, changeable, twisted and open to negotiation and bending when they read manga. However, the gay movement is marginalised in Japan. It exists in manga, but not in Japan; what happens in manga stays in manga.

A woman in the focus group interview said that manga is a closed culture in Japan, and that it takes place “at home”, while the Swedish manga culture is “social”. Together with the words above; “what happens in manga stays in manga”, the respondents seem to portray manga in Japan as digested more in private, while implicitly they produce an opposite image of manga in Sweden; as more connected to communities of belonging.

According to the interviewees above, the images of ‘Japan’, produced by the cultural product manga and its followers, bear little or no correspondence to a Japanese reality/materiality but “it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard 1988: 169). The relationship between the sign and the reality that it is said to signify, is twisted and out of order. Swedish manga followers, through their interpretations of the representations of Japan in manga, initially created a ‘Japan’ that they later find to be far from the real Japan. They can thus be said to substitute signs of the real for the real itself (Baudrillard 1988: 167).

When problematising the image of Japan as modern, open to homosexuality and sexually free, the interviewees created another representation of Japan in

which Japan is seen as traditional and homophobic. One of them said:

You can play around with gender roles within manga, but not in reality. Being gay for example is taboo in Japan, however homosexual love is still visible in manga comics. Japan appears to be much more accepting in manga, but it is not.

Further, in their critique of the romanticisation of Japan as free and open to different sexualities, Japan is portrayed as strict and ordered:

It is a little bit more pure-bred (---) especially within the BL culture; everything has to be very clear and labelled. (---) In Japan, categories and subheadings [in the genre BL] are very strict. Japan has always liked that type of order and... not fascism, but something like that. While Sweden always has been more dopey, hippie, seventies... people could blossom. (---) It has also to do with the fact that they [the Japanese] are so many. If you are many people in a country that live close to each other, it is important with order and structure.

These kinds of accounts about Japan have often been interpreted by postcolonial scholars as part of a long tradition of portraying Japan as a dehumanised machine-like nation where self-censorship and lack of emotions are prerequisites of the national soul (cf. Morley & Robins 1995). Using the other as the carrier of negative features may be seen as a way to construct the own identity as good and legitimate (e.g. Morley & Robins 1995: 172). In the quotations above, Sweden and Swedishness are both implicitly and explicitly described as open and positive towards women and homosexuality, as well as a country that allows people to “blossom”. The cultural product BL/Yaoi is seen as more fluid and open when it is experienced in Sweden than in Japan. Jasbir K. Puar (2007), among others, has interpreted these kinds of images as a result of an endless need to represent the West as more modern, tolerant and gay-friendly than the rest of the world.

The analysis above displays a gap between the Japanese real and the ‘Japan’ created by manga and its followers. ‘Japan’ prevail as a fantasy world, an exotic, wonderful, mysterious world where gender bending and sexuality are twisted and open to negotiations. However, this image, often presented in manga, do not correspond with the reality the manga followers meet as traveling to, and interacting with, the materiality of the real Japan. The ‘Japan’, which is sexually free and full of wonderful things do not correspond with the respondents’ interpretations of Japan while actually going there. This imply that new realities are created through manga, which seem to implode in their cultural meaning and create their own

hyperreal worlds. Sometimes 'Japan' is seen as *more real than the real* (Baudrillard 1983, 1988). But, even though the hyperreal world of 'Japan' is detached from the original Japan, we argue that it is still material and real. In this article, the creation of alternative possible subject positions for the subject, here the Swedish manga follower, is of relevance. Below we will discuss how these subject positions are connected to desire for another real(ity) as well as to sexual desires, including gender bending.

### *Desire for Another Real(ity) and Sexual Desires*

As suggested below, the construction of a hyperreal Japan, which in turn creates Swedish communities of belonging and new realities for their members, emerges from a range of different but related desires. The interviewees expressed a political desire, i.e. a longing for another reality (Mouffe 2005), in which gender is fluid and different sexual identifications are embraced. But there were also expressions of a more sexual desire, as in sexual cravings, pleasure and practices, in the interviews.

Our interviewees expressed a wish to transgress societal boundaries, through gender bending and other ways of experiencing sexual pleasure and desire. However, they differentiated between their own desires and the desires that they attributed to the BL/Yaoi followers and creators in Japan. One interviewee suggested that the different understandings of BL/Yaoi are a result of different longings of young women in the Japanese and Swedish contexts. In Japan, BL/Yaoi was, according to her, created as an expression of a strong desire for a reality free from patriarchal notions, rather than a desire for sexually transgressive pleasure:

Yaoi is about men who have relationships with other men. Yaoi was originally not about sex, but it was a form of resistance. It was a political action, which used taboos. Women who like Yaoi in Japan are called rotten women [fujoshi]. This label is provocative. The creators of Yaoi are like feminists, even if they do not call themselves feminists. They use sexuality as a means to disempower macho heterosexual men. They want to resist and change the hegemonic masculinity. Originally the Yaoi illustrators drew the male characters with features such as cats' tails. Later, they started to depict these macho male characters in love with each other or having sex with each other. It was just another way to ridicule these manly men. However, here in the West, that underlying idea and historical account gets misinterpreted most of the time.

In this quotation, male homoeroticism is portrayed as a feminist tool and described as something shameful that can be used to ridicule men, in the same way as a cat-tail being placed on a man can. It is seen as a way to feminise men and through

that diminish and disempower them, in line with how Hübinette and Tigervall (2009) argue that Asian men often are represented in Swedish visual culture. Interestingly, according to this interviewee, the Japanese men are also feminised and homoeroticised in Japan – when there is a need for disempowering them.

Even though Japanese women were said to mainly use BL/Yaoi as a means to try to change patriarchy, they are, according to the interviewees, also using it as a tool to liberate themselves sexually. However, the interviewees again emphasised the difference between Swedish and Japanese women, claiming that Japanese women have less sexual space, more taboos and are more trapped than Swedish women:

I think it is a difference concerning the need in Japan compared with Sweden. I think it [sexual and pornographic manga] is so big in Japan because there is a need for sexual liberation among the women. (---) Because the social structure is different. Of course, even Swedish girls have a certain frame and conditions and are stuck, but the women in Japan have less space, more taboos and harder restrictions. So there is a huge need for liberation. While here... (---) it is just another piece of the puzzle, a taste of all the choices and opportunities [you have].

Even though Swedish girls and women are said to have “frames”, “conditions” and are “stuck”, they are seen as much more liberated and free than Japanese girls and women. BL/Yaoi is described as just another “piece of the puzzle” for the Swedish followers; one opportunity for pleasure among many, one choice among many choices.

