Homonormative Patriotism: Queer Solidarity with Palestine and the Imperial Imaginary

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ABSTRACT: As Israel's public image falls increasingly out of favour on the international stage, campaigns of pinkwashing have re-emerged as important political tools for Israel and its imperial allies. With these developments in mind, this paper explores the recent rising tensions in colonial states where queers have resisted complicity in the ongoing colonial occupation of Palestine, and the more recent intensification of genocide. It begins by offering a brief history of heteronormative patriotism in the Western world, as well as its eventual development into what Jasbir Puar describes as homonationalism. With this history in mind, it explores the ways in which the "unsettlement" of both queerness and anti-colonialism links the movements for queer liberation and decolonization together in a context of increasing homonationalist sentiments. It ends with a discussion of two case studies of queer resistance to pinkwashing, providing an analysis of the contemporary state of pinkwashing in an era of heightened queer resistance.

KEYWORDS: Palestine, homonationalism, queer solidarity, imperialism, terrorism, western hegemony

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In the 1990s, responding to a crisis of public image, the Israeli government took on the "Brand Israel" campaign, in which the state of Israel was marketed as an island of modernity and progress in the Middle East. Particularly, Israel's extensions of rights to its gay population was touted as a symbol of its progressiveness and exceptionality in what was painted as an otherwise culturally 'inferior' area of the world. The hosting of WorldPride by Israel in 2006 cemented this new global image of Israel as an exceptionally modern state, whose inclusiveness of its gay and lesbian citizens rendered it worthy of praise on the international stage.² This new branding of the Israeli state was resisted by queers internationally, who recognized this new 'gay friendly' branding as an attempt by Israel to distract from their mass violations of human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories. Indeed, as Jasbir Puar points out, the 1990s represented both an era of increasing rights for gay and lesbian Israelis, as well as a decade of increasing Israeli encroachment on Palestinian territory and subsequent violence against Palestinians.³ This strategy of employing a country's record on gay rights as distraction from that same country's mass human rights violations became labelled as 'pinkwashing,' and campaigns against this practice quickly took on international prominence.

Following the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel, we continue to witness the collective punishment, in the form of mass genocide, that Israel's defense forces have meted out against the Palestinian population, particularly in the Gaza strip. As Israel's public image falls out of favour once again on the public stage, campaigns of pinkwashing have re-emerged as important political tools for Israel and its imperial allies. This paper explores the recent rising tensions in colonial states where queers have resisted complicity in the ongoing colonial occupation of Palestine and the more recent intensification of genocide. It begins by offering a brief history of heteronormative patriotism in the Western world, as well as its eventual development into what Jasbir Puar describes as homonationalism. With this history in mind, it then explores the ways in which the "unsettlement" of both queerness and anti-colonialism link the movements for queer liberation and decolonization together

in a context of increasing homonationalist sentiments.⁴ It ends with a discussion of two case studies of queer resistance to pinkwashing. The first is a content analysis of a recent Israeli comedy sketch show entitled "What a Wonderful Country" that engages in a caricature of international queer support for Palestine. The second case study examines the decision on behalf of Canadian government to drop out of Capital Pride following the organization's statement of solidarity with Palestine. These case studies are discussed within the historical context provided, providing an analysis of the contemporary state of pinkwashing in an era of heightened queer resistance.

Theoretical Framework

The political history of queer inclusion in the Western world can be traced back to the Cold War era. In both Canada and the United States, the early 1960s saw the emergence of federal programs that aimed to uncover, and subsequently fire, 'homosexuals' employed in government offices. Justification for this project derived from the belief that gays and lesbians employed in government were prime targets for Soviet blackmail. It was not only the "character weakness" of these individuals that rendered them susceptible, but also the precarious societal position that they found themselves in as a result of their identities. Soviet spies, it was thought, could threaten to reveal their sexual identities to their families and networks if they did not comply with their demands. From these Cold War era programs emerged a sort of heteronormative patriotism, in which the archetypal 'good citizen' of the Western world practiced a heteronormative lifestyle.

