Loyal Repetitions of the Nation: Gay Assimilation and the ‘War on Terror’

Judith Butler is in town. The foyer of the London School of Economics is packed with a young giddy crowd. We arrive half an hour before the talk, too late to secure a seat, and are herded into a televised theatre. This must be the intellectual equivalent of pop fandom, I think. Or of England playing.

Even in the film theatre, the air is filled with exhilaration. We become spectator participants to Butler’s mediated, yet larger than/live performance on screen. From the critical questions – Are women's and gay rights now instruments in the ‘war on terror’? How have sexual freedom and progress become tools in the civilizing mission? Is this what we fought for? – we are swiftly moved to humour, as Butler ponders (and I paraphrase from memory and notes):

Do I want to kiss in public? Yes. Do I want everyone to watch? (pauses, laughs) Do I want everyone to watch? (laughs very hard)

Almost simultaneously, the two separated halls erupt into laughter, thickening our critical audience into community. We are progressives against the war, united by our critique of the state, which has appropriated our struggle for sexual expression and misdirected it against those to whom we have allied ourselves: the migrants tested on their views on homosexuality in the Dutch civic integration examination, the Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib violated by torture methods purported to ‘sexually liberate’ them, the growing populations in West and Central Asia whose deaths and disenfranchisement are legitimated with their ‘backward’, ‘barbaric’ gender regimes.

After six years of studying these disturbing trends in relative isolation, I welcome the belated entry (or rather, return) of explicitly anti-racist discourse to queer and feminist community. However – I struggle with the seemingly endless repetition of this question about positionality – are all kisses the same? What made Butler’s joke so common sense (or queerly sensible) that it instantly glued this particular audience together? Mine is, of course, a question about the cultural politics of this emotional performance of communal humour and about the publics and counter-publics constructed by it. How do these new demarcations contest or cement boundaries, including around queer discursive and material space itself?

For example, kisses are embedded in, and invited or concealed from, various public spheres, not merely with regard to their subjects’ gender, but also, and increasingly, their colour. Thus, two same-sex kissers who are brown may not be read as transgressive outlaws, but on the contrary as secretive, repressed, closeted victims who are exceptionally brave and in need of liberation by their already-liberated (white) siblings, as well as by the state. Kissing, as a spectacle of sexual freedom, encapsulates the very discourses of gendered modernity which Butler critiques. Vice versa, the transgressiveness of the white queer kisser is never outside these discourses, either. In fact, collective imaginings of brown homophobic onlookers may prolong, and themselves constitute, this moment as playful, transgressive and queer.

Butler’s discourse, while doubtlessly well-meaning, neglects the unequal terms of this sexual playing field. Like some of her other work it is curiously silent on the question of queer positionality. Her sole focus on the state lends credence to a thus far silenced critique (without, however, acknowledging it directly). On the other hand, it leaves intact the notion of an innocent gay subject, who is victimized even by a state which appropriates its righteous struggles for citizenship and alienates it from its coalitions with other Others. Butler’s discourse problematically disremembers the struggles which queer people of colour have waged over queer whiteness and racism. It dismembers once more from the queer discourse those who have demanded coalitions all along, and have traditionally fallen into their cracks.

Out of these multi-issue struggles, earlier documentations and theorizations have emerged of the ways in
which rhetorics of women’s and gay liberation have been deployed in the war. Some of these (especially Jasbir Puar’s) anticipate several of Butler’s arguments. These writings are characterized by complex engagements, not just with the state but multiple publics and counter-publics, including, importantly, the gay leaderships in places such as Germany, Britain, the US, and Israel. There, dominant gays have actively participated in the ‘war on terror’. For this, they are rewarded, on the one hand with a limited increase in sexual rights, and on the other, with a symbolic inclusion into nations which belies an ongoing homophobia. This secures not only a loyal citizenry willing to legitimate racism and war as human-rights projects, but also pacifies sexual liberation struggles and dislocates them from the national to the international (or at least, the interracial) level.

Basic to this multi-issue critique is a memory of earlier Orientalisms, especially the ongoing investment by white feminists in colonialism and imperialism. The (symbolic) entry into citizenship by (some) gay subjects, it argues, is predicated on the globalization of anti-Muslim racism in an international context of war, as well as the various local and national regimes of migration and/or occupation with which this war intersects. The myth of gay assimilation is crucially enabled by a redefinition of the West as sexually progressive.