When describing Swedish women’s desires for BL/Yaoi, gender bending and other alternative subject positions and forms of sexual identities were highlighted among our interviewees:

Some manga, especially for girls, use role-playing with gender and sexuality. There are more variations in the way women and men are depicted [than in reality]. This opens up the possibility for the reader to identify as something other than what that person is born with. Young people in Sweden like it. They want to be able to be who they want to be and bend the gender norms. I met two girls who realised while reading Yaoi that they were in love with each other. So they defined themselves as gay people: women in love. However, when they dress up in cosplay they choose to act as gay men. Such gender bending is wonderful!

Materialities, like manga, clothes and communities of belonging (like cosplay conventions) are here described as entangled in the becoming of these young women and their subject positions and desires. This was confirmed by one interviewee, who emphasised: “(...) in the West [the Japanese] gender role-playing becomes real and we take it seriously”.

The BL/Yaoi culture seemingly provide a refuge for its fans by helping people to navigate in the world and to work on their identifications and desires (Kinsella 1998). The same pattern can be seen in other localities too. In her research about BL/Yaoi and manga culture in the Philippines, Tricia Abigail Santos Fermin (2013) found that Filipino manga followers also interpreted Japan as open to radical sexual norms and binary gender transgressions. For example, one of her interviewees said: “I think Japan has a very interesting culture, because they are open to such relationships [as seen in Yaoi and BL]. (...) So I think Japan is really interesting and unique”. (Santos Fermin 2013) According to Santos Fermin the representation of the ‘open Japan’ led to an elaboration and strengthening of the LGBTQ community and LGBTQ identities in the Philippines. She claims that BL/Yaoi in the Philippines is more related to LGBTQ culture and politics than the original BL/Yaoi in Japan, and that Japan represents a fantasy, “a Mecca-like world of beautiful gender bending and colourful transgression that they hope to take part in at least once in their lives” (Santos Fermin 2013). According to her, this often means that many fans tend to idealise homoerotic relationships in their reading and writing of BL/Yaoi – for example through describing them as more intense and ultimate; as “a love against all odds” (Santos Fermin 2013). This appropriation of the travelling cultural product BL/Yaoi is significant even among our interviewees. They (re)write, (re)read and transform meanings of BL/Yaoi in new localities in ways that provide them with what they need, for example models of alternative subject positions and practices regarding sexuality, gender and pleasure.

Several of our interviewees see BL/Yaoi as a way for heterosexual women to reclaim their sexuality. The sexual pleasures and desires connected with BL/Yaoi in Sweden are described as related to a stretching of gendered sexual norms and to the fact that there are two men and no women in the fiction. According to our interviewees this is relevant from at least two points of view: firstly, if you like men and masculinity, you get twice as much, and secondly, since there are no women involved, it is easier for women to explore different sexual roles and activities. No woman is exposed to subordination. Since there are no women in the comics to identify with, the female readers of the comics can elaborate more freely on their sexuality in relation to BL/Yaoi. One interviewee stated:

In the beginning I routinely identified with the passive recipient, the one that was penetrated. But I began to play with the thought: “What

if I was active?" (...) BL/Yaoi has changed my sexuality, I have greater freedom sexually; it has changed what turns me on.

Another interviewee expressed it as follows: "Yaoi is interesting for young women (...) who want to read comics about sex without being forced into a female subject position". An interviewee who produces manga about homoerotic relations between women, so-called *Yuri*, said: "It is both good and bad that the stereotypes exist, but there have to be other [possible figures to identify with] so that you can choose". The important thing to her is to provide manga that enables for her and other women to experience sexual pleasure. She creates manga that allows the characters, and the readers, to switch positions and identifications; she is not trying to eliminate power hierarchies in sexual relations:

It should not be that the submissive one is girlish. (---) But if both were submissive or dominant then nothing would happen. No one is going to take the first step, nothing is going to happen. But you should not be able to see who is who [passive or dominant] just by looking at them.

In this quotation, sexual activity demands one active and one passive person. The interviewee states that we are all "stuck" with pictures of "how it should be" and she herself does not even mention the possibility of creating another constellation than the active-passive. Instead she aims at expanding sexual desires and pleasures by making it possible to switch roles and to be surprised by the characters' features. For her BL/Yaoi also represents another type of masculinity than the one usually portrayed in mainstream popular culture: "I just liked to see guys that were nice to each other, that they weren't macho and that kind of things. And guys worrying: 'oh, I wonder if he doesn't like me', all that kind of things, weak guys." This could maybe be interpreted in line with putting a cat-tail on a man in the fiction, i.e. as diminishing the male character, but this interviewee did not talk about it in a ridiculing way, but rather with tenderness. She expressed love towards these "weak guys". Still, the portrayal of the Asian young man as weak is in line with the findings of HübINETTE and Tigervall (2009) and may thus be read as a form of eating the Other (hooks 1992; Hall 1993). In BL/Yaoi, it is the cartooned Asian man that enables Swedish young women to explore their own identifications and desires.

Sexual desire may stretch our understanding of the social world through what Johanna Oksala calls limit-experience; something that "throws us outside of ourselves" (Oksala 2004: 111). It is an understanding of experience as something beyond the subject, reaching the unpredictable and unintelligible by transgressing the limits of normality. The so-called experiential body can "multiply, distort and

overflow the meanings, definitions, and classifications attached to experiences, and in this sense it is capable of discursively undefined and unintelligible pleasures” (Oksala 2004: 112). Exploring and widening the sexual sphere, sometimes in the form of limit-experiences, can be seen as a way to resist heteronormative ideas about female sexuality and gender binarism. When our interviewees were asked why Swedish young women – who often are supposed to be quite liberated and free regarding gender and sexuality – find pleasure in BL/Yaoi, they argued that Swedish girls and young women consume, produce and love BL/Yaoi because of the possibilities it opens up regarding sexual self-development and sexual agency. The interviewed women explicitly talked about their commitment to manga as a feminist, even a queer feminist, process. Here, the sexual and political desires of our interviewees seem to interact, creating gender-bending and sexually transgressive practices. In this way pleasures, embodied as limit-experiences, are a locus for resistance. Judith Butler’s words about sexuality and desire as characterised by a potential to transgress regulations and as “an improvisational possibility within a field of constraints” also point at the entanglement of sexual and political desires (Butler 2004: 15).

As argued above, the cultural product of the manga BL/Yaoi thus seems to open up the possibility of other subject positions and desires. Similar patterns were noticed by Santos Fermin who states that BL/Yaoi offers tools and spaces for Filipino women to “temporarily remove themselves from androcentric society’s regimentation of their sexuality and be free to confront, explore and realise their desires in a non-threatening and distanced manner” (Santos Fermin 2013). Images of weak men, submissive men, feminine men and men engaged in sex with other men can be seen as a hyperreal ideal enabling constructions of other real worlds of love, gender bending and sexuality.<sup>3</sup> And, as demonstrated by the quotations, the embodied experiences related to BL/Yaoi produce certain subjectivities (gay identifications), practices (gender bending) and other materialities (like clothes). These experiences, in some sense, challenge the idea of hyperreality as a surface phenomenon. Cultural products prevail as important artefacts with performative power, creating new realities. In this way, matter, in the form of pictures, texts, comics, the internet, computer data etc., becomes part of the processes of becoming (cf. Haraway 1991; Alaimo & Hekman 2008; Barad 2008; Åsberg et al. 2012; Black 2014).

