

‘He’s Got a Rainbow Gun’: Homonationalism and the Israel-Palestine Conflict

By Tyler Carson, University of Toronto

John Greyson’s provocative YouTube video “Hey Elton” urges Elton John to cancel a planned 2010 show in Tel-Aviv.¹ Through the use of the “rainbow gun” metaphor, Greyson articulates the violence of gay pride, explicitly linking the gay-friendly reputation of Israel to the politics of apartheid. Greyson explains to Elton how gay tourism is central to the ongoing project of ‘re-branding’ Israel as a liberal beacon of tolerance and progressiveness. In doing so, he exposes how the Israeli state recruits and mobilizes queer populations, both within and outside of its borders, to build transnational consensus through processes of what Jasbir Puar terms ‘homonationalism’. Using this theoretical concept to guide my inquiry into the Israel-Palestine conflict, this essay maps the cultural and political terrain in which sexuality, race, and nationalism operate. This intervention traces how the Israeli state reifies the sexual exceptionalism of Western(ized) queers by positioning itself as gay-friendly, and in doing so demarcates Palestinians and ‘the Middle East’ as the backward, primitive, and monstrous other.² The essay thereby posits that the ‘politics of sexuality’ and the ‘politics of occupation’ are inextricably linked and must not be examined in isolation from one another.

Responding to the call of David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Muñoz in the introduction to a special issue of *Social Text*, “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” this paper is committed to ‘a renewed queer studies’ that is “calibrated to a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent.”³⁴ Furthermore, it endorses Puar’s assertion that accounts of queerness should move away from investigating ‘queer’ as an identity category and ‘queering’ as a transgressive practice to instead “underscore [its] contingency and complicity with[in] dominant formations.”⁵ Indeed, my examination into the operations of homonationalism seeks to explicate how a subscription to the political, cultural, and economic projects of the Israeli nation is a requisite to the normalization of some,

1 John Greyson, “Hey Elton,” uploaded on May 8, 2010 at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HSCIZbhB5g>.

2 I use ‘Israel state’ and ‘Israeli nation-state’ interchangeably throughout to refer to the ways in which discourses interact to (re)produce and sustain the imagined community of the Israeli nation.

3 David Eng, Judith Halberstam, José Muñoz, “What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?” in *Social Text*, 84/85, 23:3-4 (2005), 1.

4 This thought builds off of Judith Butler’s (1993) essay, which asserts that queer must never be “fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent expanding political purposes” (p. 228). Thus, queer must not remain fixed; queer theory must be attentive to the fluidity of queerness.

5 Jasbir Puar, “Queer Times, Queer Assemblages,” in *What’s Queer about Queer Studies Now?* special issue of *Social Text* 84/85 (3-4) (2005), 121.

not all or even most, queer bodies. The aim of this endeavor is not to demonize the Israeli or Western gay, but instead to illuminate their complicity within the larger violent structures of the Israel state—their belonging to the Israeli nation is contingent on the unbelonging of the Palestinian. Finally, this essay posits that the unbelonging of a racial-queer other is an essential facet of homonationalism that can be traced back to one of the birthplaces of the North American gay rights movement, the Stonewall riots.

While this article does provide a broad critique of gay liberalism, it does not examine how neoliberalism is the guiding framework of homonationalism, nor does it hold that queer movements lie outside the purview of neoliberal governmentality. Further, it does not engage in the necessary and important task of mapping the connections and similarities between settler colonialism in Israel and settler colonialism in Canada and the U.S.⁶ These tasks unfortunately lie outside the scope of this paper. Instead, its primary function is to provide a comprehensive literature review of homonationalism and pinkwashing in Israel. However, this paper does bring a new analytical framework—the (still unfolding) event of Stonewall—to bear on these conversations as a way of understanding the present through the past. As a white, cisgendered, non-Jewish, Canadian queer, I (attempt to) stand in solidarity with indigenous peoples in their decolonizing struggles. This essay serves as a non-native gesture of solidarity, though I am aware of my complicity in perpetuating systemic injustices even as I identify and challenge them.

The Politics of Visibility: Stonewall and Gay Identity

Before examining the Israel-Palestine conflict specifically, it is useful to sketch the dominant Western discourse that frames “progressive” gay and lesbian movements around the world, that is the infamous story of the Stonewall riots. The Stonewall narrative provides a valuable tool in understanding the violence of identity politics and how queerness is appropriated and politicized not only for particular ends but for, and by, particular bodies. This section will examine the ramifications of the Stonewall legacy and how the complexities of the rioters' identities are erased by liberal rights discourses. In doing so, it extends the historical scope of this essay to sketch the setting and logic in which homonationalism in America and Israel concomitantly emerge from and operate within.