This article synthesizes and develops some of these tools, especially Jasbir Puar’s and Amit Rai’s discussions of gender and sexuality discourses in new knowledges of ‘the Orient’. Sexual freedom has moved from the realm of the immoral or perverse to the realm of the morally superior, a central ingredient of US and Western exceptionalism. It has vacated the realm of the monstrous for the failed and perverse heterosexuality of the terrorist and terrorist-look-alike. In Puar’s words, queerness is the ‘new optic through which perverse populations are called into nominalization for control’.

Staying with the theme of masculinity, and drawing on earlier work by Jennifer Petzen, the article then reflects how the (symbolic) entry by (some) gay subjects into citizenship has been enabled by an embrace not only of imperialism but also of a heteronormative masculinity among white gay men. This is illustrated with a semiological analysis of covers of the British gay community publication Pink Paper, which celebrated the lift of the ban on homosexuality in the army and the simultaneous invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq in late 2001 as human rights victories. Using an Irigarayan frame, I argue that the performance of military masculinity, once a subversive, parodic repetition of a violently heterosexual masculinity from which gay men were excluded, has become a loyal repetition to the nation. However, the problem of sexuality discourse in the ‘war on terror’ is not merely one of gay assimilation. Queer and other sex-radical contexts, too, are not outside the exceptionalist logic of a sexually free West. I illustrate this with the fundraising efforts for Iraqi LGBT in queer spaces at the time of writing, in early 2008.

Ready for war: Sexual performances of Western exceptionalism

The critique of modernity has a long genealogy within postcolonial, anti-racist feminist, and queer of colour thought. As early as 2002, Puar and Rai published a sophisticated analysis of the emerging discipline of terrorism/counter-terrorism studies in the US, which has proliferated with the renewed military, political and economic interest in the Middle East. Puar and Rai argue that gender and sexuality discourses are central to these new knowledges, which draw on anthropological and psychological arguments in order to explain the apparent proneness of ‘Muslim’ cultures to producing terrorists. In particular, it is an improper, failed heterosexuality, manifested in polygamy and other ‘dysfunctional’ family structures, which produces these ‘evil’ masculinities, whose destruction serves as the spectacular rationale for the ‘war on terror’.

The depictions of masculinity most rapidly disseminated and globalized through the war on terrorism are terrorist masculinities: failed and perverse, these function and are metonymically tied to all sorts of pathologies of the mind and body – homosexuality, incest, pedophilia, madness, and disease.

The authors note the dominance of the monstrous in media representations of Osama bin Laden, Al Qaeda, the Taliban and Saddam Hussein, who are described as ‘monsters’, ‘dirtbags’, ‘terror goons’, and ‘diabolical henchmen’. Using a Foucauldian frame, they show how this spectacle queers ‘terrorist-look-alikes’ (a term which usefully describes how ‘terrorist’ has become the default reading for Muslims, and ‘Muslim’ the default reading for ambiguously brown people). They lift the discourse on terrorism out of its dominant time frame of culture, modernity and civilization by showing how it is part of the West’s own family of monsters:
The undesirable, the vagrant, the Gypsy, the savage, the Hottentot Venus, or the sexual depravity of the Oriental torrid zone shares a basic kinship with the terrorist-monster.\textsuperscript{14}

This queering occurs in a changing context of Orientalism. Perversity has shifted, and is no longer synonymous with sexual freedom. On the contrary, sexual freedom now signifies the exceptional status of American and, arguably, European societies, which are able to imagine themselves as morally superior in their support of female, same-sex and other alternative sexualities.\textsuperscript{15} The West, once the bearer of civilizational morality (monogamy, heterosexual marriage, sexual control), has reassumed its rightful place, but now in the name of a sexual liberation. In this, the ‘terrorist’ has partly replaced the white gay person as significant sexual Other.