## Conclusion

In this article we have analysed the cultural product manga, in the form of Boys’ Love/Yaoi, and its meanings and performative power, with the help of the concepts hyperreality and materiality. We asked questions about images of Japan and

Sweden, subject positions and desires. We also aimed to elaborate the concept hyperreality.

The hyperreal world, created from interpretations of BL/Yaoi manga, has little connection with the original bodies, soil, buildings, etc. in Japan, but is rather a (re)interpretation of representations. Nevertheless, after travelling to Sweden, the manga BL/Yaoi creates other reals with material bodies and artefacts. Embodied experiences of certain subject positions and desires challenge the idea of hyperreality as a surface phenomenon. The new reality is constituted, not of Japanese bodies/matter, but of *other, unpredictable* bodies (manga followers) and material-symbolic products (comics, computers, clothes etc.). In the analysis we have showed how this emergence of other realities is permeated by cultural appropriation of Japan and the Japanese culture, people and artefacts. By the very same gesture that positions Japan as a node that is involved in the construction of the free, radical and gender-bending Swedishness, Japan is positioned as more backward and traditional, as well as exotic and interesting (Morley & Robins 1995; HübINETTE & Tigervall 2009; Ito 2012; Tsai 2016). The cartooned Asian man in BL/Yaoi enables Swedish young women to explore their own identifications and desires, something which can be interpreted as a form of eating the Other (hooks 1992; Hall 1993).

While the interviewees argue that BL/Yaoi has provided a means of resistance against patriarchy and dominant notions of masculinity in Japan, in Sweden it prevails as a performative force for both the desire for another reality regarding gender and for alternative, maybe queer, sexual desires and practices. Various scholars have paid attention to the queer and transgressive use of gender and sexuality in manga, like BL/Yaoi. Christy Rebecca Sally Gibbs, among others, has emphasised how these images can challenge normative models of sexuality (Gibbs 2012). Gibbs argues that particularly within the manga genres of male/male (BL/Yaoi) and female/female (Yuri) erotica, sexual fluidity and the lack of gender boundaries play a key role. In our study the interviewees did not explicitly talk in terms of challenging gender binarism, but rather about gender bending, i.e. stretching the limits for the two gender categories and switching roles within the gender binary model. Further research about the subversive potential of different manga texts is needed, especially in relation to different contexts and the discussion about cultural appropriation.

Political and sexual desires are both reasons behind the adoption of cultural products, and the effects of interactions with cultural products. Desires related to the cultural product BL/Yaoi thus cultivate alternative subject positions, practices, communities and form new real worlds. Manga followers try to build elements or whole worlds of a different imagined reality, embodying their aspired future. The future is invoked in the present through pre-figurative politics or construc-

tive resistance (Epstein 2002; Young & Schwartz 2012). Thus, it can be seen as a struggle around temporality; it is a practice used by the manga followers and producers, who materialise the future in the present as a form of resistance, similar to a *nutopia/nowtopia*, a *utopia* played out in the present (Thörn 1997). The new reals that are produced from hyperreal signs are potential sites for resistance, in both personal and political ways.

This paper does not offer a complete picture, but opens up opportunities for further research in relation to cultural products and their performative power. One such area concerns gender. Rather often it is stated that BL/Yaoi has been developed by young women and largely has a female heterosexual audience – the majority being working-class girls (Kinsella 1998). However, later research has opposed this, showing that many boys and young men also produce and read BL/Yaoi (Levi et al. 2010; Nagaïke 2015). In this article, we have focused on young women's engagement with BL/Yaoi, but look forward to undertaking research that also involves young men and their engagement in BL/Yaoi. Further, when emphasising the agency of matter and artefacts, it is important not to lose sight of the subjects behind the cultural products, who interact, create and read the material artefacts in the process of meaning-making. The agency of an artefact differs from the agency of a human subject, primarily by its limited ability to reflect upon social relations and prevailing discourses (cf. Black 2014: 37). Even though an image or a computer has agency and shapes our bodily movements, our ways of interacting and thereby our very existence, it cannot act consciously. The boundary between the human body and other matter is, however, not a clear one. Daniel Black argues that there is no natural original body isolated from the environment, but that we are always shaped by objects around us. He sees the differing potentials of various kinds of artefacts as gathered into a body schema, where perception and experience are central to the relationship between the human being and the artefacts (Black 2014). This calls for further research of the relationship between different actors. Further research is also needed in relation to the concept *hyperreality*. We still need to know more about when and how this concept becomes a relevant point of departure for analysis of cultural products.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cosplay, compounded of the words costume and play, is a Japanese form of performance or masquerade where you dress up as a specific figure or an idea. Crossplay is when you perform the 'opposite' sex (Levi 2010; Okabe 2012; Tsai 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See Sara Ahmed's discussion of this; Ahmed 2008.

<sup>3</sup> BL/Yaoi also portray men as hypermasculine, violent and dominant – even as rapists. This is not discussed in this article.

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# Negotiating Identities through the 'Cultural Practice' of Labia Elongation among Urban Shona Women and Men in Contemporary Zimbabwe

By Hellen Venganai

## Abstract

Dominant Eurocentric discourses on African traditional cultural practices linked to sexuality construct these practices as retrogressive for women in these localities. These discourses take the form of women and sexual rights promoted by some women activists and scholars, whose work mainly focuses on the so-called traditional rural women as victims of these gendered sexual practices. In many ways, such approaches manufacture and exaggerate differences between Western and African women, while reproducing colonial discourses that construct Africans as backward. This article interrogates the modern-traditional binary which underpin conventional representations of some sexual practices as cultural. Following African feminist scholars who argue for research which explores the significance and meanings such sexual practices hold for those women who engage in them, this article draws on a study I conducted with Shona speaking women and men in Zimbabwe who participated and/or were interested in the practice of labia elongation. The targeted women and men, in their 20s -30s, live in relatively affluent houses in Harare, and are identified as urban, modern and middle-class. The study sought to explore why such women (as well as men) who identify as modern were so interested and invested in a sexual practice that has often been constructed as traditional and cultural. By exploring how women and men invoke notions of culture and tradition, the article demonstrates the creative and complex ways in which the young adults position themselves in relation to this practice in particular, and in relation to gender and sexuality more generally.