D’Emilio provides a historically accurate representation of the social actors and bodies that ignited the riot at the Stonewall Inn.⁷ Most of the rioters were

6 See Scott Morgensen, “Queer Settler Colonialism in Canada and Israel: Articulating Two-Spirit and Palestinian Queer Critiques,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 2, 2 (2012), special issue: *Karangatia: Calling Out Gender and Sexuality in Settler Societies*.

7 John D’Emilio, “After Stonewall,” In Carlin, Deborah and Jennifer DiGrazia, (eds.), *Queer Cultures*, New Jersey: Pearson (2004), 3-37.

'Queens', who disrupted and parodied traditional gender norms, partook in same-sex sexual activities, participated in sex work, and were members of lower socio-economic communities. According to D'Emilio, most were also people of color.⁸ The dominant narrative of 'gay rights' often neglects these facts, instead presenting the Stonewall Riots as a catalyst for the modern gay rights movement, where 'gays' literally and figuratively 'came out' of the closet (bar) and into the streets to rebel against oppressive police officers. Under this framework, Manalansan argues “gay gains meaning according to a developmental model that begins with an unliberated, 'prepolitical' homosexual practice and that culminates in a liberated, 'out', politicized 'modern', 'gay' subjectivity.”⁹

Manalansan discusses how the modern gay rights movement tends to universalize and essentialize the terms 'gay and 'lesbian' by rendering them as static categories that can be identified in all cultures and times. In this way, these categories are viewed as existing 'outside of history', instead of existing 'inside of history', where ideas surrounding gender and sexuality are constructed through shared social meanings that vary depending on social location and context. Most of the 'Queens' involved in the Stonewall Riots did not identify with any of our contemporary terminology, yet are remembered as 'the radical gays who took to the street'. Similarly, Manalansan explains how a bakla—“a Filipino man who engages in practices that encompass effeminacy, transvestism, and homosexuality”¹⁰—is often labeled a 'closeted gay' by both Western and non-Western writers. These examples demonstrate the hegemonic power of Western discourses on sexuality, and how they impose socially constructed categories and meanings upon othered bodies. Manalansan further asserts that the 'coming out' narrative, purported to be a natural progression of liberation by gays in the West, often does not accurately capture the realities or beliefs of marginalized and subjugated groups. Racialized bodies often encounter multiple oppressions that are narrated in diverse and complex ways. Manalansan argues that to someone who prefers that their identity be 'worn' instead of 'declared', such as a bakla, 'liberated' is specious and fails to acknowledge how individuals negotiate and reconcile intersecting, and sometimes conflicting, subjectivities. This common assumption is a result of an ahistorical and decontextualized analysis that lacks any critical or intersectional thought.¹¹

Norma Alarcón's concept of 'multiple-voiced subjectivities' is useful when trying to understand how sexuality is imbricated with other social identities. Alarcón uses this concept to criticize (white) feminist scholarship produced in the West that “acknowledge[s] diversity among women while positing that women recognize their unity.”¹² She argues that by asserting that gender oppression should

8 D'Emilio, “After Stonewall,” 4.

9 Martin Manalansan, “In the Shadows of Stonewall: Examining Gay Transnational Politics and Diasporic Dilemma,” in Jana Evan Braziel and Anita Mannur's, eds., *Theorizing Diaspora*, MA: Blackwell (2003): 210.

10 Manalansan, “In the Shadows of Stonewall,” 213.

11 Ibid., 220.

12 Norma Alarcón, “The Theoretical Subject(s) of This Bridge Called My Back and Anglo-American Feminism,” in Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by*

be the organizing identity for all women, Western feminism fails to consider how women are constituted and oppressed simultaneously through multiple, intersecting subjectivities; such as race, class, sexuality, religion, ability, and social location (political, economic, cultural). The dominant narrative of the Stonewall Riots does not acknowledge the tangled and messy antagonisms of the rioters. Under this framework, there is an erasure of the complexities of the rioters' lived experiences in the memory of the Stonewall Riots that, in turn, leads to the reductionist conclusion that they were fighting for the sole cause of sexual liberation, or gay rights.

A Foucauldian reading of the Stonewall Riots might reveal that power is acting productively in this context as the identities of the rioters are politicized and appropriated by the (white) gay community to form the discursive regimes of 'gay rights' and 'gay liberation'. This movement gets co-opted, however, by the *scientia sexualis*¹³—that is, a science of sexuality, which produces multiple discourses that form a truth of 'sex'—by actively engaging with and relying on the terms 'gay' and 'lesbian', which simultaneously oppress and liberate the subject. The movement thereby employs terminology that requires strict disciplining of the body and the self, yet enables the normalization of a once non-normative identity. The normalization of queers requires the procurement of the racialized and heteronormative markers of (Western/American) respectability.¹⁴ Furthermore, racialized queers encountering not only cultural imperialism, but also state violence, racism, and xenophobia, often cannot reconcile, nor conceive of, a 'gay' identity, further marginalizing them from gay and lesbian movements. Thus, the questions of who benefits from the Stonewall narrative and what bodies and identities have the privilege of being normalized are particularly salient.