That this has little to do with actual gay-friendliness becomes clear when we examine the prominence of homophobia in representations of terrorism and the ‘war on terror’. Among the early examples documented by Puar and Rai are images circulated of Osama bin Laden, anally penetrated by the Empire State Building, and of a US Navy bomb aboard the USS Enterprise (in operation since world war two) with the scrawling ‘Hijack this Fags’.\textsuperscript{16} Puar’s later work showed how the sexual torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib, too, was debated in exceptional terms. This was despite the fact that the torture was perpetrated within the notoriously homophobic setting of the American and British militaries,\textsuperscript{17} and that it actively employed sexist, homophobic and transphobic technologies such as dressing the prisoners up in women’s underwear and forcing them to engage in crudely stereotyped fantasies of gay sex.

Butler’s presentation partly repeats Puar’s description of Abu Ghraib as a site where ‘Arab sexualities’ are produced, by both the torturers and the anthropologists who were commissioned to write their scripts (especially Raphael Patai, the now infamous writer of \textit{The Arab Mind}).\textsuperscript{18} Puar, however, went much further than Butler, by problematizing the participation of gay actors in this debate. The torture was widely condemned by activists as exploiting the ‘cultural vulnerabilities’ of Muslims (a notion which Butler’s presentation partly repeats), to whom nudity, same-sex contact and cross-dressing is essentially anathema. This euphemizes the torture, and the war within which it occurs, as violating only in their sexual/cultural offensiveness.\textsuperscript{19} It also repeats the very essentialism of Islam as sexually backward and repressed which underlies the civilizing mission it sets out to critique.\textsuperscript{20}

Butler’s call to coalitions between ‘sexual’ and ‘religious’ actors, while doubtlessly well-meant, misses how these actors are co-constituted or, in Puar’s words, how ‘terrorist bodies’ are produced ‘against properly queer subjects’.\textsuperscript{21} It ignores how white gay sexualities have been invited to leave the realm of the perverted and vacate it for brown Others. It ignores, further, the investments which many ‘sexual’ and ‘ethnic’ actors have in presenting their causes as non-overlapping, following the mainstreaming of single-issue identity politics in multiculturalist regimes of recognition.\textsuperscript{22} Populist naiveties about the innocence of the oppressed subject to the contrary, straight Muslims and white queers are no ‘natural allies’ against the state, but would have to actively forge allied positions, not only with each other but, more importantly, with queer Muslims. While this need has been well-documented for straight Muslims, challenges to the innocence of the white gay subject have so far not been received. This asymmetry must again be understood within the privileging of gender over race at this historical conjuncture, and the role offered to gay leaderships in participating in national and imperial projects.\textsuperscript{23}

Elsewhere, we have argued that the state needs new feminist and gay citizenries in order to legitimate the ‘war on terror’ as a human-rights project.\textsuperscript{24} Feminists, long ridiculed as hysterical man-haters, and queers, traditionally criminalized and pathologized as promiscuous perverts and threats to the family and nation, have suddenly been declared part of an Occidental tradition of ‘women’ and ‘gay-friendliness’. Unfortunately, the discovery of women’s and gay rights as ‘core values’ reflects less on gendered progress than on racial regress. The invitation of (some) gay subjects into the national project is inseparable from the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the onslaught on civil rights and liberties in America and Europe, and the debates around ‘cohesion’, ‘integration’ and ‘the future of multiculturalism’ which frame these political, military and economic measures. Puar, drawing on the Foucauldian notion of biopolitics, argues that the emergence of queer subjecthood ‘is a historical shift condoned only through a parallel process of demarcation from populations targeted for segregation, disposal, or death, a reintensification of racialization through queerness’.\textsuperscript{25} Racism and imperialism are thus enabling factors for gay citizenship.
The invention of a tradition of gay-friendliness barely coincided with (and in some cases preceded) belated legal reforms of discriminatory statutes and policies. The British age of consent (which had constructed gay men as paedophiles) was equalized in 2001, and the ban on gays in the army was lifted in the same year. The infamous Section 28, which had prevented the ‘promotion of pretend-families’ at school (generally equated with the teaching of gay-positive material and even with coming out on the job), was repealed in 2003. Its repeal necessitated the Parliament Act, as the House of Lords, that pillar of British tradition, had repeatedly vetoed its abolition through parliamentary means. In Britain as well as Germany, same-sex partnership only became a possibility in 2001. Debates continue over same-sex adoption, with distinct echoes of the spectre of gay promiscuity and perversion, and its threat to family values and the national morality. This is even more so the case in the US. There, anal sex (and other practices considered ‘sodomy’) was criminalized in some states until 2003; same-sex unions are either not recognized legally, or entail few substantive rights; and the army continues to operate a policy of ‘Don’t ask don’t tell’. Nevertheless, gay leaders in both Europe and the US have signed a new sexual contract which claims that sexual liberation has been achieved. Under this changed sexual hegemony, traditions of criminalization and pathologization have been revised and rewritten into traditions of gay-friendliness and sexual freedom.