**Keywords:** Labia elongation, Shona women, sexuality, identities, culture, Zimbabwe

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## **Introduction**

African cultural practices feature frequently in ongoing intellectual debates about gender and sexuality. Of interest are the debates around the practice of labia elongation and its representation in the medical, human rights and feminist discourses. Labia elongation is a common genital modification traditional practice for some ethnic groups in Africa which involves massaging and pulling of the inner labia using the thumb and index finger, sometimes after applying certain herbal oils or powders to ease the stretching process (Bagnol & Mariano 2008: 576). Although this process can commence when a woman is older, it is normally recommended that it begins and ends before a girl's first menstrual cycle, when the labia is likely to grow faster (Mwenda 2006: 350). In Zimbabwe, this practice has historically been framed around cultural ideals of 'proper' Shona femininity as well as around discourses of sexual pleasure (Mano 2004: 325). However, by the late 1960s, the practice appeared to be losing its relevance particularly for Shona urban women (Williams 1969: 166) suggesting that it was no longer compliant with the lifestyles of these modern women. Yet, in 2012 when I attended a kitchen party in one of the low-density suburbs in Harare, I was confronted with young professional women from middle class backgrounds who seemed keen to undergo labia elongation. This was after one woman who had been hired to advise the bride-to-be about how to 'handle' her husband sexually, spoke positively about the importance of labia elongation in enhancing male sexual pleasure. This prompted me to conduct an exploratory study about middle class people's constructions of this practice, which forms the basis of this article. I begin my discussion by outlining the contemporary theoretical and political debates around labia elongation and other so-called African traditional sexual practices. My aim is to demonstrate the complexities and the significance of these practices in contemporary Africa, both at a discursive level and an empirical level. Next, I provide an overview of the methodological approach I took. Finally, I focus on the summary and analysis of my findings.

## **Debates about traditional practices in postcolonial Africa**

While African traditional practices such as labia elongation are usually reduced to markers of particular ethnic identities, scholars like Wickström (2010: 534) and de Robillard (2009: 87-88) suggest that we should see these practices as representing much more. The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies labia elongation as a type of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). However, this is contested by some African feminists who argue that the term 'mutilation' carries "powerful negative connotations" (Koster & Price 2008: 191), with others proposing 'genital modification' as a more 'acceptable' term. The argument advanced by these femi-

nist scholars is that WHO's negative representation of labia elongation extracts the practice from the "lived [sexual] experience" of African women, which, in their view, is not always marked by "incompleteness, anxiety and depression" (Tamale 2006: 27). Others even challenge the false dichotomy between practices labelled as FGM – projected in mainstream feminist discourse as backward, oppressive, and harmful to women in the global South – and those classified as Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery (FGCS), which although they also involve genital modification (for example clitoral piercing and labial reduction), are instead linked to positive bodily aesthetics because they are practiced in western countries by western women who are constructed as empowered (Tamale 2006: 27). Within dominant liberal feminist discourses, for example, "modernity is seen as the context within which young, black women can claim power" over their bodies when they distance themselves from customs and traditions (Clark 2006: 12). In other words, women empowerment is equated with discarding so called 'traditional' practices, which are constructed as backward and an impediment to women's progress (Amadiume 2006: 4).

These dichotomies follow a long discursive colonial history of how colonial administrators and Christian missionaries made efforts to denigrate most African practices. Christian missionaries were especially opposed to African female and male initiation practices, as a result, laws were put in place, while Christianised versions of "initiation" schools were established to 'civilise' and redefine the cultural norms and police the sexuality of the colonised, especially women (Tamale 2006: 10-11). Nonetheless, while cultural discourses and cultural practices were initially sites of oppression and policing, they later became "instruments of resistance" (Garuba & Raditlhlo 2008: 39) within the same colonial period which witnessed a rise in nationalist discourses propagating notions of 'African culture', which became influential in fighting colonial domination.

In a postcolonial context, some argue that references to culture or cultural practices appear to be central to the constructions of Africanness or African identities, in which issues of self-determination for black African people seem to be of paramount importance (Spronk 2009: 509). There is a body of literature arguing that the revival of particular gendered cultural practices – which had been abandoned due to colonial influence – is tied with notions of national cultural identities and nation building in postcolonial nations (Spronk 2009: 502; de Robillard 2009: 88-89). A case in point is the revived virginity testing ceremonies, which are now publicly celebrated in some parts of Southern Africa, notably in South Africa.

Debates about this practice are framed mainly around "return to culture" and "liberation from culture" discourses (Wickström 2010: 534) which are also situated within an HIV and AIDS context. The promotion of virginity testing is to a greater extent seen as a response to the HIV and AIDS pandemic affecting the

African continent, which some politicians and traditional leaders attribute to a 'loss' of African culture (Kaarsholm 2006: 89-90). In this context, the practice thus becomes a gendered "moral regeneration" strategy which others perceive as representing "men's control over women [sexuality] and elders' control of the young" (Kaarsholm 2005: 146). Others argue that rather than simply associating virginity testing with particular ethnic groups or presenting it as a solution to HIV and AIDS, the practice is also:

a domain in which the girl-child's chastity becomes an index of 'social purity' [...] instrumentalised through discourses and political discourses designed to adjudicate which bodies, desires and practices are authentic and which are not, within the national scheme (de Robillard 2009: 89).

It seems, therefore, that women's bodies and sexuality, as well as some gendered cultural practices, are symbolically constructed in relation to the nation, rather than ethnic identities. This has led others to argue that the celebration of 'authentic' African practices or African culture should be seen as significant "political resources" (de Robillard 2009: 88) or "political language" (Wickström 2010: 534). Although this can be traced back to the colonial period, as mentioned earlier, African political and traditional leaders continue to deploy positive discourses of African cultures as a strategy against the dominance of Western cultural practices and products.

However, this article is not so much interested in the constructions of cultural practices (notably labia elongation) by the politically, culturally, and intellectually powerful, but by young adults from urban and middle class backgrounds. Nonetheless, it has been noted that ordinary people also tend to draw on these 'political' discourses to publicly support African traditional practices even when they do not practice them personally and even criticize them in private. In a study about how young men and women in Kenya negotiate sexuality, Rachel Spronk (2009: 501) argues that at times invocations of tradition by young people are merely ideological battles which do not reflect their embodied experiences or individual aspirations. She recalls having an informal conversation about female circumcision with a particular young black urban professional man. The young man is said to have emotionally defended the practice, telling her it was an important part of their community's culture, and that 'Westerners' (like her) were wasting their time advocating for its abolishment because these women were doing this out of choice. Yet, identifying with these practices to affirm one's Africanness only represents one of the multiple identities or subjectivities that one might want to embody in a postcolonial contemporary context. Two months later, the same young man told

her that he ‘cannot marry a circumcised woman’ because he felt the practice diminished women’s chances of enjoying sex (Spronk 2009: 501). Thus, on the one hand, the young man, as a black African, felt obliged to support an African cultural practice in the context of its negative representation by the West. On the other hand, at a more personal level, as a sexual being, this particular ‘culture’ contradicts his own notions of sexuality where he values the sexual pleasure of both men and women. This suggests that the meanings people attach to these practices are never fixed, but negotiated and contextual.