Writing on the surveillance of gays and lesbians in Canadian government in the 1960s, Gary Kinsman posits that the governmental insistence upon heteronormative lifestyles during this era was used as a disciplinary and normalizing tactic that served to fight against global revolutionary sentiments. Kinsman argues that the Cold War was a war for "neocolonialism, imperialism,...empire building," and, ultimately, "white hegemony." Western nations stopped at nothing short of the total destruction of Global South

countries in the name of stunting growing international Soviet influences and cementing their own neo-imperialist interests. The endless American interventions into Afghanistan are a prime example of this phenomena. In response to global revolutionary sentiments, America and its allies cracked down on all forms of subversion, ensuring a national adherence to "white hegemony." Part of this adherence to the project of white hegemony included the proliferation of the nuclear, heteropatriarchal family. Those who strayed from this model of sexuality thus found themselves on the outskirts of citizenship in the Western world.

As the Cold War subsided in intensity, heteronormative patriotism expanded its boundaries to allow certain gays and lesbians to experience membership in the national community. Jasbir Puar dubs this phenomenon "homonationalism." Beginning around the close of the twentieth century, as human rights language became valuable currency on the international stage, marriage and other civil rights were extended to gays and lesbians in the United States and Canada as proof of the progressiveness of the Western world. This was in turn contrasted with the homophobia of other states, feeding into a narrative that Global North states are further along on a continuum of civilization than their Global South counterparts. 11 This newfound membership of gays and lesbians in Global North states, however, came with caveats. Puar highlights the ways in which gays and lesbians were required to live a homonormative life that mirrored the heteropatriarchal structures of heteronormativity. Namely, a homonormative life was an apolitical existence that did not challenge the imperial agenda or the white hegemony of the homonationalist state. 12 Gays and lesbians could not be too radical, too queer, or too subversive in their existence. They could not challenge the imperial agenda of the white Western state.

If homonationalism requires an acceptance of the state's imperial agenda, then a queer resistance to homonationalism must commit to a rejection of imperialism and other forms of colonial domination. Before continuing here, it may be helpful to define queerness within the context of this paper. To a certain extent, this

is a contradictory exercise, considering that the meaning of queerness employed here borrows from Heike Schotten, who argues that "the definitive feature of queer is its refusal to be defined." ¹³ This is, however, an important contradiction to embrace, as the queer's definitional denial "becomes the mark of refusal to regimes of the normal, a resistance in particular to the specific regimes and subjectifying effects of heteronormativity."14 This (non)definition of queerness acts in direct contradiction to homonationalism, which demands assimilation within the wider heteropatriarchal order. As Schotten points out, there is thus a certain inherent solidarity between the queer and the anti-colonial —specifically the Palestinian's—existence. As Edward Said writes, the Palestinian. too, refuses to assimilate, or disappear, into the larger imperial order. The queer and the Palestinian thus both challenge the imperial state through their refusal to assimilate. 15 Rather, these subjects exist, as Scott Morgensen writes, as "uncontained objects...of colonial and imperial control."16 Thus, as Schotten writes, both anti-colonial and queer politics find in common an "aspiration toward constant unsettlement." 17

Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai take Morgensen's observations here further, arguing that the problematic existence of both the queer and the anti-imperialist have been melded together in the imperial imaginary to create the "monster-terrorist-fag," an Orientalized object of perverse sexuality that threatens the very core of Western subjectivity. The "monster-terrorist-fag" came into existence, of course, as war on terror discourses blossomed in America. Puar and Rai begin their analysis with a discussion of the posters appearing around New York City following the attacks of September 11, which portrayed Osama Bin Laden being anally raped by the Empire State Building with the caption beneath "So you like skyscrapers, bitch?"18 Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai have described these posters, as well as other sexually violent post-9/11 depictions of Bin Laden, as representing a Western desire to "emasculate bin Laden and turn him into a fag." These discourses of a sexually deviant Osama Bin Laden reveal the myriad of ways in which the subversive violence of terrorism and the subversive

existence of queerness are connected in nationalist discourses that aim to protect the nation from both the terrorist and the queer.