This amnesia will surprise less if we examine the payoffs for the white gay subject, who has been lifted from the discursive realm of the public toilet and the asylum onto the stage of mainstream politics. Postcolonial feminism, albeit commenting on a different historical era, contains important lessons here. Meyda Yeğenoğlu argues that European women in the nineteenth century assumed sovereign status by asserting their superior status over ‘Oriental women’, and their expertise in liberating them from their ‘backward, patriarchal’ cultures. This colonial relationship of patronage has continuities with the ostensibly postcolonial era. According to Chandra Talpade Mohanty, commenting on western feminist scholarship on third-world women in the 1980s:

This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions.

The sexual politics under examination here are clearly within the same genealogy. Gay leaders have benefited from the colonial continuities of the ‘war on terror’, not only symbolically but also materially. One example is the LSVD (Lesbian and Gay Association Germany), which has assumed an aggressive stance of competition with the TBB (Turkish Federation Berlin Brandenburg) over public funds. In its claim for the larger piece of the diversity pie, the LSVD has asserted its expertise in the integration of ‘pre-modern’ migrants. Part of this ‘missionary position’ is the patronage of migrant queers, especially the Turkish-German group GLADT (Gays and Lesbians aus der Türkei), who have resisted this client role by publicly disaffiliating from the Association. Most of its limelight, however, the LSVD has gained from piggy-backing onto the debate around the so-called ‘honour killing’ of Hatun Sürüş, a young heterosexual woman of Turkish descent. This sudden preoccupation with heterosexual migrant women is ironic, given the bad reputation of the Association in women’s matters. Nevertheless, by metonymically linking gay rights with women’s rights, and marketing itself as an expert in ‘Muslim’ gender questions, the LSVD has successfully secured its share in the Islamophobia industry.

In Britain, the direct-action group Outrage, whose organizer Peter Tatchell has assumed cult-like status and immense media coverage in the post-9/11 gender regime, has played a similar role. Puar and Leslie Feinberg have both documented Tatchell’s role in organizing a new global gay movement which aims to tackle homophobia in Southern, especially ‘Muslim’, countries. That these efforts are frequently not perceived as solidarity was illustrated by an open letter by African LGBTI activists, who criticized Outrage’s involvement in Nigerian sexual politics as exploitative and harmful for local activists, and asked Tatchell in no unclear terms to end his ‘neo-colonial’ activities and ‘stay out of Africa’. A second contentious action was the widely publicized International Day against Homophobia, organized around the execution of two young men in Iran in summer 2005, in which many of the major international gay rights organisations participated. Both Puar and Feinberg question the careless ways in which Northern activists and opinion makers glossed over the ambiguity of the sodomy verdict, which many argued could have been for rape rather than homosexuality. Both, further, critique the ease with which the new movement supports Western governments in targeting Iran as the latest focus of Western imperialist and military interest. As Feinberg argued in his article:
Are the July 19 political forces really opposed to imperialist military intervention? Listen to what they said in the first week after the executions last summer.

Peter Tatchell, head of OutRage!, stated, ‘This is just the latest barbarity by the Islamo-fascists in Iran … the entire country is a gigantic prison, with Islamic rule sustained by detention without trial, torture and state-sanctioned murder.’ Sounding more Bush than Blair, Tatchell condemned the British Labour (sic) Party for ‘pursuing friendly relations with this murderous regime’ and urged the ‘international community’—the imperialist powers and those willing to line up with them—to treat Iran as a pariah state, break off diplomatic relations, impose trade sanctions and give practical support to the democratic and left opposition inside Iran.’