It is within these complexities that I situate this article, which focuses on the significance and people’s appropriations of the practice of labia elongation in a postcolonial Zimbabwean context. While colonial and contemporary hegemonic discourses construct (Western) modernity in opposition to (African) tradition, and African culture in opposition to Christianity, the article draws from scholars who caution against naturalising categories by simply taking “either or” approaches that “posit complex social issues on a binary plane” (Tamale 2008: 48). The article seeks to demonstrate the complex meanings young women and men attach to labia elongation and the symbolic connections they make about this practice with gender, sexuality, tradition, Christianity etc., which go beyond the modern-traditional binary.

### **Methodological approaches which informed my study of labia elongation**

This article is based on a study I conducted in 2015 with Shona women and men from urban and middle class backgrounds in Harare, Zimbabwe. The study sought to explore how young women and men who identify as modern relate to and speak about labia elongation, a practice that is dominantly constructed as ‘traditional’. The article questions representations of the discursive categories ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ as oppositional by interrogating the participants’ understanding of the practice of labia elongation, to see their shifting positions and how they reinforce, disrupt, and challenge this discourse.

Motivated by African feminist scholars who urge us to understand these practices from the perspectives of the people who engage in them (Amadiume 2006: 4; Tamale 2006: 27), I explored women and men’s understandings of labia elongation through interviews and (one mixed and three single-sex) focus group discussions. My commitment to include men in the research is influenced by the idea that gender operates in everyday life in governing how women and men behave in different socio-cultural contexts. As has been pointed out, “to study women in isolation perpetuates the fiction that ... the experience of one sex has little or nothing to do with the other” (Scott 1988: 32). Although labia elongation is practiced by

women, it is usually framed in relation to men's sexual needs and desires, so it is important to also explore men's constructions of the practice.

Thirty participants (20 women and 10 men aged between 20 and 39) were selected for the study, although for this article, I excluded the findings from the mixed-sex focus group discussion, which comprised three men and two women. While the number of participants represents a very small sample, this research was interested more in understanding how different women and men give meaning to labia elongation, and less concerned with generalising findings to the wider Shona population in Zimbabwe. In a way then, the research draws on versions of poststructuralist feminism, which speak against the quantifying and homogenisation of women's (and by extension, men's) experiences. Prominent among these scholars is Chandra Mohanty (1988: 66-68) who is critical of the essentialist construction of women in developing countries as victims of patriarchy and culture. She argues that research should acknowledge rather than ignore the diversity of women's sexual practices and experiences in these localities.

I do not treat interviews and focus group discussions as mere tools of tapping information from participants in terms of what they say, but as particular social encounters in which identities are performed relationally (Pattman 2015: 82). In other words, I do not take what participants said as accounts of truth. Rather, I suggest that what they said or how they said it might have been influenced by the interview context. This is informed by critical ideas constructing interviews as 'contextual and negotiated' encounters (Charmaz 2006: 27). Furthermore, this article is influenced by feminist contributions to methodology that emphasise reflexivity and the significance of situating oneself in the research because. As Charmaz (2006: 178) argues, 'researchers are part of what they study, not separate from it'. I affirm Charmaz's observation here, especially since as a researcher I had a lot in common with the participants. For instance, I also belong to the Shona ethnic group. Like the participants, I come from the middle class, and, like them, I possess a university degree. Although, I did not elongate my labia, I spoke with women who had undergone the practice and those who had not, and views from both groups of women (and some men) are summarised in this article.

I chose not to self-disclose my labia status to my participants, despite feminist arguments that revealing certain personal information by researchers improves participants' openness. My silence about my labia status, however generated interesting data, because in some focus groups and interviews, participants assumed that I underwent this practice. This was clear in the way some women who elongated their labia often asked me to affirm their responses assuming that we share similar experiences. But one woman who indicated she had undergone elongation asked me after our interview whether I had also done it and I told her I had not. My assumption is that had I declared my status at the beginning of the interview,

or if she had asked this question in the middle of the interview, this might have made her talk less openly.

In terms of analysis, I draw from poststructuralist feminism in which language “in the form of a historically specific range of ways of giving meaning to social reality, [is seen as offering] us various discursive positions, including modes of femininity and masculinity” (Weedon 1987: 25-26). Specifically, I focus on how and why participants position themselves in relation to particular discourses of gender and sexuality and tradition or culture in their discussions about labia elongation. As I illustrate later in the article, their interpretation of the practice is very complex in that it was not simplistically reduced to the modern-traditional discursive binary, but produced multiple subjectivities.

Since the article focuses more on the social identities people associate with labia elongation, I also adopt Hall’s anti-essentialist deployment of identity as a relational concept that is both ‘strategic and positional’, and not one that ‘signal[s] that stable core of the self’ (Hall 1996: 3). I employ the concept identities instead of identity to emphasise their multiplicity and instability, while I use identifications to show that how people negotiate around these multiple, shifting, and sometimes contradictory identities, in relation to particular discourses, is an ongoing ‘process never complete’ (Hall 1996: 2).

## **Ethics**

Owing to the sensitive nature of the topic, part of the ethical procedures was to explain fully to potential research participants about the nature and objectives of the research, so that they can be in an informed position to decide whether to take part in it or not. To achieve this, I drafted consent forms explaining the research, on which participants had to append their signatures. Only one of my participants, a female, withdrew from the research. The said participant had initially expressed interest in taking part in the research. But before we could set a date for the interview, she requested that I tell her some of the questions I would ask her during the interview, which I did. She told me that she was going to think about it, since she would not like to discuss her personal issues with a group of people. She never got back to me, so I replaced her with another female participant. The rest of the participants voluntarily signed the consent forms. With the participants’ consent, these conversations were recorded using a digital recorder. In the focus groups, I appealed to participants to keep our discussions confidential. I cannot claim that confidentiality was achieved because there is a possibility that the participants may have discussed the subject matter with their friends. What I managed to do, however, was guarantee them anonymity by using pseudonyms in my transcriptions, which is what I also do in this article. In the focus groups discussions, I

avoided asking questions that were of a personal nature (such as ‘have you elongated your labia?’), and only pursued these with participants who voluntarily shared their personal stories. For now, I turn to the study findings.