Building on Foucault's writings on the "abnormals" of society, Puar and Rai describe the ways in which the terrorist, in the American imagination, has been constructed as a sort of 'monster' that must be both disciplined and corrected. ²⁰ Part of this construction of the "monster-terrorist" involves the pathologization of the terrorist subject. As Lisa Stampnitzky has also argued, contemporary discourses on terrorism dismiss the social, economic, and political causes of actions labeled as terrorism, instead opting for explanations that pathologize a terrorist's emotional and psychological state. Terrorists are labeled as fundamentally irrational actors who have no 'civilized' control over their violent urges.²¹ A key part of this pathologization involves an Orientalized understanding of terrorists. Terrorists are portrayed as Orientalized foreign 'others,' whose upbringing in 'pre-civilized' cultures has led to their existence as fundamentally irrational and violent actors. The Lacanian idea of the 'Other' is crucial in these kinds of pathologizing discourses. As Jacques Lacan originally argued, the 'Other' exists as a foil to the self, and acts as a surface onto which the insecurities and fears of the self can be projected. In nationalist discourses, the collective national 'self' projects its insecurities onto collective racialized 'others,' effectively scapegoating entire groups of people.²²

Part of this terrorist's "failed psyche," Puar and Rai argue, is a perverse, queer sexuality that rejects the structure of the stable heteronormative nuclear family.²³ This rejection of stable heteronormativity is viewed as a consequence of the terrorist's upbringing in an Orientalized environment of both hypersexuality and sexual repression. A key part of the terrorist's existence as an "abnormal" in the Western imagination is his stunted and perverse sexuality that forms a part of his existence as a fundamentally irrational and violent actor. The "monster-terrorist," then, becomes the "monster-terrorist-fag." A national fight against terrorism must therefore reject the perverted psyche of this "monster-terrorist-fag," and instead subscribe to a "heteronormative patriotism" that rejects

the stunted psyche of the terrorist Other. Crucially, this "heteronormative patriotism" in turn serves to discipline the national population and ultimately "produce patriotic, docile subjects."²⁵

Ultimately, this constructed "monster-terrorist-fag" operates as a foil to the homonational, as that "uncontained object...of colonial and imperial control" that Morgensen references as an ongoing challenge to the contemporary imperial state. ²⁶ While homonormative gays and lesbians are, to a certain extent, welcomed into the Western political community, the queer and its association with this uncontained "monster-terrorist-fag" remains a subject of fear and contention in the colonial and imperial state. In the following discussion, I present two cases of queer resistance to imperial and colonial pinkwashing projects in Palestine and the ways in which state response to this resistance reveals the conditional and performative solidarity of the Western state with its queer citizens.

Discussion

"Welcome to Columbia Untisemity"

Following months of a relentless and brutal Israeli assault on the Palestinian civilian population in Gaza, student protests emerged internationally, demanding that universities divest funds from companies that profited off of this assault as well as from the larger project of the occupation of Palestine. Columbia University in the United States became one of the first universities to attract global attention for their student protests against the genocide in Gaza and for institutional divestment from Israel. Responding specifically to these protests at Columbia University, the popular Israeli sketch comedy show "What a Wonderful Country" released a sketch entitled "Welcome to Columbia Untisemity." Through a mockery of queer student solidarity with Palestine, the sketch aims to delegitimize support for Palestinian resistance. As I will demonstrate below, this sketch echoes many of the historical

narratives discussed above that aim to discipline subversive movements and subjects.