The ideological framing of the Stonewall riots serves as a point of departure for examining how Western discourses of sexuality both infiltrate and shape the transnational space of Israel, and in doing so, continue to reiterate this epistemic legacy of erasure to serve particular political agendas. I posit that the precarious positioning of the Palestinian queer and the Stonewall Queen function to legitimate a discourse of sexuality that is constructed in the interests of not only the Western white gay, but also to the maintenance and dominance of liberalism and the imperial and colonial genealogies that accompany it. Indeed, the Stonewall riots fit into a longer historical trajectory of American exceptionalism and mark one of the origin points of the homonational project.

Women of Color, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Foundation Books (1990), 361.

13 Michel Foucault, "Scientia Sexualis," In *History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Vol. 1*, New York: Vintage Books (1978).

14 Meaning that one does not come into citizenship without the proper markers of normativity that have been, and continue to be, defined by white, straight, cisgender men. This theory has been thoroughly documented by scholars interested in social movements in various locations and contexts (i.e. the respectable black body, the model minority, the women's rights and suffrage movement(s), etc).

Framing Homonationalism and Sexual Exceptionalism

Borrowing Lisa Duggan's concept of "homonormativity"¹⁵ to help guide her discussion, Jasbir Puar interrogates the confluences, intersections, and divergences between the nation and homosexuality. Puar explores how certain gay American bodies are recruited and incorporated into the nation-building project through the granting of full citizenship rights, personhood status, and a liberal sense of belonging.¹⁶ She states that in this process, the state not only allows room for the absorption and management of homosexual bodies—when advantageous to U.S. national interests—but also normalizes and disciplines them. In doing so, the state bestows the benefits of intimate citizenship¹⁷ in return for a patriotic gay subjectivity that supports the nation's political, cultural, and economic projects, such as the War on Terror. Thus, queer belonging¹⁸ is contingent on queers being assimilated into the heteronormative and racist model of American respectability. The nation-building project thereby normalizes white queer bodies in order to secure an intelligible distinction between 'us' and 'them', which is then mobilized to demonstrate the inherently homophobic culture of the Middle East and other racialized geopolitical spaces. In doing so, the legacy of Stonewall is reiterated as the racial-sexual other (the queer of color) is positioned outside not only the national imaginary, but also the queer imaginary of belonging. Now having respectable gay bodies, or what Puar terms 'docile patriots',¹⁹ within its borders, the United States is able to flaunt this achievement to the world, effectively positioning itself as a progressive nation.

The homosexual body thereby becomes a tool of what Puar terms "U.S. sexual exceptionalism."²⁰ Similar to many second- and third-wave feminist movements, the hegemony of American empire is what underscores these sexually 'progressive' movements vis-à-vis the discourse of U.S. exceptionalism. This exceptional U.S. subjectivity, Puar notes, has a paradoxical logic—it "signals both distinction (to be unlike, dissimilar) as well as excellence (imminence, superiority), suggesting a departure from mastery of linear teleologies of progress."²¹ Exception refers, in this essay, either to the discourses that continually reproduce the hegemony of the

15 Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The sexual politics of neo-liberalism," In *Materializing Democracy*, edited by Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson, Durham: Duke University Press (2002), 173-194.

16 Jasbir Puar, "Mapping U.S. Homonormativities," in *Gender, Place, and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 13:1 (2006), 67-88.

17 'Intimate citizenship' refers here to liberal inclusions in social, political, and legal discourses, i.e. legalizing same-sex marriage, anti-discrimination bills, gay adoption, and parenting rights, and the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell.

18 This essay adopts and is informed by a reading of violence that is attentive to the manifold forms that it can take in relation to belonging. Violence manifests itself in physical forms, "but also works through cultural knowledge, political and legal subjecthood, notions of humanness and forms of dehumanization" (Kuntsman, 2009, p. 3).

19 Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: the War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots," in *Social Text* 72, 20:3 (2002), 117-48.

20 Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham and London: Duke University Press (2007), 7.

21 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 3.

United States as exceptional²² or to the 'state of exception', which is used to justify extreme measures that violate the limits of judicial and political power, thereby transcending the rule of law in the name of the 'public good'.²³ Interventions by many feminists have deconstructed U.S. exceptionalism, such as Chandra Mohanty's seminal text "Under Western Eyes."²⁴ Further, Inderpal Grewal's text identified the 'women's rights as human rights' discourse as reiterating first-world-third-world power hierarchies and argued that it maintains the trajectory of 'development', where the U.S. subject is positioned as one who has 'rights', and serves as the standard by which the 'Other' is judged.²⁵