In essence, Tatchell is calling for economic warfare (sanctions); threat of military action (‘pariah state’ status); abandonment of diplomatic pressure (over Iran’s right to develop nuclear energy); and regime change (destabilizing the government from within). These are tactics that a wing of the capitalist class in the U.S. and Europe would be more than willing to back—if they would prove effective to re-colonize Iran.

The embrace of aggressive imperialist discourses on the part of Outrage, whose politics were traditionally defined as left-wing, anti-fascist and internationalist, may surprise more than those of the LSVD, a lobbying and advice organisation more akin to the British Stonewall. Both cases, however, highlight how the proponents of gay assimilation accept and even pioneer an understanding of the West as the vanguard and the harbinger of sexual liberation, including by violent means.

Petzen links the shift in Western gay politics away from white-on-white homophobia towards ‘Muslim homophobia’ with cultural shifts in gay gender identities. In particular, she points to the displacement, both in (anti-)gay stereotypes and in gay settings, of effeminate presentations by masculine, straight-appearing ones. Petzen illustrates this with white gay men in Germany, who have asserted their masculinity by assuming ‘missionary positions’ toward men of migrant, especially Turkish and Arab, descent.

There have indeed been noticeable changes in dominant gay gender presentations. I will illustrate this with the performance of military masculinity in the gay media and subcultures. In Britain, homosexuals were traditionally banned from the army. This ban harked back to sexologist understandings of homosexuality as effeminacy or ‘inversion’, as well as a moral threat to ‘normal’ masculinity. In gay culture, this exclusion from masculinity has been reworked through ironic performances of military masculinity. Dressed in uniforms and big leather boots, the soldier is a staple of gay male pornography and fetish culture. He has a firm place in gay iconography and sexual ritualism beside other heterosexualized hyper-masculinities, such as policemen, firemen, cowboys, and skinheads. The self-conscious humour and subversive criticism of these performances can be seen in the music of the Village People, whose songs ‘YMCA’, ‘Macho Men’ and ‘In the Navy’ brilliantly parody both heterosexual masculinities and the erotic and symbolic hold they have on gay male cultures and subjectivities.

This tradition of performing military hyper-masculinity in a context of criminalized, pathologized and feminized male homosexuality can be theorized as mimicry, a subversive performance in an Irigarayan sense. Luce Irigaray distinguished between loyal performances, which repeat the dominant discourse, and subversive performances, which critique or parody it. While Irigaray discusses (non-trans, non-queer) femininity, her analysis also applies to gay men, who have invented traditions of mimicry in order to negotiate their feminization and exclusion from ‘real’ masculinity and its naturalising institutions.

Nevertheless, this context changed radically in 2001, at least in Britain. The lifting of the ban on homosexuality in the army coincided with the wars on Afghanistan and Iraq. Pink Paper, the biggest free paper catering to the gay community, celebrated this reform as a dual human rights victory. At home, gays gained inclusion into a homophobic institution; abroad, ‘we’ were liberating gay people in the countries under attack.

The cover of issue 709, which carried the revealing title ‘Ready for war’, featured the face a young white man. His dreamy blue eyes are framed by camouflage clothing and some leaves and twigs. The pin-up style gaze of the blond model, who is also depicted in horizontal stalking position inside of the magazine, evokes the tradition of mimicry in gay pornography and fetishism.
However, I argue that in this moment of (symbolic) recognition, where certain gay men (and women, who classically lack visibility in this male-dominated gay medium) are hailed as citizens, the performance of military masculinity ceases to be subversive. On the contrary, it demarcates the aspiration of (some) gay subjects to sovereignty, and the loyalty they return to a nation which they hope and claim as theirs - a claim which is contradicted by the continuing levels of formal and substantive homophobia. The donning of military clothes and stance by these subjects, in this moment of fantasized citizenship, is a performance of 'real' masculinity, not incidentally embodied by a white, able-bodied man.  