"Welcome to Columbia Untisemity" begins with a shot of two caricatured queer students at Columbia University. They have exaggerated dyed hair and piercings, emulating the kinds of subversive self-expressions that are associated with the queer community. The sketch is a mockery of radical student broadcasting and begins with one student announcing that their organization is one "where everyone is welcome: LGBTQH." "H?" asks the second student, to which the first student replies "Hamas!" This immediate association of queer identities with terrorism is telling of the implicit connections made between queerness and violence in the imperial imagination. This connection is cemented further as the two students conference in via video-call their "BFF (Bestie Freedom Fighter)," Abu Fatua, who is portrayed as a member of Hamas calling in from a "tunnel under the Gaza hospital." This imagined location of a member of Hamas is of course echoing the ongoing Israeli narrative that justifies their bombing of hospitals—a war crime—by reiterating that this is where the terrorists are hiding.³¹ The students then compliment Abu on his head covering, deeming it to be "oppression chique." This overt reference to Abu, a made up terrorist, as fundamentally 'oppressed' reflects the ways in which terrorist actors are pathologized in the imperial imagination. This forms a key part of the imperial narrative that the violence of terrorism stems from oppressive cultures that produce irrational and maladiusted citizens.

As the sketch continues, the two students who represent this "LGBTQH" organization are portrayed as fundamentally uninformed and ultimately idiotic for supporting the Palestinian cause. One student expresses that he wishes he could join Abu in the fight for freedom in Gaza. Abu responds that if this student comes to Gaza, he will "throw you off the roof, you homosexual dirt," to which the student responds "Did you hear? They want to throw me a rooftop party!" This exchange reflects an ongoing global discourse that criticizes queer support for Palestine by arguing that Palestine, as a homophobic state, would not support them in return.

Queer supporters of Palestine are portrayed as uninformed of the violence they would face if they entered the Palestinian state, and this sketch represents this stance exactly. As the video continues, Abu wishes death upon the queer students multiple times, saying "it's better you just kill yourself," and ending the call with "Die!" The students do not register these threats, instead reiterating their unequivocal support for the made-up terrorist-object Abu.

The exchange of violent threats from Abu towards the students, and the students non-registration of these threats, leaves much to be unpacked. Firstly, I would like to relate these exchanges to Jasbir Puar's observations that, in homonationalist states, homophobia against white queers is consistently portrayed as significantly more repugnant than racism.³⁵ Puar explains that homonationalist narratives often racialize homophobia, labeling racialized countries and cultures as more homophobic than their white counterparts. This, of course, denies that racialized queers exist. Oueer Palestinian scholar Sae'd Atshan echoes Puar's observations, stating in a recent interview that "it's racist... to argue that the struggle against racism that's directed against Palestinians should somehow be halted or undermined because there's homophobia within Palestinian society."36 Atshan further emphasizes that these kinds of discourses erase the existence of queer Palestinians, effectively conflating a homophobic state with its people, suggesting that Palestinians are inherently homophobic.³⁷ In the current narrative surrounding Israel and Palestine, the Palestinian state's homophobia is portrayed as morally outweighing the IDF's ethnic cleansing of Palestinians. Despite their blatant and exceedingly violent racism, Israel still touts itself as progressive on the world stage because of its supposed support of its (white) gay population. In the sketch at hand, the terrorist Abu's homophobia is highlighted as proof of his whole culture's 'backwards' homophobia. His uttering of death threats towards the students is a racist portrayal of Palestinians as inherently and violently homophobic.

Furthermore, the exchange of death threats between Abu and the students allows the Israeli state to mask its own internal

homophobia through a projection of homophobic sentiments onto an imagined other. Although Israel is often portrayed in global discourses as a gay "safe haven," what this Israeli sketch ultimately sells as comedy is violence being perpetuated against unsuspecting queer subjects.³⁸ The fact that queer students are being told to kill themselves by racialized terrorists is, in this sketch, marketed as hilarious. This sketch thus embodies a perfect case study of the ways in which imperial states project their own internal fears and insecurities onto racialized 'others.' By making up a terrorist figure who tells young queers they do not deserve to live, the writers of this sketch are truly addressing an internal discomfort with the subversive existence of queers in their state. This analysis is reflected in the arguments of Harritaworn et. al, who, in their analysis of "Gay Imperialism," write that "white people become interested in orientalised gender and sexual regimes at specific times, which have more to do with developments in their own culture than with the other." Clearly, support for the Palestinian cause emanating from an internal white Western source has caused a great deal of discomfort for Israel. This discomfort has resulted in, as this sketch demonstrates, a link being made between queer and terrorist organizations, with the implied argument being that both groups need to be eradicated by the state.