A similar narrative of homosexual sexual exceptionalism can be extracted from the recent LGBT activism in the West that is attentive to the Middle East. In harmony with the tropes of 9/11 and the War on Terror, this activism constructs monolithic images of Muslim sexuality and presents the Middle Eastern countries as "pathological spaces of violence, which are constituted as sexually excessive, irrational and abnormal."²⁶ Indeed, Puar highlights how scholars and activists in the post-9/11 West "identified with the national populace as 'victims' of terrorism by naming gay and queer-bashing a form of terrorism; some claimed it was imperative to support the War on Terrorism to 'liberate' homosexuals in the Middle East."²⁷ It is therefore the duty of the sexually liberated (exceptional) gay Westerner to save the Muslim from their savage, primitive, and backward reality. In doing so, U.S. homosexuals are positioned as 'having arrived', (liberated, out of the closet), while Muslim queers are positioned as 'having yet to arrive' (unliberated, in the closet).²⁸ Puar asserts, "this discourse [of the Arab/Muslim-sexual other] functions through the transnational displacements that suture spaces of cultural citizenship in the United States for homosexual subjects as they concurrently secure nationalist interests globally."²⁹ These 'interests' must be pursued in order to sustain the hegemony of whiteness and the American nation-state vis-à-vis the specter of a racial-sexual other. This process is the work of what she terms 'homonationalism', whereby homosexual bodies are assembled to aid the project of nation-building. Thus, a common undercurrent that threads these seemingly disparate 'progressive'

22 Ibid., 7.

23 Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2005).

24 Mohanty's essay traces the operations of U.S. exceptionalism by examining how feminist scholarship originating in the West often constructs a universal notion of "gender oppression" that generalizes and essentializes the experiences of marginalized and "third-world" women. See Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30 (1988), 65-88.

25 Inderpal Grewal, "'Women's Rights as Human Rights': Feminist Practices, Global Feminism, and Human Rights Regimes in Transnationality," *Citizenship Studies*, 3:3 (1999), 337-354.

26 Puar, "Mapping U.S. Homonormativities," 82.

27 Ibid., 70.

28 Western constructions of sexuality are often read onto bodies who do not subscribe to these linear models. More recently this has been occurring in the Middle East. For a more in depth discussion of the theory of gay imperialism, see Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2007), or Haritaworn, Tauqir and Erdem, "Gay imperialism: The role of gender and sexuality discourses in the 'War on Terror'," in Miyake and Kuntsman (eds), *Out of Place: Interrogating Silences in Queerness/Raciality*, New York: Raw Nerve Books (2008), 9-33.

29 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 4.

and 'democratic' movements together is a fidelity to American exceptionalism. In other words, belonging to the nation is contingent on an unfettering loyalty to the American nation-building project.

Expanding this framework of homonationalism and sexual exceptionalism from an American-centric model proves valuable to understanding the ways that queers have been mobilized in the Israel-Palestine conflict. I situate 'U.S. sexual exceptionalism' within a broader discourse of 'Western sexual exceptionalism', which I posit the Israel state draws on and seeks to be a part of in order to garner political support from other Western countries. In doing so, homonationalism can be investigated in non-American settings, yet still be attentive to the extent to which American discourses inform, shape, and mold (trans)national discourses of sexuality. This essay will now turn to mapping the operations of homonationalism within the (trans)national and (trans)local spaces of Israel. Through a discussion of pinkwashing, exceptionalism, 'saving' narratives, queer Russian immigrants, policing the borders, and 'the checkpoint', the following sections will expose the violence of queer belonging.³⁰ The final section will then return to Stonewall in order to think through the erasure of the Palestinian queer within sexual, racial, and national imaginaries. It will also outline how queer Palestinian activist groups are contesting and resisting the violent structures of the Israeli state.

Homonationalism at Work I: Israeli Exceptionalism and Pinkwashing

Israel is actively engaged in constructing narratives of exceptionalism that feed into and sustain American exceptionalism. The Israeli state effectively (re)produces "exceptional national security issues" through the following cycle: 'exceptional vulnerability' results in 'exceptional security needs', the risks of which are alleviated and purportedly conquered by 'exceptional counterterrorism technologies'.³¹ Thus, the Israeli nation-state finds itself continually responding to perceived threats of violence that demand exceptional uses of force against the Palestinian population. American and Israeli exceptionalisms, therefore, have a synergistic relationship, as their excessive use of violence converge on the same target—the Muslim. In other words, there is a collusion of American and Israeli state interests defined by their joint oppositional posture toward Muslims.³² This posturing is sustained by narratives of Western exceptionalism, that is the U.S. and Israeli nation-states effectively mask these exceptional uses of force through the construction of an Arab or Muslim 'other' who poses a considerable civilizational threat to the progressive (exceptional) politics of modernity.

One of the ways in which the Israeli state has reified its exceptionalism is through its successful campaigning as a liberal and democratic nation that protects

30 These areas are under-theorized, so please excuse the repetitive use of sources. In fact, there is only one journal issue that examines the relationship between queer politics and the Israel/Palestine conflict. See Hochberg, "Queer politics and the questions of Palestine/Israel," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, 16:4 (2010).