An earlier Pink Paper issue from the same month, commenting on the invasion of Afghanistan and the hyper-oppression of gay people there, had also featured a young, attractive face, this time one that was brown, female, and framed by a burqa. The veiled female image, her large, dark, whimpered eyes cast upwards at the onlooker, peering out between the folds of black cloth, clearly follows an Orientalist script. Again, the 'inclusion' of a, presumably heterosexual, woman of colour in this white-gay-male dominated medium metonymically links 'Muslim homophobia' with 'Muslim sexism' and thereby exploits the longstanding colonial association between Orientalized gender regimes and patriarchal backwardness so aptly analysed by postcolonial feminists. It directly serves the exceptionalist discourse and secures the gay share in the imperial project by asserting the ability of (certain) gay men, as 'real' (white) men, to join the civilising mission and write boys’ own tales of their own. Colonialism, once described by Gayatri Spivak as ‘white men saving brown women from brown men’ is rewritten, in this moment of gay assimilation, as ‘white (straight and gay) men saving brown women (and gays) from brown men’.

The aesthetic appeal and near symmetry of the two images of the ‘Muslim’ woman and the gay ‘soldier’ illustrates the distinct sexual timbre of the gay participation in the war. It shows how the war, and the racisms which have accompanied it in the metropoles, cannot be separated from gay agency. On the contrary, the war and the backlash against multiculturalism have been central to struggles for gay citizenship.

Gay Assimilation v. Queer Transgression?
If dominant gay subcultures have participated in the war, this at first sight appears to bear little relevance for queer theorists and activists, who often identify themselves as critics of gay politics. The assimilated ‘gay’ is the constitutive outside to the ‘queer’ project, whose transgression of dominant norms is identified in opposition to the ‘gay’ demand for inclusion into them. ‘Queer’ has been defined as the disidentification from multiple normativities around heterosexism, whiteness, and middle classness, of which whiteness has been privileged as a marker of ‘gay’ essentialism and identity politics. Against this backdrop, it is ironic that the major queer theorists have so far missed the link between gay assimilation and the war which has enabled it.

One example is Matt Bernstein Sycamore’s collection of radical queer writings, That’s Revolting - Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation. While interesting on many levels and obviouslyanthologized with a view to difference, it only contains a single article about the growing Islamophobia and other racisms in gay and queer communities. It may not be a coincidence that the writer, Priyank Jindal, is a masculine-presenting person of South-Asian descent who well may fall into the category of ‘terrorist-look-alikes’ himself.

In British alternative queer scenes, too, interest in the war has been extremely limited. Most recently, this could be seen in discussions on Ladidah, the queer anarchist e-list, about fundraising for Iraqi LGBT, which organizes safe houses for LGBT people in Iraq (many of whom are targeted for their non-conforming gender presentation). According to Iraqi LGBT organizer Ali Hili, homophobic and transphobic attacks have increased exponentially in the militarized climate of occupied Iraq. This compares with a pre-or interim-war context where gender and sexual violence was rare. The group, while doubtlessly doing important work, is in a classic client-patron relationship with Outrage. Thus, Ali Hili was long described as an Outrage member, and donations to Iraqi LGBT continue to be solicited into the Outrage bank account.

In winter 2007/8, there were a series of fundraisers for Iraqi LGBT in alternative queer venues, including the big London squat party Behind Bars, a queer cafe, and a queer film night. At least one of the events (Behind Bars) was advertised as supporting LGBT people in Iraq against ‘honour crimes’. This
characterization of domestic violence, which is reserved for contexts racialized as Muslim, Orientalizes such violence and reinscribes it as a property of Islam. It is directly within the exceptionalist discourse critiqued by Puar and remains within a primitive solidarity frame, which re-inscribes the problematic temporal distinction between ‘already liberated’ populations and populations ‘to be liberated’. Organizers missed the opportunity to flag up to subaltern populations the possibility of a solidarity which does not force them to, in Rey Chow’s terms, mimetically authenticate themselves as victims of backward cultures in need of liberation through bombs. While party-makers negotiated ways of bypassing Outrage and getting the money directly to Iraqi LGBT, there was no direct critique of Outrage’s role in bolstering the exceptionalist discourse and calling for state violence against Muslim countries. None of the contributors to the discussion discussed racism or the war, and no one challenged a contributor who argued that

Outrage! are not the enemy, they have some different views and ways of doing things compared to us, but we are fundamentally on the same side as far as I can see. Making it seem like they can’t be trusted on this, when in fact they have done way more than us (as a group) to support our allies in Iraq, and in fact are the folks who made us aware of the need to fundraise right now for Iraqi LGBTs, just makes us look silly.