The blatant homophobic and racist mockery of queer support for Palestine in this sketch is a perfect case study of the ways in which the imperial state disciplines its citizens who stray too far from the hegemonic status quo. Although queers are, in theory, accepted in the Israeli state, hetero/homonormative patriotism is still a prerequisite for membership in the national community. Heteronormative patriotism may have extended its boundaries to allow certain gays and lesbians membership in the state, but their acceptance is contingent on the sacrificing of the more radical parts of their identity. If these more radical tendencies are not left behind, the state will discipline this subversion, placing these groups into what Kinsman describes as an "an administrative collecting category into which, at various historical moments, assorted social and political practices can be placed and thus be read

out of the normal and national social fabric."⁴⁰ Radical queers who challenge the racism and violence of the imperial state are placed into the same "administrative collecting category" of the "monster-terrorist-fag," an object that represents everything abhorred by 'civilized' Western society. The goal of the imperial state remains, as the above sketch demonstrates, to produce "patriotic, docile subjects" that do not challenge the state's violence.⁴¹

Ottawa's Capital Pride 2024

As the "Welcome to Untisemity" sketch demonstrates, the colonial and imperial state remains uncomfortable with its queer citizens who refuse to disappear into the homonationalist order. Queers who challenge the state's imperial or colonial agenda are subsequently punished through mockery, discrediting, and vilification. This paper's second case study explores another instance of queer resistance against the hegemonic colonial order, in which the state's response reveals the homonationalist imperative that remains at the core of the Western state's support for its queer citizens.

Following the lead of other queer organizations across the globe, ⁴² on August 6, 2024, Capital Pride in Ottawa, Ontario released a statement condemning the ongoing genocide in Palestine, and expressed particular concern around Israel's history of pinkwashing its violent campaigns of ethnic cleansing. ⁴³ Examples of such tactics include the erecting, by IDF soldiers, of pride flags over villages they have razed to the ground. ⁴⁴ Recognizing pride's politically subversive roots, Capital Pride's statement of solidarity with Palestine affirmed, in the organization's own words, its commitment to "the promise of liberation that guides our work." ⁴⁵ Upon the release of this statement, many of the parade's regular attendees quickly began to drop out. Non-attendees at 2024 Capital Pride included the City of Ottawa, including the Mayor, Mark Sutcliffe, the Liberal Party of Canada, and many of the city's publicly funded hospitals and schools. ⁴⁶

Capital Pride, like many other large-scale, state-sponsored pride events, has faced increasing criticism over the years for its

increasingly depoliticized messaging.⁴⁷ This statement of solidarity, in its outright refusal to participate in the homonationalist practice of pinkwashing, marks a significant shift in the effectiveness of homonationalist messaging and a resurgence of queer politics in the Western world. It follows, then, that as a response to this queer refusal, Capital Pride was met with the retraction of state support for its activities. Similarly to the work of the "What a Wonderful Country" sketch described above, Capital Pride's refusal of homonationalist sentiments was met with vilification and disinformation by the state. Employees of institutions who had dropped out of pride festivities received messages from their employers that painted the statement as creating an "unsafe environment," encouraging hate, and even as being outright antisemetic.⁴⁸