31 Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, 7.

32 *Ibid.*, 7.

the rights of its gay citizens. Immediately, this assertion should resonate with the homonational project of Western sexual exceptionalism in the United States, where 'progressive politics' around homosexual liberation were used to garner support for the War on Terror, as articulated above: U.S. gays aligned themselves in solidarity with the Afghanistan war because it promised liberation for repressed Arab queers. Thus, by naming queer bashing in 'homophobic Middle Eastern countries' a form of terrorism, progressive LGBTQ politics thereby colluded with conservative politics. The occupation and apartheid systems, in a similar fashion, can be linked directly to discourses of sexuality in Israel vis-à-vis the transnational campaign 'Rebrand Israel', which relies on the monolithic construction of the backward Muslim other. This project positions Israel as the liberal exception to the Middle East, relegating Palestine and other Middle Eastern nations to spaces void of sexual liberty and progress. Tying into the discourse of Western sexual exceptionalism, in this way, enables the Israeli state to secure the support and alliance of Western(ized) LGBT organizations.

Indeed, Puar has even gone as far as writing an article in *The Guardian* entitled "Israel's Gay Propaganda War" that documents the operations of homonationalism—how the Israeli state is able to recruit and mobilize queer bodies both within and outside Israel's borders to support its politics of occupation and apartheid—through an examination of the process of 'pinkwashing'.³³ In the article, Puar highlights the work of the activist group Stand With Us, a self-declared Zionist organization, which has been quoted in the *Jerusalem Post* as saying, "We decided to improve Israel's image through the gay community in Israel."³⁴ She also documents how the activism of pinkwashing has extended beyond the borders of Israel, however, particularly into North America, where Stand With Us has run seminars and community awareness programs about Israel's progressive LGBT laws and Palestine's 'record' of intolerance toward queers.³⁵ For instance, Puar notes a scheduled workshop by Stand With Us titled "LGBT Liberation in the Middle East" at the U.S. social forum in Detroit that was cancelled due to protest. Natalie Kouri-Towe, a Toronto based scholar and member of the local chapter of Queers Against Israel Apartheid, provides the following explanation of how the imperial project of pinkwashing operates in LGBT communities:

- i. "Argue that Israel is the only country in the Middle East to grant gay rights;
- ii. Accuse Arab and Muslim cultures of being inherently homophobic and venerate Israel as the only safe place for queers. Catch phrases: "gay people are killed in Iran/Palestine/etc." and "if you had a gay pride parade in Ramallah, you'd be killed;"

33 Puar, "Israel's gay propaganda war," in *The Guardian*, July 1, 2010. To read the article in its entirety, see: www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/jul/01/israels-gay-propaganda-war.

34 Ibid.

35 I have included two posters from the Stand With Us website that convey essentializing and monolithic tropes of Palestinian culture. They are labeled as figures 1.1 and 1.2 in the appendix.

- iii. Since these first two arguments must be true, LGBT people and anyone who stands for human rights should naturally stand with Israel, against the homophobic Arab world;
- iv. If anyone still wants to criticize Israel for occupation or apartheid after they've been convinced that Israel really is a gay haven in a sea of homophobia, remind them that any criticism of Israel, including the labeling of Israel as an apartheid state, is the new face of anti-Semitism."³⁶

Pinkwashing, therefore, aids the homonational project of positioning Israel as a democratic beacon, which is deserving of the financial, moral, and political support of Western queers, and in so doing, paints Palestine as the backward other that represents a serious threat to the sexually exceptional West. Puar further argues that pinkwashing “dilutes solidarity with the Palestinian cause by reiterating the terms upon which Israel justifies its violence: Palestinians are too backwards, uncivilised, and unmodern to have their own state, much less treat homosexuals properly.”³⁷ Thus, pinkwashing extends beyond the borders of the Israeli nation-state to build transnational alliances that effectively draw on the discourse of Western sexual exceptionalism in order to persuade North American and European LGBT organizations to join the cause by aligning themselves with a state that respects the rights of its gay citizens, and in doing so sends a message to Palestine about their deplorable treatment of queers.

Homonationalism at Work II: Guarding the Borders of Israeli Queer paradise

The scrutinizing gaze of the Israeli state over the treatment of Palestinian queers is structured within a larger discourse of orientalism—Israel adopts the role of the Western hero as the progressive, modern, and civilized nation whose mission is to 'watch over' the primitive Muslim and Arab cultures. These orientalist discourses manifest themselves in rescue paradigms and fuel material and military interventions that have been traced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal text “Can the Subaltern Speak,”³⁸ which coined the well known phrase “white men saving brown women from brown men.” Feminists have documented how the West continues to construct urgent racialized salvific narratives, particularly of women and children, to justify the War on Terror in countries such as Afghanistan.³⁹ Further, scholars have recently begun examining how rescue narratives have shifted from focusing strictly on saving children and women to saving homosexuals.⁴⁰ Thus, how countries treat their gay citizens, 'the homosexual

36 Natalie Kouri-Towe, “Sanitizing Pride,” *Briar Patch*, 40, 3 (2010), 13.

37 Puar, “Israel’s gay propaganda war.”

38 Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and Interpretation of Culture*. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, (1988), 271-313.