### **Labia elongation: Ethnic pride or sexual practice?**

I was interested in understanding how participants constructed their identities in relation to ethnicity, and how these intersected with their other forms of identification as young women and men from middle class backgrounds in contemporary Zimbabwe. I also wanted to find out whether they associated the practice of labia elongation with their own, and/or other ethnicities. Despite displaying knowledge about labia elongation, participants (including those who had undergone labia elongation) disagreed about whether this was a practice specifically limited to the Shona people. Some participants were of the view that labia elongation is ‘foreign’ to the Shona. They argued that those Shona people who participate in the practice ‘borrow’ it from Malawian and Mozambican women or from other local minority groups such as the Shangaan, the Venda, and the Tonga.

On the other hand, others said that labia elongation was a Shona cultural practice even though they noted that not all Shona women undergo the process. One man accused young urban Shona women who did not elongate their labia (and young urban men who are not knowledgeable about this practice) of not ‘consulting’ with people in the rural areas. Presumably, this was because of the way rural people are seen as having the responsibility of imparting knowledge about ‘cultural practices’ especially to their urban kin who are projected as easily corrupted by Westernisation. Another woman bemoaned the ‘disappearance’ of sexual traditional practices such as labia elongation among the Shona and urged women to ‘follow what we used to do in the past, our culture.’

Interestingly, among the women participants who indicated they elongated their labia, some were not keen to publicly reveal that they had undergone this practice. One woman was of the opinion that many urban women were ‘at the forefront of embracing western ways’ such that they do not teach their children about labia elongation. Hence, to reveal that they underwent this practice in an urban context carries negative connotations. It would also imply that they ‘are very backward people’. Another woman who also elongated her labia, initially tried to distance herself from rural women whom she accused of not ‘valu[ing] education’ because they were too much into ‘cultural things’ such as female initiation practices including labia elongation. But when I asked her later in the interview what motivated her to elongate despite her earlier attempts to dissociate herself from the practice and the rural women who engage in it, she said she did it ‘for the sake of being girls’. When I asked her to elaborate, she said elongated labia ‘is

something that is wanted in your bedroom for it [sex] to be enjoyable'. I propose that this respondent emphasises the relevance of labia elongation as just a sexual practice that may not be tied with people affirming their ethnic identity.

### **Labia elongation and Christianity**

As alluded to earlier in the article, Christianity influenced a shift in modes of sexual expression for the colonised, especially black African women. However, it also emerged as an important site of identification for the colonised and still does for most people in postcolonial African countries, including for the participants in my study. In Zimbabwe, for instance, 70-80% of the population identify themselves as Christians (Makahamadze, Isacco & Chireshe 2012: 711). Although Christianity is not presently associated with a particular social class, it is worthwhile mentioning that during colonialism it played a central role in the creation of an African elite. To demonstrate this shift in social status in that colonial context, the Zimbabwean middle class, "rejected tradition and custom in favour of modernity" (West 2002:4). However, unlike in colonial times where middle class people tended to dissociate themselves with practices constructed as 'traditional' or 'cultural', women and men in my study took contradictory positions to either justify or critique labia elongation by invoking Christian discourses.

There was no consensus about whether Christian churches teach (or should teach) about labia elongation, and whether the practice is against Christian values because of its usual associations with 'culture' and tradition. It seems some of the participants' invocation of religion was linked to their affirmation of their Christian and middle class identities drawing from discourses that conflate Christianity with modernity. For example, there was a view that women should not practice labia elongation because they were created 'complete' and if elongated labia were necessary 'they should have been created big like some body parts'. Another woman suggested that women who engaged in labia elongation, especially rural women, had 'no clue about what the bible says'.

The counter-arguments, some which were also framed in religious terms, were quite secular and also individualistic in rendering people's bodies as projects on which to work and improve through their own actions. This was reflected in the kinds of modern (gendered) analogous projects of self-improvement which participants engaged in and which they compared with labia elongation. In a focus group I conducted with men, one man commented that labia elongation was tampering with God's 'perfect' creation. In response to this, some men made an analogy between labia elongation and going to the gym to build muscle. Pulling labia, the men suggested, was like building muscles (in the gym). Here, labia elongation is equated to body building and is presented by men both as a positive

modern bodily (and gendered) modification in women. In discussions with women, some also equated labia elongation with applying make-up on their faces, as exemplified in the excerpt below:

[...] the issue is, it's not all about God created me without [elongated labia]. If it was like that, people would not be applying those Black Opal; they would not be trimming their eyebrows because you were not created [without them]. God created you with all those eyebrows, so why are you removing them? [For me], it's all about what people are encountering in their day-to-day lives. Even in churches, people would not be wearing trousers, people would be walking around naked because we were created naked.

Such self-improvement discourses and practices seem to resonate with key features of modernity. Yet, ironically, they are used by the participants to justify a 'traditional' or 'cultural' practice of labia elongation. Here, labia elongation is spoken about in terms of its aesthetic value just like applying make-up, or wearing clothes, supposedly to improve from where God left off. What is more striking, however, are the analogies used (of trimming eyebrows and applying make-up), which I argue, are signifiers of middle class femininity.

In other interviews, while participants were not sure whether labia elongation is 'satanic or if it is godly', religion was framed (and labia elongation justified) by some around husband-wife relationships, which – as the following extracts from two women in separate interviews show - are characterised by unequal power relations:

[The] bible respects the fact that as a wife you should do just like the [husband wants]. [The] husband is commanded to love his wife, [likewise], the woman is commanded to respect and submit to the husband. So if the husband thinks that *matinji* (elongated labia) he wants them on his wife, the wife can go out of their way to have them. So I guess it's not out of line. (Tanya)

What happens in churches is that they say that one thing that you must value most if you are a married woman [is] your husband. So what your husbands wants, that's what you do; meaning that it is not a [biblical] teaching that is done openly because maybe another man doesn't like it... (Chido)

What the two respondents say here reflects how "in some cases the Bible is un-

fortunately evoked to support the superiority of men and the subordination of women” (Machingura & Nyakuhwa 2015: 95). This is a case where women themselves (and not men) employ biblical discourses on female submission, in reinforcing rather than challenging female subordination. They emphasise that a good Christian wife must always do what the husband ‘wants’ as the Bible commands. Nevertheless, this also demonstrates the reification and deification of the Bible as a powerful person, the same way ‘culture’ is often personified by people (especially men) in relation to gender and sexuality (Pattman 2001: 235). These contradictions point to the complexity of the meanings my participants attach to labia elongation in relation to Christian religion and the particular significance this holds for them in different contexts.