It could be argued that the queer alternative scene simply needs either more education or more diversity, and efforts in the past have included race awareness workshops, which often depended on the labour of queers of colour. However, the problem with Queer may be even more fundamental. Thus, those at the margins of Queer – especially transgendered people and people of colour – have often problematized the queer fetish for transgression itself. For example, Jay Prosser, from a white transsexual perspective, argued that Butler’s account of heteronormativity simultaneously fetishized transpeople for transgressing gender, and set them up for failing non-trans queer expectations of anti-heteronormativity.

Puar goes even further by suggesting that the very idea of transgression is inseparable from the exceptionalist discourse. The queer project, according to this, is complicit, even if unwittingly, with Western supremacism. It is indeed noteworthy that ‘queer’ and other alternative practices such as sadomasochism, swinging and even some types of (non-migrant) sex work have become mainstreamed on an unprecedented scale. In the British context, this can be illustrated with the expansion of sex shops and department stores such as Ann Summers and Harmony, the proliferation of sex-advice reality shows on Channel 4 (e.g. Sex Inspectors, in early 2007) and Channel 5 (e.g. How to Have Sex After Marriage, in late 2007), and the inclusion of queer columns in the free newspapers London Paper and Metro (‘Gay About Town’, ‘Gay Girl About Town’, and ‘Harsh Words’ by drag queen Jodie Harsh). It is further reflected in the expansion of on- and offline spaces for practitioners of BDSM (bondage & discipline, domination & submission, sadism & masochism) and other ‘alternative’ sexual practices such as swinging, an increasingly popular type of non-monogamous, often public sex. There has also been a noticeable trickling ‘up’ of kinky styles in fashion and popular culture. Examples include the embrace of fetish wear (corsets, boots, even whips) by stars such as Madonna or Rihanna, and the adoption of corsets and steel-heel knee-high leather boots as everyday items of female fashion.

Some of these developments can be explained by the capitalist need for expansion, and the need for variation and transgression in consumer culture. However, even areas traditionally perceived as sex-negative are opening themselves up to sex-radical agendas. There has, for example, been a queering of feminist activism and scholarship, which needs to be contextualized with the history of feminist involvement in neo/colonial projects. One example was the Feminist Fightback conference at the School of Oriental and African Studies on 21 October 2006 in London. The conference organizers had invited several sex-radical, including sex worker rights’, interventions but ended on a highly race-conservative note when during the final plenary they called for the ‘liberation’ of veiled Muslim women.

Sex worker rights’ activists are clearly working in a different temporality from gay rights’ activists. While homosexuality has been largely decriminalized, the criminalization of sex-work related practices is far from over, and on the increase even, including seeking commercial sex, or migrating or aiding migration for the purposes of selling sex. Unlike homosexuality, sex work is still largely excluded from the ‘sexual freedom’ discourse, and is championed largely by individuals on the radical left who identify with multi-issue politics. Nevertheless, any reforms are likely to occur within a similar genealogy, and sex worker rights’ activists, like other sex radicals, will have to actively resist being enlisted into the exceptionalist discourse. Neither queer transgression nor sex worker rights, then, can be discussed outside the sexual exceptionalism which is at the basis of the ‘war on terror’. 
Outlook: Coalescing whom?
The new discourse on sexual rights v. religious rights ignores how gay citizenship has occurred centrally, and I have argued agentically, in a context of war and racist backlash. Populist calls for coalitions (with their tired tendency to stay single issue) and lazy arguments against or in favour of intersectionality no longer suffice in this context of exceptionalism. As the intersectionality approach is becoming mainstreamed in again mostly white circles, standpoint politics, too, have failed to translate. Minoritized people have a clear place in exceptionalist politics, including queers and feminists racialized as Muslim, who are given voice only where they are willing to authenticate themselves by mimaetically repeating racist notions of Islamic gender/sexuality regimes.