39 Mariam Cooke, “Saving Brown Women,” *Signs*, 28:1 (2002), 485–487.

40 Bracke, Sarah, “From ‘saving women’ to ‘saving gays’: Rescue narratives and their dis/continuities,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 19:2 (2012), 237-252.

question',⁴¹ is a significant development in the expanding criteria—constructed largely by the (white) West and imposed on the (racialized) East—of what marks or constitutes a civilized and democratic society.

In the condemnation of Palestine's homophobic culture, multiple conflicting narratives surface, yet all work toward one common purpose—securing the borders of queer paradise, or what I term Israeli 'queeradise'. Homonational Israel employs and exploits rescue narratives of Palestinian queer liberation to justify its apartheid system and ongoing occupation of Palestine. As Jason Ritchie notes,

“...forever haunted by the bogeyman of the intolerant Palestinian terrorist, properly domesticated gay and lesbian Israelis offer stories of victimized Palestinian queers “seeking refuge” in gay-friendly Israel to rationalize the marginalization of—and justify all manner of state violence against—Palestinians as a result not of the exclusionary logic of Israeli nationalism or the racist practices of the Israeli state but of the “backward” and “inferior” essence of Palestinian culture.”⁴²

Further that:

“... queer Palestinians are acceptable, and visible, only insofar as they mute or repudiate their Palestinianness; the most effective strategy for achieving that goal—and passing through the checkpoint into the space of Israeli gayness—is to confirm the racist narrative of gay-friendly Israel versus homophobic Palestine by becoming the queer Palestinian victim, who flees the repressiveness of “Arab culture” for the oasis of freedom and modernity that is Israel.”⁴³

'The checkpoint' is thereby the metaphor that Ritchie employs to describe the subjective process of identity policing whereby Palestinian queers must continually 'check' themselves and others against 'the fields, signs, and practices' in which the nation-state is situated. This requires Palestinian queers to not only subscribe to Western models of sexuality and sexual identity, but also to the politics of the Israeli state—their (limited) belonging to the Israeli gay community is contingent on them never contesting the benevolent Israeli nation.

Yet, one could argue that Israel can never truly incorporate the Palestinian queer because doing so would destabilize the fiction of Israeli exceptionalism. Instead, the Palestinian must always remain a dangerous other in order to sustain the Israeli state of exception. Israel's gay community, in policing the borders of queeradise, deploys the specter of the racialized terrorist to relegate the Palestinian

41 Jasbir Puar, “Citation and censorship: The politics of talking about the sexual politics of Israel,” *Feminist Legal Studies* 19 (2011), 39.

42 Jason Ritchie, “How do you say ‘come out of the closet’ in Arabic? Queer activism and the politics of visibility in Israel-Palestine,” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 16:4 (2010), 560.

43 *Ibid.*, 563.

queer to the space of a threatening other.⁴⁴ Indeed, the research of Adi Kuntsman documents how racism and (homo)nationalism are made manifest in the violent and sexy discourses of the (Arab) terrorist and the (Israeli) soldier on a cyberspace forum that is frequented by queer Jewish-Russian immigrants, who have returned to Israel through the Law of Return.⁴⁵ Palestinians and Arabs are largely absent in the members' accounts of Israel as a place, country, and society, and when they are mentioned, they usually figure as terrorists. The Palestinian queer is represented in these discussions not as the victimized gay refugee who needs to be saved, but as the angry terrorist, caught in the binary of being a 'terrorist-rather-than-gay' (an attacker who uses gay as a cover) or a 'terrorist-because-gay' (a queer who redeems honor through sacrifice).⁴⁶ The Israeli soldier, in contrast, is eroticized and adored as the protector of the nation whose task is to punish the Palestinian intruder, to evince their corrupt and perverse nature, and to correct this nature with sexual and physical violence. For example, Kuntsman saliently notes that “shooting Arabs between the eyes becomes a promise of national masculinity unthreatened by effeminizing; at the same time it figures as a guarantee of gay men’s citizenship.”⁴⁷ Further, the collusion of violence and sexual fantasies is made clear by forum participants who comment on the “sexy almond asses” of Arabs, while at the same time reducing them to nonhumans by asserting that “sex with an Arab is bestiality” and insisting that “instead of feeling sorry for the (poor) Arab, you’d better think how to throw them all out of the country.”⁴⁸