### **‘Complete’ and ‘Incomplete’ Women**

Earlier in the article, I alluded to how African women who engage in the so-called cultural practices are projected in dominant Western feminist discourses as oppressed victims of culture. Nevertheless, there is also a tendency by some educated African scholars to project rural and uneducated African women as the Other, which has been highly criticised by other African feminist scholars. Zulu Sofola, for instance, is critical of educated, urban African women who look down upon rural women for ‘accepting’ certain cultural practices (Sofola 1998: 62-63). She makes her argument by drawing parallels between polygamy (which she implicitly associates with rural women) and monogamy (which she associates with educated urban women). Because of the educated African woman’s supposed preference for a monogamous union, Sofola accuses her of being “totally alienated from her culture, [because] she does not even know how polygamy is organized and operated” (Sofola 1998: 63). While Sofola raises important concerns about the tendency by educated African women to denigrate other women whom they perceive as ‘uneducated’, I am critical of her portrayal of rural women as ‘carriers’ (and educated urban women as ‘violators’) of culture. I find, her construction of these two categories of women in oppositional ways rather limiting in that it replicates, rather than challenge, the Othering of particular women, while reinforcing the idea that they are distinctly different from each other.

Nevertheless, Sofola’s observations about the denigration of rural women were reflected in the interviews I conducted as I illustrate later. But I also witnessed other processes of Othering with regards to how women who had not undergone labia elongation were presented and spoken about as the Other. Labia elongation was presented as a process that girls and women have to do in order to get married, and to give pleasure to husbands as elaborated in the next section. More significantly, it was symbolically constructed as signifying a woman’s ‘completeness’.

This is also what other scholars observe about female initiation rites in Africa, that these practices and the accompanying discourses, are “about the creation of women” (Arnfred 2011: 45), which produces particular versions of femininity which become normalised.

In my study, labia elongation emerged as a medium through which some women who have undergone this practice seemed to derive a sense of self-esteem. This was apparent in the way they celebrated the practice by constructing themselves as ‘complete women’, superior, and sexually attractive, while denigrating those who had not undergone the practice. Among the female participants who glorified the practice, one said that a woman with elongated labia was ‘a woman among women’. Women who underwent labia elongation and those who did not were ranked differently in terms of women’s (sexual) attractiveness and status. Women without elongated labia were associated with derogatory euphemistic labels such as ‘open holes’ or ‘houses without a door’ in order to emphasise their incompleteness. Another participant boasted about possessing (long) labia, which she claimed was the reason her husband was ‘always’ sexually satisfied. This emerged when women were debating about whether having elongated labia resulted in a reduction of male promiscuity. In the following extract, one woman suggests it is ‘disrespectful’ to be compared with women without elongated labia, and seems quite critical of men who cheat on their wives with elongated labia with those without:

[...] it pleases him that my wife is a woman among women, and the chances of him going out they are slim. Of course men “go out” but the chances of him “going out”, can you imagine when you have a complete woman, if you do it [sex], even your guilty conscience it will tell you that why are you disrespecting this woman by going to someone who doesn’t have. (Mary)

Nonetheless, not all women with elongated labia were publicly proud of it. Chenai, for example, seemed concerned with revealing her labial status even to other women. She had the impression that she would be mocked and labelled as ‘backward’. When I asked whether she was suggesting that labia pulling was a sign of backwardness, Chenai was noncommittal, explaining instead that:

Some [women] are ashamed to openly say that I have them. Like now if I had to bath in the presence of others, if they [my labia] are long, the current generation will be laughing wondering ‘what it is...we saw her with a string [elongated labia] down there?’

The mention of elongated labia as resembling a string, and the laughter this may supposedly generate from other women, shows that Chenai was not associating it with female (sexual) attractiveness. Even more important here is Chenai's version of a 'modern woman' who has no interest in practices such as labia elongation, which she claims is as source of ridicule associated with 'backwardness'. Her construction of labia elongation as symbolising backwardness is, therefore, at odds with how other 'modern' women construct elongated labia as a source of attractiveness, 'completeness' and pride. Similarly, other women and men argue that elongated labia are unattractive and a source of 'dirt', partly because of the 'protruding flesh' and 'folds' which might produce a foul smell 'when not thoroughly washed.'

I then asked three of the women who told me they had not undergone labia elongation to respond to the derogatory remarks other women said about women like them. They told me they were not bothered by being constructed as 'incomplete'. The first one said labia elongation was not 'a measuring stick of superiority or inferiority'. She also said that women who made such comments were 'uncivilised'. The second one said she was not concerned because 'no man has ever said that to [her]' and that she 'would get worried [only] if [her] boyfriend says it'. The third woman presented other women's construction of a 'real woman' only in relation to sexuality, and particularly through possession of elongated labia, as quite narrow-minded. Interestingly, in as much as these three women initially presented labia elongation as of little significance in their lives as exemplified in their narratives above, it was only after I asked whether they ever discussed this issue with their sexual partners that it emerged that not having elongated labia sometimes bothered them. For instance, they all confessed that they initiated this topic in order to elicit their husbands or male sexual partners' opinion. Implicitly, this expresses their desire to be constructed as 'complete' women. More importantly, their concerns reflect the influence of cultural discourses of labia elongation which attempt to push women to conform to particular versions of femininity as defined in this socio-cultural context.

### **Sacrificing sexual desire and pleasure as 'good women'**

What was striking is how most women spoke about labia elongation in ways that gave prominence to men's pleasure rather than their own. This is reflected by one of the female participants who said that 'when a woman pulls, she pulls with a purpose that I want my man to enjoy.' I propose that the accentuation of male sexual pleasure rather than female sexual desire by these women had less to do with embarrassment and was connected with them performing particular versions of femininities constructed around making sexual sacrifices as wives and

lovers. Usually women only spoke about female sexual pleasure in response to my question about whether they benefitted from elongating their labia or not. Other women then told me that having elongated labia also enhanced their own sexual arousal.

In different interviews, some women with elongated labia drew parallels between the level of sexual arousal women supposedly experience when their nipples and elongated labia are caressed. They claimed that, unlike breast nipples which 'lost' their sexual sensitivity over time through 'breastfeeding', elongated labia have 'feelings' of their own which do not disappear. Yet, even though these women construct labia elongation as enhancing female sexual pleasure, they ironically see this as a dangerous problem. During a discussion about how long elongated labia should be, one woman alleged that 'it becomes a problem' when pulled labia are 'too long' because 'they bring a lot of [sexual] feelings.' Because of this, she said she discouraged girls from pulling beyond the 'normal' size, since that would cause 'a lot of' sexual feelings that 'you even fail to control yourself.' Another woman shared a story of a married woman whose labia were 'cut' by her husband after she became promiscuous. This story was in my view to emphasise the policing of women's sexuality.