And still, it clearly matters which differences we are forced to carry in and on our bodies. The new interest in phenomenology, which pays attention to both these differences and their constructedness in social encounters, is hopeful in this respect. How do we perceive injustice, against other bodies, and our own? The old truths of second-generation feminism remain relevant here, such as Audre Lorde’s call on dominant people to reach deep within our/their selves, to those painful places, like the asylum or the public toilet, which we/they would rather forget and leave behind. How do we remain in traumatized bodies without forcing others into our corner in the family of monsters, without succumbing to either coercive mimaeticism or to the violent assimilationism of a society which aggressively expels difference while claiming to love it? Finally, it is indeed important to look at the state. As Michel Foucault has long taught us, this must however be combined with a wider examination of governmentality. The gay participation in the ‘war on terror’ demonstrates the limits of an identity politics which seeks recognition by a system which is as imperialist as it is neoliberal. Consequently, the struggle against state violence must necessarily be combined with a struggle against hegemonic whiteness in gay and queer spaces themselves.

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Notes

1. Butler, Judith (2007), ‘Sexual Politics: the Limits of Secularism, the Time of Coalition’, British Journal of Sociology Public Lecture 2007, London School of Economics. In my following discussion, I am aware of the dangers of reading atmospheres in crowds. For instance, other individuals may have also been uncomfortable with the joke, and different people may have laughed for different reasons. For a critique of a model of affective contagion, see Ahmed, Sara (forthcoming), ‘Multiculturalism and the Promise of Happiness’, New Formations.
2. We have discussed elsewhere how in Germany, these demands threatened to become reality in January 2006, with the introduction of the so-called ‘Muslim-Test’ in Germany nationality law: Haritaworn, Jin, with Tauqir, Tamsila and Erdem, Esra (forthcoming), Queer Imperialism: The Role of Gender and Sexuality Discourses in the ‘War on Terror’, Miyake, Esperanza and Kuntsman, Adi (eds.), Out of Place: Queerness and Raciality, York: Raw Nerve Books.
3. Haritaworn, Tauqir and Erdem (ibid).
6. Note the centrality of kiss-ins in the politics of Act Up and Queer Nation, which are considered foundational to the Queer paradigm.
7. See Thobani (ibid), Prosser, Jay (1998), Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality,
23. Puar (2007: xiv) notes the ‘rise of a global gay right wing anchored in Europe and attaining
29. For celebratory views of Tatchell and Outrage, see Smyth, Cheryl (1996): Lesbians Talk Queer
Further gay hyper-masculinities include leathermen, ‘scally lads’ and bears. Of course, some of these styles are not unproblematic and contain certain classed, racialized and gendered connotations. My point here is that there exists a long tradition among gay men of mocking and parodying non-trans heterosexual masculinity.

Irigaray’s model has been critiqued for its simple subversion/loyalty distinction (I am grateful to Sara Ahmed for reminding me of this). Of course, Butler’s influential performativity model and her arguments about drag constitutes a more explicitly queer theory of mimicry: Butler, Judith (1990), Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Gender, London: Routledge. However, see Prosser (1998) for a critique of this model, which repeats dominant notions of trans identities as inauthentic and less ‘real’.

Being allowed to die for one’s country is, of course, the ultimate sign of citizenship in modern nationalist ideology (Anderson 1991). This ideology is in stark tension with the opportunism of military recruiters in Britain, who beside gay people targeted ethnic minorities, and even offered citizenship to certain people willing to join the British army in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Beside gay styles, our current culture of military aggression also renders problematic other alternative styles which aestheticize militarism, such as punk. A related phenomenon is the militarization of mainstream fashion, and combats and camouflage hats and shirts are now part of everyday street wear.


Yeğenoğlu, (ibid.)


See Kunzman (2008).


Mainstream LGBT events, too, got involved, such as the Camden LGBT History Month party on 21 February, 2008.

See Crenshaw (ibid) for a critique of racializing domestic violence.

Chow proposes the concept of ‘coercive mimeticism’ to discuss how racialized artists gain visibility only where they volunteer to embody white stereotypes: Chow, Rey (2002), The Protestant Ethnic and the Spirit of Capitalism, New York: Columbia University Press.

Anonymous posting on the Ladidah list.


Puar (2007).

For an example of a popular fetish website, see alt.com. The mainstreaming of kinky sex is in tension with the continuing criminalization of many BDSM practices (see spannertrust.org).

See Willis, Susan (1990), A Primer for Daily Life, New York: Routledge.


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