In this violent battle to secure belonging, Kuntsman notes that male bodies are mobilized as “queer figurations of patriotism and racism; of arriving, border crossing, and deportation; of a gay national self and of a terrorist monster; of homeland security and of killing the enemies in their homes; of pleasures and fantasies and of rape and torture.”⁴⁹ The adoration, desiring and protecting the body of the male Israeli soldier and the nation, therefore, requires the specter of the racialized terrorist—the Palestinian other—and the bodily violations that accompany it. The pain that these violations inflict is not only what marks the border between Israeli and Palestinian, but is what becomes the border.⁵⁰ Sara Ahmed, in her discussion of the politics of emotion, suggests that pain is the mechanism in which “the effect of boundary, surface, and fixity is produced”⁵¹ and that pain “involves the violation or transgression of the border between inside and outside, and it is through this transgression that I [am able to] feel the border in the

44 See Puar’s the chapter “The Sexuality of Terrorism,” in *Terrorist Assemblages* for a lively dialogue between critical terrorism studies and queer studies, which unfortunately lies outside the scope of this essay, but nonetheless is pertinent background material to this paper’s topic.

45 Adi Kuntsman, “The Soldier and the Terrorist: Sexy Nationalism, QueerViolence,” *Sexualities* 11, 143.

46 Kuntsman, “The Soldier and the Terrorist,” 151.

47 *Ibid.*, 156.

48 *Ibid.*, 156.

49 *Ibid.*, 162-163.

50 *Ibid.*, 163.

51 Quote found in Kuntsman, “The Soldier and the Terrorist,” 163. Originally published in Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2004), 25.

first place.”⁵² The Israeli and Palestinian materialize through pain⁵³; are marked as belonging or unbelonging to the Israeli nation through feeling the border; the pain of feeling ‘inside’, ‘outside’, or ‘inside/outside’.⁵⁴ The queer Russian-Israelis are able to secure their sense of belonging (their sense of being inside) to the nation by inflicting pain, which is achieved through navigating the violent constructs of the (Israeli) soldier and the (Palestinian) terrorist. Their violence surfaces as a response to feeling the pain of being ‘outside’ the national imaginary of Israeli subjecthood. As Kuntsman observes, “for queer immigrants, it seems, military violence carries a particularly tempting promise of belonging [to the nation] through masculinity and homonationalism.”⁵⁵ This feeling is at least partly reconciled by enacting violence against a Palestinian ‘other’; exclusionary violence secures the feeling of being ‘inside/outside’ for the queer Israeli-Russian immigrant. Queer belonging therefore requires that the members of queeradise, particularly those in the fluctuating space of inside/outside, continually inflict pain in order to mark and police the border between Israel and Palestine, between hero and enemy, between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

Beyond Stonewall: Contesting the Closet and Resisting Gay Liberalism

What bodies belong? A more pertinent question to our discussion thus far is: where does the queer Palestinian belong within the imaginary of the Israeli nation? The Stonewall riots served as our point of departure for this essay; they were employed to frame the trajectory of Liberalism and gay rights activism in the West. In doing so, we examined how the memory of Stonewall excludes certain bodies from its purview, similar to Israeli nationalism that cannot reconcile nor concede the absorption, and sometimes even the existence, of gay Palestinians. The invisibility of gay Palestinians has been theorized through a homonational lens by Western and Israeli gay activists who have repeatedly attributed their “supposed inability to come into (Western/Israeli) gayness as a result of the irredeemable pathology of Palestinian (or “Arab”) culture.”⁵⁶ Thus, the epistemically violent legacy of Stonewall is reiterated; the displacement of particular racialized bodies (the Stonewall Queen and the Palestinian queer) is necessitated by the homonational framework—a need to construct narratives that affirm and support the projects of Liberalism and exceptionalism.

Accused of being from an inherently homophobic culture, excluded from intimate citizenship within the Israeli nation-state, and unable to have recourse to the Liberal trajectory of rights, unless complicit with the violent structures of the Israeli apartheid system, queer Palestinians find themselves in a precarious position. Nonetheless, there is an increasingly expansive aspirational space that transcends Western genealogies of sexuality. The recent activism of Palestinian queers being able to locate a space of belonging within Israel is twofold: first, by