Many women in my study seemed concerned with 'pleasing their men' sexually, and their support of labia elongation was tied to assumptions that this would curb men's promiscuity. Here, I draw on feminist literature on the relational construction of men and women's sexuality in patriarchal cultures and discourses. However, I do not intend to portray African sexual cultures or practices as more patriarchal or as the Other and very different from Western cultures. In the Western context, for instance, the so called female genital cosmetic practices are also framed around pleasing men as articulated by many Western scholars, including Morgan (1991: 47) and Negrin (2002: 21). This is despite their hegemonic representation as practices of Western "autonomous" women. I also want to refer to Hollway (1989: 64), who argues that regardless of cultural context it seems, men and women are respectively subjects of 'male sexual drive' and 'have/hold' discourses. In other words, in heterosexual relationships, men are constructed as having an insatiable appetite for sex or a natural sex drive, while women are seen as more concerned with commitment. This was framed and played out in discussions about labia elongation, between women, and the significance of this in 'holding on' to their men.

I use the term 'holding on' both literally and metaphorically here. In its literal sense, women undergo labia elongation to keep their men/ lovers/ marriages (hence 'holding on' to them). But the expression also connotes the discourses surrounding labia elongation (as echoed by some of the female participants in this study): that elongated labia 'firmly holds' the penis so that the man 'enjoys' the

sensation that the friction from the labia causes on his penis. However, divisions and conflicts emerged between women over their presumed abilities to hold on to their husbands, and (related to this) the pleasure they presumably are able to provide for him. The majority of female participants expressed the view that the practice guarantees husbands' marital fidelity based on the assumption that this satisfies their husbands' sexual desires. Rudo, who was married and had undergone elongation, said having elongated labia ensures that:

your husband doesn't leave you [because] if you don't have those things [elongated labia], your husband will leave you for those who have them'. All men are mischievous, where can you tie him?

This is illustrative of constructions of men and sexuality which naturalise men as sexually 'mischievous' and position women as wives in relation to mischievous men. This position, too, was common in most female participants' narratives. Nevertheless, other participants (both women and men) disagreed that labia elongation reduces the likelihood of husbands cheating on their wives. These participants insisted instead that it is 'natural' for men to be promiscuous.

But while (most) female participants seemed to praise labia elongation as a solution to hold on to their men, most male participants drew parallels between labia elongation and virginity. They held the view that it is by marrying virgins, rather than women with elongated labia, that they feel they can 'hold on' to their women. Men's focus on the importance of marrying a virgin was premised on the belief that these women would remain faithful to their husbands as exemplified in the men focus group conversation extract below:

Ras: At least if you are the one who removes her virginity, you won't imagine that she will sleep with another man

Obert: Yeah!

Taurai: Because she has nothing to compare with, you are the reference point, you see.

Masimba: Exactly! Exactly!

While a few men expressed that labia elongation enhances the sexual experience for men, most argued that there was no difference when a man sleeps with women with or without elongated labia. Only when having sex with a virgin was the sexual sensation 'strikingly different', they claimed. Therefore, while women believed

that labia elongation was a necessary marital and sexual sacrifice they must engage in for their husbands and lovers, most men in my study contradicted this view by instead placing more emphasis on a woman's virginity and not whether she has elongated labia or not.

## **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that through framing labia elongation in particular ways, Zimbabweans, especially urban Shona women negotiate their identities in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. More significantly, labia elongation emerges both as a material practice and as a symbolic marker through which young urban middle class adults negotiate identifications as gendered and sexual actors in a postcolonial African context. But rather than reproducing the communities of belonging usually associated with cultural practices – such as symbolising ethnic pride and/or ethnic identity – labia elongation, as constructed and experienced by participants in my study, produces other modes of identifications and communities of belonging than ones easily recognised.

I have demonstrated, that human beings are “site[s] and subjects” of multiple discourses (Weedon 1987: 97). As such, as they engage in constructing their identities, they “can only identify their ‘own’ interests in discourse by becoming the subject of particular discourses” (ibid.). The way participants spoke about labia elongation was not just about how they perceived this practice, but was also about “a staking of [their] identities” (Pattman 2001: 235). In other words, how they symbolically constructed this practice was in relation to how they positioned themselves against an array of possible femininities and masculinities, for example, as women (with or without elongated labia) or men, as modern urban middle class people, as sexual beings, as Christians, etc.

The article has shown how participants attempted to construct labia elongation as a cultural practice but in ways that do not make them appear traditional or cultural. This is evident in how they invoked Christian religious discourses to either justify or critique labia elongation. Others emphasised discourses of self-improvement to critique dominant Christian discourses which construct labia elongation as cultural, and therefore ‘unchristian’, for going against nature. The positions taken by this group of participants were in many ways a demonstration of how significant this practice is in their lives even though they identify themselves as Christians. Whereas colonial Christian discourses constructed most African practices as ‘traditional’ and pagan, and therefore incompatible with Christian values and modernity, the participants in my study blurred these boundaries. This is apparent in the disagreements they had about whether churches were teaching women about labia elongation or not, and whether this was a practice compatible

with Christian values. Some participants felt labia elongation was tampering with God's creation, because women were created 'complete', a position that appears to project the dominant narrative which presents (Christian) religion as separate from culture. Yet, even if these Christian discourses might appear totalising, individuals may produce other discourses, no matter how marginal, to reinforce or challenge dominant discourses. This is illustrated by some of the female respondents who argue that since the bible emphasises female submission, married women must elongate their labia upon their husbands' requests. In this regard, these women are drawing on Christianity to construct themselves as 'good Christian wives' in ways which defer to their husbands' authority.

What also emerged from the study, are the multiple levels of Othering exemplified especially by female participants. For instance, most of the women who had undergone labia elongation and spoke positively about this practice criticised those who did not undergo labia elongation (whom they constructed as 'incomplete' women). Nevertheless, the same women who praised labia elongation tried to distance themselves from women of particular nationalities and ethnicities (including their own) whom they considered to be rural and therefore 'traditional'. Having elongated labia that are too long was associated with rural and old women, for example. Hence some of the female participants wanted to dissociate themselves with labia elongation.

Finally, the article examined participants' efforts to construct labia elongation as a social and gendered sexual practice that transcends ethnic boundaries, in which the women (and men) were affirming their 'modern' 'middle class' identities. Contrary to other research findings, in reference to young women in Mozambique, that labia elongation is "out of fashion" (Perez et al. 2015: 703), the findings in my study suggest that the practice is very much 'in fashion' among the Shona considering the way the female participants in my study linked it with issues of class and modernity. This article has demonstrated the entanglement of the 'modern' and the 'traditional' in people's everyday lives, rather than a distinct separation of the two as often projected in dominant discourse. Working from a perspective that these categories are productive and relational rather than simply descriptive, the article demonstrates the slippery nature of these categories and the fluidity of identities. My findings thus beg the question: Why are civil society interventions about genital modification practices in Africa such as labia elongation focused on 'rural' and uneducated women, as if their gendered experiences are distinctly different from those of their urban and educated counterparts?

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