Others, however, suggested that Capital Pride had not gone far enough in their statement. The grassroots group Queers Against Pinkwashing, for example, published a report of recommendations for Capital Pride following the release of the organization's statement, encouraging the group to cut further complicit sponsors from festivities, and to make more connections between the work of anti-colonialism and queer liberation. 49 Indeed, Jasbir Puar has pointed out the shortcomings of Western organizations that call out pinkwashing yet fail to recognize that the "shared history of practice of colonialism" renders settlers in the United States, Canada, and Israel bound together through "practices of power and empire on the international stage. 50 Rather than simply "disidentify" from the imperial project of Israel, a queer approach to imperial and colonial resistance must act to recognize why, in the first place, global gays and lesbians are called upon to encourage this project. As Puar writes, the importance of global gay subjects as "propaganda targets" for the Israeli government demonstrates the ways in which settlers around the world, particularly in the United States and Canada, are inherently bound to the settler colonial project in occupied Palestine.⁵¹ Homonationalist messaging merely obfuscates the ways in which gays and lesbians, too, are capable of benefitting from settler colonialism, imperialism, and the racism that these

practices perpetuate. A true resistance to this messaging must recognize, rather than obfuscate, the ways in which *all* settlers benefit from the harms of global colonialism and imperialism.

Despite the statement's drawbacks, the immense government-led backlash that Capital Pride faced in response to their initial pushback against pinkwashing demonstrates the urgency of the Canadian state's commitment to homonationalist sentiments. Even though Capital Pride failed to make deeper connections between the processes of queer liberation and decolonization, the response to this initial, perhaps even surface level, pushback against homonationalism and pinkwashing is exemplary of the Western state's conditional solidarity with its queer citizens. The refusal to participate in Western homonationalism has revealed that the imperial and colonial state continues to live in fear of that "uncontained object... of imperial and colonial control" that challenges its agenda of colonial expansion and control. Once again, the spectre of the "monster-terrorist-fag" was invocated here, as events of Capital Pride became vilified by Canadian government as "unsafe," "antisemetic," or as simply encouraging hate and division 52

Conclusion

While international queer solidarity with Palestine grows in momentum, the imperial state's prioritization of producing "patriotic, docile subjects" becomes all the more transparent.⁵³

The state's tactics in producing these kinds of apolitical homonormative subjects include a mockery of queer solidarity, as the Israeli sketch show demonstrated, or a complete discrediting of organizations that question the state's imperial aspirations, as the governmental defamation of Capital Pride's solidarity attempted to accomplish. The image that the imperial state hopes to produce from its punishing of the political queer is that of Puar and Rai's "monster-terrorist-fag:" a figure of both subversive violence and sexuality that threatens to unravel the hegemonic status quo of the Western state.

Indeed, as Heike Schotten emphasizes, it is the refusal of both the queer and the Palestinian to disappear that binds both causes together. Neither subject accepts assimilation into the larger colonial and imperial order. The absconding of both the queer and the Palestinian from the net of this hegemonic order is what connects them as objects of fear in the imperial imagination. Both subjects remain as unanswered questions of contention to the imperial state, as problems that will not simply "go away." It is thus vital to recognize these inextricable ties between the two causes, both of which ultimately demand liberation from the assimilatory imperial order.

If queer resistance against homonationalism is to continue, however, an acknowledgement of the ways in which all settlers, globally, are tied to projects of imperialism and settler colonialism is necessary. As Puar notes, it is no coincidence that LGTBQIA+ individuals in the United States and Canada are called upon by Israel to legitimate their colonial violence. Unpacking the ways in which settler colonial states, such as the United States, Canada, and Israel, perform colonial violence in tandem with each other is vital in resisting this very violence. As the online project "Queering the Map" writes in their introduction to the work of queering space, "queer liberation must mean decolonization, and decolonization must mean queer liberation." It remains to be seen, however, if queer organizations will commit to a return to their subversive beginnings in the face of mass state suppression, even if this means a return to the sidelines of state membership.

Notes

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⁵³ Puar and Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag," 130.

⁵⁴ Schotten, "To Exist Is to Resist," 15.

⁵⁵ Queering the Map, "About," https://www.queeringthemap.com/.

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