52 Ahmed, *Politics of Emotion*, 27.

53 Even if this is only an imagined pain narrated in cyberspace, as in Kuntsman’s study.

54 Kuntsman, “The Soldier and the Terrorist,” 156.

55 Kuntsman, “The Soldier and the Terrorist,” 156.

56 Ritichie, “Politics of Visibility in Israel-Palestine,” 560.

contesting the discourse of the closet metaphor—deconstructing the politics of visibility—and second, by resisting the racist and nationalist frameworks of gay Liberalism through the cultivation of a radically democratic queer politic. For instance, the queer Palestinian group Al-Qaws destabilizes visibility from being understood as the right to 'come out of the closet' as an equal queer citizen by asserting that visibility should only be pursued “as a strategy for challenging the repressive discourses and practices through which the respectable queer citizen is constructed in the first place.”⁵⁷ In other words, queer visibility is only pursued as a strategy for disrupting and dismantling settler colonialism. This is achieved through the dissemination of a radical politic that is grounded firmly in a respect for cultural diversity and democratic participation. Most importantly, it is attuned to and centered around the linkages between the politics of apartheid and the politics of sexuality. In this way, queer Palestinian activists refuse to emulate Western and Israeli models of visibility, “which takes its terms from the lexicon of neoliberalism and articulates its demands in a way that justifies state violence against racial others in exchange for recognition of a victimized class of domesticated queers.”⁵⁸ Queer Palestinian activism therefore exposes homonational operations in order to resist the imperial and racializing projects of gay Liberalism. Ritchie concludes his piece by setting forth an activist politic that moves from “an imagined solidarity of 'gays and lesbians' to[ward] a solidarity based on the radical democratic dream of a world in which 'the courageous anonymity of subjectivities in play' is the imperative, rather than the negation, of (queer) citizenship and belonging.”⁵⁹ Some contemporary Palestinian queer movements have thereby moved beyond Stonewall by acknowledging the epistemic violence of these hegemonic narratives and by resisting the conventional identity politics of Western genealogies.

Conclusion: Violent Queer Belongings

The theoretical framework of homonationalism has been employed in this essay to critique purportedly 'progressive' Liberal rights discourses of sexuality. Homonationalism provides transnational and postcolonial feminists with a way of thinking through the contingency and complicity of queerness with dominant formations. More specifically, it can be utilized to investigate how liberal democracies permit the national recognition and inclusion of certain gay bodies, yet at the same time, require the segregation and disqualification of a racial-sexual other from the national imaginary.

This essay has traced the operations of homonationalism in the Israel-Palestine conflict to evince the confluences, intersections and connectivities between the discourses of sexuality and the (trans)national projects of occupation and apartheid. The recruitment, normalization, and discipline of queer bodies, through

57 Ibid., 562.

58 Ibid., 570.

59 Ibid., 571.

the process of pinkwashing, has been central to the production of docile patriots, both within and outside of Israel, who buy into gay-friendly narratives disseminated by Israeli institutions and activists. In doing so, these homonational subjects subscribe to the ideology of Israeli (sexual) exceptionalism. However, the Palestinian queer who undermines the exceptional narrative of queeradise by challenging the racist and orientalist discourses and narratives of the Israeli imaginary effectively blurs the borders of belonging. The fictive identity border of queeradise must therefore be continually patrolled by inflicting pain in order to feel the border and maintain a coherent and intelligible 'us' and 'them'. The violence of queer belonging to the Israeli nation thereby becomes painfully clear—it requires the unbelonging of the Palestinian other. But this homonational project also plants the seeds of its own demise. The exclusion and unbelonging of the Palestinian queer opens up the possibility of belonging to the injured and excluded. Indeed, the fundamental pillars of homonationalism—neoliberalism, nationalism, and racism—are being contested by the emerging and growing activism of Palestinian queers who have cultivated a radical democratic politic that mobilizes pain as a form of protest. Palestinian queers are therefore beginning to articulate what 'feeling the border' means to those on the other side.

Tyler Carson will be entering his fourth year of undergraduate studies in September 2013 at the University of Toronto, where he researches Women and Gender Studies and Sexual Diversity Studies, while completing his undergraduate thesis on the 2014 World Pride festivities. Interested in the areas of queer theory, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial feminist studies, Tyler's research grapples with the intersections of race, nationalism, and sexuality. He recently won co-second place in the 2013 National Women's and Gender Studies et Recherches Féministes (WGSRF) Undergraduate Essay Prize competition for this essay.

Appendix

Treatment of Gay Men by the Palestinian Authority



- Palestinian Authority Police arrest and torture gay men.
- Palestinian families organize vigilante mobs to beat and kill gay men.
- Palestinians accuse gay Palestinians of collaborating with Israel.
- Terrorist groups pressure gay Palestinians into becoming suicide bombers to "purge their moral guilt."

KNOW THE FACTS

standwithus.com

Why does Israel look like paradise to gay Palestinians?



Israel is a sanctuary to many gay Palestinians, who suffered beatings, imprisonment, and death at the hands of their families and the Palestinian Authority police within Palestinian communities.

Israel has no laws against sodomy, and its constitution guarantees equal rights. Gay and lesbian Israelis

- have gay organizations and community centers
- hold gay pride parades
- gay members of parliament
- serve openly in the military
- enjoy tv programs with gay themes

Israel respects life.

Source: Paul Vamell, Chicago Free Press, Aug. 25, 2002

standwithus.com

Figures 1.1 (left) and 1.2 (right): Are examples of the propaganda material that the Zionist group Stand With Us distributes in order to recruit queers in Israel and the West to support the gay-friendly Israel state.